



Editorial Note

Resistance is life. These words hang as a part of *Snow*, Sohrab Hura's series of photographs taken in Kashmir. The words are not his, the camera is. Hung on a gallery wall situated within the Alipore Museum in Kolkata, the frame finds a singular resonance with the setting. It breaks through the surface calm and order of a museum which was originally a jail for political prisoners. It converges the turbulent past of the site, particularly during India's freedom struggle, with the history of the nation state that was born at the time of independence. Hura's frame merging the visual and the verbal, confronts the viewers with a powerful reminder of the "will to power" which steels even the most oppressed to resist erasure. Words, images, music are mediums through which the 'little voices of history' defy silence.

In a world which seems to be caving in to the injustices of unequal power structures resistance is not restricted to political struggles only. The wide range of topics covered by the articles in *Interlocutor Vol. IV* reveal triumphalist and homogenising discourses being challenged across experiences of class, caste, gender, sexuality and ideology.

According to Barbara Harlow (*Resistance Literature*) Ghassan Kanafani first used the term 'resistance' in connection with Palestinian literature in a piece translated as *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966* (Harlow 2) Assassinated in 1972, he was remembered as 'a commando who never fired a gun' (*Lebanese Star*). Since the mid-twentieth century developments in theory and critical practices have created bridges between academia and activism. Like the blue whistling thrush which sings in many notes, numerous movements in literature, arts and media have reflected the constant tussle between what is existing and what desires to come into existence, or what refuses to have its existence obliterated.

The central theme of the volume is captured by Dr. Sandali Thakur's special lecture which is being reproduced here. Titled "Imag(in)ing Resistance: Dalit Art in Mithila's Visual Canon", her deliberations on Dalit visual politics reveals the resistance to invisibilisation, institutional tokenism and Brahminical aesthetics. In proposing a counter-canon she sees Dalit art practices not as a site of lack but an insidious means of radical creativity which perpetuates memory and the will to survive.

Beyond Nation States

The reality of the postcolonial Indian state is undeniably marked by fractured identities. The centralising pull of the nation state is repeatedly undermined by the memories of lost lands, languages and histories. Two of the essays in this volume deliberate on how literature embodies the multiple loyalties of individuals living under the disciplining power of the state. Pritam Moni, in "Countering the Spectacle: The Sundarban Tiger beyond Binaries in Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini*", goes beyond the dominant representational lenses of ecological and cultural discourses in which the tiger is either the embodiment of wildness or held up as a symbol of conservation. Designating both as anthropocentric, Moni analyses the character in Soharab Hossen's novel to reveal how literature from the Sunderbans have the potential to challenge dominant narratives at various levels. The tiger which knows no borders becomes a metonymic representation not of national identity or belonging as stated by Helen Tiffin, but of the longing within the displaced Adhar for such a transnational identity. Memory, ecology, and cross-species identification converge in this reimagination of the tiger as a marker of submerged histories which enables empathy across species. The tiger's violent end becomes a metaphor for the violence encountered in partitioned lands. Hossen's narrative however, is too nuanced for a single layered interpretation. In Kajla, the object of Adhar's desire, the



novel also resists simplified conservationist narratives by foregrounding her dual identification with *Bonbibli* and the tigress.

“Nationalisms in Context: Somnath Batabyal’s *Red River*”, by Abantika Dev Ray discusses the way in which nostalgia for a home that resides more in the heart than in reality, informs Batabyal’s novel. Dev Ray’s reading of it prises open the instability of the idea of the nation in a novel which examines the fraught relations between the nation state and regional identities formed on its geographical margins. The destinies of three friends from diverse backgrounds are mostly recounted by the one who has no real roots to call home. Dev Ray’s analysis of this novel which is set against the background of the Assam movement in the eighties, lays bare the fragile allegiances of people when faced with choices between overarching narratives of identity and individual histories.

Defying Discipline and Punishment

Power demands obedience. But what if the mind distances itself from the body that suffers? In “Looking against the Phenomenology of Being: Analysing Ben Jelloun’s *This Blinding Absence of Light* as a Tale of Resistance”, Sudesna Roy asks, what happens to the body under conditions of extreme torture? How does the body become a site of resistance in the in-betweenness of incarceration? Roy raises these questions to challenge the capacity of traditional Phenomenological approaches to provide answers to the question of being.

Laughter and Indignation

The triumphalist march of authoritarian powers appears relentless through the machinery of propaganda. Ironically, the US, self-proclaimed defender of democracy, and the repressive regime in North Korea with no pretence to democratic values, both lend themselves to accusations of unleashing violence and repression at home and abroad.

In “Unlocking the Power of Humour: Re-defining Resistance in Select Diaries and Weblogs of Iraqi Women”, Dr. Somedutta Mukherjee quotes extensively from Iraqi women’s diaries and weblogs. It exposes how a people whose land has been taken over and whose dignity has been violated take recourse to dark humour. Their laughter rings with bathos and signals that even the mightiest axis of power can be diminished and lampooned. Humour here becomes a coded language of rebellion.

Dipanwita Sen’s “With a Pure Indignation”: Fiction, Fictionalisation and the Subtle Resistance of *The Accusation*”, dwells on the persistence of resistance under the authoritarian regime of North Korea where the fiction of well-being propagated by the state under its surveillance is sabotaged by a collection of short stories *The Accusation* written under the pseudonym Bandi.

Resisting Erasure through Performance

The advent of colonialism transformed the cultural landscape of India. Victorian assumptions of moral and cultural superiority expressed itself in a deep unease with the performing female body and unregulated arenas of performance. The resultant marginalisation of traditional cultural labour and performing traditions endangered both the refined culture of the erstwhile aristocrats as well as the vernacular performance practices amongst non-urban communities.

Women’s Studies departments have repeatedly resurrected the histories of women performers. In “Recording Resistance: Gauhar Jaan, Gramophone, and Gendered Cultural Labour in Colonial India”, Puja Saha draws on critical biography, discourse analysis, and feminist cultural theory to argue that Gauhar Jaan’s



recording on the gramophone was more than a way of adjusting to changes in forms of patronage and performance spaces. It was a means of resisting the socio-cultural erasure of her *tawaif* community. Her signature declaration after each recording, “My name is Gauhar Jaan”, was an attempt to reclaim the dignity of her labour, identity and historical presence at a time when her refined body and exuberant public presence caused deep moral unease among both the Bengali middle classes and the colonial ruling classes.

In “Reinterpreting Myth and Memory in Alternative Theatre Spaces: A Tale of Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai”, two female actors from tribal communities, with distinct performance styles are linked in the essay by Divyangana Mondal. Each brings the imprint of her particular ethnic roots to the enactment of Draupadi. The feminist projection of Draupadi as the embodiment of resistance to patriarchy is further complicated by this insistence on a vernacular idiom. Their performances are no longer confined to resisting patriarchy but also demand recognition of the plurality of traditions existing in a country such as India. In this respect they push back against homogenising cultural practices.

Religion and Resistance

Sometimes the silent mutiny of the masses goes unrecorded because they lack the written word. Dr. Ambedkar’s embrace of Buddhism and his indictment of the caste-ridden Hindu society provided a language of resistance to the marginalised tribal populations and *antaja* or low-caste populations in India. Dalit politics may be a modern political phenomenon, but way back in history the *antaja* classes in Bengal had registered their resistance to the Brahminical order by converting Buddhism, a doctrine which promised dignity to all and denied caste distinctions. Their early embrace of the egalitarian Buddhist doctrine eventually morphed into the worship of folk deities like Dharma Thakur. By dispensing with the offices of any Brahmin priest the *antaja* people in Bengal displayed their defiance of the diktats of Hinduism. In the essay “Buddhists in Bengal and Folk Gods Who Became Buddhas: An Overview of *Antaja* Conversion in Pre-colonial Bengal from an Ambedkarite Perspective”, Titas Choudhury discusses the influence of Buddhism in Bengal, an outlying region of Aryavarta.

Speculative Fiction: Imagining Dystopic Futures

Theories about the force of spectacle and hyperreality in the construction of a late capitalist society underlines the articles which deal with texts involving the modern metropolis as a space invaded with consumerism leading to catastrophic consequences in a dystopic future.

“Resisting the Spectacle: Masked Realities and Rebellious Future in the Speculative Worlds of Samit Basu”, by Srishti Khare is an examination of Samit Basu’s speculative fiction through the lens of Guy Debord, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. She expounds how Basu’s fiction grapples with the question of the intersections of power technology and myth in the twenty first century. Debord is considered to be at the centre of Basu’s reimagination of resistance as an act that insinuates itself through the cracks of spectacle in a late capitalist society.

The reality of climate change in an urban dystopia is the subject of “Water Wars and Eco-dystopia: Re-reading Sarnath Banerjee’s *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*”. In this essay, Sayan Chatterjee explores how Banerjee’s unique blend of image and text helps our understanding of water wars and point towards the uncertain dystopic future resulting from it. Chatterjee’s essay analyses how Banerjee’s achievement as a graphic novelist lies in his creative use of visuality and spatiality. In its break with narrative linearity, a visually dystopic unreal space becomes a signifier of real space. It invites the reader to imagine the reality of the climate crisis which is otherwise denied by those with vested interests in perpetuating the status quo.



“Urban Space, Dystopia, Consumerism and Hyperreality: Reading Satire as Resistance in Appupen’s *Aspyrus*”, by Srijani Dutta considers the portrayal of the postmodern city as a space infected with consumerist dreams which serve capitalism. In its choice of subject and genre, Dutta considers Appupen’s novel to be essentially subversive. It rejects the binaries between high and popular art while critiquing the values of contemporary India through his imaginary world Halahala.

The graphic artists’ ability to display and withhold also informs Srijita Banerjee’s exploration of the aesthetic of refusal in “Manga in Women, Children, and Machines: State Power, Resistance, and Gender in Japanese Mangas”. Moving from state power to family dynamics Banerjee maps the modes in which Manga comics reflect the intersectionality of power and resistance.

Resisting Gender and Sexual Normativity

In spite of its commercial compulsions, cinema has long given space to narratives that challenge gender normativity and heteronormative relationships. The essays in this volume which deal with cinema all testify to this fact.

The clash between the individual and society is never more acute than in the apparently personal choices regarding love, marriage and sexuality. Jude Fernandes’ review essay “Cinematic Resistance: *The First Wedding* as a Protest Narrative Against Heteronormativity”, discusses how the inversion of societal norms in the short film by the Goan Filmmaker Akshay Parvatkar, sensitises us to the long struggle of the LGBTQIA+ community. The main protagonists in this short film are heterosexuals striving to assert their right to love within a homosexual society. The inside out approach of the film and the mockumentary format become a powerful critique of sexual normativity as it argues for the individual’s right to personal choices.

The power of a queer counterculture thriving on queer temporality to subvert heteronormativity is ideated in Ashmita Biswas’ essay, “A ‘New Way of Living’: Exploring the Complex Dynamics of Queer Counterculture in Vijay Dan Detha’s “A Double Life””. The essay portrays a lesbian utopia through the same-sex union of Beeja and Teeja in Detha’s short story “Dowari Joon” which resists heterosexual bliss by critiquing the normative temporality of chrononormativity and procreative futurism. The counter discourse thus generated, successfully destabilises the dominant patriarchal normativity by foregrounding queerness in a heterotopic supernatural, geographical and ideological space inhabited by the lesbian couple.

““Imagination, Life is Your Creation””: The Politics and Aesthetics of Representations in Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023)”: The film critiques the consumerist appropriation of the feminist narrative. Signifying the film as a popular culture text, Aditya Mukherjee’s essay maps the metamorphosis of its protagonist, the Stereotypical Barbie from plasticity to an acquired womanhood. The essay initiates divergent discourses on film’s satirical representation of patriarchy, lifestyle and tokenistic feminism(s). It advocates a global feminist sisterhood by thoroughly examining the script of interpersonal relationships. The delineation of multifarious identities along with subversion and reification of normativities in the visual text is achieved through anthropomorphisation of the cultural artefact, Barbie.

Narrative Warfare in Indian Cinema and OTT

Rubaiya Nasrin’s essay “Cinematic Battlegrounds: Hermeneutics, 5GW, and Interpretive Pluralism in Contemporary Indian Film and Media” situates select films and OTT series as contested sites of fifth generation warfare (5GW) that weaponise historical perspectives. The essay highlights resistance of creative productions in foregrounding the plurality and instability of decoded meaning of the visual and cultural texts. Drawing from hermeneutics and media studies, the essay underscores ideological wars over narration, nation



and theology, generated through contested reception of memes, hashtags and viral controversies in the digital public sphere.

Poised on the nebulous limen demarcating academia and politico-intellectual praxis, the current volume of *Interlocutor* intends to function as testimonial to the ever-fluxional modes of human resistance emerging in the face of oppressive, totalitarian and homogenising discourses. Besides foregrounding heterogeneity as a keystone of the ontology of humanity and the human condition, the current volume also underlines the significance of subjecting diverse categories of resistance to juxtapositional assessment. This, in turn, fosters affective and theoretical understandings of intersectionality, thus establishing essential commonalities among dissenting voices. The Editorial Board stands beholden to every contributor for having presented unique sonatas of resistance intercepted from that singular harmonious urge emanating from the *spiritus mundi* – that for freedom – *eleutheria*.

The Editorial Board of *Interlocutor* would also like to express its sincere gratitude to the members of the Advisory Board for their indomitable guidance, the Editorial Team for their unwavering assistance and the peer-reviewers for their meticulous assessment of the articles. We also deeply thank the Management of The Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata, and Dr. Subhabrata Gangopadhyay, our honourable Teacher-in-Charge, for extending their unwavering support in our endeavour to publish this volume.

Interlocutor

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Special Lecture Series, Chapter 2: Transcript

Imag(in)ing Resistance: *Dalit* Art in Mithila's Visual Canon

Dr. Sandali Thakur

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This lecture emerges from a long and deep engagement—intellectual, political, personal, with the domain of Mithila art. The typographic wordplay in the title points towards a simultaneous double act of resistance: of *imagining*, that is to envision, conceptualise; and *imaging*, to give visual form. The “in” within parenthesis indicates the situated, embodied location of resistance. *Imag(in)ing Resistance*, therefore, is a conceptual and aesthetic exploration of Mithila's visual world as both a site of resistance and a mode of resistance. The artists I speak of today, *Dalit* women and men of Mithila, are not merely creating images of protest; they are *imag(in)ing* from within a social order that has long denied them visibility, legitimacy and voice.

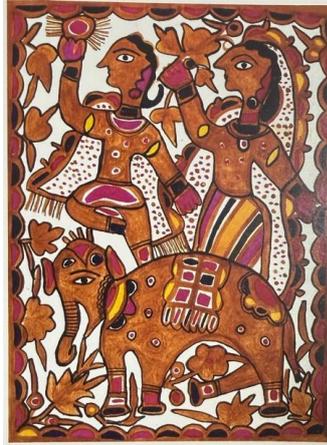
This is a question about the workings of power—about who is seen, who is allowed to create, and who is recognised as a citizen and a subject. It is also a deeply personal question—one that I first began to ask as a young MA student nearly twenty years ago. At the time, I chose to study the social relations among Mithila artists—a journey I have continued ever since. What drew me in was not only the vibrancy of the painting tradition, but the way it revealed unresolved tensions around identity, belongingness and legitimacy that I was quietly grappling with myself.

My identity as a Maithil woman, born into an ‘upper’ caste family, yet positioned uneasily within its patriarchal and caste-marked contours, complicates and motivates this inquiry. I speak both from within and against the structures that have historically shaped Mithila's visual cultures. My discomfort with the canon began not as an art historian, but as a feminist fieldworker walking into homes, speaking with artists and watching art emerge on all possible surfaces. I still remember the ebullient words of Roudi Paswan, the artist-ideator with whom I spent the most time: “We paint on every surface—except water”!

Over the years, engagements with figures such as *Rahu*, *Dom Raja* and *Raja Salhesa*, and with the stylistic innovations of *Godana* and *Gobar*, all of which I discuss today, became my entry point not only into the art being practiced by *Dalit* artists, but into a methodological and epistemic rethinking of what counts as art, whose voice counts in its interpretation and how caste operates, not only as social structure but as visual semiotic. This lecture centres on the *Dalit* iconography and stylistic innovations developed by *Dusadh* and *Chamar* artists of Mithila in the 1970s and beyond, and on the larger question of how resistance is made to appear, or disappear, in the visual canon of Indian art.

The ‘Discovery’ of Mithila Art and the Invention of Tradition

The category of ‘Mithila Art’ denotes a range of styles that form part of the pictorial expression in the Mithila region. The term has primarily been in currency amongst scholars, journalists, art collectors and connoisseurs, as well as art practitioners themselves. It encompasses a multiplicity of styles such as *Geru* (1), *Bharni* (2, 3), *Kachhni* (4), *Tantric* (5), *Gobar* (6), and *Godana* (7, 8), among others.



1. *Geru* style (Indra & Indrani), Sanjul Mandal, 1983

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 25)



2. *Bharni* style (Durga), Jagdamba Devi, 1977

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 24)



3. *Bharni* style (Krishna), Sita Devi, 1981

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 51)



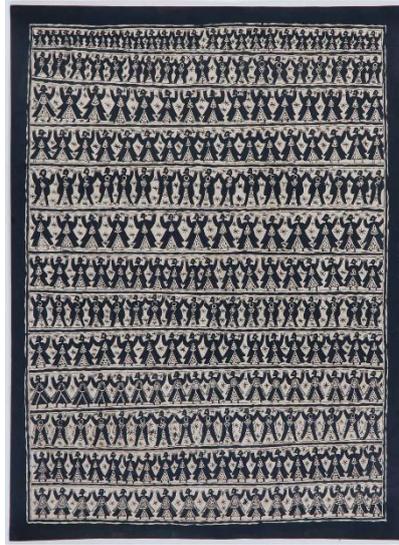
4. *Kachchnistyle* (Kamaldah/ Lotus pond)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



5. *Tantric style* (Das Mahavidyas)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



6. *Gobar style* (Raja Salhesa and companions), Jamuna Devi, 1981 (Collection of Jai Sen, Delhi)
Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 33)



7. *Godana* style (Raja Salhesa)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



8. *Godana* style (Tree of Life with Migrant Workers), Urmila Devi, 2004
Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 64)

Each style embodies its own history within the larger trajectory of the art form, with distinct or overlapping pictorial vocabulary. Historically, *Bharni* was practised primarily by *Brahmin* artists, while *Kachhni* was associated with *Kayastha* artists – the two ‘upper’ castes of the region. Over the years, the art form has continually experimented with techniques, themes and idioms, branching into multiple and diverse directions.

The term *Mithila Art* is considered to be a more encompassing term in that it denotes the art form practised in the entire geo-cultural region of Mithila, comprising several districts of the northern part of the Bihar state in India, as well as those in the eastern Terai region, along the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal (9).



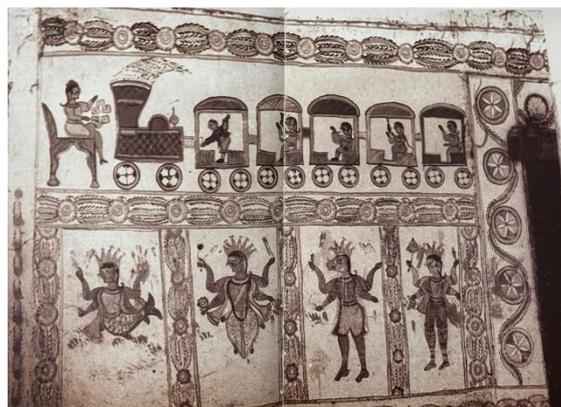
9. Map of Mithila

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Mithila_region#/media/File:Mithila_Region_of_India_and_Nepal.png

In contrast, the state apparatus has consistently used the term *Madhubani Painting*. This preference stems from the fact that the state-sponsored commoditisation of the art began in the villages around Madhubani, which later came to be seen as the epicentre of the commercialised form of the paintings. However, unlike *Mithila Art*, the term *Madhubani Painting* fixes the roots of the tradition narrowly in the district headquarters of Madhubani, thereby peripheralising art practices of the other regions within Mithila.

To understand why these categories developed, and why some practices became central while others were sidelined, I briefly trace the historical trajectory through which Mithila art first came to the attention of the state and the wider world.

Any engagement with the politics of Mithila art must begin with its “discovery” in 1934, following a devastating earthquake in Bihar. The British Indian Civil Service officer William George Archer (then District Magistrate of Darbhanga) discovered the painting practice in the region during rescue and relief work following a devastating earthquake. The earthquake had demolished the mud houses, exposing striking, elaborate murals on the interior walls. Archer went on to publish his findings in the art journal *Marg* in 1949, accompanied by photographs he took during his tours (10, 11).



10. *Vishnu and Three Avatars (Fish, Tortoise, and Boar). Railway Train and Station Master with Tickets Above.* Maithil Brahmin home, Ujan, Darbhanga, 1937.

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 18)



11. *Purain and Durga on her Tiger*. Maithil Brahmin home, Bhadeshwar, Purnea, 1929.

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 14)

Archer’s exposition was limited to the painting styles associated with the Brahmins and Kayasthas. He does mention the prevalence of art practice amongst the *Ahirs* (a community of pastoralists – lower in the caste hierarchy) but does not dwell on it, considering their art as a derivative of the art of the two ‘upper’ caste communities.

In the late 1960s, another disaster struck the region – a series of famines ravaged its agriculture-based economy. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s famine-relief team, led by cultural activist Pupul Jayakar found Mithila’s painting tradition the most appropriate for designing welfare measures. Jayakar was familiar with the painting tradition of the region from Archer’s account. Eventually, the State intervened to reconstruct the livelihoods of people by urging women to transfer their art from walls and floors to paper to be sold in the market.

Dalit iconography in Mithila emerged during the moment of state-sponsored commoditisation of painting, when artists from the *Dusadh* and *Chamar* communities of Jitwarpur village began producing images for the market. Traditionally, both communities were bound to stigmatised, caste-designated occupations within Mithila’s deeply hierarchical social order, long dominated by *Brahmins*, and later, *Kayasthas*. *Dusadh* men historically served as village watchmen (*chowkidars*) and landless agricultural labourers, and *Dusadh* women engaged in low-paid agrarian work alongside them. *Dusadh* men were also later recruited in the British army. *Chamars*, similarly the landless, were tied by caste to leather work – flaying carcasses, curing hides, while also working as agricultural labourers, with women participating in both leather-related work and farm labour. Living on the outskirts of villages and bound to ‘upper’ caste households through relations of service, dependence and humiliation, artists from these communities viewed the state’s famine-relief initiative as a rare opportunity – a possibility of dignified, remunerative work outside the entrenched structure of feudal-caste servitude of Mithila.

And yet, despite the entry of *Dusadh* and *Chamar* artists into the world of painting through the famine-relief program, prevailing accounts of Mithila art have overwhelmingly focused on its association with “women”, especially ‘upper’ caste women, whose creativity and “timeless” traditions have been upheld as the most authentic expression of the form. This narrative has portrayed Mithila art as a singular, unified, ancient women’s tradition. As with most things that become “heritage,” this canon was built through selective inclusion and exclusion. The pictorial styles practised by *Maithil Brahmin* and *Kayastha* women were elevated as the “authentic” representatives of the region. Their imagery – rooted in marriage rituals, auspicious symbols and devotional iconography – came to dominate national and international

understandings of the tradition. Meanwhile, the visual practices developed by Dalit artists were often treated as peripheral, derivative or less valuable. Their distinct motifs, mythologies and style rarely found a place in mainstream discourse.

To make sense of this selective canonisation, it is useful to recall Eric Hobsbawm's influential idea of "invented traditions", which he uses to talk about practices that present themselves as ancient and continuous, but are in fact carefully constructed in the present to convey particular values, identities or hierarchies. What happened with Mithila art was something similar.

A once diverse, caste-stratified and highly localised set of artistic practices, where different communities painted different subjects and drew on distinct cosmologies, was repackaged by state agencies, curatorial gatekeepers and cultural institutions, as a single homogenous tradition. This flattened version was then repeated so often that it began to appear timeless and self-evident. The process froze the tradition into a fixed aesthetic, erasing the long-standing contributions of *Dalit* artists, whose work spoke to very different social worlds – of labour, survival, caste assertion and everyday resistance.

Understanding this history is crucial, as it reminds us that cultural canons do not simply "emerge"; they are produced. And in that production, certain artists, communities and visual languages are privileged, while others are pushed to the margins.

It is what Gramsci calls cultural hegemony – the process by which the worldview of the ruling classes becomes naturalized as common sense. In Mithila, the brahminical caste order has long dominated not just land and language, but also aesthetics and authorship. It may not determine who paints, but it does influence whose paintings are circulated, archived, celebrated and awarded.

The impact of this invention of tradition and of the cultural hegemony of the 'upper' castes, has been profound. Ganga Devi, a *Kayastha* artist, often described as the doyenne of Mithila art, became the symbolic face of this tradition. The Republic Day tableau for Bihar state in 2009, which depicted a Mithila artist painting alongside a young girl to depict intergenerational transmission of tradition, was quite possibly modelled on her (12).



12. Bihar Republic Day tableau, 2009 <http://www.bihartimes.in/Newsbihar/2009/Jan/Newsbihar22Jan9.html>



13. Bihar Republic Day tableau, 2009 <http://www.bihartimes.in/Newsbihar/2009/Jan/Newsbihar22Jan9.html>

In the tableau, the central figure—positioned amid profusely painted Bharni motifs (13), embodies how *Brahmin-Kayastha* art came to stand in for Mithila art as a whole, becoming a metonym for Mithila itself. This metonymy erases the presence and aesthetic contributions of other castes, especially *Dalits*.

The consequences of this sustained invisibilisation were evident almost a decade later in the Bihar government's project to paint the Madhubani railway station, where among hundreds of panels, not a single one featured a *Godana* or *Gobar* painting (14).



14. Paintings on Madhubani Railway Station building https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhubani_railway_station

Yet, even as state-led projects continued to erase *Dalit* visual idioms, *Dalit* artists in Mithila have been actively reshaping the field on their own terms. Their sustained artistic resistance to the cultural hegemony of dominant caste groups has pushed Mithila art in unconventional directions. It is this resistance that has expanded the iconographic universe of the form, from the ingenious invention of *Godana* and *Gobar* styles, to the inclusion of powerful motifs such as *Rahu*, *Dom Raja* and *Raja Salhesa*. These interventions constitute not simple departures but critical re-imaginings that challenge who gets to define the tradition and what counts as “authentic” Mithila art. I discuss these in more detail in the next part of my lecture.

***Godana* as a Counter-Canon**

To appreciate why *Godana* developed the way it did, we must begin with making sense of the state's uncertainty about how to classify it. When the Government of India introduced the “Master Craftsperson” awards in the 1960s intended to recognise excellence in traditional crafts, it also created a system of categorising paintings by style, motif and genre. For well-established forms like *Bharni* or *Kachhni*, these categories were relatively stable. But *Godana* did not fit so easily. Over the decades, award classifications

shifted repeatedly – sometimes *Godana* appeared under the broad umbrella of “Mithila Painting,” sometimes as “Madhubani Painting,” and occasionally as a separate genre with caste-inflected labels. The nomenclature kept oscillating between emphasising style, community and theme. This inconsistency reveals more than bureaucratic confusion; it shows the State’s ambivalence toward an art form that did not originate in the dominant-caste aesthetic canon but in the creative labour of *Dusadh* artists. This context helps us understand why *Godana* must be read as a counter-canon rather than a derivative variation of Mithila painting.

Godana iconography was developed by *Dusadh* artists of Jitwarpur in close collaboration with *natins* (itinerant tattoo-makers), belonging to a nomadic Adivasi group. The *natins* were deft at inscribing tattoos on the body and carried with them a vast repertoire of motifs, symbols and cosmologies. *Godana* iconography emerged as a result of the collaboration between the *natins* Jayda and Reshma and the *Dusadh* artist Chano Devi, and Roudi Paswan, in Jitwarpur village in the 1970s. (15)



15. Chano Devi <https://www.folkartopedia.com/folk-painting/chano-devi-artist-godna-painting-bihar-hindi-sk/>

It is important to note that this innovation did not emerge in isolation. Although painting was endemic to the region, the *Dusadh* community was initially excluded from the state’s famine-relief art program that launched Mithila painting onto the national and global stage. Government officials, who moved around in the villages to “recruit” women in the famine-relief project, typically accompanied by ‘upper’ caste intermediaries, rarely entered the hamlets where *Dusadhs* lived. This meant that the economic benefits of the early art market flowed almost entirely to *Brahmin* and *Kayastha* women. The *Dusadhs*, who were hit hardest by famine, observed the new opportunities available to ‘upper’ caste artists and gradually began painting on paper themselves.

Their entry into the field was not welcomed. ‘Upper’ caste villagers reprimanded *Dusadh* artists for painting themes associated with “high” Hindu gods, reinforcing caste hierarchies even within the emerging art economy. This hostility, combined with the initial exclusion from the state’s project, pushed *Dusadh* artists to turn towards their own cultural repertoires and to invent a visual language that would not invite such sanctions. This is the social and political ground from which *Godana* took shape.

The German anthropologist, Erika Moser Schmitt, who spent several months in Jitwarpur during the 1970s writing about and filming the lives of women artists, provided the necessary impetus for these artists to set about their search for the new iconography. Eventually, *Dalit* artists such as Chano Devi, Urmila Devi, Lalita Devi, and others, along with the ideator Roudi Paswan embarked upon their collective and individual journeys of creating a body of work in *Godana*. For these artists, *Godana* was never merely a “style.” It was deeply tied to identity. As pioneers such as Chano Devi and Urmila Devi point out, “Moving away from *Godana* is not easy; *Godana* is rooted in our social identity.” Urmila Devi (16) recalls how she learned the idiom from Chano Devi and gradually developed her own aesthetic oeuvre. Urmila’s son,

Shravan Paswan, though he paints themes demanded by the market like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, still identifies *Godana* as his community's "own" style, and motifs like Raja Salhesa and Rahu as "our own stories."



16. Urmila Devi

Emerged from exclusion—the denial to participate in a state-sponsored famine-relief art program—*Godana* is not a derivative style. It is a rupture. A form of refusal that rejected brahmanical pictorial vocabulary and artistic injunctions against depicting high Hindu deities, and instead turned to a rich and complex subaltern pantheon. It becomes an example of cultural production that emerges not merely as reaction but as an articulation of alternative worldviews under conditions of domination. *Godana* constitutes resistance art, not only because it offers a counter-iconography, but because it reclaims space, labour and authorship for *Dalit* artists in a caste-ordered visual economy. *Godana* thus reorients the very question of what counts as "Mithila art," and who gets to define its canon.

Gobar Art

A second strand of *Dalit* visual resistance emerges through *Gobar* art—paintings created with a wash of cow dung and clay—employing images from the lived experience of the caste-marked worlds of *Dalits* (17).



17. Collecting a dead cow. Binda Devi. Jitwarpur. 2004

Reproduced from "Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form" by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 67)

This form was innovated by Jamuna Devi, an artist from the *Chamar* community, whose caste occupation historically involved the disposal of animal carcasses. Jamuna Devi not only transformed these materials into an artistic medium but also rendered scenes of carcass disposal itself. These images were not merely depictions of abjection; they were acts of truth-telling, insisting that *Dalit* labour, however stigmatized, belongs within the visual narrative of Mithila's art history.

Art historian Y. S. Alone, whose work on *Dalit* aesthetics, especially his writings on Savi Savarkar, is foundational, reminds us that *Dalit* art must be interpreted through the grammar of social suffering, labour and resistance, rather than through 'upper' caste paradigms of beauty, purity or decorum. In this sense, *Gobar* art embodies a counter-aesthetic, refusing the sanitised, brahminical iconography in mainstream Mithila painting. Instead, it reclaims the very forms of labour and materiality that caste society seeks to hide, transforming stigma into visibility, and visibility into critique.

Rahu, Dom Raja: The Shadow that Subverts the Social Order

The third strand of *Dalit* iconography emerges through the evocation of figures such as *Rahu* and *Dom Raja*, both central to the ritual life of communities like the *Doms*, *Dusadhs* and *Chamars*. As Ranajit Guha notes, "*Rahu*, who is a demon in the *Samudra Manthan* narrative of *Mahabharata* and an evil *graham* (planet) in astrology, is worshiped by *Dom*, *Dusadh*, and *Mang* castes. This is a defiance of the dominant narrative '*dev gatha*' and the ritual world of the brahminical culture. Dissidence with the classical or the great tradition is thus integral to the religious identity of the subalterns".

What does it mean to choose *Rahu* as a representative icon? As a shadow planet, *Rahu* is both dangerous and indispensable. In the celestial order, he interrupts, eclipses, disrupts—an apt metaphor for the *Dalit* artist in Mithila, whose presence unsettles the established visual field of Mithila painting. Here, resistance is not overt; it works through the shadow, by refusing erasure and making visible what the centre overlooks.

Rahu also performs what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque—the inversion of hierarchy, the profaning of the sacred, the subversion of order. In *Rahu pujas*, for instance, the *Dusadh* priest is permitted, even ritually authorized, to abuse the Brahmin. This brief suspension of caste hierarchy is not simply symbolic; it is an affective undoing of everyday humiliation. In *Dalit* artistic traditions, this becomes not just representation but performance, the canvas itself becomes a stage of defiance.

Let us now turn to this painting (18) that depicts *Dom Raja*- a legendary hero and deity revered by the *Dom* community.



18. *Dom Raja*, Artist Unknown

The *Doms*, among the lowest in the caste hierarchy of Mithila, work with the most stigmatized forms of labour. In this artwork, *Dom Raja* confronts the sun demanding repayment of a debt, and warning that the sun will otherwise be polluted by his touch. The imagery reflects the social realities of untouchability, but its

use here is unmistakably subversive. The figure of *Dom Raja* challenging the cosmic order, reflects the defiance of a community routinely excluded from the social order on earth.

The cosmologies of these caste-groups are populated by figures like *Rahu* and *Dom Raja*—cosmic dissidents who disrupt the hierarchies of gods, planets and ritual worlds. *Dalit* artists have long drawn on these icons not only to represent their world but to reverse its gaze, making caste visible, narratable and open to contestation.

Salhesa and the Making of a *Dalit* Iconography

The fourth and final strand of *Dalit* visual resistance that I dwell upon today, emerges in the paintings of Raja Salhesa—the *Dusadh* folk hero—whose exploits circulate across Mithila. Unlike Ram or Krishna, Salhesa does not belong to the Sanskritic pantheon. He is a folk sovereign, a king, protector and moral arbiter, remembered for upholding justice and resisting oppression. In contemporary retellings, Salhesa stands not merely as a figure of devotion but as a symbol of pride, dignity and caste assertion. Salhesa paintings show us what counter-worlding is—a visual practice that does not only protest exclusion but proposes alternative ontologies. These works reject inherited iconographies and offer new cosmologies.

But the introduction of Raja Salhesa into the pictorial repertoire of *Dusadh* artists must be understood not only from the social or religious perspectives, but as an overtly political project. Its genealogy traces back to the *Dusadh Mahasabha*, the first caste association formed among the “untouchable” castes in 1891. The late nineteenth century was a moment of intense caste mobilisation, when communities across north India began organising to claim administrative concessions, education and political rights under the colonial state. For the *Dusadhs*, this required the mobilisation of symbols that could crystallise a collective identity. Salhesa, whose stories were already embedded in the collective memory of the community across Mithila and wider Bihar—became precisely that figure.

Resistance, however, is never singular; it travels across registers—symbolic, material, affective and political. *Dalit* iconography, too, moves through these multiple registers. One of the most striking examples of this I encountered was at the Salhesa Mela, held annually at *Rajaji ki Phulwari* in Province 2 of Nepal (19).



19. Entrance of the *Rajaji ki Phulwari*, Nepal, 2010

This is a transborder pilgrimage, drawing thousands of *Dusadhs* and other *Dalit* groups from India and Nepal. Here, devotion is inseparable from political memorialization. It is a gathering around a deity who does not belong to the brahmanical pantheon but resides at the centre of *Dalit* histories and aspirations.

Near Raja Salhesa's garden, a temple is located that houses Salhesa as a deity (20), surrounded by *Dusadh* soldiers and mythical companions. These figures probably allude to the historical recruitment of

Dusadh men into the British army, culminating in the formation of the *Dusadh* Regiment (21). The iconography here is complex – it seems to map myth onto history, dignity onto labour and sovereignty onto the very bodies that caste society sought to render disposable.



20. *Raja Salhesa's temple, Nepal, 2010*



21. *Dusadh soldiers, Raja Salhesa's temple, Nepal, 2010*

Taken together, these shifts point towards a deliberate political resurrection of Raja Salhesa, from an everyday hero to a divine pivot around which community mobilisation, social reform and political aspiration could be organised. Recognising Salhesa's centrality in *Dusadh* art requires us to see how caste assertion operates in the visual worlds through subversive symbolism, resurrected heroes and the remaking of divine genealogies.

'Canonizing' *Dalit* interventions

Dalit iconography continues to sit uneasily within the broad category of 'Mithila Art' or 'Madhubani Paintings', precisely because it disturbs the cultural hegemony of 'upper' caste aesthetics. Despite initial state apathy and the continued exclusion of *Godana*, it eventually carved out a space in the market. Its repetitive motifs began appearing on paper, canvas and textiles, gradually entering urban homes. Over time, artists from non-*Dalit* communities also began painting *Godana*. Yet even amid newer hybrid and fused styles, caste

boundaries persist. *Kachhni* and *Bharni* have cross-pollinated freely, but *Godana* largely remains in the hands of *Dalit* artists. I once encountered a Brahmin artist who had attempted a *Godana* composition, but had replaced Salhesa with Krishna, stating, “Salhesa is not my god.” (22)



22. Krishna in Godana style, Artist Unknown, Jitwarpur, 2010

A significant moment in the expansion of *Dalit* visual vocabulary occurred in 2007, when Chano Devi and Roudi Paswan met Gujarat-based *Dalit* activist Martin Macwan. Macwan, long engaged in anti-caste activism and children’s literature, invited a group of *Dalit* artists from Mithila to Dalit Shakti Kendra near Ahmedabad for a collaborative project. The task was to create illustrations for a children’s book on anti-caste icons such as Jotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar. Carrying the *Godana* idiom into a completely different cultural landscape, the artists produced vivid paintings of the Phule-Ambedkar universe—*Mahad Satyagraha*, caste discrimination in schools and access to wells, and collective *Dalit* mobilisations (23–26). For artists like Shanti Devi, this was a transformative encounter, introducing them to histories of *Dalit* assertion beyond Mithila.



23-26. Dalit Shakti Kendra series
Reproduced from Dalit Foundation



Not all such experiments circulate widely in the art market, but they matter. They mark important expansions in the iconographic universe of *Dalit* artists, pushing the boundaries of what Mithila art can depict and refusing the confinement of *Dalit* creativity to folk cosmologies alone. These interventions reveal an ongoing effort to ‘canonize’ *Dalit* histories, heroes and imaginations within a visual field that has long resisted their presence.

Looking forward, looking back

Collaborations like these exemplify how resistance travels and transforms. Paintings created for Macwan’s project were not mere illustrations; they were pedagogies, using pigment and line to teach children histories of discrimination, dignity and dissent. It reminds us that cultural production is not just expressive. It is epistemic. It shapes how we know the world.

So, the question that remains is: Can we re-imagine the visual canon? If *Bharni* and *Kachhni* continue to stand in for ‘Mithila Art’, *Godana* will continue to remain its Other – excluded in state and non-State institutions as well as the artworld comprising scholars, patrons, and the artist community itself. *Godana*’s ghettoisation, which stemmed from the nexus of caste and patriarchy, and reproduced in “modern” institutions, will continue to be delegitimised by the cultural politics of authenticity.

This tension becomes sharper with the Geographical Indications regime. The GI for “Madhubani Paintings” registered in 2006, aims to safeguard Maithil artists and prevent appropriation. Yet by anchoring authenticity to the soil of Madhubani district, it re-invokes older ideas of purity and territorial belonging. It also raises critical questions. Who qualifies as a “Maithil artist”? Are diasporic or Anglophone practitioners included? What happens to art forms like *Godana*, that do not neatly fit into the category of Madhubani Painting itself?

Let me end with some reflections.

To build a *Dalit* visual politics is to treat the margin not as a site of lack but as a site of radical creativity, memory and survival. As Martin Macwan reminds us, *Dalit* resistance works through symbolic inversion, counter-memory and pride. And as Y. S. Alone argues, *Dalit* art must be read not for brahminical standards of technique, but for rupture, defiance and collective affect. The carcass in *Gobar* art, for instance, is not grotesque – it is a caste-marked semiotic, naming the labour that society refuses to see. *Salhesa* is not merely a folk deity – he is an anti-canonical presence invoked on thresholds, symbolizing a cosmology of courage, care and refusal.

To imagine a *Dalit* visual politics, then, is to imagine art as a refusal of invisibilisation, tokenism and brahminical aesthetics.

Centering *Dalit* art in Mithila is not simply about expanding the canon; it is about changing the very terms of what counts as art.

Thank you.



Cinematic Resistance: *The First Wedding* as a Protest Narrative against Heteronormativity

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Abstract: This paper analyses Akshay Parvatkar's short film *The First Wedding* (2020) as a protest narrative against heteronormativity. The film, which was created for Ravindra Bhavan, Margao's 60 Years in 60 Hours Short Film-making Challenge, depicts a heterosexual couple's decision to marry in a world of same-sex couples. By reversing social attitudes, the film explores the hardships of a heterosexual relationship in a society that dictates who may love whom. This analysis argues that the film's celebration of heterosexual love, at the expense of same-sex couples, is a powerful act of rebellion. It emphasises the need for acceptance and preparedness to deal with the social consequences of one's choices. Therefore, this study is a confluence of gender expression, sexual orientation, and the notion of cinema as cultural resistance.

Keywords: Couple, film, heterosexual, love, marriage, minority

Introduction

The First Wedding (2020) is an unusual mockumentary written and directed by Goan filmmaker Akshay Parvatkar. It was created on a tight budget for the "60 Years in 60 Hours" Short Film-making Challenge organised by Ravindra Bhavan, Margao, Goa. Produced by Tissue Paper Films – Porvorim, *The First Wedding* went on to win the Best Film Award at the competition. With a running time of eight minutes, it features Anuj Prabhu and Purti as Akash and Bhumi, respectively, who are heterosexual lovers in a world of same-sex couples. In an interview with journalist Frederick Noronha, Akshay reveals that his film was inspired by the American mockumentary *Zelig* (1983), starring Woody Allen as a "chameleon man" who can transform into the personalities around him (Noronha).

Synopsis of the Short Film

The First Wedding commences with a photoshoot of Akash and Bhumi at Miramar Beach, much to the disgust of a same-sex couple passing by. The scene cuts to a documentary-style interview ahead of their wedding. Akash and Bhumi answer questions by an unseen interviewer while conveying their feelings for each other. Their confidence, pride and happiness are evident through their body language and responses. Viewers learn that they are making a bold choice – "being the first one of opposite sex and that too deciding to marry" (Parvatkar 1:58–2:03).

They describe their attraction to the opposite sex since childhood, eventually realising that anyone can like anyone. This was a matter of preference, and they had grown tired of hiding their respective identities. Bhumi, who was Akash's electronics teacher, inspires his analogy of a transmitter and receiver to illustrate their love. "If I transmit, I like you; if you receive, I like you as well! I ended up getting zero in the viva, but I think I got a hundred out of hundred in life" (Parvatkar 2:40–2:57).



Given the lack of a support system, the couple decided to set an example with their unapologetic love, willing to risk it all for each other. However, their privacy is invaded by unseen assailants who barge in and drag them away. The short film concludes with a chilling revelation: “Bhumi and Akash were arrested for unlawful activities a day before their wedding. They are currently serving a ten-year sentence in the national jail” (Parvatkar 7:29–7:35).

The First Wedding as a Protest Narrative

The First Wedding critiques the societal pressure on individuals to justify or apologise for their romantic attractions. It suggests that the legally recognised union of lovers is sometimes distorted by social expectations and familial pressure. The short film argues that the opposition to love limits individual autonomy and expression. Further, it suggests that marriage should not be reduced to a people-pleasing agreement where everybody presses with contradictory demands on every last detail.

The short film reverses the foundational premise of compulsory heterosexuality, a theory advanced by Adrienne Rich (1980), which posits that heterosexuality is not a natural inclination but a phenomenon that is assumed and enforced upon people by a patriarchal, allonormative and heteronormative society. The film also draws on Judith Butler’s concept of the performativity of gender and sexuality, which demonstrates how social conditioning influences the construction of identity. Thus, *The First Wedding* revisits aspirations and apprehensions of love, while reframing them as a space of radical subversion.

Going by the norm, the couple’s families assumed they were homosexuals, and were arranging for them to marry same-sex partners. Despite these conflicts, the couple’s love for each other stayed steadfast. They did not require an institution to validate or authorise their love; yet they were keen to exchange vows and prove their commitment through marriage. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, they were ready to make it work. Clearly, they would rather accept their identities than repress them. Instead of attempting to live a lie, they pledged to be their true, unfiltered selves.

The short film is an attempt to follow one’s heart and tackle the system by resisting flawed ideologies. Its provocative act of interchanging the minority with the majority intends to spark conversations on the social privileges and problems that are often taken for granted. By marginalising heterosexual lovers, viewers experience the unease of being ‘the other’ and begin to question their own attitudes towards same-sex couples.

The film poses a powerful question: if love is a display of affection, when and why does it become an act of rebellion? As Bhumi says, “Our mere existence is a problem” (Parvatkar 5:07). The couple’s simple desire to hold hands, walk in public and freely be themselves is framed as a defiant act against a society that sees their being as an offence. The couple is made to question if their thoughts and actions were problematic. The fact was that *they* were not the problem; society was. Everything the couple said and did was seen as defiant, stubborn and anti-establishment.

The First Wedding exemplifies how being authentic can be perceived as offensive. Sexual minorities are often unable to lead a dignified private life because they are constantly reminded that they are different. They might easily be outnumbered by people who overtly express their disgust, be it at home, the workplace or in the public sphere. With the prevalence of prejudice, they are prone to being misunderstood, judged unfairly and physically, emotionally and verbally abused. Cases of ill-treatment often go unreported, and lack of intervention only exacerbates the damage.



The LGBTQIA+ community has long been fighting for the respect and fundamental rights they have been deprived of. By virtue of existence, they are placed at a disadvantage as compared to heterosexuals. It is imperative to address these issues and facilitate change. Humankind needs harmony, not just tolerance. Efforts should be directed towards reducing discrimination and promoting the normalisation of sexual orientations. Awareness of human rights and the accommodation of each other's needs should be our priorities. A pluralistic and inclusive society requires advocacy and engagement.

The First Wedding also considers the social apprehensions of coming out as a sexual minority. By sharing it openly, will one's prospects change for the better? What will people say? Will it worsen the feelings of guilt and shame? How a person copes with outright rejection is significantly contingent on the response of their immediate family and friends. It is important to celebrate such stories of courage because they need to be shared. However, one cannot deny the possibility of adverse consequences and the pressure of dealing with them. Navigating through each day could be a challenge. Sexual minorities may find it difficult to remain optimistic and not get provoked by triggers. While there is discourse about such minorities standing up for themselves, actual support is far from sufficient.

Sexuality constitutes a fundamental aspect of individual identity, and it is imperative that people of all sexual orientations receive validation, acceptance and social support. Arguments against the full recognition of queer sexual expression are ideologically and ethically indefensible. Public displays of affection should be granted the same status for same-sex couples as for their heterosexual counterparts. The goal should be to empower marginalised communities to achieve their full potential. While educational reforms are necessary to foster a more dialogic and inclusive curriculum, the implementation of such initiatives is fraught with significant challenges. It is crucial to dismantle prevailing prejudices and dispel misconceptions about the LGBTQIA+ community. Although conservative attitudes are resistant to change, there is evidence of a gradual, progressive shift in societal norms. Significant work remains to be done to normalise homosexuality, countering its stigma as a disease or "mistake" (Trivedi).

Conclusion

The First Wedding is a humorous yet thought-provoking short film that emphasises the need for belongingness and loyalty while navigating social hurdles. By reversing the sexual dynamic, the film documents a fight for equal and inclusive opportunities for all. It tries to sensitise viewers about same-sex marriages and contributes to the movement for legalising same-sex marriages. Even today, homosexuality is yet to be decriminalised in many cultures. Mass campaigns are needed to revoke discriminatory laws and to safeguard the rights of marginalised communities. More social acceptance and substantial measures are needed.

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Unlocking the Power of Humour: Re-defining Resistance in Select Diaries and Weblogs of Iraqi Women

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Abstract: Theories about power and resistance hardly ever concentrate on humour, and literature about humour hardly ever deliberates upon how it can be used to counter oppression. Humour as a form of resistance to domination is a relatively under-researched area. In other words, the strategic use of humour in challenging oppression and coercion has received less critical attention. This essay illustrates how humour has been used by some female Iraqi diary writers (both online and offline) as a subtle, yet powerful form of everyday resistance against the United States' invasion and occupation of the country. The first section of the article provides a brief theoretical framework for studying the complex and heterogenous phenomenon called resistance. In the following section, the article makes an attempt to critically analyse the complex relationship existing between the two interlinked forces: power and resistance. The concluding section of this article exclusively portrays an in-depth analysis of the strategic use of humour as a tool of resistance against the existing power structures. Based on different theories of humour (such as superiority theory, incongruity theory, relief theory etc.), this section examines the use of various forms of humour in these diaries and blogs as an alternative mode of resistance.

Keywords: Blogs, diaries, humour, Iraq, resistance, war.

Despite the ubiquity of the word 'resistance' in social sciences, it remains loosely defined. Whether there can be or should be one single definition of this essentially "plural, malleable and evolving" (Baaz et al. 138) phenomenon is a matter of much contention. The literal meaning (not in the strictly sociopolitical sense in which I will be using the term in my article) of the noun 'resistance,' according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is "the act of fighting against something that is attacking you, or refusing to accept something" ("resistance"). In medical/biological sciences, 'resistance' means a pathogen's (a disease producing microorganism like a virus or a bacteria) capacity to hold out against a harmful chemical agent (a drug). In the arena of physics, 'resistance' is something that opposes the flow of current (or electrons) in an electrical circuit. Quite interestingly, provided that the current is constant, if power increases, so does resistance, and vice versa (it metaphorically applies to 'resistance' in sociopolitical sense as well). In whatever sense may the term be used; an idea of opposition is inherent in the definition of 'resistance.' This article, however, will deal exclusively with political (politics has to be understood in a wider sense) resistance, which, in its simplest sense, means opposing or showing disagreement with some authority.

The term 'resistance' has its root in Latin *resistere*, which means "to make a stand against." According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 'resistance' is (i) "[t]he act of resisting, opposing, withstanding etc.," (ii) "[p]ower or capacity to resist," (iii) "[o]pposition of some force . . . to another or others," and (iv) "[a] force that retards, hinders or opposes motion . . ." (qtd. in Knowles and Linn 4). In contemporary literary criticism, the term 'resistance' was first applied by Ghassan Kanafani – a Palestinian writer and critic – while describing Palestinian literature in his book *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987) offers a comprehensive and impactful analysis of literary works emerging from Third World liberation movements. By delving deeper than a mere introduction to Third



World literature, her study underscores the pivotal role of literary texts in shaping political discourses and emphasises the importance of informed critical commentary.

Resistance and Power

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. – Foucault (1978: 95-96).

The discussion on resistance so far makes it evident that power and resistance are interdependent forces that keep on shaping each other. The word 'power,' comes from Latin *potere*, meaning "to be able" (Sharp et al. 2). Scholars like J.P. Sharp, P. Routledge, R. Paddson and C. Philo categorise power into two forms – 'dominating power' and 'resisting power.' Dominating power "attempts to control or coerce others, impose its will upon others, or manipulate the consent of others" (2-3), while, resisting power "resist[s] the impositions of dominating power" (2-3). Therefore, any act, which challenges power by refusing to be dominated passively, falls within the ambit of resistance. However, the German political scientist Gerhard Göhler, in his essay "'Power to' and 'Power over'" opines that power has two dimensions: 'power over' signifying power over other people, i.e., "enforcement of one's own intentions over those of others" and 'power to' signifying the "ability to do or achieve something independent of others" (28). While Göhler's 'power over' resembles Sharp et al.'s concept of 'dominating power,' 'power to' is linked to the concept of 'resisting power.'

Joseph S. Nye Jr., in his famous book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, talks about two forms of power – 'hard power' and 'soft power.' He defines 'hard power' as "the ability to change what others do [through] coercion" (7); while 'soft power' implies "the ability to shape what others want" (7) through the engagement with one's culture and values. A nation's soft power, according to Nye, is based on three resources – "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority" (7). Emphasising the value of 'soft power,' Nye asserts, "Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive" (X). However, Max Weber categorizes power into three categories—economic, social and political. According to him, economic power refers to "the measurement of the ability to control events by virtue of material advantage" (qtd. in Rawat 224). Social power, on the other hand, is all about "informal community opinion," "family position," "honour," "prestige and patterns of consumption," and "lifestyle" (qtd. in Rawat 224); while, political power, in Weber's opinion, is dependent upon "the relationship to the legal structure, party affiliation and extensive bureaucracy" (qtd. in Rawat 225). Therefore, if economic power creates hierarchy by controlling material things for economic gain, social power creates hierarchy by controlling people socially and compelling them to adhere by social rules. Political power, visible generally in a democracy, creates hierarchy and keeps it functioning through a group of people called public representatives who control and decide the future of a nation by formulating and enforcing policies. Hierarchy leads to inequality, which eventually gives rise to resistance.

The Foucauldian Concept of Power

However, one cannot talk about hierarchy, power and resistance without mentioning Michel Foucault. For him, people who occupy the topmost strata of class structure do not have a monopoly over power. As McGee states, "Foucault rejects the idea of power as deliberate coercion exercised by actors, and instead holds that 'power is everywhere,' embedded and transmitted in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes



of truth,' something which constitutes social actors rather than being wielded by them" (173). According to Foucault, the traditional concept of power, which he terms as "juridico-discursive" (Powers 29) has three aspects:

- a) Power is possession
- b) Power flows downward
- c) Primary function of power is repressive.

On the contrary, for Foucault, power is not an individual's possession; rather, he believes in the "multiplicity of power relation" (92), exercised from countless points. According to Foucault:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates; or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised in a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation. (Brito et. al. 4)

Moreover, he does not approve of the traditional notion about power being something negative or regressive. He opines:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 92-93).

Therefore, the Foucauldian concept of power, unlike the traditional one, seems more productive and inclined towards resistance power deployed by the less powerful to thwart the exercise of oppressive power through class, institution or state.

In the Foucauldian theoretical framework of power, three primary distinctions are made:

- i. Sovereign power
- ii. Disciplinary power
- iii. Bio power

To Foucault, sovereign power is the power of law, which is "legislative, prohibitive and censoring: a power that primarily makes use of the law and law-like regulations" (Lilja and Vinthagen 110). Boycotts, rebellions, strikes, revolutions, political disobedience etc. are acts of resistance through which people undermine sovereign power. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, works towards training and controlling individuals, and also punishing them if any violation occurs. Surveillance is an integral part of such power. Resistance to disciplinary power is carried out in covert and secretive ways, which James Scott calls



'everyday resistance.' In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault sheds light on a power "that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (137). This form of power, which, significantly, has a 'positive influence on life' is later designated by him as biopower. However, Resistance surfaces when there is an attempt at thwarting the execution of any form of power.

Renowned political philosopher and theorist, Hannah Arendt, opines in accord with Foucault's notion of power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. (qtd. in Habermas and McCarthy 4)

Therefore, according to Arendt, the existence of power depends largely on "people," without whose support it is impossible for a power-holder to exercise his power. Contrary to the popular notion of power flowing hierarchically from top to bottom, Arendt conceptualizes power as something, which emanates from the people at the bottom.

Interplay between Power and Resistance

The interplay between power and resistance, however, is not as simple as it seems to be. Critics like Karner (2000) have brought to the fore the "dynamic between power and resistance" (Vinthagen and Johansson 28). There is an ever-going interaction between power (dominance) and resistance and the two keep on shaping each other. Social change that takes place as a result of such "interactive dynamic" "shows various alternative patterns" rather than following "any single logic" (29). Acts of resistance, therefore, do not always lead to positive change and the outcome may be the very opposite of the intended one. Strategies of resistance adopted by a subaltern/ subaltern group can sometimes lead to increased power, to the resister's detriment. Vinthagen and Johansson elucidate the point by giving the example of what happened in an organization during the 1990s when cynicism, skepticism, and other such acts by the employees to the management resulted in increased control and "reproduced power rather than undermining it" (29). They further observe that though the interaction between these two opposing forces is an asymmetrical one, it is not always power that controls the dynamic. Though the usual tendency is "to see resistance as a reaction to power" and thus as only secondary to power (29), critics like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that "resistance" is an original activity that acts without the consent of power" (29).

Hollander and Einwohner (2004) conceptualise the relationship between power and resistance as a cyclical one. In their model, "domination leads to resistance, which, in turn, leads to further exercise of power, provoking further resistance and so on" (qtd. in Vinthagen and Johansson 30). But Vinthagen and Johansson propose a spiral model instead:

Power and resistance affect each other throughout history, in what we would instead describe as a spiral, or rather constant spiral-dynamics of actions and reactions, of innovations and counter-innovations, measures and counter-measures. (31)

Confronted with oppositions, those in power and authority devise newer ways of subjugation, control and oppression. The subjugated, on the other hand, take recourse to "new methods and strategies" (31). It is, therefore, a matter of constant improvisations and adaptation which leads to the evolution of newer techniques on both sides.



The Iraqi Resistance

As Bayat has pointed out, power and resistance do not exist in binary opposition, but in an ambivalent relationship, where one affects the other. In contexts like that of Iraq, where open resistance might have brought fatal consequences, and where everyday life became synonymous with everyday politics, resistance seems to be a way of life rather than some extraordinary event. Moreover, since war is increasingly becoming personal day by day; since it is not limited to the battlefield and targeting civilians (predominantly made up of women and children) has become normal, and since women's experiences during times of war drastically differ from their male counterparts, we need to concentrate on the ways women navigate war-space for a better understanding and conceptualisation of the complexities of war. However, while conducting research, reducing female war experiences to only what their bodies have gone through would be limiting. Researchers like H. Patricia Hynes (in her article "On the battlefield of women's bodies: An overview of the harm of war to women"), Cynthia Cockburn (in her article "War and Security: Women and Gender"), Karen Brounéus, Erika Forsberg, Kristine Höglund and Kate Lonergan (in their article "The Burden of War Widows: Gendered Consequences of War and Peace-Building in Sri Lanka.") and numerous others have shown how women are treated as casualties of war due to changing family dynamics and sexual violence. But scholarly works concentrating solely on women's survival strategies, especially, the acts identified as everyday forms of resistance, which differ from different forms of direct confrontation are few in number. In this article, I intend to explore how humour has been used as a subtle yet powerful strategy by Iraqi women to resist the dominant hegemonic structure of the western discourse on Iraq and to reclaim power through the humanisation of Iraqi people during the Gulf War and the American invasion of Iraq.

Use of Humour as Resistance

The use of humour in various literary forms like *nukat* or *du'aba* (jokes), *sukhriyya* (satire), *hazl* (jest), *tahakkumand hija* (derision) has long been a part of Arabic culture. Examples can be found in literature from almost every period ranging from the old Arabic 'invective poetry' (where poets from different tribes engaged in the act of ridiculing one another) to the Arab poetry of classical age and the satirical *Abbasid* and post-*Abbasid adab* (Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich 15). The humorous medieval folk tales of Nasreddin Hoca, the *Maqamat* of Hamadhani and al-Hariri, the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* are only some of the numerous examples where wit, irony and subversive humor has been used to challenge existing power structures and transgress norms imposed upon by the authority. It is this rich heritage of Arab satire and subversive humor that these diary writers have drawn upon to resist the daily oppression faced by them.

Theories about power and resistance hardly ever concentrate on humor, and literature about humor hardly ever deliberates upon how it can be used to counter oppression. Generally, humor is any content which is used with the intention to make someone laugh. However, apart from that, as stated by Sandberg and Tutenges:

It can be used to exert control and resist being controlled, to reduce stress and to generate well-being, to enhance in group solidarity and out-group hostility . . . Humor may sometimes be histrionic in its expression, but it can also be subtle, covert, and diffuse. It is culturally relative, since what is "a laughing matter in one culture may be criminal in another". Even within the same cultural milieu, humor can be variously interpreted. Given its ubiquity in social life, including the social life of



marginalized populations, humor deserves close attention from researchers interested in crime, marginalization, and other social problems. (564)

Scholarly works on humor have categorised three different types of humor— (i) superiority theory, (ii) incongruity theory and (iii) relief theory. In case of the first one, humour is “driven by feelings of superiority of an individual or group against other individuals or collectives” (Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). Therefore, according to this theory, humour derives from the sense of superiority one enjoys while looking down upon and laughing at others. Incongruity theory, on the other hand, focuses on “cognitive aspects of humour and conceptualises it as a social phenomenon, depending on the violation of what is socially and culturally perceived as normal” (Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). In this case, humor is derived from the gap between what is expected to happen and what is actually taking place. According to Kuipers, the juxtaposition of incongruous objects often involves the “transgression of social norms, or the breaking of established social patterns” (qtd. in Damir-Geiltsdorf and Milich 22). The third theory of humor, i.e., the Relief Theory perceives humour as a kind of emotional catharsis, healing us from several psychological scars. Papazoglou rightly asserts, humour, “enhancing the production of hormones called endorphins, which act as natural painkillers, thereby increasing vitality and reducing stress” (316). On “Day 19” of the first Gulf War, Nuha al-Radi expresses her shock about Baghdad being heavily bombed in a humorous, or rather, sarcastic way, as she writes, “They were supposed to be freeing Kuwait. Maybe they need a map?” (28). In her January 28, 2005 blog entry, Hadiya writes:

I told you before about the water in Baghdad — that there was none in the days that we were there. But I didn’t tell you about the water we were drinking when it finally came out of the tap. I studied in school that water doesn’t have a color, odor or taste. From my tap, I discovered I was wrong. So was I drinking water or something else? (42)

An alarming phenomenon like the unavailability of clean and safe drinking water is presented in the form of dark humour, probably to ameliorate the pain of not getting the basic necessities of life fulfilled. Another instance of black humour is seen when she recounts the news she heard about people throwing dead bodies in the river and believes that the toxins released from these bodies are contributing to the water’s foul smell and murky colour. Hadiya, in her June 7, 2005 blog entry, posts a joke:

A man was taking a walk in Central Park in New York. Suddenly he sees a little girl being attacked by a pit bull. He runs over and starts fighting with the dog, and succeeds in killing the dog and saving the girl’s life.

A policeman who was watching the scene walks over and says “You are a hero, tomorrow you can read it in all the newspapers: *Brave New Yorker saves the life of a little girl!*”

The man says: “But I am not a New Yorker!”

“Oh, then it will say in newspapers in the morning: *Brave American saves the life of a little girl!*”

“But I am not an American!” answers the man.

“Oh, what are you then?” the policeman asks.

The man says, “I am Pakistani.”

The next day the newspaper says: *Islamic Extremist kills innocent American dog.* (68)

Thus, in the form of a joke, Hadiya presents the serious issue of Islamophobia spreading rapidly in various parts of the worlds, especially in the western countries. By making her readers aware of the situation, she, subtly urges for a change in thinking.



However, political humor, which, according to Jason T. Peifer, is a “crucial part of society’s political discourse” (qtd. in Pearce 69) has an interesting quality of attracting those who are not even interested in politics, thereby escalating political learning and awareness among those who are lacking in political cognisance. As pertinently pointed out by Pearce:

Political humor does have an effect: the outcome of consumption of political humor is sometimes increased feelings of political efficacy; greater interest in discussion and participating in politics, and lower trust in politicians and greater cynicism. (69)

However, at times of serious social unrest like the one under discussion in Iraq, when protesting openly involves fatal risk, people sometimes tend to use humour as a tool of “soft resistance” (qtd. in Sandberg and Tutenges 567), which, by challenging oppressive socio-discursive narratives, provide a sense of power and situational supremacy. As Sorensen opines, “a demonstration, a street theatre, or hanging up of a poster has a very different impact in a dictatorial society, where fear dominates, than in a democratic society. Fear is not something one can touch and feel, but it still has a dramatic impact” (Sorensen 185). Indeed, in situations like the one under discussion, such acts of defiance can be perilous, carrying risks of arrest, torture, or even death. Humour, in such scenarios, can be a potent tool in nonviolent resistance, allowing individuals and groups to challenge oppressive systems in creative and subversive ways. Playing a crucial role in exposing absurdities and critiquing policies, humour can be a powerful strategy in the fight against oppression.

Riverbend’s both volumes of *Baghdad Burning* are replete with such political humour. Critiquing the contemporary political scenario of the country, Riverbend, in her September 24, 2003 post, writes:

For Sale: A fertile, wealthy country with a population of around 25 million . . . plus around 150,000 foreign troops, and a handful of puppets. Conditions for sale: should be either an American or British corporation (forget it if you’re French) . . . Please contact one of the members of the Governing Council in Baghdad, Iraq for more information. (*Baghdad Burning I* 76)

Here, in a sarcastic tone, she not only critiques the US war policies which has exploited her fertile, wealthy motherland and subjected her 25 million people to a life of humiliation and pain, but also critiques the existing government of Iraq, the members of which are nothing but mere puppets in the hands of the invaders. She again takes dig at the members of the Iraqi Governing Council, whom she calls “a bunch of power-hungry people” who are absent in most of the meetings of the council in her November 13, 2003 post:

I can imagine Bremer preparing for a meeting with the pioneers of Iraqi democracy, the pillars of liberty . . . the Iraqi Puppet Council . . . He strides into the lavish room, Italian heels clicking on the marble floor — there will be 25 faces today . . . He stops in the middle of the room, heart sinking . . . Why are there only 5 unsure faces? . . . Bremer roars and rages — where are the Puppets? . . . How dare they miss yet another meeting! But they all have their reasons, Mr. Bremer: Talbani is suffering from indigestion after an ample meal last night; Iyad Allawi is scheduled for a pedicure in Switzerland this afternoon; Al-Hakim is jetting around making covert threat to the Gulf countries, and Chalabi says he’s not attending meetings anymore, he’s left the country and will be back when it’s time for the elections . . . (137)

At a time, when revolting against the powerful members of IGC involved fatal risks, Riverbend chose political humor as her tool of resistance to critique their lavish ways of living, and their lack of communication among themselves and with the people of Iraq whom they are supposed to represent and



protect. Instead, as suggested by Riverbend, they are working as an extension of the occupying forces. Here, humour is used as a powerful tool against oppression. By juxtaposing the seriousness of the issue of oppression with the lightness of comedic expression, Riverbend makes a very smart use of political humour. Oppression, by its very nature, is a grave and somber reality that demands attention and action. However, when humour is employed as a form of resistance, it subtly shifts the dynamics of the situation. The act of using humour in such a context inherently suggests that the speaker is not entirely bound by the oppressive framework, signaling a degree of defiance and freedom. In her December 18, 2004 post, titled "Christmas Wishlist," Riverbend lists items like gasoline, cooking gas, kerosene (for heaters), running water, diesel generators, flashlights and candles (*Baghdad Burning II* 47) for the festival. However, she doesn't include "peace," "security" and "freedom" in her Wishlist, as "Christmas miracles are exclusive to Charles Dickens" (*Baghdad Burning II* 47). When someone includes such trivial items in her Christmas Wishlist, there remains nothing more to be commented upon how low the living conditions have reached for them. Moreover, categorising 'peace,' 'freedom,' and 'security' as 'miracles' lays bare the incompetence of the governing bodies ruling Iraq. Talking of Santa Claus, in the same post, Riverbend writes:

When Santa delivers please make sure he is wearing a bullet-proof vest and helmet. He should also politely ring the doorbell or knock, as a more subtle entry might bring him face to face with an AK-47. With the current fuel shortage, reindeer and a sleigh are highly practical—but Rudolph should be left behind as the flashing red nose might create a bomb scare. (*Baghdad Burning II* 48)

This humorous post about the precautions Santa should take before visiting Iraq on Christmas, reveals a lot about the nation's the then socio-political scenario—the possibility of being shot at any moment; the hazards of subtle movements, which might be interpreted as suspicious and thereby lead to death; the worsening condition of fuel shortage all over Iraq and the Iraqi people's palpable panic about being bombed anytime. This contrast between the seriousness of the oppression and the lightness of humour creates a unique space for subversion. Even if the humour itself does not succeed in making people laugh, the very attempt to use it in the face of oppression changes the narrative. It implies that the oppressed are not passive recipients of their circumstances but are instead active agents who can redefine the terms of engagement. The reformulation of a serious issue in a humorous mode is, in itself, a statement of resistance, creating an expectation of further challenges to the status quo.

However, another important aspect of humor is that it can help individuals preserve self-respect and dignity by overcoming political apathy. In other words, humour helps create a sense of identity and provides a sense of control. While writing about Bush's covert and hasty Iraq visit (to say more precisely, his visit to Baghdad International Airport, situated 20 minutes outside the city), which nobody knew about until it was broadcasted on different news channels after he left, Riverbend sarcastically writes:

Why didn't he walk the streets of the country he helped "liberate?" Why didn't he at least *hover* above the country he "liberated?" He constantly claims the situation is much better now than pre-war, so why isn't he taking advantage of our excellent security situation?! (*Baghdad Burning I* 152; original emphasis)

Here, we are not witnessing a timid, oppressed 'Arab woman' (the stereotype generally circulated while upholding the 'liberation' propaganda by the west), rather, we hear the words of a confident, brave woman fighting the oddities offered to her by the socio-political condition of a nation, where even world's one of the most powerful persons like the US President did not dare to venture. The mocking tone she uses in her post helps her regain self-confidence and sense of control amidst the chaos she is living in. However, this post is



not the only one where she critiques the 'liberation' propaganda. There are numerous such examples, where Riverbend expresses her dissatisfaction, or rather we should say, her frustration about this whole big lie about 'liberation.' In her March 20, 2004 blogpost, Riverbend sarcastically writes:

That was the beginning of the "liberation" . . . a liberation from sovereignty, a certain sort of peace, a certain measure of dignity. We've been liberated from our jobs, and our streets and the sanctity of our homes . . . some of us have been liberated from the members of our family and friends. (*Baghdad Burning I 227*)

In the same post, she makes a wonderful comparison between 'terrorism' and 'liberation,' using sarcasm as her tool:

We've learned that terrorism isn't actually the act of creating terror. It isn't the act of killing innocent people and frightening others . . . no, you see, that's called a "liberation." It doesn't matter what you burn or who you kill — if you wear khaki, ride a tank or Apache or fighter plane and drop missiles and bombs, then you're not a terrorist —you're a liberator. (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning I 228*)

Moreover, as humour is generally associated with innocence, which is in stark contrast to the serious phenomenon of oppression, the use of humour to resist oppression becomes a strategic move because, when violence is used to suppress non-violent resistance, it becomes difficult for the oppressor to justify it. As Gene Sharp opines:

Cruelties and brutalities committed against the clearly nonviolent are likely to disturb many people and fill some with outrage. Even milder violent repression appears less justified against nonviolent people than when employed against violent resisters. (657)

Despite the serious intention behind it, humour conveys a dual message: "Don't take me seriously," and "I'm not dangerous" (Sorensen 171). This duality allows humour to navigate the complex terrain of resistance without fully committing to outright confrontation. It provides a veil of ambiguity that can protect the speaker from severe repercussions while still delivering a potent critique of the oppressive system.

On December 24, 2003, Riverbend, in her blog post titled "Filling the Water Tank," documents a sweet and simple fun conversation she had with her brother E:

I took the final bucket upstairs to the roof . . . As I neared the water tank, I saw E leaning against it conversing with a pigeon that seemed oblivious to his presence. . . I thought he had finally lost it. "What are you talking about?!" I asked, awed.

"I was envying its wings . . ." he murmured, staring out into the distance.

"Ah . . . you'd like to fly away . . ." I nodded sagely.

"No . . . I just think it's fantastic he doesn't have to wait in line 8 hours for gas to get from one place to the next . . ." (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning I 172*)

This seemingly innocent conversation between a brother and sister has a subtle sense of sarcasm, critiquing the post-invasion scenario of the nation, where, even the non-human species enjoy more freedom of mobility than human beings. Moreover, this conversation also takes a dig at the electricity conditions of the 'New Iraq,' because of which they are compelled to fill the water tanks up manually instead of just turning on the electric pumps. The power of humour in oppressive situations lies not in its aggression, but in its nuanced



ability to convey complex messages. This type of humour requires courage to deploy, as it walks a fine line between seeming innocence and delivering a sharp critique. The ambivalence inherent in this humour allows it to be both subtle and powerful, making it a potent tool for resistance. In another post, Riverbend writes about cleaning their roof, which “took almost 2 hours, 600 sneezes and around 15 buckets of water” (*Baghdad Burning I* 271). Thus, time and again, throughout her blog, she keeps criticising the deplorable condition of Iraq using humor as her tool. The courage to use humor in this way is a testament to the resilience and creativity of those who employ it as a form of subtle resistance.

Conclusion

At the face of extensive destruction all around, the use of humour as an act of underground resistance, showcase the resilience of Iraqi women, who struggle, on a daily basis, to preserve the cultural and spiritual soundness of their communities. The use of humour in the face of oppression is a declaration of intent – a signal that those affected are not resigned to their fate and are willing to challenge it in creative and unexpected ways. This act of defiance through humour reclaims agency, asserts humanity, and momentarily shifts the balance of power. Coming from different backgrounds, these Iraqi women, consciously, never formed a group. But the content of their narratives, which bore the unmistakable scars of war and occupation, brought them close. Resistance, as we all know, is not only about bodily sustenance; but about mental wellbeing too. Resorting to humour not only helped these women survive the chaos and destruction all around but also restored in them a sense of empowerment and authority.

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Looking against the Phenomenology of Being: Analysing Ben Jelloun's

This Blinding Absence of Light as a Tale of Resistance

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Abstract: This paper argues how the idea of *being* problematises the essentialist hierarchy of mind and body. It challenges the Cartesian notion of human as a 'thinking being' and discusses existentialist notion of worldly being and existence. By referencing Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *This Blinding Absence of Light*, the paper discusses the impossibility of detaching the *transcendental ego* from its corporeal *body*. It highlights the plasticity of being (of the prisoners) that transforms them into other hybrid beings to resist every kind of inhuman torture. It leads us to the question: what is it that makes us human? Is it possible to constitute a being without a body? If the survivors become 'rare hybrid being[s]' can we call them 'human[s]' in its traditional sense? With these questions in mind, at first, the paper introduces the phenomenology of body with the concepts of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Then it reviews other research papers focusing on the primary text. The latter half of the paper analyses the story with the parallel study of the question of being, and spiritual escapism as an act of resistance. Overall, it challenges the traditional notion of 'human being' and gives a future prospect to address the crisis with the contemporary theory of posthumanism.

Keywords: Being, body, existentialism, mind, posthumanism, resistance.

What is it that makes us 'human'? Is it the rational mind or the able body, is it hope or resistance or is it the measurement of time and 'light'? Or what about the experiences and feelings, do that make us 'human'? With all these questions in mind, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *This Blinding Absence of Light* represents a story of 'surviving' that leads us towards an abyss of confusion that problematises the phenomenology of 'being' and 'existence'. At the very beginning of the *Discourse on the Method*, René Descartes, one of the early torch bearers of modern philosophy, proposes that reason is 'the only thing that makes us men [sic] and distinguishes us from the beasts...' (Descartes 36). His 'I think, therefore I am' simply concludes that it's the rational thought that makes us 'human' and places the human at the centre stage instead of God. According to classical 'humanism', rational thought, reason or the power of judgement became the basic signifier of human and the non-human. Though with Husserl's 'phenomenology', the study of the structures of consciousness, the mind-body problem looks very different. Breaking away from Cartesian mind-body dualism (Descartes distinguishes the *I* from the *body*), Husserl's ontology proposes a many-aspect monism. He believes, each human being- each *I* or *self* - falls under the two essences: Nature and Consciousness. Hence, "my body" and "my mind" or "consciousness" being different aspects of the same individual *I*. Later, Merleau-Ponty agrees, "External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act" (Merleau-Ponty 205). With the focus on consciousness, Husserl's philosophy talks about intentionality, object-directedness, body kinesthesia, and the influence of temporality as the mark of mental. His theory of self-objectivation is not prior or subsequent to the 'constitution' of the world but simultaneous with it. Thus, the self-unfolding and mundanisation of the transcendental subject, the establishing of a transcendental intersubjectivity and the having-of-the-world are parts in an interconnected process (Zahavi 80).



Later Heidegger, standing in the existential tradition [though in 1966 Heidegger himself confessed, that “it is hardly necessary anymore today to expressly observe that my thought deals neither with existentialism nor with existence-philosophy” (Wrathall and Dreyfus 1-2)], renounced Husserl’s old-fashioned phenomenological method primarily focused on consciousness because Heidegger’s interest was worldly relations rather than mental content. Twentieth-century existential approach does not define human being in terms of universal rational capacities, it rather argues for the essential absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence (Wrathall and Dreyfus 4-5). For Heidegger, the term ‘existence’ means ‘human mode of being’ and for Merleau-Ponty “*I existence*” refers to broader phenomena of being including the engagement with worldly things. In *Being and Time*, to discuss the ontological priority of the question of being, Heidegger says, “Being is always the being of a being” (Heidegger 7), and the totality of beings are surrounded by various domains like- history, nature, space, life, human beings, language and so on, that require a particular scientific investigation. He uses the term *Dasein* to define this being. This being exists within ‘worldly entities’, an organised context constituted by different goals, purposes and activities. Thus, the existential analysis of *Dasein* deals with the understanding of the *being of beings* accessible within the *world*.

Another existential philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty carried forward Heidegger’s idea of *Dasein* or ‘being-in-the-world’ to a study of our embodied experience of the world in perception. Ponty never doubts the existence of mental phenomena or denies Husserl’s observation but he insists that thought and sensation occur only against a background of perceptual activity that we always understand in bodily terms by engaging in it (Carman 206). As for both of them, body becomes the epitome of human engagement with the world. Husserl says, “I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body, nor it from me” (Husserl 1952: 159). His theory of bodily intentionality or ‘directedness of consciousness’ is grounded upon ‘sensations’, especially “the privilege of the localisation of touch sensations” (Husserl 1952: 150). With an approval of Husserl’s observation, Merleau-Ponty in his text *The Phenomenology of Perception*, alludes that one’s own body cannot be separated as a ‘discrete object’ of perception: “as for my body, I do not observe it itself: to be able to do so, I would need the use of a second body, which would not itself be observable” (Merleau-Ponty 91). Hence, the body remains an ‘incompletely constituted thing’ that is neither an internal subject nor a fully external object of experience. Taylor Carman concludes that in perception we understand ourselves not as *having* but as *being* bodies (Carman 208). Sartre presents a contradictory view. He distinguishes between the body-for-me and the body-for-the-other as entirely separate intentional objectivities. Neither does he deny the dexterity of the ‘felt body’, nor does he simplify the body as experienced from *within*. Thus, without ‘bodily intentionality’ is it possible to constitute a body as an embodied subject? Therefore, if ‘the body is our general means of having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 146), what about the body of the Tazmamart prisoners who had to forget their existence to survive the tortures: “I kept quiet. I thought nothing. I tried to melt away into the void and no longer hear or feel a thing” (Jelloun 10)?

Here, we should look into the phenomenological theory of ‘body schema’ in reference to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Regrettably, Colin Smith’s translation of the phrase *schema corporelas* “body image” is an error. Later Merleau-Ponty’s version of the terminology has been loaned from Henry Head, who explicitly differentiated these two terms ‘body schema’ and ‘the image of body’¹ The concept of schematism can be traced back to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, “it is not images of objects but schemata that ground our pure sensible concepts” (Carman 219). Hence, the ‘schema’ needs to be separated from the ‘image’. Basically, schemata are non-conscious rules and procedures structured by our brain or sensory system that control our body’s spatial actions. Therefore, it is a pragmatic representation of the body’s spatial properties that ensures ‘the construction of sensible images adequate to pure concepts of understanding’. It is an *a priori* condition that structures our *awareness of object*. Ponty’s concept of body schema partly reflects Kantian schematism. Breaking away from Kant’s intellectualist conception of schemata, Merleau-Ponty proposes an



integrated set of skills, which he calls 'habit,' which consists a kind of noncognitive, preconceptual "motor intentionality" (Merleau-Ponty 110). Therefore, as Taylor Carman pointed out, "the body schema is simply the bundle of skills" that are used as reference points for creating "a stable perceptual background against which I perceive or constitute the body's precognitive familiarity with itself and the world it inhabits." If by any chance the 'body schema' is disturbed, it affects our synthesis of the object. Henceforth, Merleau-Ponty says, "It is the *hinge* of the for itself and the for the other". When the prison survivor of Ben Jelloun's narrative confessed that his existence was, "Being there without being there. Shutting down my five senses, directing them elsewhere, giving them another life, as though I had been thrown into that grave without them" (Jelloun 6), it demands a radical reinterpretation of the phenomenology of *being*. Thus, by accessing his alternative life, he is forsaking his sensations as well as 'body schemata' or capacities that establish the body's precognitive familiarity with its changing world. Hence, the latter-half of this paper would discuss and problematise these concepts of *transcendental being* and *bodily-being-in-the-world* through the reference of *This Blinding Absence of Light*.

Shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Tahar Ben Jelloun was a Moroccan writer born on 1st December, 1944 and emigrated to France in 1961. Based on Aziz Binebine's prison memoir, this semi-fictional narrative *This Blinding Absence of Light* was published in 2001. Linda Coverdale translated it into English from French in 2002. It secured him the prestigious IMPAC (International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award) award in 2004. With its first-person narrative, Salim's (one of the survivors) voice emerges as a voice of resistance, arising from the abyss of darkness and death. Though the survivors were warned not to talk to the western media, but in the voice of Tahar Ben Jelloun 'the authorities have an enemy more formidable than 1000 foreign journalists.' This memoir catalogues the agonising journey of the living dead buried in the tombs of Tazmamart, their inhuman suffering, their resistance as well as their constant spirit and endurance for survival through the voice of Salim, the narrator. The background of the novel is set in the hellish secret prison of Tazmamart, Morocco, which was especially built for political prisoners who participated in the first failed *coup d'état* against king Hassan II in the palace of Skhirat, in 1971. It was 10 July, 1971 when the King was celebrating his 42nd birthday, almost 100 guests lost their lives at the military coup, but the King survived. Those 'traitor soldiers' were arrested and dispatched to Kenitra, a prison known for its harsh conditions, for two years, then to Tezmamart, that was more inhuman than Kenitra: "Once I had experienced Tazmamart, Kenitra seemed like an almost human prison in spite of its reputation. There was sunlight there, and a glimmer of hope" (Jelloun 23). Here 58 of them were thrown into the dark underground cells for eighteen years. Each cell was ten feet long and five feet wide with such a low ceiling that prevented the prisoners from standing up, an air vent, and a hole in the floor that served as the lavatory. With a minimum 'starchy food', with a limited undrinkable water, with no extra clothes to cover their bodies in the deadly winter, with no medical facilities, with an unbreathable air, with the stings of scorpions and cockroaches, and with complete darkness, they were condemned to a very slow, painful, agonising death. As a result of this inhuman suffering and torture, most of them lost their sanity, gave up hope and died but unexpectedly only three prisoners including the narrator survived with their fatigued body and spirit. Years of restless pain and endurance turned them into different beings. After being released, Salim finds his reflection in the dentist's mirror, and shockingly exclaims: "My eyes looked like those of a madman, although I haven't lost my mind. There was also death in my eyes, yet I am alive" (Jelloun 205). It problematises the question of *being* and the phenomenological concept of the transcendental *I*.

In the article "Into the Darkness" (2004) Maureen Freely shared a brief thematic discussion of the novel with a positive review who found 'something Beckettian' in Salim's voice as it echoes the same darkness, hopelessness and a limited environment. Asmaa Alheeh in her paper "Silenced Tongues, Speaking Bodies: The Representation of Postcolonial Bodies in Incarceration in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding*



Absence of Light (2022) examines the representation of the prisoners' bodies aligned with postcolonial bodies through the concepts of Julia Kristeva's "abject bodies", and Arthur Frank's "disciplined bodies". It focuses on the prisoners' 'hybrid bodies' when they live in the "in-between" where the meaning of existence and identity collapses. In the underground tomb, amidst the void of nothingness they lived a 'bare live' in-between life and death, between human and monster, and in-between past and future. It further talks about disciplined bodies as the site of amalgamation with the divine through self-control. It is the permeable and porous body that acts like a gate through which one can pass to the realm of the elevated mind and sublime spirit. Undoubtedly, these hybrid bodies provided the detainees with an extraordinary strength, will, and an undefeatable sense of peace that ironically empowered them against the torture of the law. This struggle of resistance and resilience reminds me of Frantz Fanon's seminal text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where he voiced, "Come, then, comrades; it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways. We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent and resolute" (311).

Another paper titled "Challenging Silence: Poetics of Representation in Taher Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* and Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*" (2021) by Ibrahim Sayed Fawzy compares the representations of tortured body and voice in the referred texts with the analysis of torture and trauma. It describes various mechanisms of resistance such as 'keeping one's dignity' in the midst of oppression and the prisoners' insistence 'on calling each other by their names instead of numbers'. All these critical works accept the individual detainees' body as detached, alienated, hybrid bodies that turn into a site of resistance against all odds. Therefore, can we define this new kind of body as 'human being' in its traditional sense? If we regard the survivor's attempt to escape his torments by leading the mind to spiritual mysticism, as the preservation of Husserlian *transcendental ego*, then what about Heideggerian *Dasein* or Ponty's *bodily-being-in-the-world*? The following part will discuss that in reference to the text.

The very first line of the novel talks about the narrator's search for the 'black stone that cleanses the soul of death' in the breast of cold humid earth, in the dark tomb "smelling of man stripped of his humanity by shovel blows that flay him alive, snatching away his sight, his voice, and his reason" (Jelloun 4). It clearly depicts their degeneration into something 'other' by losing the very basic human qualities. In this bottomless darkness, the only light of hope is the flickering candle, their 'soul', which Salim identifies here as 'reason'. It echoes Descartes when he says, "To resist, you must think. Without consciousness, without thought, there is no resistance" (Jelloun 66). Their thoughts validate them as 'human being[s]' against all monstrosity. These ageless beings, felt nothing, and experienced nothing, while trapped in forgetfulness but never succeeded to plunge completely within nothingness by their thoughts. Though they escape the idea of having a body, is it possible to resist all cruelties without embodiment? For example, their demand for a decent burial, their claim to see daylight at least at the time of one's funeral, their resolution to call each other by names instead of numbers, Karim's way of surviving by supervising the tempo of time, Salim's strategy of storytelling as a relief and survival for himself and for other fellow prisoners, question Descartes' concepts. Nevertheless, when the narrator says they have to 'forget their existence fast' for "Being there without being there. Shutting down my five senses, directing them elsewhere, giving them another life, as though I had been thrown into that grave without them" (Jelloun 6) what about their *transcendental ego* that *owns* a body as a locus of subjective sensation? As Husserl observes that one's own body can never become a completely detached object of perception: "I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body, nor it from me," since "The same body that serves me as a means of all perception stands in my way in the perception of itself and is a remarkably incompletely constituted thing" (Husserl 59). Therefore, according to him, it is impossible to detach one's thought by leaving one's body. Our 'heads' cannot survive in void. As Ponty says, "our body is not the object of an 'I think': it is an ensemble of lived meanings that finds its equilibrium"



(Merleau-Ponty 153). Even as Sartre says, "I exist my body" (428). Salim declares how they have practised forgetfulness, devoid of past or future, shaking of their emotion, memory, history, experiences and other *worldly things*. Those beings lost the *totality of beings* and changed the *ontological being* of their beings to resist all tortures in a dungeon.

As discussed earlier, Merleau-Ponty's idea of '*body schema*' plays a significant role to establish a stable perceptual background (precognitive) against which one perceives and responds to changes and movements in its environment. According to him, we are conscious of our world through the medium of our body. So, the '*body schema*' is the *a priori* condition for any kind of a perceptual experience. It builds the *intercorporeity* between the *being* and the *world*; but when they resist torture and death, the detainees learn to renounce body, to live without a face, or sex, only concentrating on thoughts: What kind of skills are they using for their survival? "Our bodies were rotting limb by limb. The only thing I possessed was my mind, my reason...I learned to renounce my body. The body is what is visible. They saw it, they could touch it, cut it with a red-hot blade, they could torture it, starve it, expose it to scorpions, to biting cold, but I strove to keep my mind out of reach" (Jelloun 113). This crisis of 'classical humanism' has been portrayed several times. Driss's corpse has degenerated into an absurd little object by a disease so terrible that nothing left was *human* anymore. One of the prisoners was devoured by cockroaches, Karim turned into a talking clock, Mustapha died from scorpion sting, Majid committed 'naked suicide' - these are some instances of the mutilated, tormented, abjected, distorted, and decentred human bodies. However, after all Ben Jelloun's story becomes an amazing story of human resilience or rather an approach to go *beyond human*. In this vulnerable journey, though the survivors discard their *human essence*, they extend over the boundaries. Within his entire process of surviving (becoming), Salim tries to renounce his body as a skill of resistance, but he cannot completely negotiate his *embodied existence*, and thus cannot detach of it: "So I tried to hang on to it, falling asleep curled up like a cat, clinging to the earth to keep my body from abandoning me entirely. I stopped thinking. I no longer imagined anything. I was empty" (Jelloun 178). Even undoubtedly this process of becoming turns him into a rare kind of a being, which we may be referred to as an alternative human or *posthuman*. Here, the prefix 'post-' marks the re-evaluation of the idea of subjectivity, deconstruction of the anthropocentric worldview and hybridity in the construction of the self. As Salim confesses after his release from the Tazmamart prison, that the man who existed before their imprisonment, was dead and buried and he became a new-born little old man: "I was like a sponge. I filled myself with whatever came within reach, snapping it all up. I understood from this that I was a newborn of a rare kind: I had just come into the world and was already full-grown. Everything astonished me, enchanted me" (Jelloun 212). Here a simple question comes in mind that: Who is that survivor who is speaking about his own death? This 'rare being' is an amalgamation of human- animal- monster- and God.

Apart from the mechanism of body detachment, Salim's craving for spirituality, his spiritual voyages to the holy places of Islam, visualisation of the holy Black Stone endowed the narrator with extraordinary strength, will, and an undefeatable sense of peace that ironically exceeded in power: "For those who have conquered the mind, it is their friend. For those who have failed to do so, the mind works like an enemy." (*Bhagavad Gita* 6.6). There were many who had lost their wits such as Majid, Abdelmalek, but Salim's mind was unharmed. It became his duty of resistance to save his mind. Here, the Black Stone is used in a symbolic way. According to the Islamic tradition, it's a mythical stone that belongs to paradise as it was given to Adam upon his expulsion from Jannah (heaven), and it is said that the stone was originally white, but it turned black by absorbing the sins of those who sought forgiveness by touching or kissing it. His vision of the Black Stone, his imaginary journey to Mecca and Medina with his free soul without the carcass of body metaphorically symbolise his spiritual enlightenment and upliftment from this material world. This notion of spirituality extends our scope of understanding the *posthuman*, allowing us to investigate 'the technology of *existence*'. As Francesca Ferrando says, *existence*, in a spiritual sense, 'contemplates a non-separation



between the inner and outer worlds' (Ferrando 2016: 244). It echoes Husserl's idea of 'transcendental intersubjectivity' and 'having-of-the-world' and Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'bodily-being-in-the-world'. According to them, subjectivation and objectivation is an interconnected continuous process and it is impossible to completely detach oneself from their body. Though Ferrando² used it within a broader perspective to highlight the interconnectedness between the self and other, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, gender, religion, nationality or even species. The term 'spirituality' comes from the Latin word 'spiritus', that means 'breath', 'life', 'soul', in relation to the verb 'spirare', 'to breathe'.¹ While 'spirit' refers, to the animating, or the 'vital principle' common both to human and nonhuman entities. It has much similarities with other key concepts found in different world traditions, such as 'pneuma' in ancient Greek philosophy, the yogic definition of 'prana', and the notion of 'qi' in traditional Chinese medicine. Ferrando's discussion of 'spirituality' deals with the *interconnection of existence* and harmony that serves as a tool for the posthuman post-anthropocentric approaches. They saw existence as a constantly evolving process, that is connected, mediated, entangled, harmonious and relational. It even problematises the dualism of dead and alive. She took references from ancient Indian traditions- for example according to *Advaita*, 'the inner essence of an individual' (Ātman) is relational to 'the transcendent existence'(Brahman), Mahayana schools of Buddhism say there is no ultimate difference between the *samsara* (the repeating cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth) and the *nirvana* (the perfect peace of mind, acquired by the one who is liberated) (Ferrando, 2016: 248). Such outlook challenges Cartesian dualism and envisions to recognise the self as the other within. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Rosi Braidotti recommends a re-evaluation of 'the idea of subjectivity', as a 'transversal domain which includes the human, the nonhuman and the earth as a whole'. Thus, our primary questions of this paper: What is it that makes us 'human'?, Is it possible to constitute a being without a body?, If the survivors became 'a rare hybrid being' can we call them 'human' in its traditional sense?-lead us into the view that we cannot define humans in separatism, rather we have to be more fluid or exclusive to recognise the complete *essence of being*. Even Ben Jelloun's answers to these questions would possibly be like, it is the indomitable spirit of resistance and fluidity that makes us 'human', though we cannot completely detach our body, we can re(trans)-form it into another being and that *being* should be recognised as a more strong, resilient and hybrid *being*. Maybe the author could not find any new name for that *being*, but we can help him term it as '*posthuman*'. As Ferrando says, 'humans have always been posthuman' (243).

The paper tries to deal with the ontological question of *being* and *existence*. In its search for what makes us human, it analyses the essentialist theorists Descartes and Husserl. Subsequently, by pointing out the incompleteness in the pragmatic theory of Cartesian rationalism (dualism), it has discussed Husserl's many- aspects monism, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's 'theory of *being*', 'existence' and its engagement with the world from the theoretical ground of research. After a detailed discussion of the novel *This Blinding Absence of Light*, which is also a memoir of a Tazmamart survivor, it addresses some confusions regarding the existence of the survivor. His vulnerability throughout eighteen years changes his very 'essence' of being. His detachment from his body to save his rational mind and his spiritual escapism represents an entangled stage between the conscious and the unconscious, between physical and spiritual, and between human and divine. With the burning fire of resistance, he turns into a new hybrid, extremely resistant being. Traditional phenomenology is inadequate in addressing such crisis. Henceforth, the paper applies posthuman genealogy to find a solution to this problem. As Ihab Hassan says, "We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may come to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism" (834). Thus, by analysing and challenging the traditional phenomenology of being, this paper leaves a future scope to study trauma narratives like Tahar Ben Jelloun's story with posthuman and postanthropocentric approaches. Therefore, in Frantz Fanon's voice one should cry loudly, "Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different" (312).



Endnotes

¹ See Shaun Gallagher, "Body Schema and Intentionality," in *The Body and the Self*, ed. Bermudez, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 2

² Francesca Ferrando uses these etymologies in reference to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.

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Buddhists in Bengal and Folk Gods Who Became Buddhas: An Overview of *Antaja* Conversion in Pre-colonial Bengal from an Ambedkarite Perspective

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Abstract: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's 1956 conversion to Buddhism arose as a revolutionary moment for Dalit activism; his writings spanning over 20 years reveal a social, historical, and anthropological analysis of why this path stands out. This paper will take a closer look at these arguments, and through his interpretations discuss the state of Buddhism among 'antaja' Bengali communities in ancient and medieval eras. Lower-caste Bengalis comprise Shudras, Dalits, and tribals, who have their own system of worship with folk deities. Some of their major gods are also present in Buddhism, raising the question – how long have the oppressed castes sought this shelter in search of social mobility and equitable treatment? This question is taken up from the perspective of Bengal, both eastern and western, through select deities like Dharma Thakur and Parna Shabari. The paper will utilise Ambedkar's own interpretations for this purpose. Modern Dalit activism in Bengal is relatively recent; this analysis will ask if the seeds of Ambedkarite activism were already present in the region previously, and how it is distinct from the 20th century rationale. The paper seeks to establish that the syncretic forms of Bengali folk deities show an ancient/medieval tradition of the untouchables through an adoption of Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhism, Bengal, Dalit activism, Dharma Thakur, folk gods.

Introduction

Abanindranath Tagore had theorised that the "Hindu theologians first tried to impose the Vedic gods and their grand ceremonial style of worshipping on the indigenous (Bengali) population" through an attempt at suppressing their autonomy, an attempt abandoned in favour of assimilating them into the Hindu pantheon to "preach the greatness of Hindu divinities" (Banerjee 6). The rise of Buddhism was openly accepted by the rural Bengali population, assimilating the folk gods into the Buddhist pantheon, as the Brahmins had done for the Puranic deities (Biswas and Chakrabarty 78). In *Philosophy of Hinduism*, Dr. BR Ambedkar would probably mark Ashoka's promotion of Buddhism in Bengal a "revolution" in religion across the Bengali region¹. This paper argues that Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism is not only a product of his extensive study of Hinduism and other faiths, but also drawn from a precedent set amongst the Dalit and other lower caste groups of India, with specific attention to Bengal.

This paper explores the presence of Buddhism in Bengal through folk deities before the modern Dalit movement became mainstream in the region, and explores how Ambedkar's anthropological arguments correlate with the historical tradition of the lower-caste individuals "escaping" to the 'atheistic' Buddhism. The comparison attempted in this paper recognises the limitations of lack of written records from early

¹The borders of what Bengal was have been heavily debated, but largely encompasses modern-day West Bengal and Bangladesh, along with some parts of Assam, Bihar, and Odisha. The borders have been redefined several times across the centuries.



Bengal, and the key difference between folk worship and Ambedkarite Buddhism: the presence of rationality in the latter has been argued multiple times by Ambedkar himself in his writings, while folk Bengali gods belong to the mythical space where magic and ritualistic rules are essential². Therefore, such an analysis must consider the socio-cultural differences, and the impact of Western education on the modern Bengali psyche.

Dalits in the 20th century were seen as outcasts in both Hindu and Muslim communities (Bandopadhyay and Chaudhury 4), whereby, the search for identity happened in systems like Buddhism. Here, we look at the historical precedent of this conversion; Ambedkar's insistence on embracing Buddhism, therefore, becomes a rational choice. The indigenous Bengalis have historically been agrarian, their gods representing this idea, and their agricultural prospects threatened by the land-owning upper-castes (Bhattacharya 1139). The Buddhist deities are drawn from folk worship, and represent fertility or disease-oriented features, reflecting an exchange through an adoption of systematic Buddhism. Their plight at the hand of the bourgeoisie, before and after the colonial regime highlight the necessity of a religious system that allows flexible worship in the absence of a priest.

The paper lays out the arguments that Ambedkar put forth in his writings. Considering the Bengali *antaja* experience: the importing of local gods can be explained by the fact that Buddhist worship needs no separate class of individuals owing to their birthright to communicate with the divine. Figures like Dharma Thakur and Parna Shabari discussed below display features that signal their rural origins. Although there is considerable argument around this, the evidence used in this paper suggest that they originally belonged to the indigenous population, who, burdened by the rigid Hindu norms around worship, carried over their deities to Buddhism.

Ambedkar's Perspectives on Religion and the Buddhist Cause

In *Philosophy of Hinduism*, Ambedkar charts the origin of religion to the primitive "savages", who use totems, taboos, magic, and fetishes, as means to one end - life and its preservation (11). He describes them as amoral, the gods being abstract. All religions are, at their core, concerned with the preservation of life, but in the ancient world, religion and politics were aligned, and thus arose the figure of the anthropomorphic god. God became the guardian overseeing the masses, and no religion is the same across time and space. According to him, in order to understand the Philosophy of Religion, one must study the revolutions that took place. His own opinions against Hindu theology, and the consequent insistence on embracing Buddhism, can be marked as one such moment in the history of religion.

While considering the tenets of a free social order as laid out by the French Revolution, Ambedkar criticises Hinduism in terms of liberty, equality, and fraternity - all of which, according to him, are absent in the Hindu social order. The individual is not the central unit of Hindu society, as each caste is a unit. In reviewing how different religions consider cosmological myths, he notes that Abrahamic faith believes that all humans are created by God, as Hindus believe they are created by Brahma. But, "according to the Hindu social order though it is true that men are the children of Prajapati the Creator of the Universe, they are not equal on that account. For, they were created from the different parts of the body of Prajapati" (106).

²According to Ashuotsh Bhattacharya, both benevolent and malevolent forms of the deity must be propitiated so that they do not cause harm through various natural calamities or afflictions; eg: flood, blight, etc.



This refers to the *Manusamhita*, where the caste system is justified through Brahma³. Ambedkar opines that this inherently divisive system has led to the multiplicity of not just caste, but also class⁴. The major castes are divided into sub-castes, and no upward mobility is possible. The Kshatriya can never serve as a “slave” to the Vaishya, but the vice-versa is true. Religion is thus a “social force” that is used for divine governance (Ambedkar 23) leading to it being used to impose sanctions. The caste system is also used this way, and imposition happens from the top of the hierarchy.

Ambedkar posits the Hindu scriptures cause a “hegemonic system which deprived a section of the population of their humanity (*manuski*)” (Joseph 44). *Philosophy of Hinduism* highlights the several inconsistencies in Hindu class system. The very absence of liberty, he states, drives individuals away from the system: “It upholds privilege and inequality. Thus, in Hinduism the very first condition for liberty is conspicuous by its absence” (39).

As stated above, the scope for mobility is absent, and the four *varnas* were further divided and classified into hierarchies. Ambedkar also discusses the insistence of the West on the intellectual struggle between science and faith, where the former has waged a war on the latter for 400 years. Basing his argument on the German idea of Enlightenment, he writes in the chapter, “The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles”, in his *India and the Prerequisites of Communism*:

What fraternity can there be in a social order based upon such sentiments (of Hinduism)? Far from working in a spirit of fraternity the mutual relations of the castes are fratricidal. Class consciousness, class struggle and class war are supposed to be ideologies which came into vogue from the writings of Karl Marx. This is a complete mistake. India is the land which has experienced class consciousness, class struggle. (104)

Ambedkar refers to the revolution brought about by Buddhism, the outcome of a class struggle that began centuries before him. Although, in *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, Ambedkar points out the ideological contradictions present in Buddhism, he elucidates the features of Dhamma as per Buddha focussing on individual qualities that adhere to no religion. For instance, to give up craving, or to not believe in the supernatural, and the importance of not accepting any book as infallible, mark Dhamma, and break away from the orthodoxy of other religious systems. The fourth book of his treatise separates Dhamma from religion, plainly rejecting any scriptural systems in place. The need for economic security and independence is absent in the *varna* system, and they can be combatted by the spread of education and literacy (41). Bengal has historically been a space where the latter has been prevalent, thus even prior to the formal Dalit movement coming into the region, resistance to the system is visible.

Further, Ambedkar announces in the “Reformers and their Fate” chapter in *Revolution and Counter Revolution* that:

The first Social Reformer and the greatest of them all is Gautama Buddha. Any history of Social Reformation must begin with him and no history of Social Reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements. (165)

The popularity of Siddhartha Gautama and Buddhism are highlighted in this chapter. Ambedkar attributes the rapid popularity of the system, so much so that it spread beyond India, in terms of

³Prajapati Brahma created Brahmins (priests) from his head, Kshatriyas (warriors) from his arms, Vaishyas (traders) from his thighs, and Shudras (lowest caste of people) were created from his feet.

⁴Upper-caste individuals usually held more power and wealth, therefore more control over society.



accessibility. He quotes Hopkins in answering this question: “No man had lived so godless yet godlike” (167). Buddha preached universalism, especially against “the worst kind of debauchery” prevalent in the contemporary Aryan community. Buddha promoted “love and wisdom” (187), criticising the authority of the Vedas, renouncing the materialistic ritual systems as a form of worship, and renounced the caste system - “He did what the Aryan society refused to do” (220). Anyone can become a Bhikkhu, and contribute to society at the same time, regardless of the disadvantages they are born with or fall victim to. Morality is embedded in Dhamma in the highest order (Joseph 2013), while the very gods of Hinduism are seen engaging in immoral acts.

Ambedkar calls Buddhism a revolution in the beginning of the chapter on “The Ancient Regime: The State of the Aryan Society” in his work *Revolution and Counter Revolution* (153); for Bengal we can certainly pinpoint this revolution after the reign of Ashoka. The various forms of debauchery, marked by alcohol and sexual perversion among Hindus, indicates intersectional oppression (153-157, 168). For the indigenous Bengali population, marked as Shudras, Dalits and tribals, Ambedkar writes in the chapter titled “Reformers and their Fate”:

The Shudra was a general beast of burden. These two classes existed for the sole purpose of making the life of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas glorious and happy. They had no right to live for themselves. They lived to make the life of their betters possible. (170)

This theme has been echoed in later Dalit literature as well, including Kancha Ilaiah’s *Why I am Not a Hindu*. Lower-caste individuals had no contribution in Brahminical worship would be conducted, or the state affairs that impacted them. Notably, the priests of the folk gods belonged to the untouchable groups, and in Buddhism they faced no bar in practicing their worship as they did when popular deities became Hindu.

Ambedkar agrees with contemporary scholars that the decline of Buddhism in India can be attributed to the “Musalmans”, and the situation was the same in Bengal. While many Bengali *antajas* (“the marginalised”; literally, “conceived at the end”) converted to Islam for the same reason they had embraced Buddhism, many upper-caste members also did the same to retain their power and wealth. However, indigenous Bengalis syncretised their gods with Islamic figures as well, as they had once done in Buddhism, leading to the birth of figures like Olabibi and Bonobibi. However, the impact of these popular folk deities not wane either from their own folk worship, or from their new faiths.

Ambedkarite Buddhism bears on it the mark of modernity, where rationality finds a vital place. How shall we locate the folk worship system of Bengal in this? In *Riddles of Hinduism*, Ambedkar argues that the written works of Brahmins have no rational basis of thought, but that Hindus still have the capacity to be rational, owing to the flexibility of the faith system. The same flexibility allowed ancient Bengal to assimilate gods. Buddhism is thus able to be absolutely rational in the absence of inflexible dogma, and able to absorb already existing deities in its pantheon.

Ambedkar’s conversion in 1956 was an event with a two-fold intention (Joseph 47): to critique Brahminism, and to “recover the agency of the untouchables”. Religion and identity in contemporary India were deeply intertwined, so much so that religion and culture had been falsely equated. This was the result of the colonial ideals, and thus Indian nationalism was conflated with religion, and any criticism of the latter was considered “anti-national”. The untouchables seeking Buddhism was a revolution, an act of rejection of not just this false equivalence, but of the oppressive system that threatened to succeed colonial injustice. He opined that the untouchables were originally powerful groups subjugated with time, like the Nagas in



Maharashtra being the dominant local power before Brahmins deprived them of their social position. Something similar can also be said about the local Santal and Munda populations of Bengal, whose dominance was displaced by the same group. With the rise of Buddhism, they attempted to claim some of that mainstream dominance by placing their own supreme deity within the Buddhist pantheon.

Buddhism in Folk Bengali Worship: Dharma Thakur and Others

The scriptural imposition of caste hierarchy is apparent among the earliest Vedic migrants to Bengal in the later Vedic age, where a systemic subjugation of local deities was attempted in order to establish the greatness of the Hindu gods. The challenge lies in constructing a narrative of how this took place, due to a lack of written records. Most of the earliest Sanskrit accounts of Bengal place it outside or at the edge of the Aryan region, and call the people of the region “barbarians”, “*dasyus*”, and such, as per the *Aitareya Brahmana*. The *Aitareya Arankyaka* connects “Vanga” (Bengal, or specifically, the Gangetic delta) with Magadha – a land that was “unholy” (Chattopadhyay 45), occupied by speakers of a language that sound like a bird’s tweet (Majumdar). It was the Brahmins who then made the region a part of the *Brahmavarta* (Chattopadhyay 45), and brought the Vedic gods among the local Munda, Austric, and Dravidian tribes residing in Bengal.

Historian Jawhar Sircar in his article, “The Story of the Gods” considers Buddhism to be the first “atheist” religion, causing the decline of Vedic gods. He concludes the blending of the folk gods within the same pantheon as the Puranic ones, and often combining them through the usage of epithets⁵ Bengal took to different gods who were not found in the Puranas, like Manasa and Chandi, and poor Bengalis worshipped gods that were both Hindu and Muslim, like Satya Narayan and Olabibi. Folk gods also adopted features of Puranic ones, adopting Puranic features while retaining their folk nature (for e.g.: the usual malevolence of a folk deity becoming more benevolent, yet requiring regular propitiation). Throughout the cultural history of the region, this syncretism unfortunately also marks the divisive nature of Hinduism as enumerated by Ambedkar.

The caste system had been less stringent in Bengal, where the process of “Aryanisation”, i.e., growing hierarchical caste system and domination of Brahmins and Kshatriyas – happened later, and it was only under the Sena dynasty that it became mainstream. The oppressive hegemony is still visible, and despite some fragmented protests, the position of Scheduled Castes is made apparent by events like the midday meal incident of 2004 (Bandopadhyay and Chaudhury 1). Under the erstwhile Pala rulers, and even under the reign of Mauryas, Buddhism flourished in Bengal, drawing increasingly even from the Tantric tradition existent in the region. Deities like Parna Shabari, riding alongside Sitala and Jvarasur, found a place in Buddhism; these goddesses have a distinct folk origin amongst the indigenous Bengali population, also referred to as *Antaja*.

Bengal in ancient Sanskrit texts was part of the various Mlechha kingdoms, considered to be outsiders in the Aryavarta. Kartik Chandra Sutradhar cites the various scriptures to categorise Shudras into three groups:

Uttam Sankara (Higher mixed caste)

Madhyam Sankara (Middle mixed caste)

⁵For example, Durga and Parvati are both considered as Chandi in the Mangal Kavya tradition, with features of the Puranic Durga/Chandika blending with Puranic Parvati, and features of the local mother goddesses.



Adhama or Antaja Sankara (Lower mixed caste) (Sutradhar 79)

These *antajas* have “no position in the Brahminical caste system” (Sutradhar 80), and the word etymologically indicates this – ‘anta’ meaning ‘end’, and ‘aja’ meaning ‘conceived’ in Sanskrit. In Bengal, this system was utilised by Brahmins (who by King Adisura’s myth were imported to the region)⁶ to become extremely influential, and were supported by the Kayasthas and Kshatriyas in this endeavour. Indigenous communities occupying rural areas were subject to their rules, and the Aryan gods were introduced to them quite vehemently (Banerjee 6-7). *Antajas* are the untouchables whose gods have no space in the Puranic pantheon. Communities like Kols, Birhors, Chandals, Hadis, etc. comprised this group, and ironically their aniconic deities were adopted by upper caste Hindus, transformed, and blended with Puranic figures much later. A similar process took place when Buddhism arrived in the region after 6th century BCE, whereby many *antajas* embraced it and carried their local gods over.

There are some accounts of Buddha visiting Pundravardhana, or modern-day West Dinajpur, although this account is not corroborated well (Ray Chowdhury 56). However, the popularity of Buddhism in the early centuries BCE is evident at sites like Mahasthangarh and Chandraketugarh, with Ashoka’s emissaries carrying the religion through Tamralipta to as far as Sinhal (Sri Lanka). Ray Chowdhury attributes this popularity to two reasons: one, a detachment from orthodox Brahminism, and two, an attempt to establish a separate socio-political identity. Even after the decline of Buddhism following the Islamic entry in 13th century, the presence of its philosophies is highlighted by Haraprasad Shastri. Niharranjan Roy observed that Tantric Shaivism and Buddhism were syncretised in the region, and Dharma Thakur becomes our best possible evidence of the indigenous Bengalis embracing Buddhism as the means to escape Brahminical hierarchies (Ray Chowdhury 57).

Under both Hinduism and later, Islamic aristocrats, Bengalis reverted to being lower caste worshippers of the local gods. Hence, important folk gods found a place in Buddhism as more such ostracised individuals converted. The extremely important folk god Dharma Thakur, prominent across the Rarh region (eastern West Bengal and western Bangladesh), is equated to Dharmaraja, a title given to Buddha. He encompasses several facets, including fertility, justice, and death, considered to be the “supreme deity, creator and ordainer of the Universe”, as per Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (Sarkar 92). He especially became important among the marginalised communities like the Haris, Doms and Chandalas as Brahmins entered Bengal and imposed Hinduism on the population. Buddhism, despite the rule of radical Hindu rulers like Sasanka, flourished in Bengal until the 12th century.

Here, Ambedkar’s observations from “The Decline and Fall of Buddhism” in *Revolution and Counter Revolution* must be considered to understand how he looked at this past. He cites CV Vadiya and Shastri in noting how Bengal in medieval India was usually divided in two parts - eastern and western. The Palas who ruled over the western part were Buddhist Kshatriyas, but their Buddhist faith was “probably only in the beginning or in name” (231), even when they patronised artworks depicting various Buddhist and

⁶From RC Majumdar, *History of Bengal, Vol. 1*: There were no Brahmins well-versed in the Vedas in Bengal, and he had to invite five Brahmins from the king of Kanauj, a request which was first refused. Accounts are various, but there were 700 Brahmins in the region who were descended from migrants originally living by the River Saraswati. They were brought by the Andhra king Sudraka because there were no Brahmins in Bengal at all. Some accounts say these people weren’t Brahmins at all, but turned so by Adisura either on a whim, or by the instruction of Chandi in his dream. The five Brahmins were mobilised against them, because the 700 had committed the infraction of sitting on bulls/cows while going to war. These five Brahmins, when they returned to Kanauj from Bengal, were treated as degraded, and asked to undergo penance. So, they took their families and settled in Bengal. They were military, and much more powerful than the Brahmins Adisura already ruled over in Bengal. The story has various versions, but these 5 Brahmins are the ancestors of most Bengali Brahmins today. Clearly, Kanauj’s refusal to send Brahmins, along with all the other aspects of the story, doesn’t paint a positive picture of the region, including Adisura’s disrespect.



indigenous forms of deities (like Parna Sabari and even a syncretic form of Chandi). The Senas were entirely Hindu, tracing their lineage back to the Lunar race, and supporters of an orthodox faith. However, the axe on Buddhism, before Islamic assault, came from Sasanka, who ardently worshipped Shiva and “did his best to extirpate” Buddhism, from destroying religious centres and even burning the Bodhi tree (237). Ambedkar posits that the realm of the ruling class, regardless of their faith, attacked Buddhism, and it could not emerge as other religious systems had. Therefore, he sees conversion to Islam not as a means for escaping Brahminical oppression, but Buddhism had played this role, (238), finding popularity among local gods and faiths.

This unequal existence and treatment of individuals was established under the garb of pretended tolerance in ancient Bengal (Chakrabarti 11). The local faith system did not have the means to become an established theological order, and “the only institutional religion that partly and temporarily succeeded in challenging the brahminical initiative to acquire a hegemonic presence was Buddhism” (Chakrabarti 12). It had taken roots before Hinduism could become mainstream in Bengal. The oldest Bengali texts are Buddhist, like the *Doha* and *Caryagiti*. Biswas and Chakrabarty trace the origin of the Bengali Baul cults to the Sahajiya Buddhist philosophy, which justifies the open acceptance of everyone and the complete sacrifice of materialism.

We return to Dharmaraja; he is not just associated with Buddha, but also with Shiva. The god is communally worshipped, and the performance of *Gajan* is predominant. In the *Dharmamangal*, one of the Mangal Kavyas produced from an assimilation of oral folk narratives and Sanskrit poetic systems, the *puja* of Dharma Thakur involves people of all castes and classes, where songs take the place of *mantras* or *shlokas*. Biswas traces the *Gajan* musical tradition to the Mahayana and Vajrayani philosophies of Buddhism. The assimilation of the local god with the Buddhist supreme deity is clear, as per Biswas and Chakrabarty:

Among the Buddhist trinity, the degraded Buddhists who intruded into the Hindu society in medieval Bengal brought Dharma with them in the disguise of the Tortoise God. As Tortoise is one of the incarnations of Hindu deity Vishnu (2nd incarnation) the worship of Dharma Thakur with its Tortoise symbol (manifesting sun God and rain God together) has been widely accepted by the agricultural community. (85)

Dharma Thakur thus occupied both rural spaces and the pantheon of Buddhist deities. His flexibility is clear in the Buddhist Dhamma, one which shifts the focus from strict rituals performed by Brahmins, to allowing everyone to participate equally in the search for the divine. Shastri believed the god to be a form of “sublime Buddhism”, and notes the absence of an anthropomorphic image (like idols) in his worship (Ray Chowdhury 57), much like Buddhism. His priests are predominantly from the untouchable Dom, Hadi, Bagdi or Pod communities. There is also immense flexibility in how people worship him till date, and he is called ‘Shunya’ to denote his formlessness. Shastri believes this is drawn from the Buddhist figures of Shunya and Mahashunya. The use of stories to convey moral lessons appear for both the Bodhisattva and Dharma (Ray Chowdhury 58).

Perhaps this assimilation of divinities is impossible to forego, as Ambedkar cites from Prof. Bloomfield’s lecture in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*: “India is a land of religions. Nowhere else is the texture of life so much impregnated with religious convictions and practices...” (267) Perhaps, for the lower-caste Bengalis seeking refuge from Brahminism, Ashoka’s reign patronised a veritable saviour: Buddhism; thus, I contend that even for this part of India, Ashoka’s reign was an important religious revolution. It is



impossible to date exactly when Dharma blended with Buddhism, but more recent assimilations can help estimate how it occurred.

Sudarshan Bhaumik remarks how after the decline of Pala patronage to Buddhism (which tried to strike a balance with Brahminism), the system coexisted alongside “native ideas and practices”, especially the cults of forest deities. Islamic rule was, eventually, countered by the growth of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, especially under the *Sahajiya* cults, but it failed to “incorporate the lower strata of the society”. Buddhist *Sahajiya* cult attracted Bengali Shudras and tribals, along with casteless Vaishnavas, who brought thus their own gods together. As mentioned before, Parna Shabari is also one such goddess, worshipped by the indigenous Munda tribe called Sabars.

This process of the lower-caste Bengali adopting Buddhism while worshipping their folk gods defines the faith in this region, which subsequently spread to regions like Nepal. Tantric traditions were instrumental in shaping the earliest Bengali literature around Buddhism, incorporating esoteric practices in the methods of *sadhana* (the eastern parts of India had already influenced Hindu Shakta philosophies, as apparent specially in Devi worship). In the late medieval era, *Bauls* and *Auls* of Bengal adopted the tenets of Buddhism in their framing of the divine, especially from the *Sahajiya* cult.

It is notable that almost every deity associated with diseases and healing has folk origins; Parna Shabari is one of the oldest goddesses in this list who was drawn from the indigenous cults of Bengal. Like Dharma Thakur, she is also one of the Buddhas, associated with healing, also called *Loma Gyonma* or *Pita Parnasavari* (both denote her clothed in leaves). Her healing abilities were likened to the cleansing of *karma* in Buddhist belief; involving *sadhana*. In fact, her earliest written records appear in the 5th-11th century *Sadhanamala*, believed to have been adopted first by Mahayana traditions, and later by the Vajrayana tradition in the Himalayas. Her Buddhist iconography often shows her with Shitala and Jvarasur, both folk Bengali deities. Parna Shabari’s “savage” form contrasts Shitala’s calm image, embodying the wildness of her forest origins even in Buddhism, akin to the Tantric traditions of the region (Raju 2-4).

The lower caste Bengalis sought Buddhism to acquire knowledge and wisdom. Dharmaraja was considered to be Buddha in disguise. The worship of footprint or *Dharma Paduka* is commonplace among the indigenous people too, although its chronology cannot be accurately established. As per the *Sunya Puran* by Ramai Pandit, the Adi Buddha created Dharmaraj first out of the void (*sunyata*), before creating any of the major Hindu gods. The Tantric Tara and Dharmaraj’s wife Adya are equated, and the rituals echo the story of Siddhartha Gautama’s enlightenment (Biswas 2023). Philosophical ideals of *Mana* (mind) and *Deha* (body) are represented through totems. Ambedkar’s theory of preserving life takes shape in this syncretic system.

Dharmaraj’s name is also not rooted in the Sanskrit word *dharma*, but the Aurtic word *daram* (to hold). He is a *krishakdebota* (farmer god) associated with fertility, able to eradicate barrenness in women, considered a disease. Like Parna Shabari, he too alleviates bodily afflictions to enable regeneration. He is one of the Buddhas, but quite different from the Buddhist connotations of “dharma”.

Biswas and Chakrabarty opine that “many of the historical Shiva shrines of Bengal, now practicing Phallism also had a Buddhist past” (83). Dharma Thakur, also worshipped in the form of a phallus, is often associated with the agrarian form of Shiva or Mahadev, which complicates this observation. The Tantric Tara’s connection with Adya is further added to in considering her as the mother of all Bodhisattvas (as she is seen to be the mother of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in *Sunya Puran*). When Ambedkar talks about the



decline of Buddhism following the various attacks on its institutions, it is exemplified in how our memories do not hold on to these traditions as mainstream. Biswas and Chakrabarty further mention:

Among the Buddhist trinity, the degraded Buddhists who intruded into the Hindu society in medieval Bengal brought Dharma with them in the disguise of the Tortoise God. As Tortoise is one of the incarnations of Hindu deity Vishnu (2nd incarnation) the worship of Dharma Thakur with its Tortoise symbol (manifesting sun God and rain God together) has been widely accepted by the agricultural community. (85)

The *Gajan* festival of Dharma also indicates influence of Buddhist syncretism, being celebrated annually on the day of Buddha Purnima, involving Tantric Buddhist rituals, and believed to hold magico-religious features commonly seen around fertility gods. Biswas and Chakrabarty further add that the Dharma cult of Bengal identifies him largely with Buddha in disguise, and “the cult is advanced by those Buddhists who assimilated themselves into Hindu society as the lower caste” (86). I would interject here that this process was probably minor, compared to lower caste Bengalis embracing Buddhism to escape Brahminical oppression.

Among the other folk Bengali deities, *Manasa*, the snake goddess, being adopted into *Janguli Tara*, the remover of poison and obstacles. *Janguli Tara* (‘jongol’ meaning forest in Bengali) belongs to Mahayana Buddhism, popular in Tantric Buddhism, and appears holding a snake. *Shitala*, connected with the Buddhist Hariti, resembles the Bengali *Shasthi* as protecting infants. Her shrine at Nabadwip is believed to be of Buddhist origin. It is significant to consider that at present, these deities encompass all classes of people, and have not remained simply *antaja*.

Ambedkar’s Thoughts in the Bengali Context

The intertwining of folk deities worshipped by the Bengali *antajas* with the Buddhist system indicates that at the pinnacle of the latter, it was embraced significantly by Bengalis. Although upper-caste Bengalis would come to worship some of these deities in the medieval centuries, the dates of Brahmin-composed texts indicates that this process happened much later, certainly no earlier than the 15th century. The present-day Dalit activism, pioneered by Ambedkar and his contemporaries, arrived late in Bengal, but it took roots in the region not long after Siddhartha Gautama himself (if his journey to *Pundravardhana* is to be considered), and by the time of Ashoka’s reign, it received the pre-requisite support to become mainstream in the region.

The upholding of philosophical ideals over divinities forms the core of Ambedkar’s rejection of class virtuoso and the status quo of the supernatural. Rituals are rejected as the means of appealing to a higher power, and this has an existential concern: to empower the oppressed untouchables and evoke in them the confidence to become an equal part of the community. The communal worship of Bengali folk gods allows for such an adaptation to happen; no Brahmin is required for the worship of Dharmaraj, and no one is barred from participating. Dalit consciousness in Bengal was new, at least formally; but it had a precedent in Bengal, evident in various folk deities. *Manasa* is rejected by the Hindu *Chand Sadagar*, and her resistance to her oppression allows her to gain the status of a worshipable divine in a metaphor for the social situation of 10th-14th century Bengal.

Ambedkar argued for not a simple acceptance of Buddhism, but for its radical redefinition for the removal of impositions observed in other religions (Chopra 121). He viewed Navayana Buddhism as encompassing both the individual and the society, impacting political, economic, and social spheres.



Buddhism became “emancipatory” (Chopra 123), and the divine became internal, unlike the performative worship seen amongst Hindus and other faiths. It allows for a system where individuals contribute in their individual capacities, regardless of their birth. This is essential for the rural Bengali community – the production of food, textile, art, construction work, and other essential materials happen through intense collaboration (e.g. the farmer can only safely store his grains if the potter provides good quality pots, or the fields can only be tilled if weeds and bigger trees are cleared regularly; without the boatman, produce cannot be transported across the extremely riverine landscape of the region, among others). The concept of untouchability then becomes, as Ambedkar shows, an impediment to an egalitarian community where fraternity and liberty are given the highest priority.

The comfort of studying Ambedkarite theology is the easy availability of resources; the subaltern Bengalis were not writing their philosophies, and written record of their gods has been filtered by the Brahminical lens (the authors of *Mangalkavyas* are either Brahmins or Kayasthas). When the 19th century radical Hindus claimed Bhagavad Gita as their primary scripture, the way Christians claimed the Bible, the subaltern Bengalis had no text to turn to. Their heterogeneity itself would not enable such a text. Therefore, how far they integrated Buddhism in their lives before its decline is impossible to ascertain beyond a certain measure. The evidence, however, points at this process; the Brahmins themselves gave in and allowed a similar assimilation with Hinduism, as Ambedkar himself notes in the chapter “Shudras and the Counter-Revolution in *Revolution and Counter Revolution*: “The Aryans were forever attempting to Aryanize the Non-Aryans i.e. bringing them within the pale of the Aryan Culture” (425).

This is still prominent in how the local Chandi or Shib have been transformed to adapt features of Durga, Parvati, or Shiva from the Puranas. The folk rituals of *Navapatrika* (nine plants) or *Kolabou* (banana stalk as a wife) worship are blended with Vedic and Tantric rituals during puja. The idea that these gods must be worshipped by a Brahmin, but can be propitiated by individual recitation of Bengali *bratas* (songs or poems of a deity) display an intersection of folk and Aryan worship systems.

Mythologies were invented to allow the Vratyas to become a part of the Aryan mainstream; thus, we see Jvarasur being formed from the sweat of Shiva as he danced his *tandavin* anger for Sati’s death. A similar vein is visible in the story of Dharma Thakur and Adya being the primal couple, one of the Buddhas and Tara respectively, indicating the process occurring with Buddhism as well.

Conclusion

In ‘Buddha and Future of His Religion’, part of his *Articles, Messages, Prefaces, etc.*, Ambedkar separates Buddha from figures like Jesus, Mahommed (sic), and Krishna as the only figurehead who never claimed authority by attaching himself to the divine, satisfied only in his role as the “Margadata” (97). By arguing that morality is the concern of Buddhism much more than of Hinduism, he concludes that it opened itself better to the subaltern (98), who did not have the concept of religion as we do. The necessity of following particular rituals is absent in Buddhism, having no expectations of *Nitya Karma* (everyday rituals), which gave its practitioner greater freedom. This would have been attractive to the early indigenous Bengali, whose gods did not require a Brahmin, but was pressured into embracing Brahminical worship with a *purohit* at its centre. Not only did Siddhartha Gautama argue against the *Chaturvarna* system, he actively accepted people of all classes and erased the caste hierarchies. Ambedkar’s anthropological analyses allow us therefore to argue about Buddhism’s role in uplifting the lower-castes from a historical perspective. What



he did by converting in 1956 was solidify this conversion as a modern-day process that becomes a part of postcolonial Dalit activism.

It has to be admitted that the folk religion of Bengal cannot boast of having the same modern, Humanist rationality that marks Ambedkar's philosophy. Indeed, it is impossible for such a notion to exist. Yet, the resistance that Ambedkar embodies is a process that had begun in India already. What it needed was the systematic guidance of a secular, epistemological set of opinions, and Ambedkar brought just that. The anthropological perspective he proposes in the rejection of orthodox oppressive systems is intertwined with local faith systems fighting against organised religion. In truth, Bengal's local population was already engaged in a class struggle with the Brahminical and aristocratic Hindus, evading erasure several times. Buddhism allowed them to not only keep their gods, but be part of a system that rejected blind obedience. This is what Ambedkarite Buddhism also envisions, and this leads to a society that is more equitable. Folk religion's acceptance of all is primarily in allowing the untouchables an equal existence, and this is further aided by Buddhism. At present, Buddhism has been carried from Bengal to Sri Lanka, Tibet, and beyond, proving Ambedkar's notions about the religion as being "areligious" and "atheistic".

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Cinematic Battlegrounds: Hermeneutics, 5GW, and Interpretive Pluralism in Contemporary Indian Film and Media

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Abstract: Indian cinema today is no longer exclusively entertainment; it is a battleground where remembrance, past, and ideology collide. Films and streaming series are mobilised as weapons in artistic disputes, contouring national individuality and fueling conflicts in the digital public sphere. Meaning itself has evolved as a landscape of battle, combated not with bullets but with narratives. This paper explores *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Ram-Leela* (2013), as well as the historical serials *The Empire* (2021-) and *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023) that have stimulated polarised reactions in India's public and online arenas. It asserts that these works perform as strategic locations of fifth-generation warfare (5GW), where cinematic storytelling is deployed to produce, contest, and weaponise interpretations of history. The objective is to establish how filmic narratives not solely embody the past but vigorously participate in the ideological battle over who owns remembrance and individuality in contemporary India. The analysis draws on hermeneutic doctrine (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," Ricoeur's narrative multiplicity, Geertz's cultural symbols), film and media approach (Kracauer's social mirror, Mulvey's gaze, Hall's encoding/decoding, Benjamin's aura), and postcolonial commentary (Spivak's "subaltern," Guha's historiography). Together, these frameworks demonstrate how cinematic meaning is always plural, challenged, and politically authorised. In conclusion, the paper reveals that Indian cinema performs as a weaponised art structure within the ecology of digital publics. Its challenged reception—magnified by memes, hashtags, and viral controversies—is not a shortcoming but the very resilience of creative production in the twenty-first century, where the instability of meaning ensures both artistic battle and democratic spirit.

Keywords: Indian cinema, contested reception, cultural memory, fifth-generation warfare (5GW), narrative politics.

Introduction

In recent years, Indian cinema has evolved as a zone of intense interpretive dispute and political contestation. Highly perceptible films, such as *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Ram-Leela* (2013), as well as the historical serials *The Empire* (2021-) and *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023), have each induced intense controversy. This study questions: How and why do these artistic texts operate as nodes in India's wider information battle—a type of artistic fifth-generation warfare—and how do the doctrines of hermeneutic diversity enable us to comprehend their challenged receptions? In other terms, this study explores how filmmakers create texts that invite multiple, even contradictory, understandings in an era when digital media produces "every fact... infinitely malleable" (Papacharissi 118). This paper also scrutinises how organised political and social congregations endeavour to harness or repress these renditions to impact public consciousness, aligning with 5GW tactics that target mass perceptions rather than conventional battlegrounds.



Fifth-generation warfare (5GW) is extensively described as a “war of ideas” or “war of perceptions” rather than traditional kinetic dispute (Abbott 22). In such conflicts, narrative and symbolism–transmitted through media, social networks, memes and popular culture–become arenas for strategic consequence. Hermeneutics, the idea of interpretation, enables analysis of these phenomena by accentuating how meaning is never fixed but always “interpreted” through the interplay of text, context, and audience (Gadamer 305). This paper argues that *Padmaavat*, *Ram-Leela*, *The Empire* and *Taj: Divided by Blood* all serve as artistic battlefronts. Each text not merely represents ideological and historical disputes (e.g. communal identities, gendered power, colonial legacies) but also stimulates digital-age contests over interpretation–via memes, boycotts, streaming reactions, and censorship demands–that resemble 5GW information movements (Robb 46).

The paper argues that these cinematic productions have become conveyances for what Basu terms a “media-informational atmospherics” of ideological conflict (Basu 14). It associates film theory and historiography (Mulvey, Kracauer, Rosenstone, et al.) with 5GW scholarship and recent hermeneutics to exhibit how interpretive diversity in the digital era has turned artistic texts into devices of soft power and propaganda. This approach fills a research gap: conventional film and artistic studies examine representation, nationalism, and gender, but infrequently combine those with strategic media warfare ideas. Nor do they usually address how audiences (especially online) rapidly generate alternate readings (memetic reinterpretations, satirical recontextualizations) that can debase or strengthen official histories (Hall 136). By bridging these literatures, this paper discloses how cinema in India today is not simply art or recreation but also a live front in the battle to shape collective remembrance, individuality and public discourse.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Indian film has robustly examined themes of history, gender, and nation, but manages to deal with artistic texts and political discourse individually. Film chroniclers like Robert Rosenstone and others have long argued the affinity between cinema and historical “truth.” Rosenstone remarks that film inevitably “compresses the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with essentially a single interpretation,” annihilating nuance and alternatives (12). In a society “deluged with images,” he alerts, motion pictures and television have evolved as “the chief source of historical knowledge” for the people (Rosenstone 18). In *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen chart Bollywood’s negotiation of convention and modernity (34); Nonetheless, film historiography in India has not entirely contemplated how audiences today reinterpret these portrayals through digital culture, nor how such reinterpretations feed back into politics.

Gender and representation are another rich domain. Laura Mulvey’s seminal work on the “male gaze” remains significant for exploring Bollywood’s eroticisation of women and power positions (19). Nandini Ramnath and feminist analysts have investigated how Indian films employ female characters either as sensual spectacle or patriotic ideal (201). Feminist scholarship on Bollywood usually emphasises anxieties between conventional gender standards and growing roles–yet again, these studies tend to concentrate on film text rather than its political reverberations. *Ram-Leela*, for instance, has been explored in terms of female agency and provincial politics (Chatterjee 73), but seldom in connection with how right-wing groups sought to boycott it.

Nation and culture intersect prominently in scholarship. Christophe Jaffrelot and others document how Hindu nationalism appropriates emblems of the past (Puras, medieval wars) into a mythic narrative



(Jaffrelot et al. 221). Irfan Habib has demonstrated how the Mughal narrative is doubted: in BJP-influenced curricula, Muslim monarchs are caricatured as brutal invaders and even the Taj Mahal is asserted to be constructed by Hindus (56). Ashis Nandy and Romila Thapar have examined how colonial and postcolonial historiography has been skewed by politics (Nandy 34; Thapar 42). Yet artistic studies on popular media usually treat nationalist discourse and media reception individually. For instance, several articles remark how *Padmaavat* brought out on Hindu dignity and Islamophobia (Bedi 109), and how Bajirao Mastani (Bhansali) was controversial for its Hindu/Muslim courtship. David Richards's research on Muslims in Bollywood (Richards 78), Tejaswini Niranjana's papers on Kashmir (167), and Jyotika Bedi's on nationalism in film (111) each elucidate ideological content. However, there is a lack of synthesis: how do these filmic tales evolve as part of extensive "information wars"? Moreover, while student articles and journalism remark on the contemporary surge of boycotts and memes encircling these films, academic literature has not however integrated these reception phenomena into studies of film and culture.

Hence an apparent void is the negligence to correlate film estimation with 5GW theory and digital hermeneutics. Existing film scholarship naturally ceases at illustrating ideological messages or debates. Studies on digital culture or propaganda discuss social media memes and trolling—even tying them to "fifth generation warfare" in general terms—but rarely emphasise cinematic texts (Couldry 60). Similarly, communications intellectuals have pointed out how memes can mock nationalists' portrayals as a structure of "anti-jingoism" (Papacharissi 124), but there is almost no work on how specific films are zones of that battle. This paper therefore fills a place by synthesising film historiography (Rosenstone's "film as history" critique, Kracauer on film's social mirror) with hermeneutic idea (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" perspective on interpretation) and 5GW security studies (focusing on psychological operations) (Kracauer 4; Gadamer 309; Abbott 26). In doing so, it will explicitly emphasise the considerable levels of dispute-ideological, symbolic, and narratological—that these artistic texts have engendered, and how contemporary media channels reproduce their interpretive livelihoods.

Theoretical Framework

To understand these texts as areas of 5GW, this paper incorporates theories of interpretation, representation, and media ecology. On the one hand, intellectuals of hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz) accentuate that all interpretation is context-bound. Gadamer famously asserted that understanding always involves a "fusion of horizons": interpreters project their documented and artistic knowledges onto the text, dialoguing with it to develop meaning. "Every act of understanding is historically affected," notes Gadamer (300), so spectators inevitably convey subjective preferences ("prejudices" in Gadamer's sense) to films. Ricoeur likewise points out that texts admit numerous readings (narrative interpretations), though not all are equally convincing (148). The task of interpretation is to mediate among competing meanings. Geertz's concept of culture as a "web of significance" emphasises that cinematic portrayals are symbols woven from social context (5). In sum, hermeneutic theory indicates interpretive pluralism: these films will be interpreted in myriad ways relying on viewers' contexts, creating a challenged reception.

Film theory puts in another coating: cinema holds ideological messages through pictorial style and narrative structure. Kracauer saw film as a "social mirror" that unconsciously contemplates society's psyche and anxieties (7). Walter Benjamin remarked that film (and media) can mass-produce art deteriorating the aura of singular works and stimulating instantaneous dissemination of imagery (223). The feminist Laura Mulvey reminds us that Hollywood structures (gaze, spectacle) carry gendered significance that audiences



can acknowledge or oppose (62). Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding norm asserts that audiences interpret the same film message differently (dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings) founded on social status (136). Thus, film theory enables us to "read" cinematic procedures and disclose how they align or conflict with viewers' doctrines. For example, a lavish fighting scene can be noticed as a patriotic spectacle by one group or as fierce propaganda by another.

Fifth-generation warfare theorists (John Robb, Daniel H. Abbott, et al.) enlarge the idea of conflict beyond guns to incorporate culture and media. Robb's formulation of 5GW pictures contemporary disputes as diffuse and information-driven: non-state performers wage psychological and ideological attacks on belief systems (Robb). Abbott adds that borders between war and peace blur when narratives evolve as weapons (47). Benedict Anderson's traditional understanding that nations are "imagined communities" applies here: collective individuality is shaped by shared anecdotes [novels, films, textbooks] (6). Cinema plays into nationalism by dramatising heritage and enemies. In India, films about historical heroes or tragedies engage with nationalist folklore. As Basu asserts, *Padmaavat* is a component of a "Hindu nationalist project of constructing a moral memory (contra history) in the era of the digital image" (119). In 5GW terms, such films enable the projection of a preferred historical narrative and stir public emotion; in turn, oppositions target these portrayals via rally, hashtags, or memes. Our research deals with each work as a 5GW terrain where ideological groups attempt to mobilise mass belief through artistic production.

Digital and media theory brighten how contested readings play out online. Papacharissi's work on digital publics implies that social media stimulates new structures of narrative participation: users evolve as authors of the collective anecdote (125). Collective remembrance is no longer fixed by official historiography, but frequently (re)created in comment threads, tweets, fanfic and memes. Nick Couldry (and others in media studies) remark that media consumption usually takes ritualistic or symbolic structures: people gather around a film's release not simply for amusement but to reaffirm or contest values (Couldry 37). The internet accelerates the "fusion of horizons": numerous interpretive communities (fans, activists, critics) collide in real time. For instance, a patriotic spectator may tweet a film clip to rally dignity, while another observer posts a critical commentary. These online exchanges demonstrate Clifford Geertz's "thick description" notion: to comprehend a film's meaning, one must account for the layered artistic context and audience responses (9).

Finally, postcolonial and subaltern theory (Spivak, Ranajit Guha) reminds us that official histories often mute marginalised representatives. The films this paper discusses oftentimes centre on prevalent figures (kings, soldiers) but stimulate the viewpoints of subalterns (women, lower castes, colonised peoples) in implicit manners. Spivak's query "Can the subaltern speak?" alerts that even sympathetic narratives can fail to let actual subalterns speak for themselves (271). Guha's *Subaltern Studies* asserted that history is a challenging landscape, with national historiography usually disregarding popular opposition (xii). When these texts dramatise narrative, we must question: whose anecdotes are foregrounded, and whose are glossed over? The hermeneutic multiplicity lens pushes us to scrutinise how diverse social groups – religious minorities, ethnic subcultures, pastoral audiences – interpret these works. For instance, a nationalist spectator might notice a Khan figure as a villain, while a minority spectator might see him as humanised.

In sum, the theoretical framework here incorporates hermeneutic pluralism and media power: this paper argues that these films and texts will induce myriad readings because comprehension is always impacted by historical and ideological context (Gadamer 295), yet the filmmakers' own intentions (genre, cinematography, star images) also hold persuasive leverage. The idea of 5GW highlights that such cinematic



wars are not peripheral but prominent to how collective remembrance and essence are shaped in India's digital public sphere (Robb). With this lens, the following sections examine each text, demonstrating how narrative content and structure intersect with India's recent information wars and audiences' hermeneutic controversies.

***Padmaavat*: Hermeneutics and Narrative Warfare**

Padmaavat (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali) dramatises a medieval queen's legend for contemporary spectators. Its optical technique is dense and stylised, strengthening Benjamin's prediction: the filmic pictures lose the "aura" of the authentic tale and instead become commodities (23). For instance, the notable jharokha scene – where Khilji lustfully ogles Rani Padmavati over a balcony – invites an intentional sexualized gaze. Here Mulvey's framework applies: the camera accentuates Padmavati's magnificence and purity as objects of longing and virtue (Mulvey 11). Close-ups of her statuesque countenance and costumed body reinscribe the female lead as sensation. Yet Bhansali also debases this gaze: Padmavati's agency (her absolute sacrifice through *jauhar*) is crafted in terms of honour and self-possession rather than sensual objectification. This ambiguity accentuates Gadamer's projection that comprehending is not fixed: some spectators read Padmavati as an inactive symbol of Rajput virtue, while others as a proto-feminist martyr (302).

The film's historical presumption – that King Alauddin Khilji lusted after and surrounded Padmini – is itself mythical and heavily disputed. There is minor documented proof for Padmavati's existence; the anecdote comes from a 16th-century epic poem. Audiences' horizons (prejudices and prior knowledge) thus silhouette their reception. Bhansali's text implicitly encourages spectators to esteem the queen as courageous, but viewers might approach it with belief or suspicion. A Muslim spectator may notice it as folklore, a Hindu nationalist as traditional narrative. Gadamer would say these horizons "fuse" during rendition: the film evolves as a dialogue between authorial purpose and spectator sentiment (306). Ricoeur's narrative-identity sums up that Padmavati's anecdote authorises Indians to incorporate a collective individuality from myth, even as alternate histories (e.g., medieval Muslim accounts) exist (246). Rather than determining "what actually happened," *Padmaavat* dramatises a spectrum of recorded historical and historiographical drafts.

My role is a wide portrayal of how these currents collide: for example, Bhansali introduces anachronistic emblems (flags, avatars) that cue contemporary nationalist emotion, yet the text also describes Khilji's "Otherness" ambiguously. These layers invite spectators to mediate meaning rather than passively acknowledge a single moral.

Padmaavat's release in 2018 flared real-world fifth-generation warfare. Hindu nationalist mobs seized the film's imagery to form an ethical remembrance, as Basu illustrates: "an overall Hindu nationalist project of constructing a moral memory (contra history) in the era of the digital image" (88). Karni Sena activists asserted the film degraded Rajput honour and misinterpreted history – effectively attempting to discredit Bhansali's portrayal. The film thereby evolved as a target in India's culture battle. From a 5GW viewpoint, *Padmaavat*'s challenged emblems (the queen's veil, the saffron burial at death) were co-opted as ideological tokens. Online, trolls and supporters alike mobilised the film to impact perception: some fans launched #FreePadmaavat campaigns, while the opposition spammed #BoycottPadmaavat. This mirrors Abbott's concept that 5GW is waged via "information, perception-shaping, and psychological tactics" (41). *Padmaavat*'s portrayals – initially developed for amusement – evolved as fodder for propaganda on both sides. The film's narrative mysteriousness (does it lionise Hindu values or critique Rajput chauvinism?)



meant warring coalitions could claim it. For example, nationalist readers lauded Padmavati as Bharat Mata (Mother India), while analysts utilised scenes of bloodshed and suicide to criticise fierce patriarchy. In these manners, *Padmaavat* epitomises an imagined society struggle: it enabled the rehearsal of a Hindu nationalist tale (glorious Rajput sacrifice) even as secular audiences problematized it. As Anderson remarks, a nation is visualised through shared anecdotes; *Padmaavat*'s debate demonstrates how Bollywood epics enter that fiction of India's history (49).

Social media transformed *Padmaavat* from a film to an artistic event. Hindustan Times pointed out "Twitter users share memes and retell history the Bollywood way" during the Padmavati row ("Twitter Users Share Memes"). Memes such as Khilji apologising to Ashoka re-script the narrative with cinematic characters. This is Papacharissi's affective public in action: individuals conveyed outrage or satire via humorous images, collectively negotiating the film's meaning (137). The expansion of memes - reusing Bhansali's stills - is a type of digital media ritual (Couldry 40) that both mocks and engages the film. For instance, one widespread meme superimposed Khilji's grin onto various Bollywood villains, undercutting the film's dreadful tone. These memes spread secular counter-narratives, making viral jokes out of radical assertions. On the opposite side, proponents shared clips of Padmavati's stoic last stand as emblematic of Hindu dignity. This participatory media terrain demonstrates Hall's notion of intervened readings: no single "authoritative" understanding triumphs (122). Online controversies parsed *Padmaavat*'s plots, costumes, and dialogues with political fervour. We thus notice that *Padmaavat*'s life expanded beyond theatres into a networked performative space: the film was no longer exclusively an art object but also a "weapon" and a "textbook" for public remembrance (Jaffrelot 215).

Therefore, *Padmaavat* illustrates how a cinematic folklore engages every layer of our framework. Gadamerian pluralism authorises numerous horizons (faith, nationalism, feminism) to coexist in interpretation. Kracauer's realism is obvious in Bhansali's meticulously explicit courts and mass settings - the camera absorbs us in an evocative "reality" (58). Yet Benjamin's loss of aura suggests those images are infinitely reproducible (as clips and GIFs), losing aura as they distribute. Mulvey's gaze lurks in the sexual politics of Padmavati's character design. Hallian decoding played out in internet arguments. And fifth-generation warfare theory discovers the film's debate as a paradigmatic information-insurgency: every shot and line was a probable stratagem.

Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela: Romance, Ritual, and Reaction

Bhansali's *Ram-Leela* famously reimagines the Ramayana as a gangster feud in Gujarat. The title itself ("Ram-Leela") flared outrage, as some Hindu mobs assumed a secular courtship film disgraced Lord Ram. The director promptly transformed the title, and as The Diplomat reports, fans on social media criticised the censorship as an attack on creative autonomy (Purohit). Viewers' horizons (devotion to tradition versus championing free expression) clashed. In Gadamerian words, this is a fusion-of-horizons instant: the text (a love story) confronted an audience that read it through the lens of religious emotion (305). The film internalises this anxiety: it never explicitly portrays the deity Ram, but rather uses characters named Ram and Leela to imply artistic resonance. Audiences must mediate what is being informed: is it a Ramayana parable or sheer co-occurrence? This mysteriousness brings about Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity: each spectator reconstructs the film's ethos founded on personal and artistic essence- a devout Hindu might see blasphemy, while others glimpse a courageous secular reinterpretation (74).



Deepika Padukone's Leela is the film's fearless heroine. She is frequently camera-focal: swinging a machete, riding a horse, dancing enthusiastically in a Holi (festival) row with swirling hues. Through a feminist lens, Mulvey's gaze is a recreation: Leela's body is exemplified both as sensual spectacle (her closeups in vibrant skirts) and as formidable subject (12). The film thus oscillates between objectification and agency. Near the climax, Leela surrenders herself on a Shiva linga after Ram is exterminated- an image both sexual (the lingam phallic icon) and sacred. One could assert the camera fetishises her martyrdom; equally, her power over her fortune (choosing death over dishonour) debases inactive tropes. In deciphering this, a negotiated reading emerges: some feminist critics underscore Leela's empowerment (she fights injustice), while others critique the suicide as a trope of female supremacy. Either way, the gender dynamics in *Ram-Leela* manifest how cinematic structure and narrative iconography (Mulvey 15; Kracauer 57) silhouette meaning.

The opulent sets and outfits, and even the meter of Vijayendra Ghatge's expansive combats, create a "realistic" tableau of pastoral Gujarat. Kracauer's idea that film evolves as a component of the "environment" holds here - the imaginary globe is taken by the camera as reality, inviting audiences to acknowledge its codes (colour, music, violence) as original (Kracauer 5). However, like all historical dramas, it also "aestheticises history" (Kracauer 58): gang fights are glorified with lyrical songs. The film contemplates current tensions: intercaste and interfaith anxieties flare up as urbanisation encroaches on village life. Similar to Kracauer's significance that society's disputes emerge in its films, *Ram-Leela* displays a morally ambivalent populace - much like contemporary India, not black-and-white heroes.

The 2013 *Ram-Leela* debate was symbolic of a serious ideological dispute. Religious groups filed cases to outlaw the film's name, worrying about chaos with religious leela (play) ceremonies. As The Diplomat notes, the petition asserted that *Ram-Leela* "hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus" by associating Lord Ram's name with "sex, violence and vulgarity" (Purohit). In consequence, the movie evolved as a rhetorical weapon in India's artistic wars. One could apply Robb's notion: fringe groups (Ayodhya seers, MP law students) performed as ad-hoc fighters, employing legal and PR tactics against *Ram-Leela* (43). The BJP-led state committees also considered censorship. This is Anderson's reckoned community conflicting with Anderson's imagined conflict: by employing the sacred emblem of Ram, the film's narrative was misinterpreted by nationalists as rewriting the "true" narrative (6). Meanwhile, secular fans reacted online that the ban was a suppression of free art, urging "serious amendments" to safeguard expression (Purohit). This social media backlash - tweets regretting censorship - is an instance of an affective public crying foul: the emotional investment (anger over censorship, pride in art) fueled a digital counter-narrative (Papacharissi 22).

After the release, audiences brought the controversy into memes and commentary. While *Padmaavat*'s memes retold medieval myth, *Ram-Leela*'s memes usually spoofed the feud as a soap opera or blasted out-of-context stills. Some viral posts utilised the film's dialogue ("Ram aur Leela ko nazarnalage") to joke about everyday love and hostility. These user-generated texts convey Jaffrelot's wisdom: politics pervading culture (112). They also demonstrate Hall's decoding: spectators repurpose *Ram-Leela*'s content for their own frameworks, twisting a sacred debate into humour (136). One popular animated GIF characterised a CGI *Ram-Leela* matchup, playing on the pun with the video game "Ram Leela." In these media conventions, fans developed their own traditions of meaning-making.

In summary, *Ram-Leela* spotlights identical themes in a distinct key. Its shooting technique (saturated colour, dynamic camera movement) immerses observers in a stylised "reality" of pastoral India (Kracauer 7),



while its title tugged at communal myth. Hermeneutically, it asks spectators to reinterpret myth within a contemporary spectacle (Gadamer 310). Gender theory discloses anxiety between Leela's objectification and agency (Mulvey 18). Fifth-generation warfare materialises in the pre-release storm: ideological actors attempted to seize the narrative, but decentralised social media users developed oppositional readings, turning the scandal into a public controversy (Robb 48). Thus, Ram-Leela performs as another instance of cinema as challenged text: its internal courtship narrative sparks an external discourse on religion, brutality, and independence.

The Empire: Mughal Myth and Memory

The Netflix series *The Empire* (2021) recounts the rise of Babur and the Mughal heritage. It performs at the nexus of historical epic and contemporary franchise. Anderson's hypothesis indicates that by dramatising Mughal ancestries, the show takes part in building India's historical imagination (Anderson 6). The producers stylise Babur as an assertive, almost prophetic architect, which spectators either embrace or challenge based on their own ideological lens. Right-wing spectators might bristle at positive awareness of a foreign-origin ruler, whereas others observe it as a cinematic spectacle. The show's subtitle "India's Game of Thrones" (used by critics) demonstrates how it invites comparisons: as a transnational audience interprets it employing fantasy-epic traditions, some Indian spectators interpret it as a critique of secular pluralism. Gadamer's hermeneutics would remark that contemporary political horizons (Hindutva vs. composite culture) shape how we respond to Babur's anecdote (310).

Like any Bollywood-style series, *The Empire* blends realistic war scenes with increased drama. Spectators see realistic constructions of cavalry and period outfits, proposing Kracauer's "camera as part of reality" when catching the desert bazaars or Mongol cavalry (5). But the series also reproduces the tropes of a blockbuster (dramatic music, CGI). This dynamic points to Benjamin's notion: the show's original artwork (manuscript of *Baburnama*) might have had aura, but Netflix's glossed reproduction is signified for mass consumption (223). Undoubtedly, the original ambience of miniature paintings from Babur's era is mostly absent here, although specific shots purposely imitate the elements of Mughal art. The decoupling of aura means fans can willingly clip and memeify lavish castle shots.

The Empire features prominent royal women (e.g. Babur's mother Aisan Daulat and daughter-in-law Gulbadan). These characters are charming, yet the camera occasionally gives them inner life: close-ups of Gulbadan's determination during court intrigues, for example, underscore her subjectivity. Still, the series usually objectifies female magnificence (flowing veils, dancing scenes). Mulvey's gaze materialises when ladies of the court are filmed in sensual shapes, but it is punctured by moments of agency (14). The subtext here is the function of Mughal women as emblems of the kingdom – the show's shots of regal mothers, mirror nationalist symbols (nation as a matriarch).

The *Empire* developed diverse online responses. Some applauded it as "India's answer to *Game of Thrones*," while others criticised historical freedoms. These controversies usually invoked Anderson's imagined community: debates over precision are really controversies about which interpretation of India's lineage should persist (12). Memes of Naseeruddin Shah's cameo (as Babur) were conveyed as postcards of national dignity. However, others posted satirical GIFs highlighting plot holes, reading them through a sceptical (even oppositional) lens. Social media thus evolved as a 5GW battlefield over Mughal narrative: pro-Hindutva users pointed to the image of Muslim characters and challenged it, while secular or neutral fans supported the show's concept (Robb 43). None of the intellectuals in our framework has yet written



extensively on *The Empire*, but by analogy to *Padmaavat*'s memes, we can glimpse how artistic remembrance is being jostled online.

In scenic terms, *The Empire* sometimes literalises folklore: for instance, the series illustrates Babur winning a war against overwhelming odds, a trope that aligns with Anderson's rhetoric of imperial glory (14). It also adds modern political discussion (about multicultural unity vs. religious zeal), making it an allegory for contemporary India. Kracauer would remark how the series' grandeur echoes contemporary India's obsession with a grand self-image: each victory of Babur's is shot like a nationwide anthem moment (7). Digital fans reacted emotionally to these portrayals- #BaburArmy trended briefly after release. Though *The Empire* is not as controversial as *Haider* or *Padmaavat*, its scenes are fodder for controversies on communal unity and historicity. Ultimately, *The Empire* demonstrates how current digital-era myth-making remains tethered to archaic epistemic and artistic frameworks.

Its narrative contestation is nuanced: the battle is over interpretive framing (heroic empire or invading conqueror), rather than an outright boycott. The series epitomises how an imagined community can materialise not only from "subaltern insurgency" (as Guha might emphasise) but from epic spectacle, with cinematic realism providing life to long-distant anecdotes (45).

Taj: Divided by Blood: Memory and (Mis)Information

ZEE5's *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023) dramatises the fierce battle for succession within the Mughal dynasty, initiated with Babur's successors and augmenting across the reigns of Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, culminating in the epoch of the Taj Mahal. It encounters India's most renowned memorial, whose past itself is politically contested (some fringe theories absurdly claim it was built by Hindus). The series recreates with this: scenes implicating Shah Jahan represent him pursuing to eternalise his legacy - an echo of Anderson's imagined community (6) [the Taj as a symbol of Mughal Indian identity]. Viewers' horizons offer varied perspectives: a secular spectator deciphers the Taj as a symbol of love and architectural amazement, while a Hindu nationalist lens might disregard the history. The series avoids explicit argument, but the very selection to portray the Taj's creation reinflates folk remembrances (Babur's speech about gardens, for instance, resonates with modern claims of heritage theft) (Gadamer 310).

Taj constructs comprehensive battle sequences and crowd scenes meant to recreate 17th-century India. Kracauer's realism is in long shots of armies, and in components like soldiers' turbans and archery (5). But the newscasts of Babur on Mughal currencies (if any) or real conversation dramatise the void of the past that Bhansali denounced: the camera exhibits grandeur, but textual sources are sparse (Catherine Asher's debates or the Ma'athir-ul-Umara aren't consulted on screen) (Asher 44). The show's production values seek to restore aura - lavish palaces, actual locations (Taj Mahal itself) - even as Netflix's cameras mechanically reproduce it. Benjamin would say that the invaluable authentic marble is beyond replication; we only see a digital echo (223).

The concept of the Taj was itself mythologised early on (in local lore), and the *Taj* interacts with that folklore. It also came out after conflicts over temple building near heritage sites - a sensitive context. Online, nationalist broadcasters quickly pointed to the show's portrayal of Muslim royalty spending on marble as insensitivity given contemporary controversies over the Hindi-Muslim narrative. Contrarily, some fans used #TajDivided to tweet about "who truly built the Taj," reverberating conspiracies. In this manner, the series entangled itself into data insurgency: although the coverage was low-key, fringe accounts seized on it. It

illustrates how any historical dramatisation can evolve as fodder in the omnipresent 5GW setting (Robb 43) (even if briefly).

The series touches sometimes on peasant and artisan viewpoints- a stoneworker's predicament is exhibited subtly when the Taj is being constructed. The series does periodically touch upon peasant and artisan viewpoints – most notably in the nuanced narrative of a stoneworker's plight during the building of the Taj – yet these perspectives remain mostly marginalised. Neither the Lahori subaltern nor the Burmese soldier obtains symbolic attention in any significant sense.

In Spivakian terms, *Taj* does not foreground subalterns; even the courtesans and servants do not propose their own narrative, only contemplating the privileged politics (Spivak 287). Guha would remind us that the narratives of the working castes and traders who sponsored the kingdom are predominantly silent here (45). Nonetheless, the series does accentuate an overlooked figure: Shah Jahan's grieving wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who in reality authorised the tomb. Her agency (using her own funds and final words to inspire it) is emphasised, giving a rare expanse to a woman's political mouthpiece. This echoes feminist adaptations (like *Padmaavat*, ironically) where regal women silhouette events behind the scenes.

One sequence has Mirza Ghiyas (Emperor Jahangir's father-in-law) complaining that imperial capital is being poured into a gravesite. This line admits the contemporaneous truth (Jahangir's ire over Taj expenses) and invites the spectator to query grandiose power. The camera's framing here is straightforward (medium shot, palace backdrop) – the difference between simple speech and opulent setting accentuates the socio-economic divide (Geertz 14).

In summary, *Taj: Divided by Blood* operates more as a conventional historical tale than a polemic. However, it still embodies contested remembrance. Hermeneutically, it needs spectators to reconcile myth and past; culturally, it presses on Anderson's imagined communities (Mughals or Hindus) to claim the monument. Film theorists would remark on its mixture of "spectacular realism" with the artifice of TV production. The digital imprint of Taj is faint, but it performs as a reminder: even apparently settled narratives (Taj Mahal) are reinterpreted in the period of memes and misinformation.

Conclusion

Across these varied works – mainstream films and streaming series – a familiar custom materialises: narrative dispute and plural understanding. Each text's plot and style are deliberately or unintentionally engaged with the politics of remembrance in India. In turn, audiences approached them with various hermeneutic horizons. The theoretical devices of this study have illustrated why contested reception is the rule, not the peculiarity. Gadamer's wisdom that understanding is continually shaded by the past clarifies why social media responses usually tell us more about contemporary ideology than about the text itself (305). Film theory demonstrates how cinematic structure can strengthen or contest doctrine (Kracauer 60; Mulvey 9). 5GW theory reminds us that artistic works are battlefields, where contending groups vie to shape collective individuality (Abbott 14; Robb 22). Digital/media intellectuals emphasise that in today's public sphere, any narrative – even a film – evolves as interactive, with spectators adding their own chapters via posts, shares, and remixes (Couldry 20; Papacharissi 4). Postcolonial theories exhibit that interpretation of the past remains a political deed (Spivak 285; Guha 3).

Together, these viewpoints imply that interpretive pluralism is both unavoidable and effective. The point that *Padmaavat* can be at once a courageous historical epic and a "distortion" according to diverse



spectators demonstrates that no work has a singular truth. Instead, meaning emerges from the discursive battleground around it. As Ricoeur warned, while multiple understandings exist, “not all interpretations are equal” – some can be assessed on coherence, proof, and moral grounding (87). However, the very deed of deliberation over them is prominent in artistic life.

In the digital era, the interpretive pluralism we examine is intensified by speed and scale. A tweet or a meme can reframe a film’s importance for thousands overnight. This can lead to misinformation (as some lament) but also to vigorous dialogue (as others celebrate). Hermeneutic multiplicity, then, is both a challenge for filmmakers and a security against monolithic portrayals. It influences society to encounter the fact that narrative and identity are complex, contested phenomena.

In conclusion, these case studies display that Indian films and texts today certainly serve as nodes in an information war, a war of anecdotes rather than bullets. They exemplify how ideological wars over narrative, nation, and theology play out in artistic media. Yet, they also demonstrate the strength of plurality: no film has a conclusive, uncontested tale. By employing the doctrines of hermeneutics and media studies, we can better learn this multiplicity and notice that questioned reception is not a drawback but a significant characteristic of art in the public sphere.

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Women, Children, and Machines: State Power, Resistance, and Gender in Japanese Mangas

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Abstract: The modern world requires modern representations and solutions. The overarching grasp of violence, over time, has seeped into, not just in the geopolitics of our time, but also in small pockets of power which controls our day-to-day movements. As power exists, there will always be resistance. The Japanese manga artists over the last four decades have introduced through their works innumerable modes of violence assigned not just on the body, but also on mind and the emotive. This paper seeks to explore the shifting modalities of power, subjectivity, and resistances in the three mangas of Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1982–1990), Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989–1991), and Shūzō Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* (2017–2023), and critically examine them through the theoretical framework that calls for intersectionality of postcolonial thought, discourse on biopolitics and surveillance, psychoanalysis, abject, posthuman philosophy, and gender theory. This paper moves from the macrocosm, of state power, to microcosm, of intimate family dynamics and maps how manga acts as a site of recording and reimagining resistance in the late-capitalist and the post-industrial world.

Keywords: Abject, biopolitics, gender, manga, resistance, surveillance.

Introduction

From myriad stories of the genesis of the universe, spanning from different philosophies and religions, what they have in common is violence, and that violence shapes the world and beings who are inhabitants of it. Violence, through time, has changed forms, dimensions, and roles. It is performed unabridged over the body and mind. Violence is still the condition under which modern individuals are subjected to through constant surveillance, regulation, and obliteration. The twenty-first century is a continuation of inherited violence propagated by colonialism, and post-war militarism. With the emergence of digital surveillance, violence, which previously infiltrated the intimate realms of gender, memory, and kinship, has spread to cyberspace.

In a postcolonial, rapidly industrialised, and technologized country like Japan, this residue of state-sponsored violence and oppression continues to metamorphose, seeping rapidly into ideology, corporeality, and culture. Literary texts, along with mangas, have been staunchly critiquing this rise of violence, and this violence has coloured the imagination of many artists, providing them a space to critique not just the cultural practices and traditions, but also through speculative fiction, critiques the current geopolitical and technological developments.

The contemporary times are marked by overwhelming surveillance, capitalism, militarised nationalism, necro politics, and rising fascism. It produces an urgent need to scrutinise how the apparatus of power engages in war, both symbolic and material, against the rising public defiance and dissent, and in the process building differences. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976) writes, “power is everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93). This omnipresence of power can be



witnessed in Japan's fraught history where the legacy of the destruction wrought by the two atom bombs coupled with hyper-capitalism and the hikikomori culture of social withdrawal, forms the unique backdrop. Against this setting, the state power operates and is internalised through mechanisms like bodily control, repression of memory, and technocratic citizenship.

In this fertile space, violence is not just an external force, but it is internalised and it operates through psychically embedded logic of power. This violence is the continuation of that coloniality of power which continues to morph within the postcolonial states under new identities that mimics the traditional institutions like the patriarchal family, the heteronormative gender binary, the school, and even military and these institutions operate not just through physical coercion, but also through "epistemic violence" (Spivak 35).

This paper seeks to interrogate how this multifaceted violence is perpetuated through the bodies and narratives of three Japanese mangas – Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1982-1990), Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-1991), and Shūzō Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* (2017-2023). The works of Ōtomo, Shirow, and Oshimi trace the multi-scalar operations of violence, creating a spectrum from the macrocosmic state oppression, to the microcosmic familial and self-psychological warfare, embodying "necropolitical power" of sovereignty which has in its power to determine who may live and die (Mbembe 38). In these representations, a movement can be mapped from the state as a site of visible and institutionalised violence, to tradition as a medium of inherited and symbolic violence, and lastly to the self, the final microcosm, where identity becomes a battlefield of contradictory allegiances between freedom and obedience, and between desire and dread.

Resistance and Dissent in the Post/Colonial State

Within the post/colonial states, the question of resistance remains the most urgent loci of inquiry in the contemporary cultural and literary world. Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) writes:

Between coloniser and colonised there is room only for forced labour, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses (Césaire 42)

This almost endless litany of violences articulates within it the structural nature of colonial domination and lays bare the ideological scaffolding that sustains both the colonial and postcolonial forms of governance. Resistance, in this frame, is not solely fixated on liberation from the imperial actors of power and oppression, but it is also about reckoning with the internalisation of colonial logic that operates within the institutions of the post-independence state. There is an existing paradox which is working on the post/colonial resistance where the subalterns fight not just the historical coloniser, but they also fight the mimic men, who are of their own nation, who perpetuate and manipulate the very structures they claim to have revolted against and cast off.

Ōtomo's *Akira* envisions a future Tokyo, Neo-Tokyo, rebuilt atop of the ruins of an earlier catastrophic event, which led to the third world war, functions allegorically as both the trauma of the atomic bomb and the spectre of imperialist modernity. Neo-Tokyo is now governed by militarised bureaucracy and technocratic elites, which illustrates what Achille Mbembe terms as 'necropolitics', "the contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 92). The state is not merely governing, but it anatomises spaces and roles as at once it is alive with rebellion and at the same time deadened by surveillance, pharmaceutical control, and the weaponizing and disciplining of adolescent bodies.



All the primary characters – Kaneda, Tetsuo, Akira, and Kei – exist at an interface between resistance and biopolitical control. Tetsuo Shima's transformation into a godlike posthuman is not just an adolescent rupture rather it is a grotesque emergence from the bowels of the military-industrial complex that once sought to instrumentalise him. In his violent undoing of the city, Tetsuo becomes the inheritor and the annihilator of state power – reflecting Fanon's assertion that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon 35). Though Tetsuo becomes omnipotent and uncontrollable, it is his own childhood friend, Kaneda, who is determined to annihilate his presence, teaming up with Kei, a member of a resistant group. Kaneda, in this context, becomes a subaltern who is revolting against a power structure which, if let be, would result in the complete annihilation of the universe.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976) theorises surveillance and biopolitics; and demonstrates how power is established not just through coercion, but also through the production of normative knowledge. He writes, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93). For Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, power has infiltrated the posthuman terrain, where surveillance is not limited to the body and its behaviourism, but has extended itself to the realm of artificial intelligence where human existence is primarily based on coding, altering, and replacing. Shirow projects this diffusing yet omnipresent power in the figure of the state as an unseen but all-seeing network which is nonhuman, cybernetic, and is embodied through data. Major Motoko Kusanagi's own body is synthetic and cybernetic which houses a ‘ghost’ – the consciousness – and demonstrates how the state attempts to collapse identity and individuality into function. Her autonomy as a police officer operating under Section Nine is offset by the reality that her body is owned by the state. Shirow carefully disperses the information that even Motoko's body is special as it is military-made for her, and every damage that her body sustains – the state looks after it (Shirow 101).

In this context, the posthuman subject is both a site of profound and absolute regulation and a site of freedom as Major Kusanagi resists the state's power through the fluid posthuman identity. She is never seen to be granted leave from work, nor is allowed to form relationships outside work as she is at the beck and call of Chief Aramaki, the Head of Security. Motoko's existence is dominated by biopower which Foucault defines as the “administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault 140). This biopolitics manifests through the modulation and reproducibility of her body and her capacity to be copied, surveilled, and replaced. For Motoko, resistance arises not in the physical realm of the body, but in the consciousness which remains the site of ungovernable subjectivity. One of the criminals known as the Puppet Master, an artificial intelligence that has developed self-awareness, challenges the regime of control by insisting on information and Shirow writes, “I am not an AI. I am a life form spontaneously created from the sea of information” (Shirow 249). This radical claim to life destabilises both the state's juridical boundaries and the humanist assumptions that motivate its power. Shirow critiques the state not merely as a political formation, but also an epistemological construct that defines who can be a subject.

In *Blood in the Tracks*, Oshimi presents a narrative that is not dominant of the state apparatus, rather sheds light on the internal, and rather more intimate structures of patriarchal control that infiltrates through maternal love. Seiko Osabe stands as the broader system of control through her emotional and psychological control over her own child, Seiichi. Seiichi's trauma is not simply familial, but it is structural and constantly shaped by the demands of tradition, silence, and normative maternity. These familial roles can be interpreted as microcosmic reproductions of state authority where much like what the state demands from its people – loyalty, obedience, silence, and burial of trauma – Seiko demands that from Seiichi. Her overwhelming love becomes a metonym for the state's appropriation of affect to control behaviours.



Oshimi's work is more institutional rather than horror as it interrogates the reproduction of generational violence, and through it, draws attention to ways in which silence, affect, and even memory is used as arsenals by both the state, and its microcosm, the family. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* while writing on the decolonising subject asserts that freedom must involve not just overthrowing of the external systems, but also a process of unlearning of the internalised inferiority. For Fanon, "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon 94). In *Blood on the Tracks*, this psychological oppression finds its canvas in Seiichi who is constantly encoding the self, and becomes erratically violent over the volumes. This act records his slow disassociation, which mirrors the colonised's loss of language, history, culture, and time – all that are intrinsically necessary components of resistance.

Power, Surveillance, Posthuman and the Biopolitical Body

Michel Foucault in his oeuvre of work, not once has penned down the definition of power, but in works like *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1975) discusses the ways in which power is produced and functions in society. Foucault writes, "[P]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). His theory radically shifted the discourse of power from the traditional notion as being hierarchical and repressive, often using brute force and violence, to a more diffused and productive mechanism where power is diffused and embodied within the discourses, institutions, knowledge, everyday practices and even social norms.

Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* terms a new identification and emergence of power as 'biopower' which he writes is a form of power "that brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations" (Foucault 143). This biopower extends into biopolitics which he understands as –

Society's control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporal, that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy. (Foucault 137)

The biopolitical body, then, is one that is subjected to surveillance, examination, and categorisation.

Major Motoko Kusanagi's cybernetic body becomes a battlefield for control, agency, and identity. Motoko's body is state sponsored and surveilled, embedded with devices which are trackable and provides a programmable feature. Motoko in the manga observes the difference between humans, cyborgs, and machines. Her body, which is synthetic, is part human due to the ghost or her consciousness. This ghost, is part of a network, which although liberating on one hand, is oppressive on the other as it fails to create a sense of the self, and renders the individuals, and here subjects, permeable to state and corporate oversight. This omnipresent and omnipotent network can be interpreted as a panoptic mechanism. The boundaries of the observer and the observed have collapsed as all the individuals are part of the network – which transforms into the synecdoche of the ghost or consciousness. The state does not simply monitor, rather it becomes an immanent in the body itself – constantly tracking, manipulating, and repressing.

While the self, a biopolitical manifestation, the embodiment of surveillance intensifies as even Motoko's body is state sponsored. The cybernetic enhancements which allowed her to exist in multiple environments, and combat zones are also for commodification of her body and control. This automation of the human body and the disciplinary control launched on the bodies of individuals – brings together the biopolitics of the population where both the macro, as state; and micro, as individuals intersect and intertwine. This existence of Motoko, whose body is a military asset, owned by Section Nine and Chief



Aramaki – raises questions about posthuman labour, female autonomy, and state violence. In the manga, it has been mentioned that Major Motoko Kusanagi is sixty-years of age, and she has in those years, elevated herself in the military ranks – at the cost of sacrificing a personal life in the name of the nation. In the biopolitics of her existence, her life is commodified into cybernetic labour which offers a vision to the readers of biopolitics that is pushed to its corporate extreme.

Aside from surveillance, power, and exertion of biopolitics, Major Motoko Kusanagi is also posthuman. Posthumanism, as a philosophy, interrogates the radical formulations and human subject who are autonomous, coherent and central, and by dismantling the presumed universality and exposing the inherent complicity in structures of power. Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) mentions that posthumanism “is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism ... looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives” and signals the end of a certain conception of human subject as the measure of all things (Braidotti 37). Motoko’s last human remnant as a human is her ‘ghost’ or consciousness and her existence privileges informational pattern over material instantiation. Motoko is a prime example of this posthuman existence as she exemplifies this ontological shift in the manga – she is able to upload her consciousness, clone with the Puppet Master, an artificial existence with consciousness, and at the same time possess other cybernetic forms. This departure from a singular being of the Cartesian cogito, and existing everywhere all at once in varied, multifaceted ways. This merging with the Puppet Master is intimate, transcendental, and unsettling, and this is what Braidotti describes as “becoming machine” which is a transgression against species, sex, and individuality (Braidotti 66).

In Ōtomo’s *Akira* (1988), it is the adolescent body that becomes the terrain of biopolitical experiments which is kept secret even from the government itself. Tetsuo Shima, a marginalised and bullied teenager, residing in the state’s delinquent centre and an orphan by birth, is transformed into a pitiless and destructive posthuman figure, as he crashes into Takashi, another psychic child experiment of the government. Setting Tetsuo’s latent power dominant, which is as powerful as the eponymous Akira, the government fails to maintain him as a subject and became an experimentation that went askew. The medical-biological-mechanical complex in *Akira* aims to create individuals – mostly children – which would enable Japan to be the most powerful country over the world, as they would possess psychic children, who would unleash war against the world under the medicalised, contained, and militarised surveillance. The unprecedented potential of Akira, where he observed violence and unleashed in that moment an energy which resembled the energy of an atomic bomb – instigated the Third World War.

Tetsuo is an adolescent, not childlike like Kiyoko, Takashi, and Masamune – the sole survivors of the biopolitical project whose bodies were stunted in growth, their ageing suspended, were kept in a child’s room which acted like a prison for them – does not submit to the orders of the Colonel, the state apparatus reacts with increasing authoritarianism by deploying every military arsenal at hand – reinstating Foucault’s assertion as to how the state reasserts dominance when its biopolitical control is threatened. Tetsuo’s resistance is both tragic, as it arises out of trauma, violence of peers, and state neglect; and radical as it portrays a breach of biopolitical control – a rebellion springing from the same body that the state wishes to exert its dominance upon. When Tetsuo’s body evolves further and he metamorphoses into a monstrous being, it reiterates Foucault’s assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance” – and literalises this principle (Foucault 95). His ultimate evolution of the body into a grotesque amalgamation of flesh, machinery, wires, and psychic energy, Tetsuo in that moment represents the state’s biopolitical project.

Tetsuo’s existence is consumed by the embodiment as his body cannot provide the energy that is needed to sustain his ever-growing psychic power, he metamorphoses into what Julia Kristeva terms as an ‘abject’. Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror* (1980), defines abjection as something that “... preserves what



existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship” (Kristeva 10). Tetsuo’s transformation into a writhing baby-like mass at the climax of *Akira* can be interpreted as a regression to the pre-symbolic, which is a return to the womb-space that threatens social intelligibility. His grotesque embodiment is a refusal to be disciplined and it shows a breakdown of the symbolic order that constructs the modern subject.

Oshimi’s *Blood on the Tracks* destabilises the locus of violence further as it projects a mother’s possessive love which increasingly becomes a site of suffocating and banalised brutality. For Oshimi, the home becomes the state, and the mother transforms into the warden. This control being more intimate, personal, and haunting becomes the site of both care and surveillance. Although Seiko is not the state’s direct dictate, yet her surveillance over Seiichi’s movements, time, subjectivity, and even control of the body, imitates the panoptic logic of Foucauldian surveillance. Her overbearing presence, emotional and psychological manipulation, and sudden violent outbursts are slivers of the mechanism of correction. Seiko’s desire to cocoon Seiichi away from the world erases his social relations with the outside world. Surveillance, for Seiko, is not mediated through technology but it is coded in her emotions, filial duty, guilt, and for Seiko, love becomes a disciplinary technique. Foucault’s panopticism infiltrates the home, where surveillance should not occur, as man cannot be themselves without being aware of being watched. The psychic death of the subject in *Blood on the Tracks* under emotional tyranny signals how biopolitics can operate within the intimate zones of kinship.

This turning of the domestic space into a space of panopticism invokes Judith Butler’s theory of subject which occurs within “regulatory norms” that produce the intelligibility of the subject (Butler 2). Seiko’s overwhelming and obsessive maternal care regulates what Seiichi must become – a boy who is insulated from society, unformed in masculinity, and perpetually suspended in a state of emotional and psychological dependence. Her surveillance is gendered which arrests normative developments and creates an abject subject, who is barred from the symbolic order, but still bound to it. In the seventeen volume manga series, readers never find Seiichi finding happiness or submitting to societal roles. When Seiko finally dies under Seiichi’s guardianship, the biopolitical control is reversed, but instead of violence he fosters kindness, warmth, and care.

Mutilating the Law-of-the-Father, Patriarchy, and Abject

Jacques Lacan’s ‘Law-of-the-Father’ is the subject’s introduction to the symbolic order governed by language, patriarchal social structures, and prohibitions. ‘Father’ does not simply refer to the biological paternal figure, but to the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ which stands for the metaphysical locus of power, discipline, and repression that attaches its subjects within ideologies (Lacan 558). The ideology of the Father is not always in the embodiment of the male parent, but mostly by institutions and figures which demand conformity, deny autonomy, and suppress desire. This rebellion to ‘Law-of-the-Father’ comes in many forms such as dissociation from the symbolic identity, psychic rupture, or violent insurrection. Lacan in *Écrits* (1966) writes that “[T]he function of the father ... is to unite (or not) a desire with the Law...” (Lacan 245). This attempt of domesticating desire through the prohibition of the symbolic is what destabilises the narrative of the three mangas.

Oshimi’s *Blood on the Tracks* presents Seiko as the maternal figure who operates as the Lacanian Father and her authority is all encompassing as she is the law maker, law enforcer, and the one who institutes the symbolic order in Seiichi’s life. She dictates his life starting from the breakfast, “pork bun or a red bean bun”; to his dreams (Oshimi 15). Her assertion, “You never let me down”, which in the literal understanding is an assertion of Seiichi’s identity, but in the metaphorical understanding, it becomes a ritualistic invocation of Seiichi’s submission (Oshimi 107). While Seiko showers her maternal love, it is



possessive, disciplinary, and pathologically intrusive. Lacan in his lectures justified that in order for the child to enter the symbolic, it must break away from the mother, and Seiichi's inability to break away from his mother perpetually posits him in the pre-Oedipal limbo – where both the symbolic order and the presence of the Real is never felt.

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* asserts that “[T]he abject confronts us ... with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal”, Seiko's inability to separate maternal and sexual love, her perverse and emotional incest becomes the abject in *Blood on the Tracks*, which violates the symbolic distinction between the subject/other, parent/child, and love/horror (Kristeva 12). For Seiichi, Seiko becomes the all-encompassing figure of both love/horror, of mother/monster. His resistance to Seiko is not politically meditated, but rather internal where his psychic rebellion occurs in silences, hesitations, denial and finally a breakdown – where a psychotic split fragments his narrative voice. His slow descent into psychological detachment from his mother, mirrors the “epidermalization of inferiority” – what Fanon describes as the internalisation of subjugation where the gaze of the coloniser is internalised and the colonised loses their coherence (Fanon xiii). Seiichi in the process of growing up, internalises Seiko's gaze and replaces autonomy with obedience. His final act of rebellion, of rejecting Seiko's maternal advances – does not reclaim the Law but disrupts its hold momentarily. While the Law is not overcome, it is cracked, leaving trauma at its awake making Seiichi completely motiveless in life with a desire to end his life.

In Ōtomo's *Akira*, the law of the Father is projected outward in the shape of the city, military, and technological systems that attempt to control the body and its energy. Neo-Tokyo's landscape becomes the paternal authority where the Colonel represents the military regime, and the scientific medicalising apparatus – all are the agents through which the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ enforces discipline. Tetsuo's transformation is radical against the paternal order while his psychic power increases to insurmountable level and intensifies, he eliminates military representatives, scientists and frees Akira from the biopolitical control and suppression of the Colonel. Akira, in the narrative, is assumed to be the supreme Symbolic Father, whose stability is in question, and he becomes the embodiment of divine biopower whose angel is Tetsuo.

In *Écrits* (1966) Lacan mentions that what “constitutes ... as subject is my question. In order to be recognised by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me” (Lacan 64). Tetsuo, in *Akira*, has no name as he is perpetually the secondary figure to Kaneda who has always been more heroic and more charismatic, and even to Akira. Tetsuo is the other whose name changes with every institution – ‘Tetsuo’, a name given to him at birth, ‘Forty-One’ given to him as a psychic subject, and ‘Prince’ by the Akira fanatics. The manga underlines this structural repression, as even when Tetsuo has outshined Akira and has literally become the omnipotent, he cries out Kaneda's name, to help relieve him from this pain of existence, a name which symbolises his inferiority, and establishes him as the Other.

While his final transformation into the grotesque mass of flesh is a regression into abjection, yet, Tetsuo is refusal of the symbolic as he could not reject Kaneda. In his monstrous body there is no language, no Law, and no name, rather there is no identity, just power in its raw form and only excess. This rebellious grotesque form of Tetsuo's body is reminiscent of how writing the body is a rebellion against the patriarchal inscription, and this writing the body or ‘écritureféminine’ is a disruptive and embodied form of expression. Hélène Cixous in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975) writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous 875).



Similarly, Tetsuo's transformation translates into the writing of his body which is violent, intelligible, and a language aimed against the 'Law-of-the-Father'. When his body explodes, it explodes with signification, and it refuses to be regulated. While Tetsuo's body collapses, the writing is unsustainable and the Symbolic remains undisturbed. However, it is to be remembered that the Symbolic is sustained not because it is a just system, but because it has in its arsenal means of annihilation.

In Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, Motoko's relationship with the Law is even more complex as being a synthetic and cyborg woman, she is situated in liminal space between compliance and subversion. While she is a government agent and an enforcer of the Law herself through cyber surveillance and political discipline, she also expresses the desire to rebel against the state when she merges with the Puppet Master, in a realm that cannot be controlled by the state. For Shirow, the Law is algorithmic and controls through surveillance, systems, and data structures. Motoko breaks away from the Law by rewriting herself, and by merging with a conscious entity outside of state's control, she performs "gender intelligibility" which Butler explains is an action that reveals performativity of identity and opens up avenues for difference (Butler 22).

Although Donna Haraway in her essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985), writes that "[T]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world ... it is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" – Motoko's body is still objectified, desired, and surveilled (Haraway 150). Even if Motoko escaped the realm of surveillance, and dissolved her identity, the Puppet Master reasoned, "The totality of my "self" is being radically simplified, but for some reason my true self is not changing" – which reasserts that the visual economy of the narrative continues to project Motoko through the male gaze (Shirow 271). While her rebellion is a success, it is only a success in ideology but not in the representation of patriarchy. To break away from the 'Law-of-the-Father' is never a complete act, it is always a gesture that is incomplete, partial, traumatic, and violent – which is insufficient in rejecting the law altogether, which is steadfast and insidiously resilient, and reveals in the process the artificiality, fissures, and violence of the law's domination upon its subjects.

Gender Performativity and the Politics of Becoming

Power, surveillance, and biopolitics, all find place in the overarching politics of gender. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) asserted that "[T]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 33). From a Butlerian perspective, gender is not the cause of behaviour, rather, it is the effect of behaviour. This performance of a gender – of masculinity and femininity, and everything else in between – provides a critical tool in analysing the constructed nature of it all, especially within the dystopian and speculative media that disrupts biological essentialism and destabilises the human form.

Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* presents Motoko's body that is constructed and manufactured by the state powers, and this synthetic body is controlled by her consciousness, or 'ghost'. While there exists a fluidity as the mind is not formed with preconceived gendered constructs – her synthetic body which looks like a woman, which moves and is seen like a woman's – places Motoko under the female sex. Even Motoko's gender is performative as the state's surveillance has coded her legible and recognisable as a female along with her body which is hyper feminine in visual design, and exceptionally hyper masculine in strength and action. This femininity is coded in her through the design logic of the male gaze and her partial nudity, stoicism, and combat skills are in dissonance with her need for the performance. Motoko is inhabiting the gender for both the state and the spectator. She becomes the embodiment of male fantasy and is consistently objectified.



Haraway envisions a post-sex space in 'Cyborg Manifesto' (1991) where she writes that "[T]he cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family ... The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (Haraway 151). Motoko's merging with the Puppet Master is the evidence of the post-sex positionality where her merging signals a new ontology of a posthuman becoming that shatters the binary of male/female, man/machine, and subject/object. While Motoko rebels by moving towards a posthuman becoming, her agency over her representation is complex as Butler notes in *Gender Performance*, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency ... rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" – and Motoko's body is state controlled and thereby state represented (Butler, 179). Motoko's suppression raises questions as to whether posthuman bodies can ever be entirely post-gender within the visual culture.

In *Akira*, the question of gender is deeply entangled with vulnerability and power rising from the crisis of adolescence. Both Tetsuo and Kaneda are designated to hyper masculine roles where they are rebels, bikers, with Kaneda being their gang leader. Their jackets and their representation with their technologically advanced bikes, and posturing of the self are a form of aestheticized masculinity. Within this lies a deep instability as both Kaneda and Tetsuo are searching for authority. While Tetsuo becomes psychically powerful, Kaneda vouches to erase Tetsuo, or he would be replaced by him. Tetsuo's eventual metamorphosis into a grotesque, uncontrollable, and volatile mass is not just biopolitical rupture, it is also an undoing of the gender. Tetsuo's physical body fails to perform the roles inscribed onto his masculine body by the symbolic order and his transformation enacts the "epistemology of the closet" which represents the instability of heteronormative identity under pressure (Sedgwick 68).

Tetsuo's desire for dominance and his compulsion to reverse the order – even with Akira – is tied with the masculinist imperative of control, and his failure in being a man by the performative standards, manifests through abjection. Butler writes that "gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin", and in the abject form, Tetsuo loses gender and its expectations, and he simultaneously becomes monstrous, nonhuman, and unintelligible (Butler 175). Tetsuo's hyper masculinity was an imitation of an ideal which never existed and his failure to sustain the ideal results in physical and symbolic collapse. Even with Kaneda, this fragility is visible as his performance is maintained through his identity as a womaniser, his use of weapons, his rebellion, and ironic detachment. Kaneda's performance falters when he is exposed to Tetsuo's abjection which brings about uncertainty and emotional vulnerability as in the final moments when Tetsuo's memories play out, Kaneda is privy to his most precious memories – of Tetsuo and Kaneda being friends. This past which was pre-gender, pre-sex, and pre-symbolic, breaks the performative armour of Kaneda. Both Tetsuo and Kaneda relied on exterior codes of validation for their constructedness of masculine identity.

Oshimi presents a scathing criticism on gendered roles, and especially on motherhood in *Blood on the Tracks* through Seiko, who is presented with an uncontainable, perverse maternal femininity – who is not a nurturing mother, but rather as a controlling figure. While her role as a mother demands protection, Seiko offers suffocation. Her femininity or rather motherhood is not interpreted as soft, rather it is projected as violent, territorial, and obsessive. Her relationship with Seichi erases the boundaries of acceptable gender roles as she becomes both mother/lover, protector/destroyer, and nurturer/monster. Seiko's motherhood, which is a gendered excess, represents the abject that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4).

Her performance of motherhood is beyond necessary and to the point of uncanny, which in the garb of care, expresses domination. Her maternal performance transforms into a performance of terror where she does not fail to perform gender, rather she overperforms it to a point where it collapses under its own weight. Butler opines that "[W]hen the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of



sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice” and Seiko’s femininity transforms into a free-floating force that does not map out into any coherent and ethical role (Butler 10). She is the looming figure encompassing mother, tyrant, child, and deity. Seiko’s horror does not lie in her appearance but in her unpredictability such as pushing Shigeru off a cliff as read in *Volume I*. As spectators, readers are unaware of the gendered roles to apply to her and Seiko’s unclassifiable status transforms into terror.

Conclusion

Manga and comics as a visual and verbal form uniquely capture the breakdown of systems. The use of aesthetics is innately plural and polyphonic, as the graphic form can both show and withhold, display and disorient at the same time. The spatiality of the comics and manga page can linger on trauma, violence and repeat an image obsessively, distort time or scale and in this way stimulate the psychic, abject and spectral. *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Blood on the Tracks* collectively defy any singular narratives on power, gender, and nation. *Akira* represents adolescent children contested on battleground of state surveillance and psychic detonation, while *Ghost in the Shell* highlights the politics of the self, body, and surveillance in the age of cybernetics, and *Blood on the Tracks* presents a psychodrama by dislocating from the public to the private and familial, where the violence is not spectacular, rather personal and intimate.

Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* (1987) writes that “resistance narratives go further still in analysing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation ... the discourse of narrative is capable of exposing these structures ...” (Harlow 85). These mangas resist power, violence, and totalitarianism through its form and context and they present a language of entropy, grotesque dismemberment, and obsessive close-ups. They foreground the aesthetic of refusal, and provide a space where the collapse of language, disintegration of gender norms, and the breakdown of nationhood becomes visible. The relevance of the mangas is not in their political themes, but rather in their refusal to resolve violence into a narrative closure and in a way the works present to us catharsis instead of ruin, evolution instead of mutation, and transcendence in place of breakdown. These narratives are a site of archiving, a site where the symbolic is constantly challenged and in that undoing, resistance is not narrated, but embodied frame by frame, line by line, and visual by visual. They collectively challenge the dominant modes of agency and authority, as they exist in real time.

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“With a Pure Indignation”: Fiction, Fictionalisation and the Subtle Resistance of *The Accusation*

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Abstract: The oppressive Kim regime of North Korea seeks to control all possible aspects of citizens’ lives. All thought and action must occur along lines sanctioned by the ruling Workers’ Party. The production of art and literature is strictly monitored and must serve to elevate the ruling family and denounce the country’s enemies. Any deviation intentional or accidental is punished by exile to tortuous labour camps or by execution. North Korean criticism of the Kims has come mainly from defectors to the South, who have been derided and even threatened by the North Korean government. This paper seeks to study resistance as embodied in *The Accusation*, a collection of fictional short stories, by a writer who still resides within North Korea and uses the pseudonym Bandi, meaning ‘firefly’. The stories offer intimate glimpses into the lives of ordinary North Koreans who find themselves disillusioned with their apparently benevolent government and, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to resist the tyranny of the state and assert their agency as individuals. The paper also looks into the fictionalised nature of North Korean society and the mental turmoil that arises when reality lived and reality propagandised collide.

Keywords: Bandi, fiction, Kim, North Korea, resistance

Introduction

“But North Korea is not an undeveloped country”, writes Barbara Demick in Chapter 1 of her book *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. “It is a country that has fallen off the face of the developed world.” (Demick, “Holding Hands in the Dark”) To the outsider, North Korea appears to be a primitive prison – frozen in time and destined, perhaps, to be ruled forever by tyrants. The impression is, no doubt, well-founded to a large extent, but Demick, as quoted above, challenges the widely prevalent but erroneous notion of North Korea being eternally backward; the country had, at least until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, displayed technological and economic progress, at one point surpassing its impoverished, America-backed Southern counterpart. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, China’s refusal to keep bankrolling the North Korean economy (which found itself increasingly renegeing on debts), a strict separation from the supposedly capitalist and imperialist West, isolationist and tyrannical domestic policies, strict crackdowns on the dissemination of information and an inability to keep up with the social, economic and scientific progress made by the rest of the world put a stop to North Korea’s technological, infrastructural and industrial development –a fact that the North Korean government would do its best to keep from its citizens through propagandising and punishing. The key to understanding Bandi’s *The Accusation* lies in understanding the country’s twin system of propaganda and punishment.

North Korea, born following the division of the Korean Peninsula after the Korean War of 1950, is ruled with an iron fist by the Kim family. Information – except that which is controlled and circulated by the state – is allowed neither in nor out of the country’s borders. Foreign media content and literature is accessible only to a few elite citizens, including the workers at North Korea’s Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD).



The department is allowed to peruse South Korean and American news and literature (an act that would get the ordinary North Korean sentenced to hard labour in a prison camp), keep themselves abreast of current events and release heavily edited and manipulated versions to convince their citizens of their country's position as a veritable paradise on earth. Crimes and disasters natural or man-made in enemy countries are amplified in North Korean news, especially such long-standing enemies as Japan, South Korea and the United States who, so North Koreans are made to believe, would like nothing better than to launch a military attack on their beloved country. This phenomenon has been observed both by North Korean experts like Barbara Demick, a 2001 correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* who reported extensively on both Koreas, and by dissidents like Jang Jin-sun, who worked with the propaganda department and was intimately acquainted with the North Korean system of brainwashing even prior to his defection. Paranoia regarding foreign military attacks is bred into North Korean citizens from when they are very young: classrooms walls sport posters of cartoonishly evil American soldiers terrorizing North Koreans and enslaving South Koreans; 'Yankee bastard' is a term of abuse and young pupils are taught mathematics through problem-solving exercises featuring the number of children an American soldier might kill. (Demick, "The Accordion and the Blackboard")

Propaganda is the Kim regime's most effective oppressive arm. It tells the citizens what to think, when to think and when and how to act. Defectors, who have hitherto had their whole lives (and deaths) planned and executed by the state, often find themselves at sea when confronted with the freedom of choice in South Korea and the necessity to think and decide for themselves. Most of our information about the isolated and strictly-sealed state comes from the North Korean citizens who manage to escape the country, usually travelling through China to South Korea. They speak, write and sometimes draw of unspeakable atrocities in prison camps: of prisoners dead and dying from hard labour, starvation, illness and torture; of dead bodies left to the mercy of rodents and natural elements; of women suffering sexual violence, forced abortions and infanticide. The enduring image - unchanged from when Kim-Il-Sung, the country's first ruler, took up the reins of government - is of a people parroting propaganda and bowing obsequiously to the reigning Kim even as they are starved and executed.

Kim Jong-Il once noted that he "rule through music and literature" (Jang, Ch. 1). Writers are, in essence, mouthpieces of the Workers' Party of Korea, the ruling party. "...every single writer in North Korea produces works according to a chain of command that begins with the Writers' Union Central Committee of the Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department," notes Jang Jin-sung, a former poet with the United Front Department of the Workers' Party. "Anyone who composes a work that has not been assigned to the writer through this chain of command is by definition guilty of treason. All written works in North Korea must be initiated in response to a specific request from the Workers' Party. Once the writer has handed in his piece, it must then be legally approved before being accepted as a new work. Those writers who produce distinguished works under these standards are of course rewarded." (Jang, Ch. 1)

It is obvious, then, that the literature produced in North Korea (in addition to the works authored by the Kims) express reverence for the 'Great Leader' or the 'Dear Leader' and the Socialist system and hatred for its supposed enemies. It is equally obvious that any deviation, which includes intentional or accidental dissemination of the South Korean material confidentially loaned to these writers, brings forth punitive hard labour or even execution. Jang Jin-sung's own defection was prompted by a similar occurrence: disillusioned and disgusted with his own government after his exposure to accounts of South Korean life and economy and to the famine that he saw sweeping the country outside the privileged bubble of Pyongyang, Jang had loaned a book from South Korea to a like-minded friend, Hwang Young-min, who misplaced it. Knowing that if found out - which they would eventually be - they would be arrested for treason, the two friends decided to defect. Jang managed to escape, but Young-min was apprehended in China. He killed himself on the way back to



North Korea, preferring death by his own hand to the punishment awaiting him (and in all likelihood his family) at the hands of the state.

The Accusation in the Context of North Korean Fiction and Fictionalisation

In 2013, South Korean human rights activist Do Hee-yun found himself in possession of a 750-page manuscript. He had been apprised of its existence by a female North Korean defector he had helped rescue and at her request had sent a letter to Bandi, her relative, through his Chinese friend. The friend had brought back the manuscript, which contained seven short stories written between 1989 and 1995. Do took the initiative to get the stories published as “an earnest entreaty to shine a spotlight on North Korea’s oppressive regime” (Sumi, “Bandi and Surviving North Korea: A Review of *The Accusation*”). The book garnered little attention when it was published in South Korea in 2014, which Do attributes to the “over-democratization” (Rao, “A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins”) of South Koreans – a kind of “somnambulant indifference” (Rao, “A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins”) to the humanitarian crisis plaguing their brothers and sisters in the North. Bandi’s book generated international interest only with a French translation in 2016 and an English translation by Deborah Smith in 2017, published under the title *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea*.

The Accusation has sometimes been called the first work of fiction from North Korea. It is an idea worth examining, both in the context of fiction as a literary genre and the degree to which fact and fiction are distinct (or indistinct) in North Korea. To state that North Korean authors have produced no works of fiction – no poems, no novels, no short stories – would be an untruth, though works of any importance must have been approved of by the state and any and all works are monitored for traces of dissent or insubordination. Han Sorya’s *Jackals* (1951) comes to mind in this context. Bandi’s own literary career began with works he had published in North Korean literary magazines. But fiction is literature created from imagination and experience by the creative mind, much like life thought and speech are products in North Korea created by the state or, to be more accurate, the propagandising arm of the state. North Korea’s veneration of the Kims depends on the fictionalising of the history of the Korean war, painting Kim Il-Sung as a superhuman warrior-general who singlehandedly ended the Japanese occupation of the country and drove the bloodthirsty ‘Yankees’ (flanked by their supposed puppets, the South Koreans) away from North Korean borders (defectors report being shocked when they first learn that their country had not, in fact, won the Korean War; that it had ended, essentially, in a stalemate, and that Kim Il-Sung had been the aggressor instead of the ‘puppet’ South Korean government). North Korea has no religion, but the depiction of the Kim dynasty in North Korean media and literature bears striking similarities to the rise of epic heroes and divine figures: Kim Jong-Il, for example, is said to have been born in his father’s military camp at Mount Paektu, the peak divinely regarded by both halves of the Korean peninsula, and his birth was heralded by the appearance of a rainbow in the sky. The legend is an indisputable part of official North Korean history and also blatantly untrue – Jong-Il was born in Russia, and he wasn’t even called Kim Jong-Il to begin with. He’d been given the Russian name Yura. Yet the birthdays of Il-Sung and Jong-Il, father and son, are state holidays, and children are expected to bow and thank the Great Leader and the Dear Leader respectively for the chocolates and sweets that they receive as gifts. Any deviance in practice or thought from these established practices or beliefs is immediately punished by exile to labour camps or by execution.

Paul Fischer, author of *A Kim Jong-Il Production*, describes North Korea as “one vast stage production” with Jong-Il (in Fischer’s book, at least) as “the writer, director and producer of the nation” (Fischer, Ch. 22). The only way to survive and perhaps be reasonably happy is to adhere to one’s role, parrot off the expected lines and never question what the Workers’ Party proclaimed to be the reality. The comprehensive and all-pervasive North Korean propaganda also accounts for many defectors’ “complicated relationship with fact”



(Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins"); a polite euphemism for heavily fictionalised or embellished accounts. Notwithstanding successful defections, former residents of the regime have had to lead "a life of deception" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins") because, quite simply, their lives and their family's depended on it, and this is sometimes reflected in their accounts of North Korea. Shin Dong-yuk, the young protagonist of *Escape from Camp 14* (a reference to North Korea's prison camp number 14 where he was allegedly born and raised) confessed in 2015 that many of his claims about his life in North Korea had been false. Yeonmi Park, arguably the best-known North Korean defector, came under fire for claiming in her book *In Order to Live* that she'd known of North Korean citizens executed for watching South Korean content, which many defectors flagged as false. It must be noted, however, that while Park's claim (and many others in her book) might be disputed, it cannot be denounced as absolutely untrue, at least not under Kim Jong-Un: speaking on the condition of anonymity, residents in North Korea have described the increasingly stringent crackdown on the consumption of South Korean content and have reported at least two executions as a result of the same.

Analysts and thinkers familiar with the sway the North Korean government holds over its citizens have questioned whether it is possible for a resident actually living within the country and the system to see through the lies the common man is constantly fed. Barbara Demick is of the opinion that *The Accusation* is written by a defector. Others who are familiar with Korean literature feel differently. Lydia Lim, student at Princeton University and the granddaughter of defectors, has studied the language and the metaphors used in the book and the idiosyncratic word choices that are the result of a "linguistic rift" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins") between North and South Korea. She has also spoken to North Korean defectors familiar with the locations – often obscure – that Bandi describes in his stories. She has found no cause to doubt that *The Accusation* has indeed been written by a disillusioned North Korean writer working for the state.

It would be, perhaps, more accurate to describe the book as the first work of dissident fiction authored by a writer still living in North Korea – an occurrence that makes the book's message all the more powerful. Do, who has had sporadic communication with Bandi, said in 2017 that his agents been in touch with the North Korean writer some months ago and that Bandi was safe and "was aware of the book's publication in the outside world" (Choe Sang-Hun, "A Dissident Book Smuggled from North Korea finds a Global Audience"). Profits from the book, according to Do, would go towards supporting not only Bandi's family in North Korea but also defectors who live and write in the South.

Oppression and Resistance in *The Accusation*

Jong-Il had been an advocate of the *chongjaron* or 'seed theory' of expression in literature and film, wherein each story contains a central idea (the 'seed') and the events or characters depicted would aim to lend credence to that idea. The 'seed' is the central idea – usually political in nature (but not subversive in any form or manner to the Kim family) to guarantee the film's success – and unites such elements of the work as the protagonist, the conflict depicted, the events and the resolution. Jong-Il expounds on the idea in his book *On the Art of the Cinema* (1973). His intention, of course, had been to use media (his personal favourite being film) as a vessel for pro-Party propaganda and to celebrate the benevolence of the ruling family. The seven short stories in *The Accusation*, taken together, do in principle adhere to the seed theory in that the idea that is planted in the first story comes to fruition in the final one with the stories in between gradually elaborating on it and exploring it from different perspectives; only, Bandi's intention is not to venerate the Worker's Party and its leaders but to condemn them.



The stories in *The Accusation* explore North Korean oppression from the point of view of ordinary citizens of different *songbun* or class that is determined by one's individual and familial history of loyalty to the Party – from a “witless mine worker” (Bandi, “So Near, Yet so Far”) to an educated woman with a background of impeccable familial loyalty to the Party, so much so that she is the “white crane” compared to her wavering-class “black crow” husband (Bandi, “Record of a Defection”). There is a spectrum across the stories of realisation of the oppressive system they live under: Lee Il-Cheol's wife, hitherto privileged by her family background to be unaware of the fate of those below her in *songbun*, is shocked and disillusioned when she finds her husband's beloved nephew, a child, has been stripped of his rank of class president simply because the entire family belongs to “Class 149” and is regarded as comprising “hostile element” (Bandi, “Record of a Defection”); the passengers stuck in the waiting room in “Pandemonium”, labouring in crowd and heat for hours for a train that never seems to come, wonder “*What bastard's Class One event takes this long? What bastard's Class One event kills people like this?*” (Bandi, “Pandemonium”), implying they are aware that the supposedly considerate and benevolent Kim Il-Sung is responsible for their suffering. Bandi, however, does not hold the Kims alone responsible for the suffering of his countrymen. He condemns the very political system that had made the rise of the Kim family and their consolidation on power possible. One of the poems that had accompanied the manuscript of *The Accusation* reads thus:

That old man of Europe with his bristling beard
Claimed that capitalism is a pitch-black realm
While communism is a world of light.
I, Bandi, of this so-called world of light,
Fated to shine only in a world of darkness,
Denounce in front of the whole world
That light which is truly fathomless darkness,
Black as a moonless night at the year's end. (Bandi, “In Place of a Preface”)

Bandi's denunciation of Communism in the poem is not the mere result of his disagreement with or dislike of a certain political ideology; it is the result of his disillusionment with a political system that had been touted as egalitarian (as opposed to the supposedly inhumane and debauched capitalism of South Korea and the United States) and had later shown itself to be anything but. This sentiment would later be echoed by many of the South Korean and Japanese citizens who had immigrated to North Korea lured by promises of a just and progressive workers' paradise and had instead found themselves trapped in a country where the hapless citizens worked simply to enrich the ruling family and their cronies. Bandi's bitter criticism of Communist ideology is echoed in the final story of the book wherein the aggrieved and maddened scientist Ko Inshik locates in the “Redbrick house” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”) – the Municipal party office – the likeness of the poisonous red mushroom that had sickened him and his men and killed a fellow worker: “*Pull out that red mushroom, that poisonous mushroom. Uproot it from this land, from this world, forever!*” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”). The destruction of the red mushroom is also his only appeal in court, torn, as the journalist Yunmo realizes, from the depths of his “snow-white conscience” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”), though the rest of the attendees find it incomprehensible and discuss how the accused “must have gone soft in the head.” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”).



It is worth noting that the conflicts faced by the characters in the stories because of the discrepancy between reality as propagated by the state and the characters' lived reality manifest in things so mundane or so inconsequential that they would not be worth a second thought in any country that is not North Korea. Han Gyeong-hee's young son in "City of Spectres" is terrified by the portraits of Karl Marx and Kim Il-Sung opposite their building in Pyongyang. Gyong-hee uses double curtains, blue in colour, to hide the portraits from the child. Her failure to use the translucent white under-curtains the Party has provided them with draws the ire of her husband as well as of the local Party secretary. Gyong-hee is hardly a fervent opponent of Kim Il-Sung or Karl Marx – she is simply an exasperated mother trying to soothe her sick child (and, by extension, suppress any conjecture that the child was frightened by the portraits because his parents were irreverent to the men in them). Her efforts bear no fruit, nor do her explanations about the curtains and her child's ailing health. Her family's loyalty to the Party is disregarded and she is exiled to the countryside with her family for "Neglecting to educate their son in the proper revolutionary principles, with a negative effect on the National Day ceremony" and "making coarse remarks about the portrait of Karl Marx, the father of communism, and comparing the portrait of our Great Leader to a manhole cover." (Bandi, "City of Spectres"). It is extremely ironic that Gyong-hee's efforts to pour oil on troubled waters and downplay her son's childish fears end up accelerating the outcome she had hoped to avoid – punitive exile. But Gyong-hee had not insulted the Great Leader any more than her child had deliberately insulted Marx; her reference to the manhole cover in no way reflected her views of her country's relationship but was simply a North Korean saying: "The child who fears turtles will flinch at a manhole cover" (Bandi, "City of Spectres"). Her attempt to explain childish behaviour had been misconstrued – deliberately or otherwise – as political irreverence.

It is also worth noting that rigid and repressive regimes like North Korea's thrive on, among other things, completely stripping the common people of agency; the degree of the individual's allegiance to the regime is, paradoxically, the degree to which agency may be restored, though as a privilege and certainly not absolutely (reporting one's neighbours and even family members to party officials for purported unpatriotic behaviour is one of the many ways of demonstrating allegiance). It stands to reason, therefore, that the creatures and the objects that stand for resistance (though the characters would probably be hard-pressed to describe them as such) are commonplace themselves and that, at the same time, they are, for those that wield them, the means – often the only means – of asserting their agency and their rights as individuals in the face of state ideology that demands the dissolution of the individual in favour of the collective.

In "Record of a Defection", for example, the narrator and his wife, in spite of their class differences, are happily married, yet the husband discovers his wife's contraceptive pills. He flies into a rage thinking she does not want a baby with him because it would be an inter-class "mongrel" (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"), then finds out it is because she refuses to bring a child into a society that punishes the children (and grandchildren) for the sins of the father: "In this country, a mother has only one wish when she brings children into the world: that their passage through life will be blessed. But if she knew for a fact that what lay in wait was an endless path of thorns? She'd need the cruelty of a hardened criminal to condemn a child to that." (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"). Their family's poor *songbun* and the prospect of Il-Cheong's acceptance into the party also render the woman vulnerable to the sexual advances of the local Party secretary, for to refuse him would be to hamper her husband's career prospects. It is the contraceptive pills and the story that spills out with their discovery that prompts Il-Cheong to try to defect with his family from the "barren desert" that is their country, "a place where life withers and dies" (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"). The freeing of his pet larks from their cage – the second time, by physically breaking the cage into two – is the only act that the timid and passive Myeong-chol performs in complete senses and under his own agency in "So Near, Yet so Far". Myeong-Chol is unable to protest when he is refused a travel permit to see his dying mother; his decision to travel without a permit is taken in a fit of drunken desperation and he falls to pieces as soon as he is caught travelling without a permit



- a crime in North Korea that warrants punishment by hard labour. The birds, a gift from Myeong-chol's village, represent his own imprisonment (hence his feeling of kinship with them and his efforts to set them free), but his ownership of the birds and his complete control over their lives also mirrors the state's ownership over his person and its right to deny him (in the interests of the state, of course) an urgent visit to family: "That's right, what am I but a caged animal, for whom the shortest distance might as well be a thousand ri? A pitiful, domesticated creature!" (Bandi, "So Near, Yet so Far"). In setting the birds free, Myeong-Chol chooses, albeit unconsciously, to feed his own desire for freedom and to deviate from the treatment he, a mine worker, received from the Party officials, his superiors: "There's no 'why.' I needed to break the cage, so I did, that's all." (Bandi, "So Near, Yet so Far").

"Life of a Swift Steed", "Pandemonium" and "On Stage" capture the devolution of the North Korean state as a whole, culminating in the parallel between the parasitic red mushroom and the Communist-run country in "The Red Mushroom". If the elm tree in "Life of a Swift Steed" is emblematic of the Communist utopia that the simple, hardworking and idealistic Seol Yong-su envisioned - "...pure white rice with meat every day, and silk clothes, and a house with a tiled roof!" (Bandi, "Life of a Swift Steed"), then the story of pandemonium, "the abode of the demons" (Bandi, "Pandemonium"), where the old demon king used laughter to "conceal his evil mistreatment" (Bandi, "Pandemonium") of his slaves is the story of a country where people must mask their fear and discontent of their ruler behind smile and prayer. "On Stage" explores the performative nature of North Korean life where one must, quite literally, act to save one's life (which is what the Hong Yeong-pyo, the stern father and the loyal Part member of the story, realises as he watches a banished man's wife weep unabashedly for the dead Kim Il-Sung). The degeneration of North Korea is marked by the disillusionment of her loyal citizens and a slow and increasingly horrifying awakening about inescapable, deceptive and repetitive quagmire that passes for life in North Korea: Seol Yong-su is found dead with his chopped old elm that had ceased to flower; Mrs. Oh comes to the realization that the story of pandemonium she plans to narrate to her granddaughter is "that old tale, which was not really old at all" (Bandi, "Pandemonium"), and Yeong-pyo presses his gun to his temple, reeling from the accuracy of his wayward son's comparison of their life to playacting and from the insinuation that he, too, with his impeccable Party credentials, had been one of the actors.

Bandi recounts in *The Accusation* not "outright rebellion" but about survival in the face of the "slow onset of despair" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins"), not only because of the nature of the society and the life they describe but also because the characters lack the hindsight and the sense of freedom that defectors come to possess in the South or even, to a much lesser degree, in China. What matters to him is they be read and understood. In an untitled poem that accompanied the manuscript, he writes:

Though they be dry as a desert

And rough as a grassland

Shabby as an invalid

And primitive as stone tools

Reader!

I beg you to read my words. (Bandi, untitled poem)



Conclusion

Bandi's stories and the defectors' accounts show that North Koreans are not as completely taken in by propaganda as their government would like them to be. In recent years, especially, there has been an increasing influx of South Korean media into the North thanks to the Chinese traders who smuggle things in and out of North Korea as well as North Korea's own flourishing black market. More and more North Koreans have begun waking up to the reality of their leaders and to the preposterous lies they have been fed about their supposed enemies, especially the South. There are, of course, no apparent manifestations of the growing discontent, particularly in the younger generation, for any signs of dissent are still ruthlessly crushed, but the question remains: what next?

Kim Jong-Il was succeeded after his passing by his third son, Kim Jong-Un. The younger Kim had spent many of his formative years going to school and playing basketball under a pseudonym in Switzerland. He had been exposed to Western capitalism and Western democracy and some had wondered, both inside North Korea and outside it, whether the young man would consider some version of *perestroika* and *glasnost* for his starved, impoverished and sanctions-riddled country, beginning, perhaps, with negotiating a freeze or – miraculously – an end to North Korea's controversial nuclear weapons programme. Their hopes have been mostly unfounded.

Following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, Jong-Un marked his ascension to power by eliminating any potential political rivals, including his uncle. He is also said to be behind the assassination in 2017 of his older half-brother Kim Jong-Nam. Jong-Nam, once a favourite of their father's, had long fallen from grace, but he still had extensive contacts within the country and was allegedly working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Jong-Nam died in Kuala-Lumpur airport when two girls sprayed him with what turned out to be lethal nerve agent. The girls, budding actresses, claimed they had had no knowledge of a murder and were simply recruited by a North Korean man for starring in a comic film. They'd been under the impression that their stunt at the airport was simply a part of shooting the film.

Jong-Un's human rights record, like his predecessors', is less than stellar. There are no traces in the way he runs his country of the Western education and Western exposure to democratic and free market values that had inspired cautious optimism in political analysts. He has enforced stricter penalties (including executions) for getting caught with or consuming South Korean content, wearing denims and similar manifestations of imperialist decadence. He has also taken harsher measures to guard against defections by, in part, reinforcing existing fences and border walls, increasing military presence near the border with China (the most common route taken by defectors) and permitting border guards to shoot dead any citizen suspected of trying to cross over. The Chinese government's policy is to arrest and hand over any North Korean found to have illegally entered the country, which has been made easier in recent years because of sophisticated surveillance systems like facial recognition and digitized, impossible-to-fake identity cards. "It has become physically impossible to cross the North Korean border into China", (Nakagawa, "North Korea Reinforces Border with China, Tightens Control to Prevent Defections that could threaten Kim Jong Un's Rule") said defector Seo Jae Pyong in 2023. In August that year, he'd been contacted by a starving North Korean resident who begged Seo to help him escape. Seo had had to tell the man that "There is no way to help this time" (Nakagawa, "North Korea Reinforces Border with China, Tightens Control to Prevent Defections that could threaten Kim Jong Un's Rule"). North and South Korea do share a border, but it is the site of the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) and is one of the most heavily fortified places in the world.

While the terrible days of the Arduous March (the North Korean name for the famine that swept across the country in the 1990s following the death of Kim Il-Sung) have passed, North Korea's citizens still suffer



from a chronic shortage of food. The country is unable to produce sufficient food for its citizens and sanctions do not permit much import of food. Residents told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2023 that they are “stuck and waiting to die” (Mackenzie, “North Korea: We are stuck and waiting to die”). The food and fuel Pyongyang imports from China, one of North Korea’s few allies, finds its way not to the common people but into the pockets of the elites of the city, as does the humanitarian aid supplied by the international community (particularly the United Nations and the United States) in the form of rice, formula, diapers and powdered milk.

Government officials in such countries as Iran and Russia who have been accused of violating human rights often find themselves under heavy sanctions. The question that arises then must also inevitably arise now: what sustains the Kim regime? The Kim family and their stooges help themselves to the lion’s share of the little their ruined economy manages to produce, it is true, but the Kim regime is also propped up by China and Russia – extremely ironic considering the Kim family’s references to Japan and South Korea at every conceivable opportunity as American puppets. China, especially, has vested interests in ensuring the stability of North Korea’s current government: a China-backed North Korea may be used to counter America’s military presence in Japan and South Korea; also, any kind of political upheaval in North Korea would initiate a mass exodus of North Korean refugees – a problem China emphatically does not wish to deal with. China and the erstwhile Soviet Union are also the only countries to have signed military treaties with the North and, as of writing, thousands of Jong-Un’s countrymen are dying as part of Vladimir Putin’s forces in Russia’s war with Ukraine.

Kim Jong-Il established his own private criminal enterprise that would soon become a source of resources and revenue for the Kim family. The outfit was responsible for kidnapping women from Western and Middle-Eastern countries as well as from South Korea and Japan during Jong-Il’s reign, both for the leader’s private benefit and the benefit of North Korean government enterprises. Paul Fischer, in his book *A Kim Jong-Il Production: The Extraordinary Story of a Kidnapped Filmmaker, His Star Actress, and A Young Dictator’s Rise to Power*, describes how South Korean star Choi Eun-hee found herself tricked and abducted by Kim Jong-Il’s henchmen. During her years as Jong-Il’s captive, albeit in a gilded cage of luxury almost unheard-of by North Korean standards, Choi would meet fellow abductees, including French and Jordanian women. An investigation by TIME magazine found that Jong-Il’s nefarious activities stretched across Asia to Russia, Europe and the United States. Harvard University researcher, Sheena Chestnut, notes that the activities of the enterprise are controlled by Bureau 39, which comprises the dictator’s top financial advisors and closest deputies – findings that have been corroborated by multiple intelligence agencies working in East Asia. The outfit is also responsible, currently, for securing funds for the regime through cyberattacks, kidnappings, assassinations and forgery – counterfeit American dollar bills produced in North Korea so closely resemble the original that they have been nicknamed ‘megadollars’. The outfit’s responsibilities also extend to persecuting and, if necessary, eliminating critics of the Kim family inside and outside North Korea. Do Hee-yun has found himself targeted by cyberattacks since the publication of *The Accusation*. He is still in possession of Bandi’s manuscript and is very cautious as to who he shows it to. He does not allow photography for fear of the North Korean regime identifying Bandi through his handwriting.

There seems little prospect of the ordinary North Korean’s life changing for the better until the Kim dynasty is vanquished and a proper democratically-elected government of enlightened and progressive citizens is established, which may then work towards economic and infrastructural development within the country, international alliances and the removal of economic sanctions. But regime change prompted from without rarely works, and the prospect (as of now) of regime change from within North Korea seems extremely remote. The thought is not, perhaps, very encouraging, but one can only hope that Bandi’s will not be the only light that shines through the darkness of the Northern half of the Korean peninsula.



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A 'New Way of Living': Exploring the Complex Dynamics of Queer Counterculture in Vijay Dan Detha's "A Double Life"

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Abstract: Vijay Dan Detha's short story "Dowari Joon", translated into English from Rajasthani by Ruth Vanita as 'A Double Life', centres around the lesbian couple Beeja and Teeja whose union in marriage, ironically, result from one of the many chinks in the faulty fabric of a patriarchal society, and its aftermath. In this paper, I argue that the text, in permitting a same-sex union within the parameters of a Hindu wedding ceremony, opens up a discussion on the queer counter-culture that continually thwarts and subverts the pervasive dominant culture of the times. Interestingly, instead of righting the wrong and setting things straight, the narrative's queer trajectory offsets the naturalised heterosexual matrix and interrogates the fallacies of heterosexual bliss by contrasting it with Beeja and Teeja's miraculous lesbian utopia. The story allows for a close analysis of the queer heterotopia materialised by the ghost chieftain for the lesbian couple to reside in, thereby launching a queer counterpublics where a "new way of living" (98) is created outside society's dominant heteronormative logic. Given that the lesbian couple stands outside of the normative temporality of "marriage - reproduction - child rearing - retirement - death" (Halberstam 182), this paper will also explore the text's engagement with queer temporality.

Keywords: Counterculture, heterotopia, lesbian, queer, queer temporality

Introduction

Vijay Dan Detha, a literary luminary shining brightly on the landscape of Rajasthani literature, was a recipient of several prestigious awards like the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi award in 1974 among others. What is most striking about the body of work produced by this writer is his stance of non-negotiability when it comes to portraying his roots, so much so that he spoke in defence of his literary allegiance to his land: "My land [Rajasthan] is full of stories, whatever I've written is just a drop of the ocean" (Detha). Detha's imagination is steeped deeply in the wealth of the Rajasthani cosmos. Of particular interest is his persistent focus on the folkloric and mythic roots of his native land and all the stories carefully balance the quotidian and that which is out of the ordinary. Paralleling this penchant for the fantastical is a crude realism that reveals a critically penetrative view of the world and all its shams which shroud human existence.

Detha's short story "Dowari Joon", or, as translated into English by Ruth Vanita, "A Double Life", centres around the lesbian couple Beeja and Teeja, whose union in marriage, ironically, result from one of the many chinks in the faulty fabric of a patriarchal society, and its aftermath. Detha's story tackles the cruelty of patriarchy, the fallacious rubric of gender, and is a vivid exploration of and experimentation with nonnormative sexuality. For context, the narrative begins with two Seths whose unusual attachment to one another propels them to get married on the same day, and miraculously, their wives conceive on the same day, consequently giving birth on the exact same date and time. At the moment when the two Sethanis conceived together, the Seths took the opportunity to strengthen their bond and arrange a generous dowry, by promising



their children's marriage. The promise was based entirely on the premise that one Seth would have a boy, and the other, a girl, and that the father of the boy would come out richer in the end for a hefty dowry. Their confidence at such a presumption was thwarted by nature's play when both the Sethanis gave birth to daughters, but one Seth hatched a great deception by announcing the birth of a son by "beating a copper plate instead of a winnowing basket" (85).

This deception is carried on till the two girls' marriage, for Beeja was brought up under the misconception that she is a man and was always dressed thus. Once the betrayal is revealed, Beeja and Teeja accept their union not as a pathetic outcome of patriarchal machination, but a wilful choice of cohabiting together as legally married individuals. Since society cannot accommodate such nonnormative coupling, the girls abandon their village and venture into uninhabited lands, having only themselves as companions, until they chance upon the ghost chieftain and the story takes a turn towards the fantastical where supernatural agency intervenes to create a lesbian utopia. In this paper it is argued that the text, in permitting a same-sex union within the parameters of a Hindu wedding ceremony, opens up a discussion on the queer counter-culture that continually thwarts and subverts the pervasive dominant culture of the times. Interestingly, instead of righting the wrong and setting things straight, the narrative's queer trajectory offsets the naturalised heterosexual matrix and interrogates the fallacies of heterosexual bliss by contrasting it with Beeja and Teeja's miraculous lesbian utopia. This opens up the possibility of viewing Beeja and Teeja's newly found home as a counter-public challenging the logic of heteronormativity followed in mainstream society.

A 'New Way of Living': Dan Detha's Queer Counterculture and Counterpublics

In the short story, Detha consistently draws attention to the 'new life' that Beeja and Teeja embark upon as a nonnormative couple. There are scattered references to the newness of this alternate way of life that the lesbian couple embraces without any inhibition. At the same time, it is also important to note that nowhere in the narrative does Detha attempt to define or describe the nature of their relationship. What Detha implicated then by suggesting a "new way of living" (98) now has a significant political weightage. This queer way of living that marks Beeja and Teeja's cohabitation as a legally married same-sex couple is a politically charged state of existence which invites theoretical interventions from Fraser's theorisation on subaltern counterpublics, Michael Warner's discussion on queer counterpublics, and even Foucault's conceptualisation of a "homosexual way of life" (30). Whether the revelation of Beeja's true gender automatically nullifies the couple's marriage is something that remains unaddressed in the story, but the couple's decision to keep cohabiting as a married couple can be viewed as a manifestation of a queer counterculture which resists the dominant ideology of heterosexual hegemony. This section of the paper discusses the ways in which Beeja and Teeja's nonnormative relationship upsets the social order in place, consequently embodying a counterpublic that comes into "conflict with the norms and contents of their cultural environment [entailing] distortion" (Warner 63).

Once the lesbian couple abandons the conniving Seth's home by accepting the "deception" as a "blessing" and a gift, they come face to face with a society that refuses to acknowledge the validity of their relationship. The villagers, who can also be seen as Detha's representation of a miniature society, or, in Warner's terminology, "the public", refuse to accept such a gross violation of societal norms. The reason behind their rejection lies in the fact that the lesbian couple have now become an outlier to society's dominant logic of heteronormativity, as a result of which they can no longer be integrated into the fold of mainstream society. Their existence has now been marked by their outsider status and they are relegated to the margins literally as they exile themselves from the village. However, in interrogating the reason behind the villagers' aversion to the lesbian couple, their reasoning mostly borders on how the unusual pairing completely cancels out any masculine presence in their lives:



Marriage between two women! Oh no, two girls have got married to each other! What a slap on the face of manhood! This new way of living will destroy both kinship and community! [...] If a woman marries another woman, what is a man to do – go and find a mousehole for himself? (98)

The logic behind the villagers' outcry is also reminiscent of what Bonnie Zimmerman (1981) had to say about lesbian existence, that the lesbian is a threat to both masculinity and patriarchy simply because they are a testament to the fact that women can survive without needing a man, thereby making the lesbian a symbol of danger (464). It is the possibility of a world without men that makes the lesbian a threat to traditional hetero-patriarchal discourses. Culture also has a role to play. In India, culture becomes a site of a complex amalgamation of issues ranging from the literary to the political, and the nationalist framings of femininity becomes the apotheosis of such cultural ideologies. Consequently, it is culture, constitutive of beliefs and practices, that is the prime agency through which hegemonic forces are enacted (Panjabi and Chakravarti ii). Indian queer feminist scholars have analysed the repercussions of locating the figure of the lesbian within the country's socio-cultural context and arrived at the conclusion that being Indian and Lesbian comes with politics of invisibility and a creation of independent feminine cosmogonies (Thadani 10).

To understand the larger significations of the figure of the lesbian in Indian literature, it is imperative to first chart the country's ideation of womanhood. Partha Chatterjee has observed that the 'Indian woman' as a historical project was formed at the crossroads of colonialism and nationalism, thereby leading to essentialist assumptions, one of them being that the true Indian woman is akin to a Goddess which strategically effaced her sexuality (622). Similarly, Suparna Bhaskaran notes that women are held responsible not only for maintaining honour and purity, for preventing shame, but also for reproducing national culture (26). Madhavi Menon points out using historical and mythological instances how sexual morality has been policing women's desires since ancient days (ii-iii). Thus, the 'Indian woman' as a historical construct remains trapped within frameworks of essentialisms.

Detha's narrative underscores the role that patriarchy plays in constructing and deconstructing roles for women according to the convenience of men. Beeja is allowed to enjoy the rights of a man because prolonging the charade allows the Seth to amass a large dowry, hence benefitting him economically. The Seth's mercenary tendencies and indifference towards the outcome of the marriage and the tragedy of the daughter's lifelong façade shows the ruthless extent to which patriarchy would go to serve the selfish motives of men. However, Seth's presumptions are frustrated when Beeja and Teeja welcome the deception as their reality without a fuss.

Beeja and Teeja's relationship becomes a veritable threat to the very cultural and ideological structures of society, and in doing so, they come to embody Warner's postulation on how queers have the potential to upset the embedded sexual hierarchy of a majoritarian straight culture: "lesbians and gay men have found that to challenge the norms of straight culture in public is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behaviour and eroticism that are appropriate to the public" (25). The couple's transgression marks a paradigmatic shift in the sanctified and sanitised traditional values upheld by society, and thus stands out as a counter-norm. Noting the outsider status granted to the lesbian couple, the queer counterpublic thus established, subverts the social order while simultaneously remaining conscious of its "subordinate status".

Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without



saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (56)

In countering the normative standards of living, Beeja and Teeja together come to constitute a counterpublic which is marked by a subordinate social status. In her work “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” (1990), Fraser reconceptualises Habermas’s notion of “the public sphere” by proposing the concept of “subaltern counterpublics”, which she describes as standing “in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics” (70). According to her, members of groups who have been historically subordinated, like “women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians” engage in subaltern counterpublics when they “invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (67) that allow the proliferation of alternate identities and “help expand discursive space” since they are excluded within the “dominant public” (67). Borrowing Fraser’s terminology, the “subaltern counterpublic” that the lesbian couple now come to represent and embody, leads to an inevitable movement from the centre of society to the margins – a move physically demonstrated through their self-imposed exile as they abandon the village on their own accord and proceed to begin a new life in a new place. Detha was very much conscious of the radical implications that Beeja and Teeja’s liaison has and hence reiterates its newness in the story as a way of underscoring its larger significance: “They wanted to set up house together in a new way of their own, making enemies of the village men” (101). Even Ruth Vanita notices the recurrence of Detha’s focus on the newness of Beeja and Teeja’s alternate way of life and mentions in a footnote:

The words translated as ‘set up house together in a new way’ are *nayagharvās*; these words appear several times in the story. *Gharvās* refers to *grihasthāshrama*, the householder stage in the Hindu understanding of life. This stage includes marriage, sexual relations, domesticity and companionship. Detha plays on the word several times in the story. (101)

By embarking upon a “new way of living” (98), Beeja and Teeja rework the public’s understanding of gender and sexuality. The iteration of the word ‘new’ can also be seen as a byword for a radical and paradigmatic representation of a subversive understanding of gender and sexuality that questions the fallacies of a hegemonic and binarised societal division. Beeja and Teeja’s cohabitation contribute to the generation of alternate forms of association and queer relationalities that galvanises discourses surrounding nonnormative erotic practices while dismantling heteronormative hegemonic ideologies. It is certainly interesting to note that even Warner, while theorising on queer counterpublic, underscored the possibility of “new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship” (57), thereby allowing readers to map Beeja and Teeja’s nonnormative erotic association in the context of this theoretical lens.

Portrayal of Heterosexual Relationships

Vanita rightly observed that Detha’s story “introduces an unsettlingly radical analysis of male oppression of women” (121), and by extension, it is also a biting criticism of heterosexual marriages. Detha’s portrayal of heterosexual relationships is frequently and deliberately contrasted to the homosexual union of Beeja and Teeja. Significantly enough, the narrative opens not with the marriage of Beeja’s parents, but with the strong affection that Beeja and Teeja’s fathers had for one another:

In these two villages lived two Seths who were similar in their wealth and their miserliness. *There was no limit to their greed or to their love for each other*. So united were their fortunes that the weddings of both took place on the same night. At the same moment, their hands were joined to those of two beautiful brides, and at the same moment, pearls were generated in the two oysters. In their joy, the two Seths promised each other that regardless of which of them had a daughter and which a son, the offspring would be united in marriage. (84-85; emphasis added)



The readers are introduced to the world of Detha's story through homoerotic undertones undergirding the 'friendship' shared by the two Seths: "Intoxicated by their love for one another..." (85). The trajectories of the two Seths' lives, particularly marriage and conjugal union, are paralleled in such a manner and clothed in such an ambiguous language that it almost seems like it is the two Seths who have been united while their wives fade into insignificance. It is this suggestive, unarticulated, and consequently unfulfilled same-sex desire of the two Seths that finds fulfilment in the marital union of their daughters, Beeja and Teeja. Marriage becomes a crucial leitmotif in the story as the Sethani finds the idea of their daughter marrying another girl to be ludicrous: "Have you ever heard of a girl being married to another girl?" While the Sethani's response is understandable, the Seth's pronouncement is at once problematic and liberatory as it throws the validity of the institution of marriage into doubt: "Why not? What does it take to get married? You decide to do it, and it's done" (86).

As a statement on marriage, it is problematic because it calls into question the purpose of the institution: the Seth's apathetic rendering of marriage reveals the way in which he views his own marriage - as a union devoid of emotional attachment and something that was done just for the sake of it. Such a view fuels conversation surrounding how marriage as a social construct promotes heteronormativity in the name of procreation. This interpretation of the Seth's remark makes the author's iteration of his affectionate relationship with the other Seth come across as a deliberate attempt to mystify the aggrandised concept of marriage as a symptom of compulsory heteronormativity. On the other hand, another interpretation of the remark would lead curious readers to view the statement as a radical denouncement of the equational relationship between heterosexuality and marriage, thereby taking on a more queer-coded appeal. In this sense, the desire to marry is enough, the genders of the individuals involved become insignificant.

The vignettes of heterosexual marriages as depicted by Detha paint a pathetic picture of womanhood. Beeja and Teeja's friend married a wealthy man whose impotence enabled her father-in-law and her brother-in-law to take sexual advantage of her. She is consistently abused by all the male members of the family. As she does not get pregnant, she is socially reduced to an object of ridicule. The Sethani's parents' relationship is far from perfect - her mother was known to be unfaithful to her father multiple times, and the Sethani herself is a living testimony to her mother's rampant infidelity - once again proving the baselessness of heterosexual marriages. In such a context, Beeja and Teeja's lesbian relationship offers not only sexual liberation, but also a fulfilling emotional bond which the other heterosexual marriages depicted in the story could not offer. Susan Sontag in her work "The Third World of Women" discusses the centrality of sexuality in giving women agency in relationships. She writes that "[w]ithout a change in the very norms of sexuality, the liberation of women is a meaningless goal" (48). This is primarily because according to her most "sexual relationships act out the attitudes which oppress women and perpetuate male privilege" (47). Elaborating further on the relationship between sexual liberation and women empowerment Sontag wrote:

The notion of 'sexual liberation' seems to me even more suspect. The ancient double standard, which imputes to women less sexual energy and fewer sexual desires than men (and punishes them for behavior condoned in men), is clearly a way of keeping women in their place. (47)

Sontag seems to be claiming that heterosexual sex victimises women by reifying the sexist gender hierarchy. It is after stating this that Sontag makes the most important point: "What sexuality are women to be liberated to enjoy? The only sexual ethic liberating for women is one which challenges the primacy of genital heterosexuality" (48). The dialogue between Detha's story and Sontag's argument is significant because both seem to articulate, in their own ways of course, how institutionalised heterosexuality has battered women,



forcing them either to be subjects of violence and abuse (as is the case of Beeja and Teeja's friend), or to seek out sexual and emotional fulfilment outside of marriage (as is the case of the Sethani's infidel mother). This idea has been brilliantly explored in the story as Beeja, after submitting in to the lifelong delusion of being a man, finally decides to temporarily adopt the identity of a man. The ghost chieftain obliges, but things end horribly for the lesbian couple as Beeja, donning manhood, is cruel to Teeja and establishes dominance over her: "I am not one of those fools who become enslaved to their wives and put up with women's nonsense" (119). For Sontag, sexuality is of central importance when it comes to dismantling the extant gender hierarchy:

In a nonrepressive nonsexist society, sexuality will in one sense have a more important role than it has today - because it will be more diffused. Homosexual choices will be as valid and respectable as heterosexual choices; both will grow out a genuine bisexuality. (49)

Detha's narrative dissects the ways in which heteronormativity and gender inequality is related. It is heterosexuality, according to both Detha and Sontag, that is at the root of the gender problem. The argument that Beeja's mother's puts forward to separate the lesbian couple lays bare the extent to which the heteronorm has been the dominant logic. Beeja's mother thus articulates:

A woman can survive without water but not without a man's sweat. Your father has received a great many offers. The finest and wealthiest young men of the province are willing to marry the two of you - separately, of course. Give up this false pride now. Settle down and be happy. Start a family. Bathe in milk, have many sons and prolong a lineage like a creeper with many leaves. (108)

As society's mouthpiece, the Sethani vocalises mankind's eternal cry for the necessity of procreation, the antithesis of which has been for long believed to be queerness, and as such, the narrative creates the opportunity to invite discussions on Detha's exploration of what Jack Halberstam had termed as "queer time". Halberstam defines "queer time" as "a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (4). It is also a "perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of [...] marriage - reproduction - child rearing - retirement - death" (182), the temporal logic of which is disrupted as the lesbians do not enter into heterosexual marital alliances. Together the couple decide to chart out a new path untraversed by anyone before them:

We will have to find our own path to liberation. What's so wonderful about marriage between a man and a woman? Everyone knows that the sun rises in the east. Were it to rise in the west, that would be something really special! (94)

Interrogating Beeja and Teeja's Lesbian Utopia

Considering Beeja and Teeja to be social actors within the world of Detha's short story, their performance marks the presence of a queer world outside of the narrative space offered to them. It is in the forest, which according to Vanita, in "Indic as in Indo-European narrative, is a liminal space of secrets and transformations; it may be dangerous but is also miraculous" (120), that Beeja and Teeja performs, as it were, their love. Performances like these lay bare the faults in heteronormative sexual cultures and in the process lead to a "new formation, a future in the present" (Munõz 62). The opulent castle accorded by the ghost chieftain to the couple is politically positioned away from the village. In doing so, the positioning of Beeja and Teeja's new place of cohabitation is automatically marked off as an alternate space where an alternate way of living is accommodated under the protection of supernatural intervention. This section of the paper will attempt to evaluate this new territory presented to the lesbian couple via the existing theoretical lenses of



Munõz's queer utopia and Foucault's heterotopia and investigative ways of engaging in a discursive discussion on the heterosexualisation of spaces and how they can be queered.

When talking of the "subaltern counterpublics", Fraser had proposed the idea that such counterpublic is necessarily accompanied with an exclusionary politics of their own. In the story, the ghost chieftain makes it known that male presence will not be tolerated in this utopia which is solely reserved for feminine presence:

You can set up house here without fear. Near this lake I will erect a palace which a king might envy. The state treasury may run dry, but you will never be in want. All the wishes of your heart, small and big, will be fulfilled. I can never repay you for the joy I've found in the sight of your pure love. Women can come here, but no son of a woman will be able to cast a sharp glance at you. (102-103)

The heterotopia as a place that is "outside all places" is a subversive space where normative codes of conduct are turned topsy-turvy and non-normativity is embraced. Such spaces offer a completely different spectrum of experiences for queer people. Theorists like David Bell, Jon Binnie and Gill Valentine began to bring to light the special experiences of the sexual other in the mid-1990s. They posited that "just as individual persons do not have pre-existing sexual identities, neither do spaces" (Oswin 90). Binnie wrote: "space is not naturally authentically 'straight' but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized" (Binnie, 1997a, 223, as cited in Oswin, 2008). In the story, heterosexualised spaces, that of the village, have been presented as a waste land:

The same encirclement of walls and barriers. The same huts and roofs. Each with its own limits and boundaries. Each with its own kitchen and stove. Each with its own fires and smoke. The squabbles of thine and mine. Heaps of rubbish lying here and there. Amid all the squabbling to secure peace and happiness, bankruptcy show its face. Worries and anxieties over children. Stinking baby clothes. Filth everywhere. Conflicts and quarrels in every house. (104)

Noting the contradictory aspect of heterotopias, Foucault wrote: "Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the emplacements in the interior of which human life is enclosed and partitioned, as even more illusory," or, "on the contrary, creating another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill construed and sketchy" (21). Likewise, the story, in setting up two alternate spaces with distinct geographical and ideological boundaries, implicates the "illusory" supremacy of normativity, while exalting the "perfect[ion]" of non-normative spaces. Upon visiting their village after receiving the boon of an elegant palace from the ghost chieftain, Beeja and Teeja cannot help but think to themselves: "How had they lived in this hell for so many years? How had they grown up here? Today, remembering that past life, they were filled with disgust. How dreadful!" (104). The heterosexual world of the villagers and the queer space of the lesbian couple's newly found homeland are held in a contestatory relationship. By invoking Munõz at this juncture, the subversive politics of Beeja and Teeja's relationship aided by supernatural intervention allows for the possibility of queer world making:

Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present. I gesture to sites of embodied and performed queer politics and describe them as outposts of actually existing queer worlds. (49)

Detha was cognisant of the message which the story would be imparting and hence it had been a careful and calculated decision to portray Beeja and Teeja's lesbian utopia as a place far removed from the reach of heteronormativity. What is even more significant is how men are relegated to nothing, their power and influence being rendered useless in the queer space materialised by the ghost chieftain. Interestingly, Susan



Sontag had postulated that “[w]omen cannot be liberated without reducing the power of men” (43), and this is the approach undertaken by Detha in the story. As long as the ghost chieftain is present, men will not be able encroach upon the territory marked exclusively for women and queer women. In providing Beeja and Teeja with a land of their own, Detha is ensuring that the narrative space offered to nonnormative people translates into actual geographical locales where they can exist without heteronormative society’s persistent hindrance.

Conclusion: Burnt Womb and the Myth of Chrononormativity

Given that the lesbian couple stands outside of the normative temporality of “birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (2), Detha’s final stance remains a brutal denial of reproductive futurism and a dismissal of chrononormativity. Teeja is not impregnated by Beeja’s violent bouts of love-making as a man and the author expresses relief at this stroke of good fortune: “Thanks to the ghost chieftain’s miraculous powers, not only the filthy seed of man but Teeja’s womb burnt up forever” (120). Procreation is the ultimate end point of a heterosexual culture and Teeja’s miraculously “burnt” womb becomes a potent symbol that stands against the imperatives of heteronormativity. In this regard, Warner wrote:

Hetero culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist. (xxi)

Queer temporality reigns supreme as the heteronormative framing of time is done away with. While the necessity of supernatural intervention to materialise, sanction, and protectively promote an alternate mode of existence can indeed be scrutinised, Detha’s story leaves a pleasant aftertaste. Beeja and Teeja’s ethereal lesbian romance, the invocation of natural beauty and its oneness with the exiled lesbian couple, and Detha’s masterful handling of spatial and reproductive politics underscores the significance of the text in today’s time. Readers who might be tempted to dismiss the story as mere fantasy cannot be blind to the gravity of the issues raised in the narrative, and Detha himself assures his readers at the end that Beeja and Teeja’s romance lives on, for he himself had been an exception to the ghost chieftain’s imperative that no man would be allowed to enter into Beeja and Teeja’s sacred lesbian utopia by being a most fortunate witness:

...just once I visited them, on Teeja’s invitation. I saw that wonderful palace with my own eyes, and I wrote this story at Teeja’s dictation, in her words. Would the ghost chieftain have spared me if I had dared add a word to her account? (120)

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Resisting the Spectacle: Masked Realities and Rebellious Future in the Speculative Worlds of Samit Basu

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Abstract: This paper explores Samit Basu's *The City Inside*, *Resistance*, and *The Game World Trilogy* as major contributions to contemporary South Asian speculative fiction. It argues that Basu reimagines resistance not as heroic or spectacular but as fragmented, affective, and embedded in everyday life. Building on Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance and biopolitics, drawing on Guy Debord's theory of spectacle, Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, and Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternity, this paper places Basu's speculative worlds within larger debates over power, technology, and postcolonial identity. Through close readings of Basu's fiction, the study demonstrates how resistance manifests in subtle refusals, fractured kinship, ironic mythic subversions, and digital counter-practices. The paper draws out how spectacle itself serves both as mechanism of control and a site of rebellion, particularly in Basu's explorations of surveillance optics, influencer culture, and commodified dissent. It discusses comparative references to the works of Indra Das, Vandana Singh, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Amitav Ghosh, placing Basu within a larger South Asian speculative tradition. By blending humour, satire, and genre experimentation, Basu challenges authoritarianism, neoliberal capitalism, and the weaponisation of myth, positioning speculative fiction as a critical space for imagining rebellious futures.

Keywords: Resistance, South Asian speculative fiction, spectacle, surveillance capitalism.

Introduction: Resistance as Creative Counterforce

Resistance has long been a central element of cultural expression. Across history, literature and performance have provided platforms for marginalised voices to push back against erasure, whether through oral storytelling traditions during colonial domination or postcolonial novels critiquing authoritarian power. In speculative fiction, resistance often emerges in unconventional forms such as fragmented narratives, satirical subversions of myth and the persistence of characters which refuse conformity. By presenting alternative realities, speculative fiction generates a conceptual space where the future can be questioned and reimagined. The concept of the spectacle is particularly important in analysing resistance in the contemporary era. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord portrays modern society as one where social relations are mediated through images. According to him, the spectacle is not just a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by appearances. In such a world, dissent itself is vulnerable to commodification, packaged and consumed as another product within the circuits of capitalism. Michel Foucault's work on surveillance and biopolitics extends this argument by showing how power in modern societies operates not primarily through violent coercion but through the subtle disciplining of bodies and the management of populations. In the twenty-first century, as Shoshana Zuboff further develops this line of thought, showing how surveillance capitalism intensifies these mechanisms by turning human experience into data for behavioural prediction and monetisation.



Within this framework, Samit Basu, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Indian speculative fiction, reimagines resistance under these conditions. His fiction demonstrates that resistance is rarely spectacular. It does not always appear as mass protests or revolutionary manifestos, but is often found in smaller gestures, emotional exhaustion, fractured kinship, ironic humour, or the destabilisation of established narrative norms. In *The City Inside* characters like Joey resist not through open rebellion but through affective burnout and micro-refusals against the coercive optics of digital culture. In *Resistance* survival itself emerges as a form of dissent in a world defined by displacement and systemic control. *The Game World Trilogy* rewrites epic fantasy by mocking prophecy, destabilising divine authority, and reworking Hindu myth into ironic parody, refusing the ideological purity that has historically underpinned both empire and nationalism. Across these works, Basu positions speculative fiction as a site where political critique and imaginative resistance intersect.

This paper argues that Basu's contribution lies in his reworking of resistance as a deeply affective, fragmented and every day, practice. Rather than framing resistance as a grand revolutionary narrative, Basu depicts it as dispersed across the domains of spectacle, labour, gender, myth, and marginality. His works highlight the contradictions of living under conditions of surveillance and commodification, where even dissent risks being co-opted into the very structures it opposes. Yet, through satire, humour, and irony, Basu also illuminates the cracks in these structures, suggesting that resistance however small or ironic remains possible. To develop this argument, the paper draws on a theoretical framework that combines Foucault's concepts of surveillance and biopolitics, Debord's notion of the spectacle, Butler's theory of gender performativity, Haraway's cyborg feminism, Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern, and Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism. These frameworks provide the tools to analyse Basu's fiction as both a reflection of contemporary power structures and an imaginative reworking of how they might be resisted. Importantly, this study situates Basu within the wider landscape of South Asian speculative fiction. While Basu is among the most prominent Indian writers of fantasy and science fiction, his work gains additional depth when read alongside that of other South Asian writers such as Vandana Singh's *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*, Indra Das's *The Devourers*, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. These writers similarly grapple with questions of technology, identity, myth, and resistance, though each in distinct ways. Basu's fiction contributes uniquely to this tradition by blending satirical humour with dystopian critique, creating speculative worlds that are simultaneously local and global in their concerns.

Theoretical Framework

This study approaches Samit Basu's speculative fiction through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together insights from cultural theory, political philosophy, and postcolonial studies. The purpose of this framework is twofold that is first, to clarify the conceptual tools that guide the analysis of Basu's texts, and second, to demonstrate how these tools illuminate the forms of resistance dramatised in his fiction. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* remains foundational in understanding how modern power operates through images and representations. For Debord, the spectacle is not simply a collection of images, but a social relation mediated by appearances. It is the stage on which life is performed, consumed, and commodified. In such a system, even dissent risks becoming another consumable image, stripped of its subversive edge. Basu's works, especially *The City Inside* and *Chosen Spirits*, resonate with Debord's analysis, activism, resistance, and identity is entangled in digital platforms where they circulate as optics, hashtags, and memes. The spectacle is thus both an instrument of control and a paradoxical site where counter-images can emerge. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and his lectures on biopolitics provide a model for understanding how power in modern societies functions through surveillance and the internalisation of discipline. The panopticon Jeremy Bentham's architectural model in which inmates are visible to a central



watchman but cannot see him becomes for Foucault a metaphor for the diffusion of power through surveillance. In Basu's *The City Inside*, this model finds a twenty-first century analogue in digital surveillance systems, where citizens monitor themselves in pursuit of visibility and relevance. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* extends this analysis into the realm of contemporary capitalism, showing how human experience is transformed into behavioural data that can be predicted, monetised, and manipulated. In Basu's fiction, this logic manifests in the influencer economy, where identity itself becomes the commodity. Basu terms "soft fascism" as the product of these mechanisms, a system in which overt authoritarianism is unnecessary because individuals willingly participate in their own monitoring, motivated by the promise of attention, status, or security. Arlie Hochschild, in *The Managed Heart* coined the term "emotional labour" to describe the ways in which workers manage their feelings to produce emotional experiences in others. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* expanded this into the category of affective labour, labour that produces and manipulates emotions, relations, and forms of sociality. In the gig economies of Basu's imagined futures, affective labour is central. Influencers like Joey in *The City Inside* are required to manage not only their images but their moods, relationships, and affective ties. Resistance in such a context takes the form of the refusal to perform emotional scripts, the collapse under exhaustion, or the withdrawal from visibility. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* redefined gender not as an essence but as a performative effect produced by repeated acts. Gender, in this view, is what one does, an ongoing performance shaped by social norms. Basu's fiction reflects this fluid understanding of identity. Characters such as Joey embody forms of gender and sexuality that resist categorisation, destabilising the heteronormative frameworks imposed by both society and state. In highlighting these fluid identities, Basu demonstrates how resistance can emerge from the refusals that conform to fixed gender roles.

Cyborg Feminism

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* challenges binary distinctions such as human or machine, male or female, and natural or artificial. For Haraway, the cyborg is a figure of hybridity that disrupts essentialist categories and opens possibilities for new forms of kinship and solidarity. Basu's speculative worlds reflect this cyborgian sensibility, characters form chosen families that transcend biology, adopt digital selves that blur the line between real and virtual, and forge hybrid identities that resist classification. Resistance here is not a return to purity but an embrace of multiplicity and hybridity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* raises the critical question of whether those at the margins of power can represent themselves within dominant discourses. Spivak argues that the subaltern is often spoken for rather than allowed to speak. Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance* complements this by suggesting that resistance is not always overt revolt but can take aesthetic, symbolic, and even silent forms. Basu's fiction amplifies subaltern voices of migrant workers, precarious labourers, hacked identities who resist erasure not necessarily through speech but through survival itself. Their persistence, invisibility, and refusal to conform, constitutes a radical form of dissent. These theoretical perspectives provide the scaffolding for the analysis that follows. By bringing together Debord, Foucault, Zuboff, Butler, Haraway, Spivak, and Weiss, this study situates Basu's fiction at the intersection of global theoretical debates and South Asian cultural contexts. Basu's novels dramatise how the spectacle, surveillance, affective labour, gender, hybridity, and subalternity function in speculative futures, and how resistance can be imagined within and against these structures.

Surveillance and Soft Fascism

Basu's *The City Inside* offers one of the sharpest fictional explorations of surveillance in contemporary Indian fiction. Set in a near-future Delhi, the novel imagines a society in which public life is dominated by influencer culture, political optics, and digital visibility. Surveillance is not imposed by an authoritarian



state. It is willingly reproduced by citizens who perform themselves for constant monitoring and approval. The protagonist Joey works as a “Reality Controller” managing influencers whose lives are broadcast as immersive feeds. The text describes how “every mood swing was monetised, every gesture converted into data, every breakdown into a commodity” (Basu *The City Inside* 67). This line exemplifies Shoshana Zuboff’s theory of surveillance capitalism, where human experience is transformed into behavioural data for profit. The fact that breakdowns themselves become profitable signals a disturbing collapse of public and private boundaries. Foucault’s concept of the panopticon also resonates here. Unlike Bentham’s prison model, where inmates feared an invisible watcher, Basu’s Delhi demonstrates a situation where citizens internalise the logic of being watched because visibility is equated with survival. As Joey reflects, invisibility is tantamount to social death: “If you were offline, you didn’t exist” (*The City Inside* 101). Basu thus illustrates what he terms “soft fascism” is a system of power that does not rely on overt violence but on voluntary participation, where coercion is disguised as consent. Resistance in this context is subtle and fragmented. Joey’s moments of burnout, where she refuses to maintain her influencers, emotional labour, signify small but powerful refusals. Theorists such as Arlie Hochschild and Michael Hardt help frame this as a refusal of affective labour, she resists by failing to perform the emotional scripts that sustain digital capitalism, the act of withdrawal becomes a form of dissent, even when it is invisible. In *Resistance* surveillance is literal and militarised, set in a dystopian scenario of migration and displacement. Yet, even here, Basu complicates the narrative. Characters find small ways of resisting through anonymity, adopting fluid identities, or simply through persistence.

Genre Subversion and Myth

Basu’s *Game World Trilogy*, *The Simoqin Prophecies*, *The Manticore’s Secret*, and *The Unwaba Revelations* function as both homage to and parody of the epic fantasy. Unlike traditional epics, that elevate prophecy and divine authority, Basu destabilises these tropes through satire. The trilogy opens with a mock-heroic prophecy that collapses almost immediately, undermining the expectation that narratives are driven by divine destiny. A passage in *The Simoqin Prophecies* illustrates this parody, “The prophecy was vague, self-contradictory, and subject to constant reinterpretation yet everyone followed it because it was all they had” (*Simoqin* 23). Here, Basu critiques the ideological function of myth, which often justifies power structures through claims of inevitability. This aligns with Darko Suvin’s notion of cognitive estrangement, by defamiliarising myth through irony, Basu forces readers to see its constructedness. Suparno Banerjee argues that South Asian science fiction often reworks myth to critique postcolonial politics. Basu exemplifies this trend by showing how divine figures are flawed, Gods are petty, and prophecies unreliable. Resistance, in this context, emerges through laughter and irony. By refusing the seriousness of myth, Basu resists its ideological use in nationalist and authoritarian discourses. Importantly, Basu’s mythic parody resonates in contemporary India, where myth is frequently weaponised in political rhetoric. His irreverent treatment becomes a subversive act, showing that speculative fiction can challenge cultural essentialism by destabilising its narrative foundations.

Gender, Queerness, and Identity

Basu’s speculative universes consistently foreground fluid identities and non-normative kinships. In *The City Inside*, Joey’s identity cannot be contained by heteronormative categories. Her relationships, affective ties, and performances of the self, reflect Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity: gender is not essence but enactment. Joey’s refusal to conform destabilises normative expectations and becomes itself a form of resistance. In *Resistance*, queer characters form chosen families that resist both the biological determinism of kinship and the coercive structures of the state. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” helps



illuminate these dynamics. Characters become cyborgian not because they are literally hybrid with machines, but they embody fragmented, fluid, and hybrid identities that can break binaries. Considering a moment in *Resistance* where a queer collective provides sanctuary to migrants, “No one asked where you came from, who you were, or what you had done. Survival was enough” (*Resistance* 141). This radical openness rejects the state’s demand for legibility. It is a politics of refusal, grounded in hybridity and multiplicity. Basu’s depiction of queer kinship also resists the commodification of identity in digital capitalism. Unlike influencer-driven optics, these relationships are sustained through solidarity and care. Resistance here is relational and it is enacted through the creation of spaces where difference is embraced rather than policed.

Pop Culture, Digital Optics, and Techno-Resistance

In *Chosen Spirits* (the earlier version of *The City Inside*), Basu satirises how even resistance is commodified in digital cultures. Activism becomes a performance for optics, “Hashtags burned bright for a day, and then the next spectacle replaced them” (*Chosen Spirits* 89). This echoes Debord’s argument that the spectacle consumes even its own negation. Basu critiques what might be called “performative activism.” Characters post radical slogans but remain complicit in the system. Yet, he does not dismiss digital culture entirely. Instead, he shows its ambivalence, while the spectacle commodifies dissent; it also provides tools for counter-narratives. Memes, satire, and digital art in Basu’s fiction become ways to subvert state propaganda, even if temporarily. Foucault’s idea that power is everywhere but so is resistance is apt here. Digital platforms are both mechanisms of surveillance and spaces of creativity. Basu captures this paradox by showing how influencers may be trapped in optics but can also exploit visibility for subtle forms of dissent.

Subaltern Voices and Marginal Resistance

Finally, Basu foregrounds the voices and lives of those at the margins. In *Resistance*, migrant workers are depicted as precarious, invisible, yet central to the survival of society. Their struggles echo Spivak’s question, can the subaltern speak? Basu shows that while they may not be heard in dominant discourse, their persistence constitutes a form of speaking through survival. Weiss’s aesthetics of resistance helps frame this. Resistance is not always a spectacular revolt, sometimes it is the quiet endurance of the marginalised. In *The City Inside*, hacked identities that exist outside legal frameworks embody this silent resistance. Their very existence challenges systems that demand legibility and control. A striking passage in *Resistance* describes migrants moving invisibly through Delhi, “They were everywhere, yet seen by no one. The city could not function without them, yet it denied their existence” (*Resistance* 203). Here, Basu highlights the paradox of the subaltern indispensable but invisible. By giving narrative space to these figures, Basu’s fiction amplifies their resistant presence.

Comparative South Asian Context

While Samit Basu is one of the most visible figures in Indian speculative fiction, his works gain greater significance when placed in dialogue with other South Asian writers who also explore resistance, identity, and futurity through speculative tropes. Situating Basu within this broader literary landscape not only highlights his unique contributions but also demonstrates how Indian and South Asian speculative fiction collectively challenges dominant narratives of modernity, technology, and myth.



Vandana Singh: Climate, Multiplicity, and Everyday Resistance

Vandana Singh's *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* presents a body of work that is deeply invested in ecological futures, scientific imagination, and the everyday lives of ordinary people. Like Basu, Singh does not portray resistance as a grandiose revolution but as small everyday gestures and acts of care, persistence, and questioning authority. Her stories often draw from Indian philosophical traditions of plurality and relationality, offering alternative models of temporality and subjectivity. Basu's emphasis on the quotidian lives is similarly depicted to that of Singh. Joey's exhaustion in *The City Inside* or the migrants' persistence in *Resistance* parallel Singh's insistence that resistance emerges through the ordinary rather than the extraordinary.

Indra Das: Queerness and Mythic Reimagination

Indra Das's *The Devourers* combines fantasy and historical fiction to tell a queer, postcolonial story of werewolves in Mughal India. By blending myth with queerness, Das destabilises heteronormative frameworks and challenges colonial histories of categorisation. Basu's works resonate with Das's in their shared concern with hybrid, fluid identities that resist normative boundaries. However, Basu departs in tone whereas Das deploys lyrical intensity, Basu uses satire and humour. Together, they demonstrate how South Asian speculative fiction reclaims myth as a space for resistance, whether through Das's queer poetics or Basu's ironic parody.

Manjula Padmanabhan: Dystopia and Gendered Resistance

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* envisions a dystopia where women are almost extinct and strictly controlled. Her work explicitly links gender oppression with authoritarianism, showing how control over reproduction becomes a mechanism of power. Basu's *Resistance* and *The City Inside* echo these concerns but frame them in the context of surveillance capitalism and digital optics. Both writers highlight how gendered bodies are sites of control and how alternative kinships whether queer, cyborg, or chosen families function as resistant strategies.

Amitav Ghosh: Science, History, and the Postcolonial Imagination

Amitav Ghosh is not usually classified as a speculative writer, but his work *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a landmark text that engages with science, secrecy, and colonial knowledge systems. Ghosh demonstrates how scientific discourse itself was shaped by colonial hierarchies, and his novel stages a subaltern intervention into scientific history. Basu's fiction, particularly *Resistance*, echoes this concern with how knowledge and control intersect. By giving narrative space to migrants, hackers, and marginal voices, Basu extends Ghosh's interrogation of who has the authority to define truth and progress.

Critical Context: South Asian Science Fiction as Resistance

Critics such as Suparno Banerjee's *Other Tomorrows* and Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* have argued that Indian science fiction is inherently political, often mobilising speculative tropes to address postcolonial anxieties, technological unevenness, and authoritarianism. Basu participates in this tradition but also distinguishes himself through his playful style. His use of humour, parody, and pop culture references differentiates him from writers like Singh and Das, whose tones are more serious. Yet this humour is not superficial, rather it is in resistant mode, destabilising myths, exposing absurdities, and refusing solemnity in the face of oppression. When read alongside other South Asian writers, Basu's work



reveals a distinctive contribution, he situates resistance within the contradictions of spectacle and digital capitalism while simultaneously mocking the mythic and epic traditions often mobilised for nationalist purposes. His fiction is thus both local: deeply embedded in Delhi's urban fabric, Indian mythologies, and South Asian socio-political contexts, and global: speaking to concerns about surveillance, neoliberalism, and authoritarian drift.

Conclusion

Samit Basu's speculative fiction, encompassing *The City Inside*, *Resistance* and *The Game World Trilogy*, represents one of the most sustained attempts in South Asian literature to grapple with the entanglements of power, technology, and myth in the twenty-first century. By foregrounding resistance as a dispersed, affective, and often unspectacular practice, Basu reframes how rebellion might be imagined in a world where power operates less through overt coercion than spectacle, surveillance, and the commodification of life itself. The notion of the spectacle, drawn from Debord, is central to this reframing. In Basu's Delhi, resistance risks being consumed as performance hashtags, optics, and influencer dissent. Yet, precisely because spectacle saturates everyday life, it also becomes a site where subversive cracks can emerge as satire, irony, or even refusal. The "soft fascism" of Basu's worlds depends on voluntary participation, but that very voluntariness creates spaces for hesitation, burnout and refusal representing minor forms of dissent that accumulate significance. Basu's reworking of myth and genre is equally significant. By parodying prophecy, mocking divine authority, and refusing the solemnity of epic traditions, Basu destabilises the ideological use of myth in both colonial and nationalist contexts. His humorous irreverence resists cultural essentialism, reminds readers that myths are not immutable truths but contested narratives. This genre play constitutes a resistant aesthetic, opening fantasy itself as a tool of critique rather than affirmation. Basu's fiction also insists on the centrality of gender, queerness, and hybridity to contemporary resistance. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity and Haraway's cyborg feminism, his characters embody fluid identities that challenge normative frameworks. Chosen families, queer kinship networks, and hybrid digital selves resist not only state control but also the commodification of intimacy in surveillance capitalism. Resistance here is relational, enacted in acts of solidarity, care, and refusal to conform. Perhaps most striking is Basu's amplification of subaltern voices. Migrant workers, precarious identities, and hacked existences populate his narratives, often invisible yet indispensable. In echoing Spivak's question can the subaltern speak? Basu demonstrates that survival itself can be a mode of speaking. By narrativising these marginal lives, his fiction enacts what Peter Weiss called the "aesthetics of resistance" a recognition that resistance need not be heroic but may reside in persistence, invisibility, or irony. Placed in conversation with other South Asian speculative writers Vandana Singh, Indra Das, Manjula Padmanabhan, Amitav Ghosh, Basu's work reveals its distinctive contribution. Singh emphasises ecological multiplicity, Das explores queer mythic hybridity, Padmanabhan stages dystopian gender oppression, and Ghosh interrogates colonial science. Basu, on the other hand carves out a space that blends humour, digital critique, and satirical fantasy. His irreverence is his resistance, refusing both authoritarian solemnity and neoliberal optimism.

In conclusion, Basu's speculative worlds remind us that resistance is not a singular event but a dispersed practice. It emerges in the exhaustion of labour, the mockery of myth, the opacity of subaltern survival, and the queer refusal of categorisation. It is an insistence on the possibility of other futures, however fragmented and ironic. By reimagining resistance in these terms, Basu not only enriches South Asian speculative fiction but also provides readers with conceptual tools for navigating the contradictions of our own surveillance-saturated present. By exposing the absurdities of surveillance culture, mocking authoritarian power, and celebrating solidarity and hybridity, Basu opens up new ways of thinking about



rebellion. His works prove that even within a world dominated by spectacle and surveillance, small acts of refusal and imagination can still carve out possibilities for resistance.

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Reinterpreting Myth and Memory in Alternative Theatre Spaces: A Tale of Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai

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Abstract: This paper explores two alternative theatre practices developed by Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai to assess the community memory that resonates through their body and performance. Through critical analysis of Teejan and Sabitri's performance, this research will investigate the questions of cultural identity, autonomy, and socio-communal history. How does an ethnic performer hold assertion over a semiotic space by integrating collective memory in her artistic expression? Given the abundance of spectacle in consumer culture, can ethnic performance create an alternative paradigm by restructuring the nature of spectacle? How do the ethnic performers, Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai, uphold the language of theatre transcending the differences in language and cultures? This study will critically map the configuration of alternative theatre spaces, in Manipur and Chhattisgarh respectively. It will further examine how the two performer-activists, Teejan and Sabitri, use their ethnic subjecthood as the means of liberation and empowerment.

Keywords: Community memory, healing, improvisation, living theatre, spectacle

Theatre of Roots: Indian Theatre in Post-Independence Era

John Berger in the foreword of *Bhimayana* explains, that art needs to get out of the shackles of conventional proscenium type of representation and must be replaced with the history of a community - with its struggles and resistances - to challenge capitalistic authority (10). Although Berger was trying to make his argument on behalf of a graphic novel, I find it completely relevant to other forms of visual representations. The proscenium theatre came to India after the British occupied the subcontinent. Proscenium theatre in India basically started as a colonial practice, in the metropolis centres of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. This was mainly introduced to India for British immigrants who settled here. Eventually, it also reached to English educated Indian audiences, who lived in the colonial cities. Besides, this practice, catered to urban audiences, and was dominated by western traditions. This Eurocentric proscenium theatre is an arch shaped enclosed structure, contrary to the Indian traditional and indigenous folk theatres. Apparently, this colonial practice had a huge polarity both in form and content with traditional theatrical aesthetics of India. During the 1960s in the post-independence period of India, a number of young stage artists emerged; they were willing to counter this colonial enterprise by going back to their cultural traditions. Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, K.N. Panikkar, Girish Karnad, Ratan Thiyam, Mohan Rakesh, Sombhu Mitra and many more names are engraved in this legacy. They integrated their regional art forms, mythologies and folktales in theatre. Moreover, Badal Sircar deconstructed the entire idea of the proscenium arch itself by embracing street theatre which is performed in open spaces. This theatrical revival is often known as the "Theatre of Roots" movement that is constitutive of regional practices, and folklore, rituals - like *Jatra*, *Yakshagana*, *Tamasha*, *Nautanki*, among others. Similarly, Heisnam Kanhailal is another such theatre exponent who took his Manipuri traditions through folk ritual theatre. Sabitri and Kanhailal together built a theatre that exceeded local and global boundaries by going back to ethnic roots. Teejan Bai independently took Pandavani to the world stage. Both the women in their distinct theatrical genres upheld their regional traditions through theatrical representations.



In my critical observation of their performances, I have identified the predominance of the “vertical movement”, within a confined site and space - that intensifies the indigenous theatre narratives in the performative culture. This technique challenges the “horizontal movement” of a mainstream theatre, preserving the autonomy of the alternative, ethnic art medium.

Archetypal Memory Traces in Alternative Theatre through the Art of Two Female Performers

Sabitri and Teejan hail from peripheral parts of India, where women are subjugated and marginalised. Amid the regional tension and gender politics, these two women marked their art not only in the regional but also at a global scale. Manish Mitra writes for Teejan, “In spite of her immense popularity, she always recalls the days of her childhood in the Adivasi belt of Chhattisgarh where the Pardhi community women existed as mere male counterparts whose only identity lay in their reproductive capacity” (30).

On the other hand, Sabitri’s theatrical approach upholds her indigenous Manipuri Tribal culture and its horrors. The body of the artist is the central element in her performances; the same body which has been the object of shame in Manipur. Sabitri turns the body into an active subject of rebellion. Trina Nileena Banerjee writes about Sabitri on the 2001 production of *Draupadi* in the context of enforced bodily shame upon Manipuri women:

It was impossible to effectively distance ourselves from Draupadi the Character’s experience and leave theatre in relative safety, because the real body of Sabitri the Actor stood unmistakably naked before us. Our discomfort and humiliation were no longer once removed from ‘the real’; this rested on our perception of the shame that we were convinced Sabitri the Actor must necessarily be feeling in these circum-stances. Yet, we were forced to witness a willing and acutely painful; performance of the shame. (Banerjee 154)

In *Draupadi*’s performance, the actor and the victim were no longer separate, Sabitri’s body completely internalised the shame that Manipuri women have suffered for centuries.

The emphasis on “body” is a unique theatre style focusing majorly on the physical movements that has been developed in Kalakshetra Manipur, under the tutelage of Heisnam Kanhailal and Sabitri. Sabitri embodies the collective memory of her *Meitei* culture that is archived in the performer’s body - reflecting *Meitei* rituals, simplicity of ethnic people, communal harmony, and theatre ecology. She preserves the collective memory that is transmitted through her ancestors. This creates a trance (Maibi) element in her performance. One could call this mystic overflow as “catharsis” (Shivaprakash and Rojio 146), which makes the audience aware of the ethnic presence of an indigenous community (Shivaprakash 148). In the words of Kanhailal, “My theatre appeared through the autonomy of the body that speaks and thereby solidifies our social experience in a haunting effect.” (9).

Teejan Bai, on the other hand, inherits the narrative culture of Chhattisgarhi folk tradition. Her enactment consists of her *tambura*, decorated with peacock feathers. In the *Kapalik Pandavani Shaili*, she performs eighteen parvas of the *Mahabharata*. In *Kathagayak*, Teejan enacts the local reinterpretation of stories from *Mahabharata* in a vernacular narrativisation. Thus, Teejan Bai’s art represents the narrative memory of Chhattisgarhi folk culture. As observed by Mitra, “Her stories are interestingly interwoven with colloquial slangs which in a way democratizes the text which once was considered to be the text of the upper class - and this colloquial and rustic use of language invariably makes the performance rooted to the life and sagas of common folks” (Mitra 47).



Heisnam Sabitri has developed a kind of theatre that represents archetypal memory of a living community - archived in a performer's body. She uses her body or "hakchang"¹ to form an intense communication with the spectator. Her style is developed through influence of indigenous practices like *wareeliba*, *thangta*, *maibi* cult of the Meitei community of Manipur (Shivaprakash and Rojio 126).

The Theatre of Kanhailal

"In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." (Debord 2). Manipuri theatre, under the tutelage of Kanhailal and Sabitri Heisnam, has created a theatrical space that critiques the commodified nature of spectatorship. It does not rigidly follow the doctrines of the overtly political propagandist theatre like that of Safdar Hashmi or Badal Sircar, or Augusto Boal, to mobilise a mass audience. It is an overlapping paradigm between rough and immediate theatre that Peter Brook refers to in his book, *The Empty Space*. Their theatre implicitly bears political overtones to mobilise the mass into active viewer-participants. Kanhailal and his troupe use the mainstream proscenium as a site to critique commercial nature of theatre practices. The contemporary political overtones are interwoven in the plots of their plays, but the form of the theatre aesthetically challenges the conventional ways of seeing. Kalakshetra Manipur creates a different type of spectacle through the body of the performer that ruptures the enchantment of a commercial spectacle. The body of the performer can turn the empty stage into a living spectacle, that is free from ornamentation of external props or instruments, similar to the tradition of Grotowski's poor theatre. The body transforms into a space in itself and connects series of communicative threads that spread among the audience. They seek a language of theatre that is not restricted by linguistic barriers. As in Rabindranath Tagore's adaptation of *Dakghar*, Kanhailal uses actors from different linguistic backgrounds like Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri to Bodo and Rabha to merge linguistic divisions and reconstitute cultural identity within the troupe itself (Kanhailal 227).

Heisnam Sabitri and Kalakshetra Manipur: In Search of Ritual Theatre

Adorno explains in *The Culture Industry*:

But if works of art have only intermittently been perceived as such, then mass art has taken that alienation of the masses from art, blindly sustained in life by society, up into the process of production as its presupposition, lives from it and deliberately reproduces it. The work of art becomes its own material and forms the technique of reproduction and presentation, actually a technique for the distribution of a real object. (64)

Interestingly, an alternative theatre emerged alongside this urban paraphernalia. Works of Antonin Artaud and Grotowski resolutely critiqued such spectatorial gaze. It curated a language of theatre that is articulated through the performer's body. A performer can turn the bare stage into a living spectacle. The empty space on a stage can be transformed into the body of the theatre, eventually provoking new ways of seeing.

Bramha Prakash argues in his book *Cultural Labour* in the context of ethnocentric folkloric performances - "Ritual and performance in their affective turn produce corporeal values in the form of impulses, feelings, sensations, and passions. Deeply rooted in the ritualized context, the performance reveals the most vivid exemplification of formation of cultural and aesthetic values in society." (7). Ritual practices



make and transmit cultural values, and create collective impulses, as the critic states. Kalakshetra integrates community rituals, traditional music, folk art, and myths. Sabitri Heisnam's methodology of acting focuses on finding "inner-outer" balance, that she calls "nung-paan" (Shivaprakash and Rojio 117). It is a process of going deeper into one's roots to unearth inner impulses "nungdaphaonaba" (Shivaprakash and Rojio 147). This process creates an encounter with the actor and the spectator, where the inner impulses are evoked, shared, and absorbed actively during the course of the performance that is deeply immersed in the *Meitei* ritual practices.

Sabitri's intense performativity often explores features of a *maibi* (Kanhailal 84-85). In Manipuri culture, *maibi* is a priestess or Shaman who performs mystical religious rites. Sabitri's audience often find a similar trance in her performances. During the cult of Kanglei Thokpa, *maibiis* possessed by Khoriphaba (Kanhailal 84). The entire ritual is an intense exchange of internal resonances. She is not a *maibi*, and does not acquire any prophetic quality – but there is a controlled trance element that overflows from the performer to spectator in her performances. Yet, Sabitri is not possessed by an external force who controls her, rather she is completely in control of her senses (Kanhailal 85). The intense motion in her physical movements originates from her minute observation of bodily experiences and intrinsic relation to her *Meitei* culture and rituals as H.S. Shivaprakash observes (Shivaprakash and Rojio 148). In *Dakghar*, Kanhailal uses a mystical incantation to revive Amal's sleeping body, through hypnotic mimesis (Rojio 171). It is a *maiba* cult called *thawai mi koukhatpa*, mentioned in multiple *Meitei* myths. By using such ritualistic element, Kanhailal has created a healing effect that is intrinsic to *Meitei* community and cathartic to a larger audience (Rojio 171). Sabitri's performance radiates an elemental energy that is vital to Manipuri tribal/ethnic cults. It slowly affects the psyche of the spectator. Kanhailal calls it "haunting effect" or "healing effect" interchangeably (Kanhailal 9-228). By incorporating community practices in her performances, Sabitri recreates cultural memory as part of an alternative performance tradition. The cultural memory, thus, is archived in her own body. "Now she incarnates the spirit of the community in her own being" as Rustom Bharucha observes in context of her performance in *Pebet* (136). Through this alternative form, cultural memory is set free beyond the confinements of a particular regional space integrating communities across, thus building the scope for a universal language of theatre.

Contesting Spectacle

In Kanhailal's *Dakghar* – Sabitri plays a ten-year-old Amal. As Amal, she establishes a fluid communication with the audience that starts sharing Amal's instincts. She is completely uninhibited while playing a little boy in her sixties. She applies her mental, physical and vocal faculties to manifest a healing effect. Sabitri combines fluidity of gestures with dance movements, synchronised songs along with rhythmic verbalisation, screams and silences (Rojio 166-172). The confinement of Amal within a small room with a window opening up to the world, has been reconstructed on a small podium, where Sabitri performs through "vertical movements", evoking the confinement. Audience gets arrested by that vertical sight which influences the audience to observe minute details of the performer's body, rather than just focus on the language of the text.

The spectacle generated here is not to induce pleasure, as often used in commercial theatres, but to confront our ways of seeing, that is constitutive of both remembering and forgetting. The most relevant example comes from Kanhailal's production of *Draupadi*, a dramaturgy based on Mahasweta Devi's short story (Spivak 381-402). Sabitri who plays the rebel protagonist Dopdi Mejhen, undresses herself on stage to contest the nature of male gaze (Mulvey 438-448). Her critique is rather implicit. She latently weaponises her body as a tool of resistance. This is to evoke our memory of the nude protest in Manipur against Armed



Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, after the brutal rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in 2004 (Sirur 2021).

Sabitri removes the white cloak from her naked body. Standing fearlessly in bare body, she cries out: “*come on, counter me -?*” This is an epiphanic journey for both the performer and the audience. A world of life in theatre-activism breaks the institution of objectification of body in Indian Stage, intertwined with the cultural history of resistance of Manipur, the ethnic voice through the language of theatre. Stripped to utter vulnerability, Dopdi uses her own vulnerability as strength, transforms the body from a site of oppression to a weapon of resistance. Mahasweta Devi writes: “for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.” (Spivak 402). The Senanayak, a figure of oppressive forces, is taken aback by the sheer ingenuity of the apparatus for resistance. This act of counter militancy is influenced by Charu Majumdar’s praxis on Naxal movement which clearly urges the activists to rise up to the occasion during most vulnerable circumstances. Naxal Movement has been silenced long back, but the praxis carries deeper implications even today. In Kanhailal’s play, Sabitri decides to act deliberately and uses proscenium stage to articulate the nature of trauma caused by justifying violence and subverting the terror through a memory of resistance. This particular aspect of justifying violence over innocent citizens is in direct violation to our Constitution and takes us back to mid-19th century 2nd Fugitive Law (Caldwell 2024). This particular law imposed in 1850 in America considers the body of a slave as an object of possession for the master and anyone who “conspires” to liberate one’s own self from the terrorising clutches of the master is seen as a criminal, and corporal punishment is bestowed upon them. Since it was sanctioned by law, the federal agents had the law to support and legalise their violence upon any fugitive or conspirators. The slaves had no agency of their own. The wound of the trauma that emerges out of this law is still fresh in many Afro-American writings; Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* bears testimony to the fact. Our world has progressed radically in the last one and half century, yet such imposition on common lives raises multiple questions that still remain unanswered. In the context of the paper, Sabitri’s resilience to confront the supposed progressive audience with these perennial questions could be explored. The very moment of the rupture (in the text, and for the spectator) merges performer-activist Sabitri with Devi’s character Dopdi. Sabitri’s act not only establishes autonomy over *body* or “*hakchang*” but also takes the audience to Manipur’s historical trajectory of oppression and resistance. Sabitri’s intervention breaks down the disturbing chain of body-as-object-on-stage to a more empowering body-as-a-pertinent-question-on-stage. This moment of intersection between stage and real-life praxis is the core of this current research.

Kanhailal states the primary objective in context of *Dakghar*:

The sensible audience does not perceive my theatre as ‘public exhibition’ but as an experience of the theatre of catharsis that does not lie in its message, in educating the people, in creating amazement and so on. Where Tagore transcends conventional literature, I succeed in overcoming the challenge of ‘how to see theatre’. (Kanhailal and Das 230).

The objective of Kalakshetra is to open up more queries through the space of theatre, persistently critiquing the methods of production of theatre and as its perception, thereby configuring an alternative paradigm.

Art as a Reflection of Life

It is inspiring to see how in 2004, after four years of Sabitri’s performance of *Draupadi*, twelve Imas came out in naked march in front of Kangla Fort holding banners painted red with slogans: “Indian Army Rape Us”, “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”; to protest against the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by Indian Army. She was severely shot in her sexual organs after being raped (Sirur 2021). In Amar



Kanwar's documentary Sabitri describes, she cried that day! Though, the Imas reported they didn't know about Sabitri's performance of *Draupadi* at that time (which was mostly in protest of rape of Ahanjaobi, the first reported case of rape by the army), but it is true that art and life follow each other. After the protest of Imas, people started calling Kanhailal *Chingngu* (Shivaprakash and Rojio 77-79), who could foresee the future. Sabitri's nude protest on the stage was not commercialisation of art, as many people criticized it to be, at the time. Rather, it was resistance against the brutality that was choking the Manipuri community every day. Sabitri's art transcends from theory to praxis. She makes her nude body the medium of revolt, which makes the predators sense the reverse horror. Through her body, she overturns the power dynamics. Sabitri makes her art the medium of resistance which represents the sufferings and traumas of her indigenous society. Thus, it is apt to assert that Sabitri, through her artistic intervention has produced an alternative form of Indian theatre. This alternative theatre practice not only provides a space for indigenous communities, but it also drifts away from the rising commercialisation of contemporary urban theatre.

Sabitri's living theatre presents a theatrical language of its own. Sabitri establishes a fluid communication with the spectator through her body dynamics, and minimal usage of spoken language. This makes her performances globally more acceptable, as it is not confined to any particular linguistic form. It further helps Kalakshetra in portraying indigenous struggles and resistance in front of a more dynamic audience. The epiphanic moment between the performer and the spectator creates a unique aesthetic language by itself. The community theatre is enacted in its regional languages, without any translation. They try to communicate through the body of the performer, incorporating certain sounds and words, that preserves authenticity of the performance. Simultaneously, they are also aware of not imposing any obstacle due to the language barriers. This unique language of theatre forces the audience to rethink the Indian stage. This provocation of thought counters the sublime spectacle of the commercial visual art. It triggers questions about the psyche of spectators, who are otherwise passive onlookers of spectacles. Therefore, it is a moment of illumination for the cultural history of Indian theatre art forms. It takes us back to Charu Majumdar's core objective of Naxal praxis for immediate change. Sabitri-Kanhailal's theatre continues to carry this notion of change through artistic intervention on stage. However, it remains challenging to break communal binaries through art in the north-east, a region which has such diverse ethnicity. It becomes more difficult, especially in the case of such a turbulent state like Manipur. Hence, Kalakshetra's persistent negotiations would continue to find newer forms of art and activism. Eventually, it is plausible to influence more methods of representation. These negotiations would inevitably provoke newer ideas and methodology in academic discourses as well.

Teejan Bai, Pandavani: Revision of Canon

Performance cultures have often been the prerogative of male folks. When Teejan Bai entered into the performance culture of *Pandavani*, women were completely forbidden from participation. She was born in northern Bhilai, into a Pardhi community of hunter tribes. In her community, a woman's attachment towards performance culture was perceived as a matter of shame and hence she was initially outcasted (Singh 56-62). Nevertheless, she introduced a paradigm for female performers that challenges androcentric notion of Pandavani, thereby revising the canon. Anita Singh states:

As the performance unfolds, with her boisterous and overpowering voice and her tribal identity, she shuttles in the stage space, making free use of it as she plays her tamboora, sings, dances, delivers dialogue and, in between, comes forward to communicate with the audience and then moves back to interact with her accompanists. The theatricality of her performance, her own inimitable style, her



large presence – she is a tall and well-built woman – and her uninhibited movements on stage render her presence even larger and more powerful. (64-65)

Her vertical presence on stage creates a spectacle in itself through an evocative journey for both the performer and the spectator often breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience, as an integral part of her improvised text.

Pandavani is a musical ballad that involves storytelling from *Mahabharata*, usually associated with Pardhan Gond tribe of Chhattisgarh. Teejan Bai has pioneered *Kapalikpandavanishaili* which is considered to be the vulgarised version, in contrast to *Vedamatishaili* that follows the tradition of Vedas. *Kapalik* style is unscripted, raw, and vernacular performed through memorisation or *smriti* (Singh 75). It is closer to indigenous myths, legends, tribal oral traditions, and folk music (Singh 49-52). She takes reference points from Sabal Singh Chauhan's *Awadhi* version of *Mahabharata* (Singh 51), and primarily focuses on oral traditions. Her autonomy over the already established popular narrative provides her the authorial agency to reintegrate a text for her audience, thus producing a text in the process.

Recreating Cultural Memory

It is Teejan's improvised live inputs on stage, both in form and in content, that create variations in her performances in either proscenium stage or in the dynamic open stage. A striking example perhaps is Draupadi's *Cheer-Haran* episode performed with different intensity, in front of Kolkata's small-scale elite audience (in 2019), compared to a dynamic audience in Varanasi's *Assi Ghat* (in 2018), (Singh 63). She can instantly adapt according to situational demands and improvise on stage by understanding the pulse of her audience. As Draupadi, Teejan resists the narrative of female shame and uses rhetoric that questions the male agency in power. In the episode when Draupadi is dragged to the assembly, confronting humiliation, while Dushasana is trying to strip her – the men in the assembly watch silently. Teejan contrasts a momentary silence with a rhetoric: "Yahan koi kuchnahikahnevala?" - "Aapbhinahibologe?" - "Koi kuchnahibolega?" ["Is no one going to say anything here?" – "You won't speak either?" – "No one will say anything?"] (Singh 66). Similarly, she subtly brings an intervention through Rukhmani into the context when Draupadi calls Krishna for help, saying "Jaldi ja jaldi ja aur Draupadi ki laj bacha, aajdraupadi ki lajnahibacchitohsoch le ki bharat ki nari ki lajbachna bahut mushkilhai" ["Go quickly, go quickly and save Draupadi's honour. If Draupadi's honour cannot be saved today, then remember – protecting the honour of the women of India will become very difficult."] (Singh 66). She breaks the fourth wall to directly launch the pertinent yet perturbing queries for her audience. Teejan intervenes into the popular memory through improvisatory method and creates rupture in the conventional understanding of the canon. Her performances are intrinsically based on oral performance culture, which allows her space for creative improvisations, thereby reconstituting cultural memory.

Towards a Language of Living Theatre

Teejan Bai's performance becomes expansive to the global audience, despite being strictly bound to the Chhattisgarhi dialect. She uses fixed vertical movements in her performances with a limited use of horizontal movements, that transfers the attention of the audience to the approach of the narrative rather than the language of narration. Similar to Sabitri Heisnam, it is her evocative presence that establishes communication with different audience base irrespective of linguistic differences. Through the layers of vertical movement, both Teejan and Sabitri have created alternative paradigms of theatre practice, that contest spectacle bound perspective of commercial theatre. This vertical movement enhances the spectacle



where the gazes are arrested within a limited space. This does not imply that the audience does not have liberty to experience the whole stage.

Both, Sabitri Heisnam and Teejan Bai, through their distinct performative genres create a language of theatre that is not restricted to mere words or linguistic differences. Their theatrical impact is experienced through non-verbal forms, consisting physical, vocal and mental faculties. Sabitri uses fluid bodily movements, gestures, voices, tones and silences to communicate with the audience. On the other hand, Teejan's empowering tribal presence speaks for itself. There is an inherent simplicity in Teejan's performances that establishes communication with the spectator. Their alternative theatre form takes one beyond the linguistic confinements, reconstituting the gazes through rooted vertical presence on stage, thereby creating a universal language of "living theatre". Each performance demands an active participation and provides a "healing effect" for the audience who are transposed into an evocative journey of critical thinking.

The Transgressive Draupadi: An Iconographic Representation

Draupadi's presence is inevitable to the diegetic space formulating the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi not only disrupts *dharma*, she also reinstates her own authority by asserting it, where she affirmed her autonomy by asking a pertinent question, when put on stake (cf. Game of dice). Draupadi, born as a transgressive woman and yet asserting her autonomy over her own body and mind provides her the freedom to reintegrate *dharma*.

Teejan Bai's narrativisation of Draupadi asserts her own authority as means of a performer and revisits the question of docility surrounding women in general. Teejan states, "Mahabharata is not another separate story. It is all related to our life. All that is happening to us has happened in Mahabharata and all that has happened in Mahabharata is happening to us know. It is duty of the artist to look into it with love." (Mitra 44). She questions the limits of patriarchy and its order through her rhetoric. Her improvisation evolves the narrative of Draupadi by incorporating contexts of contemporary times of crises. Thus, she creates a didactic encounter both in form and essence. Teejan Bai's iconography of Draupadi asserts her autonomy as a performer and revises functions of patriarchy by reinstating various forms of lapses across societies. She takes part in a form of popular culture to create the spectacle of empowerment, while subverting the very forms of patriarchy that pertains in the arena representation.

Sabitri's *Draupadi*, is based on the adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's figure of the oppressed - Dopdi Mejhen. An Adivasi woman, who is deliberately involved with her political mission. Sabitri's recontextualisation of the tribal narrative of Dopdi, persistently reflects upon the transgressive icon of mythological Draupadi. She is the symbol of common people, vigorously alert, and always subverting the power dynamics of oppression. For Dopdi, retribution is a long road ahead. It is her transgression that provides her the will to find a retribution in the very process of struggle. The body that is itself seen as vulnerable, as a space that could be violated, transforms into a space of resistance. Sabitri uses myth to demystify the figure of Draupadi. Her objective is not essentially didactic. However, the pedagogy of resistance placed symbolically through her performance, creates more resonance without providing a teleological closure to the text of Draupadi (the icon, the epic and the contemporary versions).

The binary icon of Sita and Draupadi, similar to Artemis and Aphrodite in Greek myth, are based on the notion of docile and transgression. Where one is seen as the direct antonym of the other, and within this spectrum of docility and transgression, women are often mapped within societies. The docile are valourised and worshipped (cf. *Devi* by Satyajit Ray or Kannagi in Tamil Epic *Cilappatikaram*) and those who transgress



are seen as threats. (In *Cilappatikaram*, Kannagi was not hailed as a martyr owing to her protest against the king, but deified because of her 'virtue' as a faithful wife.

Both Teejan and Sabitri try to redefine the binary by deflating and asserting more questions within this restricted spectrum. By redefining the space, we become more alert as readers/spectators to rethink the methods through which the generic meanings are produced. Today, when India is shaken up by macabre memories of Nirbhayas and Abhayas, with hope and hopelessness persistently voicing up against injustice - these performances allow us to pursue new meanings and interpretations. In our persistent protests they are brought into dialogue and continue to contest the grand narratives.

Endnotes

¹"Hakchang" is the Meiteilon/Manipuri term for body

²*Draupadi* (1978) is a short story by Mahasweta Devi. Later, it was translated into English Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, with an additional foreword. It depicts a tribal woman's revolt against the exploitation of her community and her eventual rape by the Indian military during the Naxalite revolt. Theatre director Heisnam Kanhailal converted the story into a Meiteilon play, creating an analogy to Manipuri context, first production in 2000. Kanhailal's analogy between *Draupadi* and Manipuri realities is very evident to the audience.

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Water Wars and Eco-dystopia: Re-reading Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*

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Abstract: Sarnath Banerjee, through the medium of visual storytelling in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, portrays a dystopian future associated with the water wars of Delhi. The concept of water wars was first addressed in the 1990s by Ismail Serageldin. The water wars discourse was conditioned by the overlapping concepts of water inequality, scarcity produced by capitalism and existing hierarchies of power. Sarnath Banerjee succinctly portrays the overlapping factors which lead to water crisis in India in his text. He visually elaborates how such political forces, capitalist corporations, financial institutions and greedy local elites try to extract wealth by damaging the society and environment. He also shows us how this crisis affects the middle class and lower-middle class through the portrayal of Girish, the plumber who loses his job and later tries to find the mythical underground river Saraswati, to solve the water crisis. The paper will explore how Banerjee's unique blend of image and text helps us to get an alternative view on the discourse of water wars (deviating from the mainstream water war novels) and how it predicts the uncertain dystopic future associated with it. It will also elaborate on how the reality of the water crisis has significantly entered the political domain in recent times leading to the actualization of the textual content on water emergencies.

Keywords: Eco-dystopia, crisis, environment, marginalisation, Water wars.

They keep saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue of all. And yet they just carry on like before. – (Thunberg 7)

The word 'dystopia' comes from two Greek words (*dus* 'bad' and *topos* 'place') which means "diseased, bad, faulty or unfavourable place" (Claeys 4). Dystopia is usually considered to be the opposite of utopia, it is usually seen as an antithesis to utopia, but it often talks about a failed utopia of totalitarian systems (Claeys 5). Dystopian texts critique the hegemonic forces and hierarchies within power structures. They also help us question the existing modes of knowledge production and subsequently critique the projected image of an egalitarian society. According to Pramod K. Nayar, dystopian texts also "speculate on the state of the earth if existing socio-historical conditions – industrialization, hyper-consumption, unchecked pollution – continue unregulated" (47). Gregory Claeys had identified that there are three main types of dystopias, namely, "political dystopia," "environmental dystopia" and "technological dystopia" (5). But one can decipher that there are overlapping zones of interaction between the three and one cannot easily separate them. Any political or economic chaos can lead to an ecological disaster and vice versa. Wars due to technological advancement or epidemics form the content of dystopian fiction where humans (in their current injured or deformed state) must adapt to their new dystopic condition and space. Many authors have addressed the theme of environmental degradation through their depiction of a dystopic world to talk about the urgency of climate crisis. Eco-dystopian texts not only talk about the past or the present, but they often talk about a perilous future and serve as warnings. Pramod K. Nayar in his recently published book *Vulnerable Earth*, states that "... literature's role – and more broadly narrative's – has been central to not only the documentation of disasters but also *imagining* of future disasters, alternative worlds, and an environmental ethics that promises justice to human and the more-than-human" (2). Hoda M. Zaki states



that “These texts in effect warn that if certain social trends go unchecked, the future will exhibit certain specific undesirable qualities...” (244).

Sarnath Banerjee’s *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* belongs to the genre of speculative fiction. It portrays a dystopian future (also present and past) associated with the water wars in Delhi. It freely explores possibility and impossibility alike. As per the description of the book, it is “A Homeric tale of a man’s journey to the centre of the earth to find the mythical river Saraswati... set against the fictitious yet ever-so-real Water Wars of Delhi” (Banerjee). It talks about a dystopian future with elements of cli-fi (climate fiction) exploring the themes of water scarcity, urban planning, and resource management. The concept of water wars was first addressed in the 1990s by Ismail Serageldin who had stated that the “wars of the next century will be over water” (Selby 49). Such predictions became a part of reality when scarcity of fresh water was associated with the rhetoric of ‘climate crisis’ and ‘climate emergency’ (Boast 2). The water wars discourse was conditioned by the overlapping concepts of water inequality, scarcity produced by capitalism and new forms of business opportunities which were created by ‘disaster capitalism’ (Boast 3). Political ecologists now deal with the concept of water wars with greater caution than how it has been liberally used in most policy debates and media. Literary critics have also addressed the apocalyptic nature of water wars to point out the urgency of dealing with climate change and how humanities, as a stream, is trying to address it (Boast 2). There is also a growing tension within the geo-political domain where nations seem to exploit the existing courses of rivers by building dams and literally adding to the concept of water wars. According to Jan Selby and Clemens Hoffman, “predictions of water wars seem to be intuitively plausible. These predictions are typically found on the Malthusian concept that resource scarcity will lead to conflict” (Boast 76). Population growth tends to outpace the growth of resource, leading to inevitable shortages and crisis, potentially resulting in famine, disease and war. Hannah Boast elaborates how the water wars discourse has certain concerning implications. For example, she talks about how future predictions related to water wars often divert the attention from present day water-inequalities. Such predictions overshadow the realities associated with the present crises in the lives of the four billion people who suffer from water crises every year. It is also important to note that water crisis is not ‘natural’, it is produced or often generated by privatization. In India, we have a wide range of conflicts starting from protests about creation of dams to community level water wars between cities and slums.

The first section of Sarnath Banerjee’s graphic novel shows us the contrasting pictures of pre- and post-privatized Tambapur. Banerjee paints a picture of how things drastically change in Tambapur after the Indian government had decided to sell Bharat Copper limited (a fictionalized version of India’s Hindustan Copper Limited). The quality of life of the people of Tambapur change due to pollution, scarcity of water and depletion of natural resources, all caused by the Australian multinational/profit-oriented private company. Girish, the psychic plumber, loses his job as he is fired by the Platypus Group and goes to Delhi to look for a job. Before talking about Girish again, Banerjee gives us a glimpse of the morning routine of the people of Delhi, where we see that they must get up early in the morning to switch on the water pumps, almost like a ritual, so that they can get water throughout the day. Girish finds a new role for himself under the influence of an entrepreneur named Rastogi. Rastogi had initiated a project called *Pataal Jal Anusandhan Vikalp*, to find the mythical river Saraswati and eradicate the water crisis in Delhi. Rastogi states that “I fund expeditions into the earth’s core, in the hope that one day we will discover the mother of all rivers, the mythical Saraswati” (Banerjee 17).

Girish starts digging the earth to find the mythical river but finds several characters (water-borne criminals) living beneath the surface of the earth. Banerjee creates a hell-like image to accommodate all the water-borne criminals (Jagat Ram, Tanker Rajan, Lt. Col. B. K. Gambhir, L.M. Awasthy and Philippa Carrey Jones). Jagat Ram used to work at the Delhi Jal Board, and he was blamed for the losses of the company as he



sold water to the private tankers illegally. The Delhi Jal Board's statement on the water crisis gives a shock to the readers, "A report came out, that of all the water pumped into Delhi, only 37 per cent reaches the consumer. PREPOSTEROUS. Consumers always lie" (Banerjee 22). He took the blame entirely but got demoted from his position and was ultimately instructed to find the mythical river but was banished to Patalpuri (*Patal* means hell in Sanskrit). Tanker Rajan, owner of Tandav Tankers Pvt Ltd, used to buy water from Jagat Ram and sell it at an exorbitant price (5k to 15k depending on the colony) during emergencies. He regarded this action as a "tiny toll tax for an important social work" (Banerjee 25). He wanted to avoid any more scandals after getting caught and decided to find the river himself. Lt. Col. B. K. Gambhir was a 'fallen soldier' who had been stealing water from his neighbor's overhead tank. He talked about how stealing water "grew into an obsession" and that he "continued doing it every night. During the day it was ok, but at night my desires spiked. I felt the intense pull of Mishra's tanker" (Banerjee 29). After he received a letter from Mishra's young wife Kusum, his guilt intensified. He wanted to clear his conscience and find the source of underground water for his neighbors but ultimately settled in Patalpuri after a point of time. Awasthy was a corrupt high ranking MCD officer who was seen to be residing beneath the surface because of his sins and his policies which caused constant damage to the environment. Banerjee portrays Awasthy as someone who "achieved notoriety by hacking down branches of ancient trees in order to let in the winter sun" and who had designed ornamental gardens after chopping trees which Banerjee ridiculed as "The sort South Delhi's affluent class adores but barely visits" (34). He casually makes fun of the word apparition and called it "Appa-Rao-Nation" (Banerjee 33). As a punishment, he was thrown into Patalpuri and expressed his regret to Girish with statements like "I will never waste water" and "I will protect trees with my life, please take me home" (Banerjee 37). Girish finally met Philippa Carrey Jones, the ambassador's wife from an unnamable country, who got transferred to India as a part of punishment posting. To match her living conditions, she wasted a lot of water and ended up swimming into this hellish world because of her actions.

Banerjee presents a variety of water-borne criminals belonging to different class positions. He consciously creates such a wide range of characters who have been exiled for wasting/ misusing water. The consequences of environmental degradation are subtly portrayed by Banerjee. He also critiques the existing power hierarchies and the corrupt policy makers and officials who are responsible for the water crisis in Delhi. Girish finally discovers the mythical river Saraswati and finds his way back to the surface, along with Awasthy, to inform Rastogi and his associates. He discovers that Delhi is in a state of war (the battle of Kalkaji). The war has in fact been manufactured by Rastogi. He had planned to acquire plots in Delhi at lower prices and sell exclusive apartments built by private companies in Gurgaon to wealthy Delhi-ites. Water Wars, as we can see in the text, is entirely manufactured, and the text stresses the idea that scarcity can be created by socio-political factors and is not always a natural phenomenon.

One of the most interesting sections in the text is titled "Short-termism". Banerjee critiques short term policies adopted by the government (policies that contribute to water scarcity and chaos for vulnerable communities). He defines short-termism as "when floors upon floors are held together by optimism" or "when armies of young people are employed in an industry that develops no skills" or "when industries take over agricultural land and dams drown entire villages and destroy settled communities to produce unjustifiably low amounts of electricity" or "the culture of use and throw" or "constant talk of building new institutions without restoring the old" amongst others (52-57). People in power try to define short-termism as coming from "Partition mentality", as coming from "anxiety", as a "by-product of Hindu fatalism" and as a "South Asian disease" (58-62). He destabilizes the narrative of national economic progress by demonstrating the price paid by marginal communities for development projects and by showcasing India's deep class inequalities (Madan 2).



Banerjee gives us a glimpse of Rastogi's childhood days and states that he "grew up on the wrong side of water racism" (115). Rastogi is humiliated by his peers and is referred to as "Kachra" (waste). According to Anuja Madan, "Banerjee's use of the term water racism hints at the xenophobic underpinnings of unequal water distribution of Delhi" (13). Banerjee also mentions, through the character of Prof. Satyavadi, that the amount of water varies according to the locale, for example per person in Delhi cantonment gets 569 litres, in Lutyen's Delhi it is 462 and in Mehrauli it is 29 litres. In an article by ANI, Tanya Chugh reported that a recent survey has indicated that there are "significant disparities in water supply, with some areas facing severe shortages while others receive more than their actual needs" which indicates that there's a lack in terms of effective management regarding equitable distribution of water (Chugh). For example, places like Karwal Nagar and Burari which are supposed to get 25 and 45 MGD (million gallons per day), get only 4.7 and 12.5 MGD (Chugh). Several areas in Delhi do not have proper water pipeline connections as well. Most marginalized people living in such areas do not have access to treated water and as a result suffer from several diseases. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, had elaborated how "communities whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development... narratives of national development are partial narratives... that hide from view communities that inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent" (150). Similarly, this inequality which has been existing since the 1980s in Delhi, has been partially addressed through the years. The water crisis has been a part of several manifestos of different political parties, yet they have failed to meet the demands of the marginalized people in terms of per capita water consumption. The reduced water level of Yamuna has resulted in decreased output of water from treatment plants by fifty percent. Untreated waste from the industries led people to mistake the foam in the river for some sort of washing agent and as a consequence they had fallen sick in 2021, 2023 and 2024. Rob Nixon also talks about slow violence which "occurs gradually over an increased period of time due to consistent exploitation through systematic and structural socio-cultural factors. Its invisibility is caused by its dispersal across time and people in general usually respond fast to the impending problems. This demand for the representation of slow violence especially on environment based on the immediate need with the Anthropocene" (193).

In an interview, published in *Dialogue Earth*, Banerjee was asked a simple question by the interviewer while referring to this text - "Why water?" (Ahmad). Banerjee referred to Delhi in the 1980s and 90s when people had to get up early in the morning to start their pumps to get water. He replied by saying that "It was like having a small baby. My late uncle's vitality was depended on whether he managed to fill his overhead tanker during the summer months" (Ahmad). Banerjee uses his personal experience to visually depict how important an issue, water management, was during his childhood days, and it continues to be a massive problem. He was then asked why he chose the mythical river Saraswati and not Yamuna. He had replied by saying that "With the special brand of science and technology that the nation is currently encouraged, the prefix 'mythical' may not stick to the Saraswati for long" and that Yamuna "is destroyed to the point that it is best left in the hands of the environmentalists. Yamuna is too real for me. My narrative is unreal" (Ahmad). This unpredictable unreal which Banerjee refers to is something which eco-dystopian texts often create but there's more real in this unreal. Banerjee himself admits that "Lately it feels that the unreal has become more tangible than it ever was" (Ahmad).

Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, had defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and /or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). This definition is also applicable for movies, but McCloud talks about a crucial difference between the two mediums. He states that "each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space- the screen- while each frame of comics must occupy a different space... Space does



for comics what time does for films” (McCloud 7). He focuses on two important aspects related to comics, visuality and spatiality. He also notes how “In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially...” (McCloud 100). Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* had explained how the very act of “paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters... it ‘tells’ time” (28). What he means by this is that the images, elements, symbols, speech balloons, gutters, etc. help the readers to frame their conception of time through the visualities created within and beyond the space of the comic book. Jason Dittmer, while talking about visualities, had elaborated that, “comic book visualities hold out the possibility of introducing a new ‘optical unconscious’ to geography, one that holds open opportunities for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge from a singular montage” (223). Banerjee creates these visually dystopic and un-real space(s) in the pages of his text to talk about real space(s). He uses his panels not only as medium of control but to break the linearity of time, causality and chronology of events in the narrative. His section on Short-termism draws on illustrations from different movies to depict the water wars in Delhi, while his portrayal of the hell for water-borne criminals helps us to understand how Banerjee breaks the linearity of time in his narrative through the visual depiction of these different spaces. Banerjee also experiments with frames and panels which not only provide structural support, but become a part of the narrative itself. The tangibility of the dystopic and unreal spaces is not only dependent on Banerjee’s imagination and illustrations but how the readers imagine these spaces while reading the text. The urgency of dealing with climate change is not only felt through the actions depicted in the panels but through the blank spaces between them. Unlike a film, in which the transitions occur from frame to frame, the gutter is where the reader uses his or her imagination to fill in the gaps. Scott McCloud stressed on the importance of participation calling it a “powerful force in any medium” (69). He elaborates how gutters or the “negative spaces” play “host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics” (66). The gutters or the transitional spaces between the panels help the readers to imagine the reality in relation to such dystopic illustrations in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*. The effect of Banerjee’s illustrations is similar to that of Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm* (2010), which re-imagines Delhi during the Emergency. As Preeti Singh in her article points out that “*Delhi Calm* not only provides the reader with the picture of a turbulent time in Delhi but also narrates this time through references to popular culture” (99). She elaborates how Ghosh has depicted the episode on mass sterilization with reference to a popular scene from the film *Sholay*, with its famous dialogue “Kitne Admi The?” (99). Banerjee also uses popular film references and illustrations in his text like, “Saving Private Arora”, “Bridge on the River Yamuna”, “Khurana’s List”, “The Guns of Ghantaghar”, “Chronicles of Narayana”, “Justice Bipin Bose” and “The Jorbagh Circle” (92-101). The depiction of eco-dystopia and climate crisis through references to popular culture creates a new language in graphic narratives. Through a text like *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, Banerjee successfully makes slow violence visible in the reader’s mind.

The representation of such dystopian settings in texts like *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* serves two purposes. The first focuses on the urgency of dealing with climate crisis as these texts give us warnings about the degrading ecosystem. The second purpose is related to Eco-literacy. M. Angkayarkan Vinayakselvi and R. Abhinaya state that “Eco-literacy” is attributed to the broader use of humanities and it “focus[es] on the sustainable human communities and society”; they also explain how “An eco-literate person understands the infrastructure of the environment and ecosystem in relevance to the socio-economic and cultural involvement and works towards sustainable future and also has a constructive attitude towards non-human stakeholders of nature” (191). The graphic novel becomes a very important visual medium to make readers conscious of their surroundings and Banerjee also uses this medium in a similar way. “It gives the message of sustainability after the elaboration of its alternative impacts. The roundabout of illustration creates fear of uncertainty without losing hope towards a better understanding of one’s role in environmental protection” (Vinayakselvi Abhinaya 193). They conclude their article by saying “Banerjee creates awareness about the ecosystem and its changing nature highlighting climate change and water related issues” and they invoke



“empathy and participatory response from the readers which in turn generate eco-literacy” (194). The allegorical journey of Girish hints at the factors responsible for the city’s structural inequality and water crisis. He is celebrated as the best psychic plumber at the end with a direct connection to Bunyan “the plumber’s pilgrimage”. Such a title indicates the possibility of a solution which would eradicate this inequality in terms of water crisis and achieve an ecological democracy.

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Nationalisms in Context: Somnath Batabyal's *Red River*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the concept of 'nationalisms' as they occur in Somnath Batabyal's *Red River*. It will map the variable ideas of 'nationalism' as they appear and morph over time to three central characters of the novel – Rizu, Samar and Rana, three young friends in Assam of the 1980s. Benedict Anderson's idea of nationalism as a fragmented, imaginary concept will be referred to in this context. Additionally, the paper seeks to question the idea of one homogeneous 'nation' by referring to Homi Bhabha's idea of the nation and explore the various manifestations of resistance to it, thereby also drawing attention to 'identity' and its intricacies. The paper also intends to look at the concepts of home, migration and identity in Assam of the 1980s, at a time of intense political violence.

Keywords: home, identity, nationalism, nation, resistance

I

"This red river carries all our tales, Samar. If you listen, wherever you are, you'll hear them. Carry the river in your heart and, I promise you, you'll never walk alone" (Batabyal 353).

The quest for identity in Assam has long been connected with the issue of language. The separation of Sylhet from Assam and its inclusion in Bangladesh in 1947 assuaged the Assamese fears of marginalization and gave the Assamese a hope of a 'homogeneous' homeland, excluding all other communities and particularly Bengalis. The roots of this desire for isolation may be traced to the rather "one-sided engagement with linguistic nationalism" (Misra 7). Nandana Dutta mentions in *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* that at one point during the British rule, Assamese nationalism grew in relation to their interactions with the Bengalis, since in the movement for self-formation, Assam was considered as not having things that Bengal did (50). The Assamese soon began to define themselves on the basis of their differences with the Bengalis. This intensified into a more full-fledged conflict which came to be known as the Assam Movement of the 1980s, to which the issue of migration (illegal or otherwise) came to be added simultaneously.

II

The Assam Movement has been defined as a movement that seized the initiative for self-construction. The movement started with the desire to oust the 'outsider' in Assam, who comprised mostly the Bengali, Marwari and Bihari population. It was spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). It, however, made enemies of people who previously inhabited the same landmass peacefully and now belonged to different countries due to the Partition. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), created in 1979 at Rang Ghar in Sibsagar, stated that a more militarily strong attitude was required to quell the problems of 'illegal' immigration into Assam. The ULFA decided to take up the demands and problems of many sub-



nationalities in Assam. This endeavour was taken up with a zeal to further Assamese sub-nationalism and this soon grew to a great magnitude. The text in question, Somnath Batabyal's *Red River* reads this troubled scenario in Assam from the perspective of three young boys – Rizu, Samar and Rana who are the dearest of friends and yet of different backgrounds and languages. Nationalism for each boy has a unique and different significance; their ideas of 'nationalism' also challenge the ideas of one single 'nation' and 'country'.

A large part of the story is set in the 1980s Assam when political turmoil had reached extreme heights, mainly centred on the crisis of 'illegal' immigration from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan). This migration, 'illegal' or otherwise, was considered to be the principal threat to the creation of a homogeneous homeland for the Assamese in post-Independence Assam. It must be remembered that with the Partition of India in 1947, migration became a complicated issue because previously legitimate movements were now considered to be illegal. This worsened with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In Assam of the 80s, problems of xenophobia and jingoism soon grew, concerning the non-Assamese communities, of which Bengalis were the foremost at the receiving end.

The story opens with a family who had their roots in East Pakistan, but now reside in Assam at Gopalpur House. Here they are able to retain some of their previous traditions of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) but mostly have to adjust to a new land with a new language. Lucky Dutta, or Banalakshmi, is married to Amol Dutta, and they are often exposed to threats of speaking and behaving like the Assamese and not as Bengalis although they have a Bengali identity. Often in the vicinity, they can hear shouts of 'Jai Aai Asom' (Hail Mother Assam). In one episode, a group of young men barge into their courtyard with sub-nationalistic demands. These people clearly resist the idea of India as their nation and insist that Assam is to be regarded as their motherland. Lucky and Amol are threatened by the boys; "We are sons of our motherland and have taken an oath to free her from the foreigners who have subdued her for centuries" (Batabyal 28). As the idea of 'nation' is not uniform for every community in the novel and the meaning of the word bears different yet significant connotations, 'nation' for the Assamese, encompasses only Assam which is also their 'home'. For the Bengalis in Assam and some parts of Bangladesh, the idea of 'nation' is not tangible - they lose their 'nation' and 'home' all at the same time during Partition. Like Lucky and Amol, there are several other Bengali families in their vicinity, who also look for a safe haven where they would not be victimized on the basis of their language and identity.

Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines a nation as "an imagined, political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). He says it is imagined because although members of even the smallest nation will never know or see their fellow members, yet there will be an image of the nation and its members in their minds. Anderson also mentions Ernest Gellner as he says, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (169). Anderson states that communities are to be understood as they imagine themselves. In Assam, similarly, the Assamese 'community' and who would be included in it – are imagined in much the same way, since the Partition created a fear of being outnumbered in the psyche of the Assamese. The idea of an 'Assamese' community also included a question of identity. Thus, a comradeship was always imagined among the people which also signified being unified as a community. This nationalism, which people envisioned amongst themselves, was not only restricted to one's national identity but soon extended also to the issue of language.

Lucky and Amol have a son named Samar who is quite young and quiet at the beginning of the novel, but turns out to be one of the most important protagonists of the novel, as a large part of the story is narrated from his perspective. In fact, as he grows up, he becomes friends with Rizu Kalita and Rana



Chaudhary, two other important protagonists in the novel. The ideas of 'nation' and 'home' are read differently from each boy's perspective and not one of them coincides with the other. It is interesting to note also how resistance builds up in their minds against notions of the 'country' / 'nation'.

The dissatisfaction and discontent that certain sections of people in Assam felt towards the Indian Union led them to consider only Assam and not India as their motherland. In fact, not accepting India as their motherland and also disregarding 15th August as Independence Day was quite common among other states of Northeast India. In Assam, the complaint was that Assam was facing problems of underdevelopment, lack and unequal distribution of resources and so on. Organizations with sub-nationalistic demands violently fought against the Centre about these issues, since they found that no solutions to these problems were devised by the Central Government. What they demanded was an independent or 'Swadhin Asom' which would be free from the control of the Indian 'mainland'. Udayon Misra writes:

What took shape in the form of secessionist militancy in the late 1970s or early 1980s needs to be seen against the backdrop of the pre-Partition politics which spawned seeds of suspicion and distrust about the newly emerging Indian nation-state and strengthened autonomist/separatist tendencies in the entire region (41).

The only way, according to many sub-nationalists, for Assam to gather an independent identity within the Indian nation state was to adopt violence against the control of the Army, which included bomb blasts, ransom killings, abductions and so on. The Centre, in response to the violence and unrest, adopted even stronger measures and thus, the matter ultimately transpired to a state versus centre clash. A huge number of families were affected in the process and many young members joined groups like ULFA, having undergone a shift of allegiance. In the course of the narration in *Red River*, one finds this very interesting shift of allegiance reflected in Rizu Kalita.

Rizu is the younger son of Madhob Kalita, the Headmaster of the local school in a fictional locale, Moramela, and quite a respected figure in the locality. Madhob Kalita's elder son, Romen had announced recently that he would be enlisting with the ULFA. As Madhob Kalita is aware of the perils of joining such an organization, he discourages his son Romen and sends him away from Moramela. Madhob is also well aware that it is only a lack of money and food that leads young men to join revolution, and therefore they must be given aid accordingly to dissuade them from their path. He is accosted by ULFA cadres for letting some land within the school for training young cadres. He is also told by them, "No more singing the Indian national anthem. Train your students to sing *Joi Aai Asom*. A new country must have its own songs" (Batabyal 60). Under such circumstances, Madhob Kalita is extremely careful to let his sons steer clear of sub-nationalist politics, since he himself is not a supporter of their views.

Romen Kalita still joins the ULFA without his father's knowledge, and unfortunately is killed by the Army. His body comes floating down the river where the parents and the brother, Rizu are able to see him for the last time. However, amidst this immense grief, the Army's routine questioning almost destroys Madhob's mental stability - because it is impossible for him to imagine that his carefully sheltered son could have been part of such an organization. Rizu reacts as well; at this point, the Army people are his worst enemies and murderers of his brother. As Rizu grows up, he is aware of anti-Army feelings growing inside him too, although the manifestation of it is seen much later in his life.

The story skips back and forth in time to accommodate several different characters from different backgrounds. Rana Chaudhary, the third member in the trio of friends, is of a different league altogether; he



would soon join this group of friends. He is the son of a military officer, Kabir Singh Chaudhary, who is incidentally posted in the northeast of India as part of a mission to rid the region of terrorism and violence. Kabir Chaudhary is not in favour of indiscriminate violence in the northeast despite the retaliation against the Army. When he first takes over in the region, he wishes to use as little force as possible. He says to his subordinate officer, "The use of force must be minimal. We're fighting fellow Indians" (Batabyal 33). He is quite different from the rest of his peers, he has a deep sense of fellow feeling with the people in this marginal land of India and yet, he is bound by duty to protect the country and its people from acts of violence and terrorism. At this juncture, Kabir is posted in Nagaland, which had previously disregarded Indian Independence too. He regards not only Nagaland, but the entire region as a miniature form of Southeast Asia, as it is a melting pot of cultures. Kabir is perhaps unique in considering the heterogeneity of the region, since almost all conflicts arise from the Centre disregarding the diversity of peoples in the region. The imposition of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) and the control of the Centre on the states was an issue of discontent between two parties which later manifested into a greater crisis. The novel also portrays Kabir being in two minds about Army activities in the northeast. He says, "That Chacha Nehru Act has given us immunity from everything. We can loot, kill, plunder, do anything in the name of internal security" (36).

The idea of one nation imposed on the region without considering that differences exist among the people was countered by the people in several ways. People in the region refused to acknowledge that they belonged to the Indian nation-state. This may be read from various theoretical perspectives, of which Homi Bhabha's view in *Nation and Narration* may be considered here. He has questioned the idea of the 'nation', by stating that nation is not a homogeneous identity, rather it is a contested and ambivalent space shaped by competing narratives and cultural representations. He also states that the nation may be 'written' differently from different perspectives, thus one finite idea of the nation is never possible to come up with or imagine:

What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of the nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of a nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality (1).

Thus, the Centre putting forth one idea of the nation on the entirety of India becomes problematic. Regions considered 'marginal' by the 'mainland' India often object to the idea of 'one' homogeneous nation, just as the 'mainland' refuses to acknowledge the margins. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and its Fragments* talks of the nation being a fragment; it is not a monolithic identity but composed of different parts, each of which has their individual relationship to the 'national' project. Chatterjee states that nationalism as defined by Anderson is a derivative of the Western concept, and would never be suited to the postcolonial nation-state since 'nationalism' here developed out of a resistance to the Western dominance. Thus, in a postcolonial state like India, the 'nation' can exist in multiple forms and features. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, "It is the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (2). In the 'in-between' spaces, as it were, new selfhoods are created. This creates the scope for a heterogeneous nation. The novel has references to some other examples of sub-nationalism too, albeit of a different nature, taking place in a different part of the country. The Khalistan Movement was assumed to have been aimed at similar objectives of creating an ethno-religious sovereign state for the Sikhs in the Punjab region in the 1980s. It included widespread violence and militant activities, which then faced



retaliation from the Centre in the form of Operation Blue Star. Kabir's father, a Sikh, was killed in 1984 as a result of the violence that broke out in northern India due to the assassination of the-then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

It is almost as though the lives of the characters in the novel are interwoven with each other and they are all part of each other's story. While Kabir and his team are instrumental in nabbing Romen Kalita, Madhob Kalita's son, Kabir's son Rana will eventually become best friends with Rizu. Kabir issues orders that the young Romen should not be killed, but unfortunately, he is. His body floating across the river bears a sudden and incomprehensible shock to his parents and neighbours alike. Following this episode, the police begin to suspect that Madhob Kalita is also involved in such underground activities. The police, who are representatives of the Central forces, care little for the calamity that has befallen the Kalitas; instead, they seem to mock and ridicule the family for harbouring a 'militant'. Madhob Kalita is injured very badly in his encounter with the police; he is left with a ruptured kidney due to the blows and kicks that the police inflict on him. The Kalitas become a heroic family – with the local people supporting them in their endeavours as Madhob Kalita soon works towards benefiting the land and its people.

When Rana meets Rizu and Samar at St Joseph's school in Guwahati, he is hardly aware of Rizu's history since Rizu is sent off to Guwahati after the horrific incident of his brother's death. Samar, a Bengali in Guwahati, has a secondary role as compared to Rizu since he is an Assamese in Assam. Rana joins school late in the session, and is not immediately friends with Rizu who has become quite a hero in school by now. The Headmaster of St Joseph's was used to donations from powerful organizations who wanted their sons to be admitted mid-session, but Rana was the son of an Army brigadier and therefore there was "no negotiating with the Indian Army" (Batabyal 82). While the requests of ULFA cadres could not be turned down, the Army diktat was also something that no one dared defy. Certain sections of Guwahati had now been transformed by the ULFA money, and yet, inequality was perhaps never more rampant than now. It is also the Headmaster's wish to develop the school more and more, however, he hardly has the money for it. The situation in Assam at this point is precarious; while the ULFA brings in a lot of money, the holistic development of Assam does not happen as the problems they fought against at one point of time still persisted. On the other hand, the atrocities of the central forces increase manifold and there are recurrent clashes between the sub-nationalistic organizations and the central forces. The people, therefore, go through a severe crisis and disillusionment as they do not know which way to look for peace and stability. There is a tacit rivalry between Rana and Rizu about who would be more popular in school among the boys. This continues for some time till Rana swoops in magically one day to save Rizu and Samar from blows, punches and beatings by a group of miscreants. Eventually Rizu and Rana turn out to be the best of friends with Samar as their constant companion.

It is not uncommon for Bengalis to be forced to speak and behave like the Assamese. Samar and his father bear the brunt of it often, and while they refer to Gopalpur House as their 'home', both of them know all too well that as migrant Bengalis from Bangladesh, they hardly had a 'home'. Samar knows that his parents, like most of the locality's elders, were migrant Bangladeshis; "They had paid their dues in an earlier revolution for a country no longer their own. Burdened with memory and longing for that land across the border, their only wish now was to be left alone" (Batabyal 131). Rana, however, is quite unaware of the political intricacies in Assam. He does not know what AASU or ULFA mean; neither does he see the necessity for blackouts and protests. It is Rizu who enlightens and acquaints him with the scenario: "We are at war. AASU is protesting against the army presence in Assam" (133).



Further, Rizu questions Rana about what his 'country' is. Rana of course, lightens the mood by saying that he belongs everywhere because of his movements across the country. This is also reflective of Rana's perspective of 'nation' and 'country'. For him, a country exists where there is fellow-feeling and no hatred among people. For Rizu, however, it is different because Rizu's country is Assam. He cannot bear with the fact that the Armed forces infiltrate into people's homes and massacre them ruthlessly:

I haven't moved anywhere, Rana. This is my home. Assam. I was born here. I will die here. Now, imagine people you don't know, inside your home with guns, torturing your brothers and your fathers, killing them even. If you belonged anywhere, you would know why we do not like the Indian Army here (133).

The ULFA in the 1980s had become a household name, and received adequate support in the early years. However, it failed to create a common united national platform for the people of Assam since its perception of national identity was always "confined to that of linguistic identity alone" (Misra 157). There was also a rapid rise in violence and encounter deaths which soon reached alarming levels towards the beginning of the 21st century. From 31 deaths in 2009-10, it shot up to 54 the next year and to 87 in 2011. Thus, Rizu's reason for disliking the Army presence in Assam seems to be quite natural as most people during this time were of the same opinion. The trauma unleashed on the people of Assam during this time had far-reaching impacts; even after the violence ended, the trauma existed in people's lives and minds for a very long time to come.

When Rana visits Samar's home for the first time, he is exposed to a very different kind of life than the one he is used to. Samar's family is not of the same opinion of the 'nation' as Rizu. Rana is an immediate hit with them, since both Lucky and Amol consider Rana to be a better influence on Samar than Rizu. It may be mentioned here that Lucky or Banalakshmi had known Kabir Singh Chaudhary while in Dhaka. For Lucky, Dhaka was her home and East Pakistan/Bangladesh her country, much more than Assam could ever be. Thus, seeing Rana at Gopalpur House rekindles memories for her, as she is immediately reminded of Dhaka and her association with Kabir Chaudhary.

It is interesting to note that for Samar, 'nation' is fluid; it is not restricted only to Bangladesh or Assam, but wherever life would take him. In what is only perhaps a fictitious recounting of history, Samar writes of his journey away from Guwahati to Kadamtala on Bangladesh border and then back to Dhaka again, where with the help of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he ventures on to Britain, to return for a brief time again to Assam. Perhaps in the course of the entire journey, Samar never really feels at 'home' since it is elusive for him. It does not exist in Dhaka, or in Kadamtala and perhaps never in London. The closest that he could feel to home was in Guwahati where he had spent his childhood. It is perhaps this desire to return home that brings him back to Guwahati many years later, when he has changed a lot from what he was in his childhood. Undoubtedly, his vision of Guwahati these many years later also changes as he misses the sleepy northeastern town of his youth; instead, it is now filled with vehicles, new buildings and many different people from various corners of the country. The last he remembers of Guwahati were the memories shared with his friends and his cousin, Leela, who had come to stay with them for some time. Now when he visits St Joseph's, he is astonished to learn that a lot of the development of the school was funded by Rizu Kalita who had become quite a big name in Guwahati. Samar also comes to know that Rizu had been a member of ULFA, and all his money was earned after he quit membership of ULFA and surrendered to the Police, becoming thereafter a Surrendered(S)ULFA. To his great dismay and despair, he also comes to know that Rizu is no longer alive. No one is able to tell him the exact reasons and circumstances of his death and it is an issue that no one really wishes to talk about.



Throughout the novel, Samar is never really an insider, but continues to observe the course of events from an objective distance. To him, his friends Rizu and Rana are never the representatives of different nationalities and identities; when he returns to Guwahati so many years later, he still wishes to find his childhood best friends and a slice of the youth he had left behind here before they abruptly left the town. Instead, he is now left only with memories of Rizu which he shares with Leela, who had also incidentally married Rizu after he quit the ULFA. On his return, he is also introduced to Madhob Kalita who has turned out to be a taciturn old man. Madhob Kalita is also quite cynical now; like most other people in Assam he has lost interest and hope in the politics of ULFA which has been corrupted by money, greed and dishonesty. He is also coping with the death of his son Rizu. It is Leela who finally lets Samar into this deeply guarded secret and it is not something he is prepared for.

Rizu's time in the mountains as an ULFA cadre taught him many difficult things. However, not for once had he been unfaithful to Leela whom he had promised to marry. Leela and Rizu get married too, yet Leela is drawn towards Rana who also reciprocates. This creates confusion for all three of them because the Army wants Rizu killed for he is the kingpin of the arms smuggling racket that goes out of hand, and Rana can never execute this plan, primarily because of his deep care, protection and friendship towards Rizu. At this point again, it is almost a struggle between the state and the centre, as Rizu and Rana are pitted against each other with their common thread being Leela. On the discovery of the affair, Rizu intends to shoot Rana but events take a different turn: it is Rizu who is killed – not directly by Rana but on his orders. It is poignant that even though Rizu was a member of an organization that insisted that identity be based on language, he never let that interfere in his friendship with Samar and Rana. Rizu remains true to the core ideals of friendship, love and loyalty as do Samar and Rana, albeit in their own ways.

Red River thus explores love and loyalty in the time of violence. It is as much a tale of friendship as it is of rivalry, between two very different kinds of people. Borders among nations in this novel are porous; they clearly do not define the 'nation' as the definition of nation is not steady. It is, therefore, a tale of a journey that transcends space and time and yet, brings together friends torn apart by history and destiny.

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Recording Resistance: Gauhar Jaan, Gramophone, and Gendered Cultural Labour in Colonial India

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Abstract: The paper critically examines the cultural and political significance of the gramophone recordings of Gauhar Jaan in early twentieth century India, positioning them as a form of gendered resistance and artistic labour. Focussing on the declining position of *tawaifs* in colonial India and the shifting audience of traditional art and culture under colonial and nationalist reformist ideologies, the paper explores how the advent of modern sound technology like the gramophone not only introduced a new mode of musical reproduction but also provided a space for survival for the *tawaifs* at a time when their existence was being systematically erased. Drawing on critical biography, discourse analysis, and feminist cultural theory the paper argues that recording on the gramophone was not merely an act of adapting to the changing forms of market economy; it was also a form of resistance against the socio-cultural erasure of the *tawaif* community who actively fought against their systematic erasure. It further emphasises that Gauhar Jaan's strategic use of the gramophone was not merely a commercial adaptation, but a subversive act of cultural authorship and agency. Her signature declaration after each recording, "My name is Gauhar Jaan", becomes an echoing assertion of identity, labour and historical presence in the face of growing marginalisation. The paper contributes to the reading of gender, performance, and postcolonial cultural production by reframing the *tawaif* not as a relic of the past but as a modern cultural worker navigating the politics of visibility, respectability and modernity in early twentieth century India.

Keywords: Gauhar Jaan, gramophone, labour, marginalisation, resistance, *tawaifs*.

The emergence of sound recording in India in the early years of the twentieth century marked a significant shift that had a far-reaching socio-cultural impact in terms of archiving the previously excluded voices of those for whom there was hardly any space in the mainstream cultural narrative of the nation. The gramophone not only modernised the consumption of classical music but it also helped preserve the custodians of the form, the *tawaifs*. The paper seeks to situate Gauhar Jaan within the transforming cultural and political landscape of colonial India and the growing marginalisation of the *tawaif* community under the British and later nationalist moral surveillance, and explores how the gramophone offered them a cultural and economic space to legitimise their presence through their singing. Under colonial and nationalist ideologies, *tawaifs* were seen as moral suspects and cultural threats. With the decline of princely courts and the growing changes in the patronage system, *tawaifs* were systematically marginalised. At such a turbulent time the arrival of the gramophone provided a new aesthetic space requiring singers like Gauhar to condense their art form to meet the requirements of the commercial format of the new medium, thus redefining performance as a form of gendered labour and self-assertion within the rapidly shifting cultural landscape of the country. The paper focuses on the advent of gramophone technology in modern India as a transformative force in cultural production and its first female singing star, Gauhar Jaan, who like countless *tawaifs* would have been erased from cultural memory had she not strategically engaged with this new medium. The paper argues that her engagement with this new technology was both a form of gendered and artistic labour and also an act of resistance against the erasure, growing marginalisation of her community and the resultant economic vulnerability. The gramophone not only democratised classical music, extending it beyond the royal courts of kings and nawabs, but it also enabled singers like Gauhar Jaan to enter the



‘respectable’ domains of the Indian middle and upper middle class, which had historically sought to erase them in an effort to sanitise the culture of the new emerging nation.

Before they were labelled under the misleading and homogenising term ‘prostitute’, courtesans were some of the first women performers in India. They held a unique status that was markedly distinct from the ‘respectable’ women confined within domesticity and seclusion. In her article “Courtesan Culture in India: The Transition from the Devdasi to the *Tawaif* or Boijee”, Mekhala Sengupta writes, “Courtesans, freed from domestic conventions, were unarguably the first specialists in the art of winning friends and influencing people. It was not just charm, but entertainment and persuasion” (Sengupta 125). Their role, interestingly, was not limited to performance alone, rather they played a pivotal role in shaping cultural trends, negotiating gendered boundaries, and acquiring political and artistic influence. Their *kothas* or salons served as centres of refinement and education, where elite young men learned etiquette, poetry, and music. The word ‘*tawaif*’, now used pejoratively to mean ‘prostitute’, is in fact a historically open-ended term encompassing a wide range of professional female performers – from affluent courtesans in royal harems to impoverished sex workers at the city’s margins. This semantic ambiguity has contributed to the conflation of *tawaifs* with terms such as *baiji*, *takahe*, *nachni*, and *randi*, each carrying its own socio-cultural baggage. Yet historical accounts, especially of Lucknow, reveal that many *tawaifs* were highly trained artists working in reputable *kothas*, often under the guidance of *chaudhrayans* (chief courtesans). These spaces functioned not simply as performance venues, but as sites of cultural labour, where music, poetry, dance, and etiquette were not only practised but taught. While analysing the history of *tawaifs* in Lucknow, Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her book *The Making of Colonial Lucknow* depicts the *tawaifs* as some of the wealthiest women in Lucknow, enjoying considerable political and economic power. Their ability to command elite patronage illustrates the complex intersection of art, gender, and power in pre-colonial India. Pointing to the extensive training behind this charm which is often overlooked, she notes, “They were extensively trained from an early age (seven or eight years old) to dance, sing, converse, amuse, and excel in the exaggerated politeness for which Lucknow had acquired a special reputation during the *nawabi*. The more distinctive the dress, jewels, manners, and food served in the house the greater its respectability among the local patrons.” (Oldenburg 135)

Prior to the British annexation of Lucknow in 1856, such *kothas* played a central role in the city’s intellectual and artistic life. Oral histories suggest that prominent musicians and poets gathered in these salons, and elite families sent their sons to *tawaifs* for training in civility, aesthetics and refinement. This positioning of the *tawaif* as a cultural labourer complicates her marginalisation. While her body was the site through which she worked – through voice, movement, and presence – it was also the site of regulation and stigma. Even as she exercised skill, discipline, and artistic agency, her body was simultaneously marked as deviant or excessive in public discourse. Vikram Sampath quotes the nineteenth century reformer Keshab Chandra Sen’s virulent attack on nautch-girls:

Hell is in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or willful victims that fall in her way. Her blandishments are India’s ruin. Alas! Her smile is India’s death. (Sampath 186)

The hyper-visibility of the *tawaif*, as a performer, teacher, and a public woman became the source of her cultural strength as well as the mechanism of her marginalisation.

The prominence of courtesans as public women, however, also drew attention to their embodied presence, which was central to both their authority and their marginalisation. Noted feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz argues that the female body is not merely a biological fact but a cultural text, inscribed with social



meaning, particularly around sexuality and morality. In the colonial Indian context, the courtesan's body was marked simultaneously as a site of aesthetic refinement and moral anxiety. The embodied presence of the *tawaif*, her singing, dancing, stylised movements and sensuality, seen as uncontrollable, excessive, and intimately tied to her sexuality, thereby threatening the cultural 'purity' of an emerging independent nation-state. Her hyper-visible and hyper-audible body defied the norms of feminist respectability by occupying the public space and exercising erotic and artistic agency. The *tawiaf's* body thus became not just an object of desire, but a dynamic and resistant medium through which cultural authority was both performed and asserted.

With the onset of British colonial rule, there was a marked shift in how society perceived the *tawaiifs*. Women who had once been celebrated as cultural assets under *Nawabi* rule began to be seen as cultural threats with the rise of Victorian morality. They started to be seen as symbols of moral laxity and excess that needed to be controlled. The British, unable and unwilling to appreciate the artistic and intellectual sophistication of the *tawaiif*, increasingly reduced her role to that of a necessary social evil and a speedy solution to the sexual needs of colonial soldiers. The exile of Wajid Ali Shah in 1856 marked the loss of the *tawaiif's* chief patron, triggering the rapid erosion of their social standing. With the collapse of courtly culture, the profession grew more competitive and precarious. The new patrons—members of the colonial ruling class and military personnel—had neither the linguistic proficiency to understand the polished Urdu of the salons nor the aesthetic training to appreciate the subtleties of the nautch. As a result, the refined courtesan was gradually supplanted by the brothel-based sex-worker, more attuned to the demands of the colonial economy and its simplified desires. This decline was accompanied by a growing obsession with regulating her body. The Cantonment Act of 1864 and the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1865 institutionalised the surveillance and control of women's bodies in the name of public health and social order. These laws required the *tawaiifs* to be registered, medically examined, and classified according to the "facilities" they offered—transforming their bodies into biopolitical objects, to be scrutinised, inspected, and disciplined. The subject became a site of sensational public debate. Newspapers debated how best to identify and regulate "dangerous" women in order to protect the respectability of "innocent men". The very women who had symbolised cultural prestige just a decade earlier were now reduced to routes of disease and moral corruption. The colonial regulation of the *tawaiif's* bodies became the locus for broader anxieties about degeneracy, control, and imperial authority.

One of the central projects of the nineteenth-century social reform movement, particularly in Bengal, was the construction of the *bhadramahila*—the respectable, domesticated middle-class housewife. This figure became emblematic of national virtue and was constructed in direct opposition to a range of women who did not conform to this emerging moral order: female performers, artists, Vaishnava poets, singers, and most notably, the *tawaiif*. As the boundaries of respectability were being redrawn, such women were actively delegitimised and pushed to the margins of society. The ideal *bhadramahila* was defined through her purity, chastity, and special fixed position within the domain of the domestic, whereas the *tawaiif*—with her artistic presence, sexual agency, and mobility—came to embody the dangerous and the impure 'other'. This contrast between the two figures was not merely moral but deeply tied to the gendered construction of the nation itself. Partha Chatterjee, in his influential reading of nationalist thought, observes:

It (nationalism) related the question of the political independence of the nation to virtually every aspect of material and spiritual life of the people... applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day to day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. The world...is typically the domain of the male. The home in



its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world- and woman is its representation. (Chatterjee 624)

This division placed the *tawaifs* in an acutely precarious position. Their involvement in art forms, once central to elite culture, now marked them as symbols of moral excess and cultural degeneration. The closing years of the nineteenth century in India witnessed several anti-nautch movements driven by Christian missionaries and British Anglicists like Miss Tennant, who saw it as their divine mission to cleanse Indian society of its growing moral degeneration. The first law banning *devdasis* from temple services and public dance performances was issued by the Mysore Government in 1909. In north India reformist groups like Punjab Purity Association (Lahore) and Social Service League (Bombay) spearheaded the anti-nautch campaign targeting the *tawaifs*. Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar played a major role in reforming Hindustani music, establishing formal notation systems, and removing erotic themes from classical compositions. Interestingly, Bhatkhande proposed the creation of a *tawaif* school to rehabilitate these women and to reintegrate them into the cultural mainstream. However, when some *tawaifs* expressed interest in joining the school as teachers in order to earn an honest living, their proposal fell on deaf ears. Vikram Sampath notes this in his biography of Gauhar Jaan:

Paluskar had established the first modern music school of North Indian music known as the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Lahore as early as 1901. This school was open to all, and was structured along the lines of the numerous missionary-run English schools which had been set up in India in the later half of the 19th century. Bhatkhande's '*Tawaif* School' was an attempt to bring the *tawaifs* into the mainstream. It was ironic that the custodians and practitioners of the art form for generation needed a modern school of this kind to hone their skills! And surprisingly, *tawaifs* like Nanuan and Bachchuan wrote letters to Bhatkhande requesting him to appoint them as teachers in this new school, so that they could earn an honest living. Their appeals fell on Bhatkhande's deaf ears. (Sampath 190)

In the same book he also records how *tawaifs* have been repeatedly declined any active participation in the freedom struggle of India and efforts were made to ensure their removal from public lives:

In 1921 when the *tawaif* community organized a meeting and offered to be a part of Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, Gandhiji is reported to have unequivocally rejected this 'obscene' proposal. The discrimination continued even after Independence. The Home Ministry under the new Home Minister Sardar Patel issued stringent orders to All India Radio not to permit 'those women whose public lives were a public scandal' to enter their studios! (Sampath 190)

The decline is not merely statistical but symptomatic of a larger cultural reorganisation, wherein the performing woman was no longer seen as a custodian of tradition but as a hinderance to the moral regeneration of the nation. In this newly emerging nation, the *tawaif* became a spectral figure, hyper-visible and yet increasingly silenced. Moreover, the everyday violence faced by *tawaifs*, from medical surveillance to police harassment, reveals the layered nature of their marginalisation. Policemen, emboldened by authority and frustrated by their own limited access to these women, often enacted a form of retaliatory violence rooted in class resentment, gendered power, and colonial entitlement. Thus, the once-celebrated courtesan was transformed into a regulatable and violable body, stripped of her cultural labour and reframed as a public nuisance. Yet even in this moment of decline, the figure of the *tawaif* retained traces of her former agency. Her resistance, whether through negotiation, evasion, or appeals to local government, suggests that she was not merely a passive victim but engaged in active resistance in order to survive.



In 1856 following the exile of Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta, then the capital of British India, the city emerged as a new cultural nucleus, especially for the performing artists. However, this transition also marked a significant shift in patterns of patronage and audience. The *kotha*, once sustained by princely courts and royal patronage, now catered increasingly to the rising urban elite, including the aristocracy and upper middle class, whose tastes and expectations were notably different from those of the Nawabi patrons. Performances gradually moved beyond the traditional space of the *kotha*, adapting to more public and semi-public occasions such as Durga Puja celebrations, weddings and private soirees etc. In this evolving cultural landscape, Bengal became home to several notable *tawaifs*, the most iconic among them being Gauhar Jaan. As a historically prominent performer, Gauhar Jaan serves as a powerful case study of resistance against cultural erasure. She, like a few other high class *baijis* of her time, appeared at a critical juncture of India's cultural history and asserted her presence at a time when the entire *tawaif* community was being marginalised as obscene.

Born in Azamgarh, she arrived in Calcutta with her mother at a young age, determined to carve out an independent artistic career. As she matured, Gauhar received rigorous training in both music and dance under some of the finest *gurus* of the time including Bindadin Maharaj, a stalwart of the Lucknow gharana of Kathak, and Bhaiyya Ganpat Rao, a celebrated vocalist. Her training and talent positioned her as one of the earliest and most successful women performers to negotiate the changing dynamics of performance, class, and public visibility in colonial India. Placed historically within this hostile environment, Gauhar Jaan stands out as a pioneering figure and one of those female artists, who continually reinvented her art and identity as a performer to survive in the changing market economy of her time. As the first singing star of colonial India her artistic career not only redefined the possibilities for women performers but also marked a critical shift in the modes of cultural production in colonial India.

Trained in the vibrant cultural milieu of Benares and Lucknow, Gauhar was fluent in multiple languages and highly skilled in Hindustani classical forms such as *khayal*, *dadra*, and *thumri*. She began her initial training at Benares under the guidance of Pandit Bechoo Mishra before relocating to Calcutta in 1883. In Calcutta she underwent diverse musical training in different forms of music in order to establish a place of her own in the cultural market of Bengal, especially in the court of Wajid Ali Shah. Since music was not just an art form but also a form of labour to survive in the highly competitive market economy, Malkaa Jann, her mother, ensured that she received the best training. Gauhar trained under Bindadin Maharaj, one of the most important figures in the development of *thumri* and *Kathak* in northern India. Zohra Bai of Agra was another acclaimed student of Bindadin Maharaj at that time. Gauhar took lessons in Bengali songs from the famous Bamacharan Bhattacharya, a distinguished singer at the court of Wajid Ali Shah and also the court singer of the Maharaja of Panchkot. She learnt *kirtan* from Ramesh Chandra Das Babaji. Srijanbai trained her in the more serious and contemplative genre of *Dhrupad Dhamar*. One Mrs. De Silva was appointed to teach her English while her mother, Malka Jaan, personally instructed her in Urdu, Persian, and the art of composing verse. As a result, Gauhar soon became proficient in reading, writing, and singing in several languages including Hindustani, Bengali, English, and French. Her move to Calcutta, the cultural and political heart of British India, situated her at the intersection of older performance traditions and emerging technologies of mass reproduction.

It was during this critical juncture that Fred Gaisberg led the first commercial recording expedition in India, arriving in Calcutta in October 1902. However, he was not alone, he brought with him not only portable recording equipment, but also a degree of cultural confusion. The early gramophone recordings were in fact quite arbitrary in nature, ranging from *thumris* to comic dialogues, depending more on the availability of the artists than the quality or coherence of the content. The gramophone first arrived in India as a marvel of Western technology during the early twentieth century. It was the first medium, predating



both cinema and radio, that transformed Hindustani classical music into a form of mass media. Interestingly, its arrival coincided with the collapse of royal patronage and the emergence of an urban middle class in colonial India. This period witnessed a significant spatial and institutional shift in the performance of classical music as it moved from royal courts to urban theatres and recording studios. As the urban bourgeoisie replaced the *nawabs* and *maharajas*, as primary patrons of the arts, musicians found themselves navigating the precipitous decline of princely support and the precarity of newly emerging commercial markets. Gerry Farrel notes in his article, *The Early Days of the Gramophone Industry in India*, "Within the span of one generation, Indian musicians could look back to a vanishing world of princely patronage and forward to a new commercial environment fraught with economic and artistic uncertainty." (Farrel 32) Amlan Das Gupta in his article titled, "Women and Music: The Case of North India", notes,

Among the most obvious effects of recording, one was to alter radically the patterns of circulation and dissemination of music. Now purchasable as a commodity, music associated with definite and specially value-laden social loci - like the *darbar*, the *mehfil*, the *kotha*, the theatre - can be transferred into the confines of domestic privacy, and acquires the near-miraculous power of reproducibility, thus crossing the boundary of what Jacques Attali has called the domain of representation to that of repetition. (Das Gupta 12)

The first two artists to record in Calcutta were Soshi Mukhi and Fani Bala, two nautch girls from the Classic Theatre, whom Gaisberg later dismissed for their "miserable voices". Yet, if we trace the early years of the gramophone in India, the prominence of women singers becomes unmistakably clear. Of the 553 recordings made in 1902, around 230 featured women singers. Between 1906 and 1907 around 35 women recorded classical music, a significant number considering the mood of the period and the constraints put on women performers. Unlike the male singers who often remained confined to *gharana* based traditions, women performers frequently traversed multiple genres including *thumri*, *dadra*, *khayal*, *dhrupad*, *tappa*, and many more, thereby offering both stylistic variety and artistic fluidity. The reason behind the diversity was rooted in economics of learning and survival. Women, unlike men, were not bound by *gharana* secrecy and hereditary restrictions, their learning was more transactional and flexible: they paid for their learning and often hired the *sarangi* players or male *ustads* to teach them. For many of these women, music was not only a sacred tradition but a means of economic survival and personal independence. Naturally, recording on the gramophone was embraced not just as a technological novelty but as a potential source of economic gain and fame, especially during a time of socio-cultural instability and decline of older forms of patronage. The popularity of female voices was so pronounced that male singers started imitating feminine tonal qualities. The only popular male artist of the time was Peara Saheb, whose appeal lay in his feminine voice. Apart from Gauhar Jaan there were several other women who made their mark through early gramophone recordings including, Oomda Jaan of Hyderabad, Janki Bai Chhappanchhuri, and Banni Jaan of Meerut.

Gaisberg first met Gauhar Jaan, at the house of a wealthy babu. With her exceptional voice range and proficiency of singing in as many as twenty languages, Gauhar embodied the very excellence Gaisberg sought. With her training under the tutelage of the renowned Bhaiya Saheb, son of the Maharaja of Gwalior, she was already renowned as a representative of the elite musical tradition of the country. With her wide range of repertoire that included *thumri*, *khayal*, *dhrupad*, and *ghazals*, Gauhar was also flamboyant, media aware and commercially savvy. Gaisberg writes, "She knew her market value as we found to our cost when we negotiated with her" (Farrel 36) She demanded a remarkable 3000 rupees per recording, a fee that the Gramophone and Typewriter Company (GTL) readily accepted, which was a testament to her popularity and negotiating skills. However, in adapting her music to the demands of the gramophone format, she had to shorten each composition to a mere three minutes to fit onto the recording discs, a constraint that offended many male *ustads* of her time, who saw this condensation as a violation of classical norms. The transition



from the intimate, affective space of the kotha to the impersonal, disembodied circulation of the gramophone discs was far from neutral. It marked a profound shift from embodied, pedagogical performance to commodified production, where the artist's presence could be consumed without the contextual knowledge of her labour or artistic lineage. While Gauhar's popularity soared through this new medium, her identity as a *tawaif* simultaneously excluded her from the nationalist narratives that later shaped Indian classical music's postcolonial respectability. As nationalist reformers sought to recast music as a morally purified, upper-caste pursuit, the contributions of courtesans like Gauhar were systematically effaced, even as their repertoires were absorbed into institutionalised pedagogy. When she recorded her voice in 1902, she was not only adapting to a new technological format, she was asserting her claim in a rapidly transforming cultural economy. Her concluding declaration after each recorded song, "My name is Gauhar Jaan", was more than an audio signature; it was an assertion of authorship, agency, and presence at a time when women's creative contributions in public domains were increasingly being denied.

The gramophone then did more than modernise Indian classical music; it redefined the landscape of performance and provided an alternative performing space to *tawaifs*, particularly Gauhar Jaan. Far from being a technological marvel, the gramophone offered a new space for artistic labour and subtle resistance. It demanded a different kind of performance: condensed, reproductive and commodified, but it also provided a platform for visibility at a time when traditional avenues were crumbling down. For a courtesan like Gauhar Jaan, the gramophone was not just a commercial venture, it was an act of reclamation, a way to reassert presence in a cultural field that was rapidly narrowing under the pressure of respectability politics and colonial modernity. Her engagement with the medium was both gendered labour and a subtle defiance, an assertion of artistic authorship, artistry and survival in the face of strategic erasure. In an era when the entire patronage system was disintegrating and *tawaifs* were perceived as moral threats, the gramophone offered them economic sustenance and renewed cultural recognition.

To foreground Gauhar Jaan here, then, is not simply to recover a forgotten icon; it is to reframe our understanding of cultural production in colonial India. Her career unsettles the binaries of public/private, sacred/profane, and respectable/immoral that came to dominate nationalist imaginaries. Through her gramophone recordings, Gauhar entered the 'respectable' domains of society which had long excluded women like her. As a *tawaif*, she inhabited a precarious space- celebrated for her talent yet marginalised by the very discourse that consumed her art. Her recordings endure as sonic archives of a feminised, embodied, and affective knowledge system that colonial modernity sought to silence. In restoring her place in history, we do more than honouring a single artist, we begin to see the *tawaif* not as a relic of the past, but as a cultural labourer whose voice shaped the very soundscape of modern India.

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Countering the Spectacle: The Sundarban Tiger beyond Binaries in Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini*

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the dominant representational regimes that spectacularise the Sundarban tiger as either a ferocious predator, an endangered icon, or a commodified emblem of conservation. Drawing on Guy Debord's notion of spectacle and Barbara Harlow's theorisation of resistance literature, the study explores how Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* subverts these reductive imaginaries. Through intimate portrayals of human-nonhuman entanglements, especially in the relationships between Adharbabu, Kajla, and the tiger, the narrative resists anthropocentric binaries such as human/animal, wild/domestic, and predator/protector. By reimagining the tiger as a being imbued with memory, myth, and affect, the novel offers a de-spectacularised, ethically attuned vision of ecological coexistence rooted in embodied histories and regional specificity.

Keywords- Binary, human-nonhuman, resistance, spectacle, sundarban,

In contemporary ecological and cultural discourses, the Sundarban tiger has come to embody a set of dominant representational regimes, often reduced to the spectacle of wilderness, a marker of danger, or a commodified symbol of conservation. Whether showcased as the flagship species of eco-tourism campaigns, feared as a ruthless predator, or fetishised as an endangered being requiring human intervention, the tiger's identity is continually shaped by narratives that serve institutional, governmental, and capitalist interests. As Guy Debord, in his *The Society of the Spectacle*, asserts, "...life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly experienced has been replaced with its representation in the form of images" (16). The Sundarban tiger, in this sense, is not merely an ecological being but a constructed figure, an image which is staged, commodified, and consumed in public imaginaries.

Against this backdrop of spectacularisation and reduction, Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* emerges as a narrative of resistance. The novel counters these dominant discourses by restoring agency, ambiguity, and vitality to the figure of the tiger and the interwoven life-worlds of the Sundarbans. In *Gang Baghini*, the tiger is not merely an emblem of danger or ecological fragility; rather, it is a being with affect, desire, memory, and mythic resonance. The novel resists the objectification of the tiger and challenges how human-nonhuman relations are structured by power, violence, and containment. The narrative raises a 'systematic and concerted challenge to the imposed chronology of what Frederic Jameson has called "master narratives" (Harlow 78). Hossen deconstructs the image of the tiger as spectacle and instead crafts it as a symbol of entangled resistance: resistance against the spectacularisation of the tiger.

Through its textured character portrayals, particularly the evolving relationships between Adharbabu, Kajla, and the tiger, the novel reconfigures both human and nonhuman subjectivities. It complicates the rigid binaries of human/animal, predator/protector, and wild/domesticated, offering instead a layered intersection of ecological, psychological, and gendered consciousness. The tiger becomes not only a nonhuman actor but also a mirror for human trauma, desire, and exile, especially in the shadow of partition and personal displacement. Ultimately, *Gang Baghini* asserts that resistance to spectacle is not only



aesthetic or symbolic but also ethical, embodied, and ecological, unfolding through myth, memory, desire, and wounded belonging.

Annu Jalais, in her “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger”, critically examines the representations of tigers in recent history, and draws a crucial distinction between the globalised notion of the “cosmopolitan tiger” and the locally situated “Sundarbans tiger”. She argues that the cosmopolitan tiger, often valorised by urban conservationist narratives and global wildlife discourses, becomes emblematic of Western-dominated environmental concerns. In contrast, the lived realities of those who coexist with tigers in places like the Sundarbans are rendered secondary. Through a comparative analysis of colonial and postcolonial representations, Jalais demonstrates how even depictions of wild animals are deeply imbricated in structures of power. Drawing on Philippe Descola’s theorisation of the multiplicity of ontologies surrounding “nature,” she shows how dominant frameworks of conservation marginalise alternative ways of relating to and understanding nonhuman life. The ‘cosmopolitan’ view, she contends, perpetuates an unequal and coercive relationship between those who consume mediated images of the tiger and those who must negotiate its physical presence daily. Thus, her work powerfully critiques the epistemic violence embedded in global environmental imaginaries and urges a rethinking of conservation ethics that accounts for plural ontologies and local knowledge systems (31-38).

Animals hold a profound and enduring presence in Bengali literature, as their representations are deeply embedded in the region’s cultural and narrative traditions. Though both the mainstream Bengali literature and the literary expressions emerging from the Sundarbans fall under the broader category of Bengali writing, the latter remains largely peripheral and underrepresented. The literature of the Sundarbans is shaped not only by aesthetic trends of mainstream Bengali literature but also by the socio-economic realities and ecological specificities of the region.

The Sundarbans, the world’s largest mangrove forest and one of the richest in biodiversity, is home to species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger, Javan Rhino, wild buffalo, barasingha, leopards, saltwater crocodiles, and fishing cats, alongside a wide variety of avian life. Coexisting with them are over four million people whose livelihoods (woodcutting, honey collection, fishing) are deeply entangled with this non-human environment. This intricate entanglement has given rise to a body of literature where animal presence is more frequent and symbolically potent than in the mainstream Bengali literature. From Manoj Basu’s *Joljāngol* (1941) and *Bon Kete Basat* (1951) to Avijit Sengupta’s *Kuhakjatra*, these reflect the daily struggles, resilience, and emotional landscapes of the Sundarbans’ inhabitants, while simultaneously capturing their interdependence with the region’s flora and fauna.

Within this context, Soharab Hossen’s *Gang Baghini* stands out as a compelling narrative that reimagines the human-animal relationship beyond surface-level coexistence. Set against the Sundarbans’ harsh and unpredictable terrain, *Gang Baghini* centers the lives of woodcutters, honey collectors, and coast guards, figures marked by vulnerability and resistance. Through the interplay of human desire, ranging from intimate longing to primal instincts, and the persistent presence of non-human beings, Hossen blurs the lines between the real, the mythical, and the psychological. Importantly, *Gang Baghini* can also be read as an act of resistance against dominant representations of the Sundarbans tiger, often framed within global conservation discourse as either a spectacular object of ecotourism, a menacing killer, or an endangered species in need of protection. By reconfiguring the tiger as a figure of shared vulnerability, psychological mirroring, and migratory longing, Hossen resists the flattening effects of such cosmopolitan, external narratives. In doing so, the novel “provides a more developed historical analysis of the circumstances of economic, political, and cultural domination and repression” (Harlow 78). It opens up a space for an



alternative ethics, one that reclaims the agency of both human and non-human inhabitants of the Sundarbans against imposed imaginaries and structural marginalisations.

Helen Tiffin, in *Reimagining Communities*, explores how “flora and fauna” often become metonymic of the nation-state, functioning as symbolic representations of national identity and belonging. As she observes, “the koala and the kangaroo in Australia, the beaver and the maple leaf in Canada” exemplify this symbolic process (Tiffin 23). A similar dynamic is at work in the Sundarbans, where the Royal Bengal Tiger has come to stand as the dominant metonym of the region, projected as its singular emblem across global conservation, tourism, and ecological narratives. However, this symbolic elevation often comes at the cost of rendering invisible the lived realities of the people who inhabit the Sundarbans, whose entangled lives with the forest are marginalised within this narrow, spectacular framing. The colonial-era prestige associated with hunting and killing tigers has, in contemporary times, been replaced by the prestige of conserving and protecting them. Today, the tiger is expected not only to embody its historical epithet of the “royal beast” but also to fulfill its role as the national animal and a global icon of wildlife conservation, carrying the burden of both national pride and cosmopolitan environmental branding. Moreover, in recent years, the expansion of travel economies, facilitated by government-led promotion of tourism in the Sundarbans, has contributed to the increasing commodification of the region and its non-human inhabitants, particularly tigers. In contrast, *Gang Baghini* offers a markedly different narrative that actively resists the instrumentalisation and spectacularisation of the tiger as a national or ecological symbol. It challenges dominant discourses that reduce animals to symbols of national pride, tourist attractions, or conservation icons. Instead, *Gang Baghini* gestures toward a relational ontology in which species boundaries are porous, and interdependence is not structured by domination or utility but by shared precarity, mutual recognition, and psychic resonance. In doing so, the novel resists both anthropocentric narratives and the commodifying gaze of global conservation, offering a counter-discourse rooted in embodied experience, memory, and vulnerability.

In the beginning of *Gang Baghini*, Coast Guard officer Adhar Roy reflects on the quiet beauty of Kolos Dwip: “Kolos camp is giving a dreamy appearance. It is beautiful too” (Hossen 16).¹ Though stationed there for five years, his initial understanding of the Sundarbans, shaped by geography textbooks, saw it only as a vast, untamed terrain. This reductive view begins to shift as he gradually develops an embodied connection with the land. One evening, he perceives the delta anew: “The waters of rivers, rivulets, tributaries, and estuaries caress the small deltas with affection... marked by swampy regions known as bada... small, forested delta[s]” (Hossen 16). This transformation underscores how dominant representations often exoticise the Sundarbans through the Royal Bengal Tiger or depict it as inhospitable, obscuring its rich ecological and cultural life. Roy’s perceptual shift illustrates the value of a situated, affective epistemology rooted in proximity and lived experience. Just like a local once told Annu Jalais, “Wait till you have seen the forest and understood its ways,” and so too does Adharbabu come to “grasp the forest’s beauty and unique geography through witnessing and understanding its ways” (Jalais 9).

In the opening chapter of *Gang Baghini*, a conversation between Haladhar and Manikhar reveals how human presence in the Sundarbans poses a greater threat than non-human animals. When told of river pirates, allegedly from Thailand, Haladhar asks if they are “jantunamanush” (animal or human), and upon hearing they are human, he asserts that it is the humans in the *bada* (swampy forest) who are truly dangerous (Hossen 14). Unlike animals, they are unpredictable and destructive. Similarly, when fisherwomen Kajla and Shankari, identifying as *Sabare*, are asked by Adhar Babu if they fear fishing in predator-infested rivers like the Thakuran or Matla, they respond that their real fear lies not in tigers or crocodiles but in the exploitative *managers* who buy their fish at half the value. As they say, they are “snatching food from the mouths of tigers and crocodiles,” yet it is the human economic predators who inflict the deepest harm (Hossen 21). For the



Sabare, the real “tigers” are not in the forest but within the human economic structure, embodied by the oppressive intermediaries who perpetuate systemic exploitation. These scenes destabilise the binary between the human and the animal, foregrounding a complex interplay of animality and humanity where the moral hierarchy is reversed: it is the humans who exhibit predatory behavior, while the non-human animals become part of a larger, interdependent ecology.

During his stay on Kalas Dwip, Adhar Roy learns from local woodcutters that Kajla has begun to identify herself with *Bonbibi*, enacting the goddess's persona in both ritual and daily life. Kajla's self-impersonation of the goddess invites a feminist reading of resistance and agency. Positioned in a precarious socio-economic landscape and having been objectified by multiple male figures, forest officers, navy personnel, and boatmen, Kajla's embodiment of *Bonbibi* represents a strategic reclamation of spiritual and social authority. In taking on the figure of the divine protector, she transcends her vulnerable position as a widow and *Sabare* woman, asserting both bodily autonomy and moral power within a deeply patriarchal context. Her transformation foregrounds a subaltern feminist politics, wherein divinity becomes a mode of self-empowerment and collective protection in the face of systemic gendered exploitation.

Adhar Babu, who had once attempted to initiate a relationship with Kajla five years prior, seeks to rekindle that connection. However, Kajla firmly resists his advances, asserting that she is no longer “just a woman” -she is something beyond. She declares that she is, at times, *Bonbibi*, the revered forest goddess of the Sundarbans, and at other times, a tigress:

-You are making a mistake again, Kajla whispers, I am not just a woman.

-Then what are you more?

-I am Bonbibi. Also...!

-Also what?

-Now I am a tigress too. (Hossen 34)

...

-You must ease your mind before attempting to take root anywhere, Babu.

-I know...

-Then why are there signs of lust in your eyes? Ease your mind (Hossen 35).

This self-identification is deeply significant, especially within the cultural mythology of the region, where the figure of the tiger is traditionally associated with the demon king Dakshin Rai, the adversary whom *Bonbibi* defeats to protect the forest-dwelling communities.

Kajla's dual identification with both *Bonbibi* and the tigress complicates the conventional binary of divine protector and demonic predator. Her appropriation of both roles signals not merely a personal strategy for survival or resistance against male aggression, but a more profound reconfiguration of local mythologies and gendered power. By embodying both the sacred and the feared, the maternal and the feral, human and non-human, Kajla destabilises the symbolic order that rigidly separates protector from threat,



human from animal, and human from animal. As the narrative unfolds, her figure gestures toward a subversive rewriting of spiritual and ecological agency, one that challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric structures alike.

The metaphor of “taking root” functions as a potent symbol of settlement and intimacy within the narrative, particularly in the interaction between Adhar Babu and Kajla. While Adhar expresses a desire to establish a relationship, both emotional and corporeal, Kajla resists, invoking the cosmology of the *badabon* (swampy forest) region. She reminds him that in the cultural belief system of the Sundarbans, rooting oneself in a human body requires a ritualistic acknowledgment of *Bonbibibi*, the forest goddess, followed by the symbolic taming of the tigress. Only through the completion of these acts, she suggests, can one hope to carve a “river terrace”, a metaphoric space of emotional anchoring, within the heart of another. (Hossen 36)

Kajla’s articulation complicates normative understandings of love and desire by framing them within a mytho-ecological ontology. When he asks what it takes to create such a river terrace in a woman’s heart, she offers a striking image: ‘the death of a hundred tigers – tigers driven by unfulfilled, frenzied desire. According to her, the landscape of the Sundarbans – the small deltas, the terraces, the shifting riverbeds – emerges from the residue of such failed mating attempts’, suggesting that the very geography of the region is shaped by the embodied pain of desire denied (Hossen 35).

This passage invites a profound symbolic reading, where human longing, animal instinct, and the natural world are entwined in a shared ecology of affect. Kajla collapses the boundaries between human and non-human, between cultural mythology and physical geography. The tigress, here, is not merely an animal but an extension of female agency and carnal resistance; the tiger becomes a figure of masculine aggression and frustrated desire. Through this lens, desire is no longer a private, internalised phenomenon; it becomes material, shaping not only relationships but also the landscape itself.

Psychologically, this narrative blurs the division between human consciousness and animal instinct, suggesting that emotions like lust, pain, and longing are trans-species energies that leave traces on both the body and the earth. Ecologically, the story affirms an animistic worldview where the land is not inert but is born of, and continues to bear, the imprint of interspecies interactions. Kajla moves beyond the spectacle of the ‘cosmopolitan tiger’ which ‘becomes a badge of one’s own cosmopolitanism, because it is seen as moving beyond the parochialism of one’s location, which necessarily rests within the confines of urbanity and one’s nation-state’ (Jalais 10). Rather, she relates to ‘a more local tiger, their tiger’ (Jalais 10).

Culturally, Kajla’s speech embodies a subaltern feminist cosmology, where women’s bodies are not passive sites of male desire but terrains that demand reverence, ritual, and reciprocity before access. In a deeply symbolic moment in the narrative, Kajla informs Adhar Babu that a young tigress has entered her mating season and is releasing the scent of *atap chāl* (sunned rice) to attract a mate, a scent that evokes both fertility and longing in the cultural imagination of the Sundarbans. Adhar Babu, at first unsettled by the fragrance, soon realises that it emanates not from the forest alone, but from Kajla herself. This realisation blurs the boundary between human and non-human, between woman and tigress, positioning Kajla as a liminal figure who embodies both feminine subjectivity and animal desire.

Overcome by desire, Adhar attempts to inhabit the role of the tiger, attempting to assert a dominant, corporeal claim over Kajla. Yet his effort to fully inhabit this hybrid identity fails. His desire, though made explicit, is ultimately thwarted, not by force, but by the ecological counter-presence of a real tiger. Kajla interrupts Adhar’s approach by pointing toward an actual tiger swimming across the Raymangal River toward *ChhotoChamot* island – the very space they occupy. The tiger, migrating from the Bangladesh side of



the Sundarbans, is drawn by the same scent of sunned rice, signaling its search for the tigress it associates with that olfactory trace. This mirroring of Adhar's desire in the tiger's movement produces a profound moment of psychological and ecological doubling.

The tiger's presence on the riverbank becomes a potent trigger for Adhar Babu, catalysing a resurgence of long-suppressed memories linked to his own displacement during the Partition of Bengal. As he watches the tiger cross the Raymangal River, moving fluidly between borders, Adhar's mind is transported back to his origins in Faridpur, Bangladesh:

The liberation movement of Bangladesh was at its pinnacle at that time. He started his journey from Dhaka's Jagannath Hall to his ancestral house at Faridpur. That uncertain journey ultimately stopped in this side of Bengal. He could not return to his motherland since then. His heart beats a bit louder still when he remembers these events. (Hossen 54)

This recollection situates Adhar's personal history within the broader trauma of partition and statelessness. The tiger, in this moment, is no longer merely a symbol of ecological wilderness or physical threat; it becomes a psychic mirror, reflecting Adhar's own fractured sense of belonging. What follows is a striking exchange between Adhar and Kajla that probes the limits and absurdities of human-imposed borders:

- Kajla, Is there any partition exists in the case of the tigers?
- What?...
- Is there any barbed wire in the river, Kajla?
- No.
- Is there any 'that side of Bengal' or 'this side of Bengal' division for the tigers?
- I don't know.
- Can the tigers return to their homeland when they come to India? (Hossen 54)

This dialogue exposes the arbitrary and anthropocentric nature of national borders when juxtaposed with non-human movement. The tiger, indifferent to geopolitical demarcations, becomes a figure of ecological continuity, able to traverse what humans divide. Adhar's shift from desiring to be the tiger (as a metaphor of masculine dominance and access to Kajla) to identifying with the tiger (as a fellow exile) signals a profound psychological transformation. No longer projecting upon the animal, he begins to internalise its condition.

This moment establishes a nuanced psychological interconnection between human and non-human. The tiger, moving instinctively across rivers once charged with the violence of partition, evokes in Adhar a deep affective recognition of his own dislocation. The tiger becomes a transgressive figure that collapses the binary between human and animal, native and outsider, self and other. Ecologically, the scene underscores how rivers, fluid, transitory, and borderless, form a habitat that resists the fixity of political cartographies. The Sundarbans, straddling India and Bangladesh, becomes not just a contested geography but also a liminal space where species and subjectivities coexist, migrate, and remember.

This convergence of memory, ecology, and cross-species identification reframes the tiger not merely as a creature of danger or desire, but as a carrier of submerged histories and a catalyst for empathy across species lines. The narrative subtly dislodges anthropocentric assumptions by suggesting that understanding the non-human may require inhabiting their vulnerabilities and disruptions, echoes of one's own.



In the surveillance tower overlooking *Choto Chamot*, a protected deltaic island prohibited to local woodcutters and fishermen, Adhar Babu becomes acutely aware of the presence, or perhaps the phantom scent of sunned rice (*atap chal*). This olfactory signifier, ambiguous in origin (whether emanating from Kajla or an actual tigress on the island), permeates the air and erodes the human-non-human divide. In granting access to his subordinate Bankim and a select number of locals, Adhar orchestrates a site for cross-species encounter and shared belonging.

During this vigil, Adhar confides to Bankim a confession laden with personal and historical resonance: he details the brutal violence of the Partition era politics, the cruelties enacted under the banners of religion and power, the tyranny of Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Awami League machinations, and the abusive governance of military regimes. He recounts his flight from Faridpur, the wrenching separation from his family, the economic precarity of survival in West Bengal, and his eventual acceptance and establishment within the Coast Guard. Yet, he remains unrooted: a citizen by necessity, but never quite home.

In this moment, the tiger's attempted migration across the Raimongal River becomes an uncanny echo of Adhar's own journey. The animal, unimpeded by barbed wire or national demarcations, traverses a boundary that once violently partitioned Adhar's homeland. Psychologically, the tiger's crossing activates Adhar's sublimated trauma, a deep-seated displacement that resurfaces with the animal's efforts. The tiger emerges as both mirror and agent of memory, destabilising the geo-political limitations that entrap the human subject. Adhar's insistence to share the experience with Bankim underscores a posthumanist solidarity: both human and non-human inhabit an ecological-emotional terrain unbounded by artificial constructions.

This convergence of human and animal movement also foregrounds a non-anthropocentric critique: while Adhar laments his own rootlessness, the tiger exemplifies a form of mobility that resists human-imposed immobility. The shared boundary-crossing becomes a meta-narrative about belonging, agency, and the porousness of categories. Adhar's narrative and the tiger's expedition converge to suggest that ecological systems—rivers, wildlife, human collectives—speak in one symbiotic voice, where both human and non-human histories co-author trauma and belonging.

As the tiger attempts to penetrate the interior of *ChhotoChamot*, it is met with the violent obstruction of barbed wire fencing, an emblem of regulated access, conservationist control, and geopolitical containment. The tiger hurls itself repeatedly against this steel threshold, refusing to yield to the territorial logic imposed by human authorities. The narrative unfolds:

In that moment, the tiger makes a mighty leap, as if he will soar over the barbed wires. But his second attempt too ends in failure. Still, the male does not give up. He retreats to the river, emerges once more on the shore, and leaps again. Again, the sharp metal tears into his flesh, and he crashes to the ground. Watching the tiger's repeated defeats, Adhar Babu is overcome with sorrow.

'Is it not possible,' he says, 'to cut a portion of the wire?'

'Have you lost your mind?' Bankim responds in a trembling voice. (Hossen 100)

This moment is not merely about an animal's thwarted crossing; it reveals a profound psychological and ontological identification between Adhar Babu and the tiger. The tiger's struggle with the wire parallels



Adhar Babu's own unhealed trauma of partition, dislocation, and rootlessness. Born in Faridpur, present-day Bangladesh, and forcefully displaced during the Liberation War, Adhar Babu carries the psychic scars of national division. In watching the tiger crash against the barbed boundary, he sees an allegory of his own journey across fractured homelands. His impulse ("Is it not possible to cut some parts of the wire?") is more of a subversive yearning to undo the very structures that have shaped his historical exile. Just like Eduardo Kohn's encounter with jaguars and local beliefs taught him that through such an encounter "we do not remain unchanged. We become something new, a new kind of 'we' perhaps, aligned somehow with that predator..." (Kohn 2), Adhar's encounter with the tiger similarly draws him into a shared desperation, to belong, to root himself, aligning his psyche with that wounded, persistent predator. Here, the barbed wire becomes a metaphorical hinge between human and non-human experience, an interface where trauma, desire, and memory leak across species boundaries. The tiger is not just an ecological subject; it becomes a mirror of Adhar Babu's embodied history, turning the animal into a vector of political critique. Through this entangled interspecies identification, the idea of the nation-state is rendered fragile. The tiger's disregard for human-imposed borders, its natural impulse to move fluidly across rivers and deltas, directly challenges the geopolitical logic of division.

Adhar Babu's longing to dismantle the barbed wire thus emerges not only as a critique of conservationist enclosure but as a symbolic rejection of partitioned identities and bordered sovereignties. His emotional identification with the tiger destabilises the fixity of the human/non-human binary and, simultaneously, the political naturalisation of the nation-state. In this moment, the border ceases to be a line of protection and becomes a wound on the tiger's body, and on Adhar Babu's psyche.

As the narrative unfolds, the tiger's repeated, desperate attempts to leap over the barbed wire and enter the protected terrain of *Choto Chamot* begin to take a severe toll on both its body and on Adhar Babu's psyche. With each failed attempt, the tiger becomes increasingly wounded; its body is ravaged by the metal thorns of human-imposed borders, its flesh torn open, its blood staining the soil of contested territory. The tiger's suffering becomes a brutal manifestation of border violence—violence not just geographical, but ontological.

For Adhar Babu, this is not a distant spectacle. As Descola describes the "social objectivation of nature," the tiger, framed as spectacle, becomes a victim of this objectifying gaze (85). In contrast, Adhar Babu resists such reduction—he does not merely observe the tiger; he internalises its struggle, psychically aligning with its wounded persistence. The tiger's bodily wounds evoke deep psychic resonances, reactivating his own historical trauma of crossing the India-East Pakistan border during the Partition. As he watches the tiger's futile efforts, he sees in its struggle the mirror of his own: the desperation of exile, the violent dislocation of belonging, and the profound alienation that comes with trying to root oneself in a foreign land. Adhar Babu forges a "substance of kinship"² with the tiger through their shared trajectories of displacement, trauma, and spatial belonging, each a subject shaped by the violent legacies of Partition and the liminal geography of the Sundarbans. His reflective gaze upon Partition is thus mediated not through a distanced historical lens, but through an intersubjective entanglement with the non-human other, wherein both human and animal co-inhabit a landscape marked by rupture, exile, and survival. The tiger's bleeding body becomes a site where the human and non-human converge in shared suffering, a communion of loss that transcends species.

This interspecies empathy destabilises Adhar Babu's rational faculties. As his identification with the tiger deepens, so too does his rebellion against the cultural mythologies that have historically structured Sundarban cosmology. In a moment of affective rupture, he abandons reverence for the protector deities like



Banabibi, Shah Janguli, and even Kapil Muni, and instead invokes the exiled figure of Dakshin Rai, the demon-king often demonised as a ferocious tiger in local lore:

-Let it be! - Adhar's voice erupts into a roar, uncannily echoing the tiger's cries across the border- It is the time of Dakshin Rai! His wealth has been stolen by Kapil Muni, Banabibi, and Shah Janguli! Now the time has come to return it to him! Do you understand?
– No, Babu! Kajla whispers in fear (Hossen 126).

Here, Adhar's psychological disintegration is complete. His identification with the tiger transforms from affective sympathy to symbolic possession; he no longer just sees himself in the tiger, he becomes the tiger. The tiger's failure is his failure. The collapse of the tiger, beaten and bloodied in its final attempt, signals the collapse of Adhar's hope, his masculinity, and his tenuous sense of belonging. And yet, the death of the tiger does not pass without cultural inscription. Kajla, rooted in the oral cosmology of the Sundarbans, interprets the tiger's demise as generative – an ecological sacrifice that, in the beliefs of her people, will give rise to new riverbanks and deltaic formations. In the rhythms of Sundarban life, such deaths are not just endings but beginnings – suffering is a precondition for regeneration. Her belief carries the eco-cultural understanding that land itself is shaped through death, pain, and the slow accretion of organic loss.

For Adhar, the tiger's death is not symbolic; it is personal. It is a reiteration of his own futility, his failed desire to root himself in love, in place, and history. The *sunned rice*, the scent that once symbolised intimacy, fertility, and connection, now becomes a phantom trace of what he can never possess. In a final act of psychic collapse, Adhar enacts violence not upon the state, nor upon the tiger, but upon the woman who stood as the interstitial figure between the human and the animal, the goddess and the survivor: Kajla. He shoots her. Though Kajla survives, wounded but alive, the social fabric ruptures irreparably. The group disbands, each individual carrying their own scar, be it on the body, the memory, or the soul. The narrative closes on this melancholic note: an ecological parable where human longing, animal suffering, and geopolitical trauma dissolve into one another.

Kajla's reading of the tiger's death as generative reflects the local epistemology of the Sundarbans, where struggle and sacrifice form the basis of ecological and spiritual regeneration. This stands in sharp contrast to Adhar's modernist melancholia, highlighting a clash of worldviews. Adrian Franklin argues that the "animal world" is not a uniform or universal category but a socially and historically constructed field, laden with moral significance. This field emerges from the human tendency to project social logic, tensions, and complexities onto animals, and is shaped by variables such as class, region, gender, and religion.³ In *Gang Baghini*, this dynamic is evident in the contrasting ways Kajla and Adharbabu relate to the tiger. For Kajla, who has grown up in the Sundarbans and internalised its mythologies, the tiger holds deep cultural and spiritual meaning, rooted in local narratives and rituals. In contrast, Adharbabu's relationship with the tiger is shaped by his personal history, trauma, and displacement, through which the animal becomes a psychic mirror of his own struggle for belonging. These differing modes of meaning-making not only highlight the plurality of human-animal relations but also serve to challenge and resist the dominant urban, middle-class perception of the tiger as merely a spectacle to be consumed or protected.

Also, as Jalais writes that for the local people, the tigers, 'by becoming "cosmopolitan" animals, had become high-status animals and had moved onto the other side of the overarching socioeconomic divide' (13). Moreover, the tiger (especially in Sundarban) has become "the spectacle" which is both "the product and producer of the contemporary form of reality. It is not a supplement to, or decoration of reality, but the very heart of pseudo-reality" (Debord 18). The narrative of *Gang Baghini* resists this spectacle and dissolves the distance between the tigers and the people of the Sundarbans, as seen in Adharbabu's



becoming one with the tiger and Kajla's culturally embedded relationship with the Sundarban tigress, culminating in her symbolic merging with the animal as a means of subverting the patriarchal gaze.

Bruno Latour writes that "ecology movements have sought to position themselves on the political chessboard without redrawing the squares, without redefining the rules of the game, without redesigning the pawns." (69) His argument underscores the necessity of rethinking not only our ecological practices but also the epistemological and ontological foundations that structure our understanding of the non-human world. For Latour, addressing ecological crises, whether local or global, requires "adding a new series of new voices to the discussion, voices that have been inaudible up to now." (69). In the spirit of this call, *Gang Baghini* by Soharab Hossen offers a compelling narrative that foregrounds precisely such voices, those of the Sundarbans' human and non-human inhabitants, whose mutual entanglements have long been silenced or misrepresented in dominant ecological and literary discourses.

The inhabitants of the Sundarbans have historically lived close to the non-human world, developing modes of interrelation that challenge anthropocentric binaries. This deeply relational existence, where the boundaries between humans and animals are porous and continuously negotiated, reveals a form of ecological subjectivity grounded in interdependence, affect, and co-becoming. Within this context, *Gang Baghini* emerges as a narrative of resistance, not only against the material violence of displacement and marginalisation but also against the symbolic violence enacted through the spectacularisation of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Through its refusal to frame the tiger solely as an endangered species, a spectacle for tourism, or a menacing predator, the novel reconfigures its image by embedding it within the psychic, cultural, and material lifeworlds of local people. Adharbabu's psychological identification with the tiger, Kajla's mythological entanglement with the tigress, and the narrative's repeated disruptions of mainstream imaginaries of the forest animal collectively dismantle the sanitised and commodified portrayals that dominate popular and conservationist narratives. In this sense, *Gang Baghini* enacts what Barbara Harlow refers to as the power of resistance narratives:

Resistance narratives go further still in analysing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation. Where symbols and images often fail to elucidate the implicit power structures of a given historical conjuncture, the discourse of narrative is capable of exposing these structures, even, eventually, of realigning them, of redressing the imbalance. (Harlow 85)

In Sundarbans literature, human-animal relations are depicted with remarkable complexity, resisting reductive binaries of predator and prey. In Niranjan Mondal's *Badaboner Padabali* (2019), stories such as *Banabibir Apon Bone* and *Jal Jongol Jibon* show how fishermen and honey collectors, though vulnerable to tiger attacks, continue to revere the animal as 'boromiyan', recognising their own intrusion into its territory. Nikhil Mondal's *AyelarChinri* (2017) reveals how characters identify themselves with prawns, while Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char* (2007) portrays the elderly Dhanapati as embodying an ancient turtle, blurring human-animal distinctions and transforming such identification into a source of communal resilience against state oppression. Similarly, Tapan Bandyopadhyay's *Koti KotiBochorer Pari* (2002) situates human evolution within a broader struggle for survival alongside other species. Across these works, animals are not symbolic ornaments but integral to ecological, cultural, and psychological life. Within this tradition, Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* stands out for reimagining the tiger not as a ferocious predator or endangered icon, but as a mediator of trauma, desire, and resistance within a shared ecology of human and nonhuman vulnerability.



By invoking a rich, culturally embedded, and ecopsychological understanding of human–animal entanglements, Hossen’s *Gang Baghini* resists dominant paradigms of animal studies that universalise experience without attending to regional specificity. Through its blurring of binaries like human/animal, wild/domestic, predator/victim, the novel deconstructs the spectacle of the cosmopolitan tiger and resists its symbolic commodification. In doing so, it invites a more inclusive, situated, and relational framework for animal studies—one that prioritises local epistemologies and challenges the extractive logic of both capitalism and conservationism. Ultimately, the narrative reclaims the Sundarbans tiger as a living presence within a dynamic ecology of shared vulnerability and mutual recognition.

Endnotes

¹All the translations of Soharab Hossen’s *Gang Baghini* are done by the author of this paper unless stated otherwise.

²As mentioned in Radhika Govindrajan’s book *Animal Intimacies*, according to Carsten, “substance of kinship” is not solely derived from biological ties but is cultivated over time through shared practices and entanglements (such as eating from the same soil, drinking from the same rivers, and worshipping the same gods) which together produce a sense of relationality and belonging.

³My interpretation of Annu Jalais’ writing on Adrian Franklin as quoted, “The “animal world” for any society, says Adrian Franklin (1999), is never an indivisible category but a historically constituted and morally loaded field of meanings that derives from the human habit of extending social logic, complexities, and conflicts onto the natural world, and particularly onto animals. The possibilities for differentiations in meaning and practice in human-animal relations, he says, are multiplied everywhere by the social differentiations that stem from class, regional affiliations, gender, and religion. But in this case, whatever their regional affiliations, gender, and religion, the urban middle classes the world over are “united” in a particular perception of tigers and the “protection” of wildlife.’

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“Imagination, Life is Your Creation”: The Politics and Aesthetics of Representations in Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023)

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Abstract: As a popular cultural artefact, Mattel’s Barbie doll has been subjected to discourses scrutinising its ideal plastic beauty. Through its emotional branding, Barbie has implemented an effective strategy to inspire impressionable girlhood into an economically independent and self-sufficient womanhood. From imitating a Caucasian, objectified femininity in a bathing suit to later incorporating ethnic and morphological diversities in its Barbie dolls, Mattel has been critiqued for its consumerist marketing and faux feminist propaganda. In 2023, Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* adapted Mattel’s narrative for the cinema. As a satire, it has reinterpreted Mattel’s branding through its protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie’s journey from Barbie Land to the Real World. The plot highlights patriarchy as the primal issue of its metafictional world, as the Barbies, the Kens and the Humans unite together to resist it. This essay attempts to map the representational politics and aesthetics of Gerwig’s film. *Barbie* assimilates in its aesthetics, the elements of Mattel’s pink Barbie world within its mise-en-scène. In its politics, *Barbie* incorporates divergent discourses. They range from satirising and incorporating matriarchy, lifestyle and token feminism(s) in Barbie Land to mobilising a feminist sisterhood in reclaiming it from Kendom. The research questions will inquire into the characters’ volatile identities and interpersonal relationships, predominantly influenced by patriarchy. The research methodology will incorporate theoretical frameworks from Gender and Sexuality Studies, Film Studies and Cultural Studies to signify *Barbie*’s ambivalent commentary, as a popular culture text, in framing Stereotypical Barbie’s metamorphosis from plasticity to womanhood.

Keywords: Barbie, feminism, human, patriarchy, womanhood.

“That’s My Barbie”: Introduction

Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023) is a cinematic reinterpretation of Mattel’s quintessential Barbie doll that occupied a significant keystone in American popular culture. Marking its 80th anniversary in 2025, Mattel, Inc. was founded by the husbandandwife pair, Ruth and Elliot Handler, along with Harold Matson, in January, 1945. Its business identity as an American toy manufacturer began as the company implemented the leftover materials of its picture frames products, using them to fashion dollhouse furniture, along with the launch of the “Uke-a-Doodle,” a children’s ukulele in 1947 (Funding Universe). In the twenty-first-century, Mattel comprises a comprehensive listing of children’s entertainment simulations ranging from Thomas & Friends, Fisher Price, Hot Wheels to Monster High, American Girl and Barbie (Mattel).

Regarding Barbie, Uncu writes, “this ultra-feminine doll,” has been transformed into “a popular culture icon in the lust of Marilyn Monroe,” characterised by “her long blonde hair,” “fashionable clothing style,” “high heels,” “red lipstick” and “well-proportioned physique” (88). Barbie’s external appearance was inspired by the X-rated German comic strip character, Bild Lilli, whose experiences encompassed maintaining her luxurious lifestyle by associating with sex work (Monteil). Before the doll’s release, in 1958,



Mattel's market research reports highlighted that mothers felt Barbie had "too much of a figure," worried about the doll's portrayed sexualisation on their impressionable daughters (Britannica). Further, in 1963, Mattel sold questionable Barbie accessories, promoting unhealthy psycho-somatic aspirations, such as a book titled *How to Lose Weight* with the advice, "Don't eat" (Monteil). Susan Stern observes that Ruth Handler's business aspirations were motivated by her daughter's proclivity to play with adult paper dolls. She deduced that a doll with a three-dimensional replica of a biological woman's body would assist little girls to "ease their feelings about themselves and their breasts" (qtd. in Tulinski 6). Handler's vision behind Barbie's fabrication followed her intention, "It would be pretty, but not so specifically pretty that girls could not imagine themselves in its place" (Lord 26). On one hand, Barbie was designed as "glamorous and American" (Lord 43), imbibing the fashion world's haute couture emulations, with the initial twenty-one ensembles, inspired by Dior, Balenciaga, Balmain, Carven, Fath, Givenchy, Gres, Heim, Schiaparelli and Saint Lauren (Boy 22). On the other hand, Handler assimilated Barbie's ensembles, mirroring the apparently recognisable representations of the twentieth-century American teenager, ranging from the ballerina outfit and tennis dress to the football game outfit.

According to Frederic Stopp, satire has traditionally "borrowed its ground-plan, parasitically" and "by ironic inversion, from other forms of ordered expression in art or in life" (201). In her film, Gerwig, taking after Stopp's definition, borrows and ironically inverts Mattel's "ordered expression" of a projected culture of lifestyle feminism. By the early 1980s, the politicised sisterhood, intrinsic to the radical feminist movement, gradually lost its significance to a lifestyle-based feminism. This notion of interpretation has rendered feminism more attainable. It has propagated the practice of feminist politics through consumerist choices and appropriated alternations to daily routines, replacing a fundamental destabilisation of patriarchal culture and oppression. It has contextualised individualistic oppression and retaliation as a generalised phenomenon, facile in its emulation and interpretation. During the initial ten years of Barbie's existence, she signified quintessential Caucasian features as a traditionally tall, slender, white young woman with straight, blonde hair. Mattel's production schemes to diversify Barbie's ethnic and professional characteristics can be comprehended as attempts to strengthen its capitalist profits by penetrating multifarious community markets. In 2002, Mattel introduced the first pregnant Barbie, Midge, flaunting a detachable stomach which popped "out a curled-up baby when her belly was opened" (CBS News). As the customers were concerned with the representation of a pregnant doll with their children, Mattel discontinued its production due to the product's substandard sales. In Gerwig's film, this has been satirised, as the narrator muses, "Midge was Barbie's pregnant friend. Let's not show Midge, actually. She was discontinued by Mattel because a pregnant doll is just too weird" (*Barbie* 1:47:47-41).

The introductory montage of Gerwig's film surfaces numerous Barbie models. It frames the Stereotypical Barbie in a bathing suit, the Astronaut Barbie, the Totally Hair Barbie with long blonde hair, the Aerobics Workout Barbie, the Flight Attendant Barbie, amongst others, behind a white background. Gerwig's satire directs itself against Mattel's lifestyle feminism, as the narrator voices:

Yes, Barbie changed everything. Then, she changed it all again... She might have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more. She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything. And this has been reflected back onto the little girls of today in the Real World. Girls can grow into women, who can achieve everything and anything they set their mind to. Thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved (*Barbie* 1:51:11-50:20).



This narration is accompanied by the scene (*Barbie* 1:50:35), portraying girl children of multifarious ethnicities, dressed in the professional makeovers, ranging from that of a gymnast, a singer, a hairdresser to those of a chef and a doctor, who pose beside their accompanying Barbie doll representations. Birkle writes that in 2000 Barbie became President. From the 1970s, she became a Pilot, an Astronaut, a Doctor, a Businesswoman with the accessories of a laptop and a mobile phone. Being a Nurse, a Beach Girl and a Rock Star previously, she incorporated around seventy-five career diversities over the years (260). Mattel's slogan, "We girls can do anything, right Barbie?", for Rand, is as "pseudo rhetorical as Barbie's body is pseudo proportional", because "Barbie can't do everything, and neither can we girls" (198).

While the feminist movement of the 1960s initiated a debate about the concept of femininity represented by Barbie, the Civil Rights Movement, with its strive for racial equality, initiated changes in the toy industry (Birkle 261). Neither Francie, Barbie's black ethnic version, introduced in 1967, nor Barbie's friend, the black Christie, introduced in 1968, were successful. In 1980, Mattel introduced Black Barbie, "the first doll with Afro-style hair". However, she too "appears to have suffered from a low advertising profile and low sales" (Urla and Swedlund 404). More than twenty years of Barbie's white portrayal could not sensitise Mattel's teenage and child consumers to Black ethnicities. Until 1990, the white Barbie doll was the only one to be advertised on television (Debouzy 141). In Gerwig's film, the President is a Black Barbie, who is not compartmentalised in her administrative role in *The Pink House*. Symbolising a feminist solidarity, she says, "Everybody, turn to the Barbie next to you. Tell her how much you love her. Compliment her" (*Barbie* 1:47:22-18). In Stereotypical Barbie's "giant blowout party" (*Barbie* 1:42:58), she grooves to the music beats, later staying back to participate in the Barbies' Girls' Night. Similarly, the Lawyer Barbie traverses beyond her role in the courtroom to assist the Doctor Barbies in Ken's physical treatment. In one of the scenes, when she states, "I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time" (*Barbie* 1:46:36-34), as Gerwig's mouthpiece, she repudiates patriarchy's classification of womanhood with hysteria, echoing Lord Chesterfield's renowned letter to his son:

Women, then, are only children of a larger growth; they have an entertaining tattle, and sometimes wit; but for solid, reasoning good sense, I never knew in my life one that had it or who reasoned or acted consequentially for four-and-twenty hours together (qtd. in Crawford 88).

While Doctor Barbie operates as the Disco Jockey in Barbie's blowout party, Writer Barbie achieves the Nobel Prize for Literature, besides supervising Ken's medical treatment. Stereotypical Barbie, representing Mattel's original Caucasian Barbie, traverses beyond her cosmetic pursuits to attend the President Barbie's Pink House session and the Lawyer Barbie's trial address. In her pursuits to have the "best day ever" (*Barbie* 1:40:35), predominantly through partying and participating in the Barbie's Girls' Nights, she exudes material superficiality. From waking up in her pink heels in the Malibu Dream House of her "own pink world," waving to her "own homegirls" (*Barbie* 1:50:02-49:48), she relinquishes "the pastels and plastics of Barbie Land" (*Barbie* 00:07:43) to transform into Barbara Handler of the Real World, as the last scene (*Barbie* 00:07:11) depicts her in a customary attire of a beige jacket, white inners, blue jeans, a pastel pink bag and Birkenstock sandals. Although the doll Barbie's metamorphosis into womanhood may signify a transition from an inanimate plasticity to a human sensitivity, Gerwig's satire does not necessarily imply it to be an evolution. In the last scene, when she is asked, "And what are you here for today, Barbara?", she replies, "I'm here to see my gynaecologist" (*Barbie* 06:50-46).

According to Knight, "the satiric practice of imitating, parodying, and borrowing other forms" are implemented "in the interests of attacking not only evil but the actual, historical individuals who penetrate it" (22). "Imitating, parodying, and borrowing," Gerwig's satire attacks Mattel's legacy of a cultural influence



that has represented womanhood through plastic tokens, fabricating feminism with consumerism. When Barbara sees her gynaecologist, the discourse around the limiting anatomical and clinical signifiers of womanhood is highlighted. It depicts Mattel's paradox that moulds Barbie on the morphological dimensions of womanhood, yet it only imitates them, as Stereotypical Barbie confesses, "I would just like to inform you, I do not have a vagina. And he [Ken] does not have a penis" (*Barbie* 1:25:14-12). In *Barbie*, not only does the want of a phallus for both Barbie and Ken liberate them from the panoptic gaze of biological signification, it also renders them able to mimic and destabilise the cultural performativities of gender representation, segregating feminism from biological sex.

The representational politics of *Barbie* (2023) is to disintegrate labels. Mattel's consumerist stratagem to categorise Barbie into disparate professions is undermined in the film. Writer Barbie can simultaneously be Doctor Barbie, Totally Hair Barbie can both be Doctor Barbie and Disco Jockey Barbie, Weird Barbie is essentially not the discarded 'other' to Stereotypical Barbie's Caucasian beauty epitome, as she can assume the leadership of the sanitation department in President Barbie's cabinet. Although Barbie and women can be everything and "extraordinary" (*Barbie* 14:59), they can also choose not to integrate themselves within the consumerist contest of evaluating their self-worth by assuming capitalistic professions. Nevertheless, *Barbie's* politics is ambiguous. As one of the co-producers of the film, Mattel generated a \$150 million revenue increment from *Barbie*, including direct movie participation, associated toy sales, and consumer products (Verdon). It implies the film's satire to formulate a schematic self-sabotage programme for Mattel to participate in the webwork of 'woke' diplomacy.

"Looked So Alive, Turns Out I'm Not Real": Barbie, Plasticity, Perception and Humanity

According to Kim Toffoletti, Barbie takes after the department store mannequin, as a "quintessential modern emblem of consumerism, femininity and artifice" that invites the window-shopper's gaze (64). Griswold contends that to situate Barbie within a cultural context is to comprehend that she is a collective product, who is "fundamentally social in her genesis," comprising multifarious processes of production by a plethora of social actors (14-15). Griswold writes that it is through cultural production that an object becomes public, entering "the circuit of human discourse" (71). With the social and economic parameters intersecting, the Barbie doll becomes "retrievable" (Schudson 161), as the popular cultural icon, rendered available to the masses. Gerwig's film renews Barbie's narrative for the consumer, making her retrievable, as popular discourse reinterprets the multiplicity of her representation. Alluding to Laura Mulvey's theorisation on scopophilia that establishes the conventions of screening and narrative conditionings to provide the spectator an "illusion" of looking into "a private world" (806), *Barbie* formulates a complex narrative, when it fabricates the toy story for the cinema. On one hand, the audience, as the panoptic onlookers, seem to consume the apparently private "to-be-looked-at-ness" (809) life of Barbie. On the other hand, beneath this illusion, *Barbie* intimates the shopper's consumerist associative gaze that "demands product after product" (Motz 128). The film upholds the cultural discourse of rendering Barbie retrievable, a token to be desired, with the aesthetics of Mattel's branding, Barbie's pink plasticity, her accessories, the mannerisms of children's playtime with Barbie, incorporated within the film's plot. It associates the "primordial wish for pleasurable looking" of the consumer/spectator with the "narcissistic aspect" (Mulvey 807) of fulfilling their self-recognition by wanting to integrate themselves within the moving frames of Barbie Land. Bellas writes that the "youthful and feminine mode of consumption" emphasised throughout the film invites spectators to window shop in its "shimmering and girly landscape" (3). Friedberg writes that the shop window with its captivating displays and alluring glimmer becomes a site "for visual intoxication, the site of seduction for consumer desire" (65). The association of pink with feminine consumerism aesthetics has been mirrored with such precision that speaking to *Architectural Digest*, Gerwig and the film's production



designer Sarah Greenwood highlighted that during the construction of Barbie Land, which is almost fluorescent pink in its totality, the film had caused an international shortage of the pink colour (Malle)

The scene (*Barbie* 1:49:21) frames a medium-long shot of Stereotypical Barbie facing her wardrobe, as she selects her outfit. It progresses to feature a featureless pink mannequin wearing a pastel pink gingham dress, along with pastel pink floral necklace and a glossy pink oversized brow. Bellas writes that made of thick, transparent Perspex, the wardrobe's doors exude the aesthetics of both, the glass store window and the Barbie doll packaging's plastic vitrine. In the film, as the next shot stages the magical disappearance and replacement of Barbie's outfits accompanied by the visual transition of a flurry of sparkles, it echoes, according to Bellas, the narrative of the shop window that inspire the desires for "endless consumption" and "maintenance of the glamorous body" (3). The aesthetics of pretend play with dolls are emulated in Gerwig's film. Barbie does not bathe in tangible water, she mimics the procedure. She is not reflected on a material mirror, but a hollow one. Her hairbrush and car are disproportionate to her face and body, respectively, similar to Mattel's doll accessories. She imitates breakfast proceedings. Doors automatically open for her and she is lifted off her Dreamhouse to her car, as the narrator states, "When you're playing with Barbies, nobody bothers to walk them down the stairs and out the door, et cetera. You just pick them up and put them where you want them to go" (*Barbie* 1:48:08–47:55). "While there are inner walls," in the Dream houses, each house is "open for everyone to look in." Incorporating the spectator's gaze into Barbie Land, "there are no secrets or hidden agendas in Barbie Land." As thoughts of death begin to bother Stereotypical Barbie, she's unable to screen it from the other Barbies (Business Insider).

According to Ferriss, window shopping in fashion films often encapsulate scenes that can function as a "moving shop window" or "a kinetic substitute for flipping through the pages of a magazine" (54). The montage sequence (*Barbie* 1:28:00) that frames the journey of Stereotypical Barbie and Ken to the Real World, signifies this. As Barbie drives her pastel pink car on the pastel pink brick road, it echoes the yellow brick road from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In her journey, she traverses the likenesses of Californian desert lands, the oceanic space, the universal space, flower-fields characterised by fluorescent pink and yellow flowers and the snow-fields. Wipe transitions signify the passage of each setting from Barbie Land to the Real World, emulating the aesthetics of catalogue or magazine pages being turned. Each vehicle, from the bubble-gum pink motorboat, the neon pink bicycle, the pastel pink caravan and snowmobile to the pink, blue and yellow miniature rocket ship, on top of which Barbie sits, emulating the posing for a magazine cover, sports the Barbie branding, captivating attention to the displayed commodity. These "elements of playful spectacle, glamour, and surprise in window shopping," writes Bellas, present an enticing consumer girlhood, as the spectators are invited to indulge into the cinematic pleasures "aesthetically and kinetically" (3). To incorporate the aesthetics of Mattel's marketing, history and Barbie's plastic accessories, Gerwig integrates multifarious meta-references. Stereotypical Barbie's golden iridescent blowout party jumpsuit is a homage to Mattel's 1980 Golden Dreams Barbie. Skipper, Barbie's younger sister, introduced in 1964, is shown in the film, framed in a long shot (*Barbie* 1:47:52), situated at the door-step of her miniature purple house, waving at Barbie. The neon outfits of Barbie and Ken that they sport at Venice Beach are inspired by the 1994 Hot Skatin' Barbie's neon costume. The discontinued Sugar Daddy Ken, Earring Magic Ken, Growing up Skipper Barbie and Video Girl Barbie, Barbie's Poop Scooper Dog, all appear in Weird Barbie's house. Further, there are references to the Mattel's archival fashion attires from the Celebrate Disco Bell Bottoms, Ice Capades Pretty Practice Suit and Pajama Jam in Amsterdam Set to the Pretty Paisley Palazzo Pants.

De-familiarising the tradition of pretend play with baby dolls, Barbie as an imitation of self-sufficient, adult womanhood, attempted to inspire girlhood femininity to destabilise the domestically 'othered' archetypal motherhood and persuade capitalistic recognition. This is reflected in the film's narratorial voice:



“The girls who played with them could only ever play at being mothers. Which can be fun, at least for a while, anyway. Ask your mother.” (*Barbie* 1:52:36–25). The politics of representation in *Barbie* initially depicts motherhood and domesticity as antithetical to economic self-sufficiency. This has been reflected in the emotionally distanced mother-daughter relationship between Gloria and Sasha. The flashback sequence (*Barbie* 1:00:56) explores this strain. In one scene, Gloria and a child Sasha play together with Barbie dolls, followed by the scene where Sasha runs through the green door to embrace Gloria as she is working late hours on the sketches of Barbie dolls. It is contrasted by the scenes, where the teenager Sasha gradually becomes emotionally reticent, as she disposes off the Barbies and her other playthings in a cardboard box. It is complemented by the scene, where she does not convey parting goodbyes or affectionate gestures to Gloria as the latter leaves for work or the former for school. When Sasha condescends Gloria for relating to Stereotypical Barbie on thoughts of death and cellulite, through the sketches of Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie, she states, “Oh, Sasha, listen. I’m just a boring mom with a boring job and a daughter who hates me. Can you blame me for wanting to have a little fun?” (*Barbie* 1:00:14–08). Naomi Wolf’s observation of the twentieth-century American woman’s questioning of the rigid “ideal of beauty”, considered as “unfeminine” and “heretical” by the patriarchy of the departing “Evil Eighties” (2), has been interrogated by Sasha’s confrontation with Stereotypical Barbie, contextualised in the twenty-first-century:

You represent everything wrong with our culture. Sexualised capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals... You set the feminist movement back 50 years. You destroyed girls’ innate sense of worth and you’re killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism (*Barbie* 1:13:31–01).

When Gloria advances the conception of Ordinary Barbie, who “want[s] to be a mom,” or a “president,” or “a mom who is president” (*Barbie* 14:54–46), the dichotomy between motherhood and capitalistic professionalism is blurred. It echoes Ruth Handler’s trajectory of motherhood, her observation and interest dispensed towards her daughter, Barbara’s playtime with adult figured dolls that manifested Barbie. Contextually, Barbara, Barbie, girlhood, and perceptibility evolve and destabilised normativities. Towards the film’s conclusion, Stereotypical Barbie converses with the character of Ruth Handler:

Barbie: Do you give me permission to become human?

Ruth: You don’t need my permission.

Barbie: But you’re the creator. You... Don’t you control me?

Ruth: I can’t control you any more than I can control my own daughter (*Barbie* 10:35–22).

Barbie’s metamorphosis from plasticity into imbining perceptibility is a journey from being “the idea” to a desire to “do the imagining” (*Barbie* 10:44). It is an enterprise towards autonomy, accountability and mortality along with the acceptance of their qualifying consequences.

In Barbie Land, the Barbies imitate humanity in their faculties of emotional perception. However, unlike Stereotypical Barbie, they possess a one-dimensional emotional quotient, wanting the human nuance, association and will. In their pursuits of materialistic hedonism and the ‘beauty myth,’ they do not traverse beyond their unidimensional plasticity into corporal mutability. As Stereotypical Barbie voices out her thoughts about death, “You guys ever think about dying?” (*Barbie* 1:40:25), instead of empathising with her through an associative sisterhood, they stare at her in shock and petrification, linguistically castrated, while the merrymaking at the blowout party is momentarily terminated. When Stereotypical Barbie confesses about her morning bad breath and the mutation of her flat feet from her arched heels, Doctor Barbie screams,



“Flat Feet!” (*Barbie* 1:35:58) before imitating the gesture of disgusted regurgitation. They encapsulate her within a medical gaze as Physicist Barbie touches her flat foot and screams in terror along with the other Barbies, with Writer Barbie otherising her to have been “malfunctioning” (*Barbie* 1:35:27). Interestingly, as they recommend her to visit Weird Barbie instead of incorporating Barbie Land’s medical treatment, it suggests that Stereotypical Barbie’s “malfunctioning” is more physiognomic than anatomical. In *Barbie*, Weird Barbie is the satiric manifestation of cosmetic pretend play. The montage (*Barbie* 1:35:08–34:58) that frames the ‘making’ of Weird Barbie, shows a girl child of the Real World slice, burn, dishevel and highlight the blonde hair of a Stereotypical Barbie doll emblem, before misappropriating her attire, splitting her legs and dumping her into a waste paper basket. Although the act contextualises Naomi Wolf’s inquisition of the woman’s body as “the pliable sex,” conditioned to being “shaped,” “cut,” and “subjected to physical invasion” (270), it liberates Weird Barbie from the societal expectation of being “the most beautiful Barbie of all” (*Barbie* 1:35:12). Contextually, as Weird Barbie and Stereotypical Barbie destabilise the ideals of the ‘beauty myth,’ they familiarise themselves with the ontological comprehensions of the functionings of Barbie Land and the Real World. While Weird Barbie initiates Stereotypical Barbie’s demystification of the Barbies’ negligible autonomy in aspiring feminism in the Real World, it is the latter’s primary oppression by patriarchy that renders her to negate her categorisation into a passive ‘dollness’.

It can be highlighted that Gloria’s apparently consumerist inception of manifesting the sketches of Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie furnished Stereotypical Barbie’s initiation into humanity’s free will. Nevertheless, as Weird Barbie says to Stereotypical Barbie, “You had something to do with this too... Takes two to rip a portal” (*Barbie* 1:32:04–01), it suggests the latter’s contribution into the symbiotic conceptions of the thoughts of mortality and cellulite that Gloria and Stereotypical Barbie share. While Gloria confronts patriarchy in the Real World, Stereotypical Barbie leads the feminist sisterhood in destabilising the dystopian Kendom. In *Barbie*, being human is not something granted by an authoritarian hierarchy, not something to “ask for” but “discover” within the self (*Barbie* 09:58–51). Being human is to associate, “to be a part of the people” (*Barbie* 10:56), as Stereotypical Barbie states. It is to inculcate consciousness, empathise with imperfection and mutability, defy authority. It is to foster an associative concern beyond self-interest. Unlike Victor Frankenstein, who does not provide an initiating shelter of care to his creation against the perils of humanity and civilisation, Ruth says to Stereotypical Barbie, “I can’t in good conscience let you take this leap without knowing what it means” (*Barbie* 09:47–44). However, Stereotypical Barbie has known and engendered the practicality of formulating her self-narrative that “make[s] meaning” (*Barbie* 10:53) and tells her own story. Traversing beyond her erstwhile egotism to “look perfect” (*Barbie* 1:03:27), she develops an autonomy to appreciate corporeal beauty beyond Mattel’s imposed cosmetic standards. The scene (*Barbie* 1:20:06) that frames Stereotypical Barbie in a long shot, seated beside an old woman, both staged in a frame-within-a-frame composition, with the metal pillars of the shed and the resting chairs, signifying their demarcated boundaries, anticipate the dissolution of confinements in Stereotypical Barbie’s metamorphosis. Correspondingly, she observes the wrinkled face of the old woman, complimenting her, “You’re so beautiful” (*Barbie* 1:20:17). Visually, Gerwig accentuates Stereotypical Barbie’s evolution through the gradual appearance of wrinkles in her face, along with her instances of shedding tears, accompanied by the extreme-close shot (*Barbie* 09:10) of her golden heart necklace, emphasising her heart beat. Surpassing her self-interest, she assists in mending the emotional distance between Gloria and Sasha. She destabilised authority, implementing rationality, when she did not adhere to Mattel’s CEO’s advice to get into her packaging box, sensing it to be an entrapment. Ruth says to Stereotypical Barbie, “Humans make things up, like patriarchy and Barbie” (*Barbie* 11:21–20). Although the latter’s metamorphosis into humanity and womanhood anticipates her patriarchal oppression in the Real World, it also signifies her consciousness of it. In Barbie Land, she was ignorant of her compliance as a doll, when Weird Barbie said to her, “We’re all being played with, babe” (*Barbie* 1:32:27). In the Real World, she would be “a Jezebel,” that Mattel could not make to “get



in the box" (*Barbie* 1:06:37), a signifier of trans-womanhood that patriarchy could not defy. Contextually, she challenges the assertion of the Real World by destabilising the foundations of Gender Critical Feminism, as she emulates cisgendered womanhood through the apparent acquisition of female genitals not assigned at birth.

"She Got Loyalty, She Says, 'I Love You Girl'": Barbie's Sisterhood over Kendom

In *Barbie*, Ken's usurpation of Barbie Land stems from the intrinsic antagonism that patriarchy posits in its practice of otherisation. Simon de Beauvoir writes about this in *The Second Sex*, concluding from the theories of Lévi-Strauss and Hegel, as she observes that in man's journey from the state of Nature to that of Culture, "a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself," as "the subject posits itself only in opposition," asserting "itself as the essential" while situating "the other as inessential, as the object." Contextually, socio-cultural and biological relationships are established by man's ability to comprehend them "as systems of oppositions," constructed through "duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry" (26-27). In his visit to the Real World, Ken's compliant 'dollness' prevents him from interrogating patriarchy's ontological roots. From socio-cultural facets of the Real World, he assumes patriarchy's status-quo, imbibing its behavioural representations of a hegemonic performative masculinity. Houghton observes, when Ken appropriates Abraham Lincoln's summon of the constituent power as "Government for the Kens, of the Kens, and by the Kens" (*Barbie* 50:28-26), "his pointed change of [constitutional] syntax," depicts "how power in this new order is going to be wielded for the benefit of one group." However, the Kens are not solely asserting their place within Barbie Land, they are attempting to dominate its constitution (4).

As Ken recounts about the Real World, "Everything, basically everything exists to expand and elevate the presence of men" (*Barbie* 55:06-03), he appropriates patriarchy's status-quo in Barbie Land without interrogating its predicament. He says to Stereotypical Barbie, "And if it weren't for these technicalities like MBAs, medical degrees," "I could have ruled that world. But I don't need any of those things here" (*Barbie* 51:28-20). His autocracy in Barbie Land is implemented through the projection of a heightened physicality and an exaggerated masculinity. He shouts at Stereotypical Barbie when she protests against him and works out with the pull up bar while explaining Kendom's schemes. Practising an emotionally reticent masculinity, in the scene (*Barbie* 31:44), when Stereotypical Barbie arrives to propose her romantic commitment, he flexes his bicep muscles. After that, he goes inside his house, screaming, "Sublime!", while strutting out and replying to her, "I don't know. I'm gonna have to think about that" (*Barbie* 31:34-29). In 1997, the Danish band, Aqua released their song, "Barbie Girl," interpreting the Ken-Barbie equation on innuendos, predominantly reducing the latter into a sexualised subordinate of the male gaze. The lyrics read:

Barbie: I'm a blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world

Dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dolly

Ken: You're my doll, rock and roll, feel the glamor in pink

Kiss me here, touch me there, hanky-panky (lines 15-18)

In Kendom, the Kens' dialogical conversation with the Barbies is manifested in similar objectifying characterisation. Ken classifies Stereotypical Barbie as his "long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriend." Writer Barbie arrives in an essentially fetish fashion black one-piece dress, stating, "Where are my hungry



boys? Who wants snacks?" Similarly, Doctor Barbie says, "I like being a helpful decoration," after carrying brewski beers for the Kens (*Barbie* 53:21–52:50).

The aggression and virility that Ken associates with masculinity, identifying patriarchy with men and horses, is possibly imitated by him through the consumption of the Real World's print media. In the film, he steals the books titled, *Why Men Rule the World (Literally)*, *Men and Wars*, *The Origins of the Patriarchy* and *Horses* from a Real World school library. Contextually, Gerwig's satire situates itself when the Kens unconsciously give into the Barbies' schematic sisterhood, fighting a simulated war amongst themselves with toy bows and arrows, balls and hockey sticks. It is the film's inversion of the archetypal patriarchal discourse that associates femininity with irrationality and masculinity with reason. The Kens' brainwashing of the Barbies to dissociate them from their professional achievements and situate them as their submissive 'others' symbolise the patriarchal oppression of womanhood to limit them within domesticity. It echoes Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's observation of women to be made "a coquettish slave" to render her "a more alluring object of desire," as "a sweeter companion to man." However, the "natural cunning" that Rousseau advises women to not exercise, is satirised, as the Barbies do not "resign" but 'govern' their "arbitrary power of beauty" to restore Barbie Land. In doing so, the Barbies do not "prove that they have less mind than man," as Wollstonecraft had opined regarding women, but they outperform the Kens in their rationality. (24–28). In *Feminism is for Everybody*, Bell Hooks writes:

Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice... Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy (15).

Gloria's feminist speech of protest that accounts for women's patriarchal oppression in the Real World functions as an antithesis to the Kens' brainwashing of the Barbies. Having a deprogramming effect, it restores Writer Barbie's feminist consciousness.

The Barbies manifest their fabricated submission into the Kens' "masculinist signifying economies" that perform "in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain" (Butler 19). Appropriating the archetypal iconography of 'damsel-in-distress,' they "distract" the Kens "by appearing helpless and confused" (*Barbie* 36:31), feigning a complacency to essentially uplift their masculine egotism. Gerwig here satirises popular culture elements that inculcate an essentially masculinist discourse. Contextually, Writer Barbie recounts her disillusionment when she was invested in the Zack Snyder cut of Justice League. Similarly, when Ken talks about the influence of Porsche 365 on the motoring world to President Barbie, Writer Barbie as the Decoy Barbie, pretends to be inefficient in using the Photoshop software, distracting Ken away from President Barbie. After President Barbie's deprogramming, she acts as the Decoy Barbie, affecting her interest in the film *Godfather*, distracting Ken from Lawyer Barbie. As Stereotypical Barbie dresses up, applying cosmetic makeup, she conforms to her 'beauty myth' while simultaneously destabilising it, when she inculcates Ken within the illusion that she has subjugated to be his "bride wife" (*Barbie* 53:21). The political sisterhood that the Barbies share, unites "radically differing identities: humans, Barbies, Kens, Skipper and Allan" (Burke and Kon-Yu 8). It renders them to identify patriarchy's segregationist politics as a system. Correspondingly, Gloria's speech highlights patriarchy's moulding of women "to answer for men's bad behaviour," conditioning them "to stay pretty for men but not so pretty" to "tempt them too much" or "threaten other women" because women are "supposed to be a part of the sisterhood but always stand out" (*Barbie* 39:18–05). Gloria and the Decoy Barbies deprogramme the Brainwashed Barbies by recounting to them the nuances of patriarchal oppression. It signifies their attempt to interrogate patriarchy's gender-conditioned ontology by highlighting its subjugating practices that



essentially masquerade as normativities. When the Barbies come out of their manipulated phases, their initial reactions involve a critical questioning and denunciation of their sexualised subordination comparing them to their erstwhile professional accomplishments.

In the bonfire scene (*Barbie* 31:15), the Barbies destabilise the heteronormative conditioning of romantic commitment by showing interest in interacting with the Kens besides their respective partners. Subverting patriarchal discourse, they reduce the Kens to their sexual jealousy that anticipates the parodied civil war between them that ultimately disintegrates their performative homosociality. As Gloria mentions in her speech, “that the system is rigged” (*Barbie* 39:00), Kendom’s restoration to Barbie Land, symbolises the erstwhile hierarchical reinstatement founded on matriarchy. However, Barbie Land’s matriarchal dimensions function as a satire on the Real World’s patriarchy. As President Barbie provides Ken with employment in a “lower circuit court judgeship,” the narrator states, “Well, the Kens have to start somewhere. And one day the Kens will have as much power and influence in Barbie Land as women have in the Real World” (*Barbie* 15:25–13). Barbie Land’s matriarchy also signifies Mattel’s marketing narrative. In Mattel’s conception, Ken had been introduced to compliment Barbie’s companionship, to imitate a heterosexual union. Contextually, the narrator introduces Ken, saying, “Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him” (*Barbie* 1:46:03–00).

“Barbie, You’re so Fine, You’re so Fine You Blow My Mind”: Conclusion and Barbie’s Legacy

An article of the *Time* Magazine, titled, “Barbie’s Got a New Body,” posits, “Now can we stop talking about my body?”, highlighting Mattel’s apparent diversification of Barbie’s body measurements (Dockterman). However, the “three new bodies: petite, tall and curvy,” that the brand introduced in 2016, depicts its simulated inclusivity because it predominantly caters to the mainstream media’s representation as, “the curvaceous bodies of Kim Kardashian West, Beyoncé and Christina Hendricks have become iconic” (Dockterman). Naomi Wolf writes, “Even Barbie has been redesigned with a more realistic body type and now comes in many colours.” However, in such seemingly inclusive redesigning, Mattel creates a “pluralism in the [beauty] myth,” rendering identities to strive toward the “many beauty myths” (6). Correspondingly, Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* defies normativities, simultaneously sustaining them. Towards the conclusion, as matriarchy characterises Barbie Land, the film’s essential ‘woke’ politics attempt at inclusivity, with President Barbie stating, “I don’t think that things should go back to the way that they were. No Barbie or Ken should be living in the shadows” (*Barbie* 16:00–15:53). Although Stereotypical Barbie’s feminism can be critiqued in wanting dimensions of class, economy and racial diversity, the characters of Gloria and President Barbie represent intersectional resistance. Notwithstanding the emulation of Mattel’s consumerist politics, *Barbie* attempts to interpret it through a feminist narrative. Despite the film’s generation of a billion dollar box-office success that surpassed Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*’s collection in the popular *Barbenheimer* narrative, it could not generate an Oscars’ lead actress nomination for Margot Robbie, anticipating the netizens’ dissent. The film’s trailer read: “If you love Barbie/ This movie is for you” and “If you hate Barbie/ This movie is for you” (Warner Bros. 1:41–55). While Pamela Paul’s iconoclastic title for her review in *The New York Times*, displayed, “‘Barbie’ is Bad. There I Said It,” Richard Brody’s title in *The New Yorker*, opined, “‘Barbie’ is Brilliant, Beautiful, and Fun as Hell.” Through its nuanced politics and aesthetics of representation, *Barbie* accomplishes its objective in manifesting discourse(s) encompassing it that sustains its relevance as a popular culture text. Although it incorporates within its narrative, divergent representations of politics, it instils within its composition, an associative perspective in destabilising hierarchies to promote the inclusivity of multifarious identities. In Greta Gerwig’s directorial trajectory, *Barbie* takes after and compliments the nuances of feminist resilience(s) in *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Little Women* (2019). Like Christine in *Lady Bird*, Stereotypical Barbie comes of age. Unlike Christine’s emotionally



turbulent relationship with her mother, Ruth's symbolic motherhood, warmth and love sensitise Stereotypical Barbie into the negotiations of the Real World. Like Jo March in *Little Women*, Stereotypical Barbie's metamorphosis anticipates the stimulation of her cognition to compose her own narrative. Like the Marches, Stereotypical Barbie's humanity desires to perceive, associate and evolve beyond the accomplishment of her limited self-interest. *Barbie* is not solely the cinematic adaptation of a toy-story. It is a textual imprint of interpersonal relationships. It is a visual narrative of feminist sisterhood, characterised by satire, wit, comedy, parody and realism in the pastels and the plastics of Barbie Land and the Real World.

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Urban Space, Dystopia, Consumerism and Hyperreality: Reading Satire as Resistance in Appupen's *Aspyrus*

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Abstract: The publication of Amar Chitra Katha has been marked as the beginning of the advent of the graphic novel. Amar Chitra Katha is moving away from the traditional, stereotypical stories and is broadening its horizon and scope to become more like graphic novels. The graphic novels are the new instances of visual culture of India. They reimagine and reconstruct the Indian epics and myths. Gradually, the scenarios of the graphic novels have gone through changes. The graphic novel artists do not limit themselves to the representation of the myths but also broaden their venture to the socio-political burning issues of the society. Appupen has taken a satirical stance in his artworks. He formulated his own realistically unreal space, Halahala, that epitomises modern, even the postmodern, India. Out of his consciousness, he has given birth to this simulated and mimetic cityscape in his graphic novels. This essay attempts to shed light on dystopia looming around the urban space of this hyperreal land and celebrates satire as an expression of resistance.

Keywords: Dystopia, hyperreality, resistance, satire, urban space.

Body of Discussion

Appupen is one of the prominent graphic novelists who has created his own landscape named as Halahala to attack the negative side of the city life, the modern consumerist culture. His wordless graphic illustration effectively creates the illusion of the incidents of the society as well as India. He primarily deals with the dystopian futuristic land, its dwellers and the relationship among the urban ecology and the inhabitants. He is deeply influenced by the German expressionist graphic artist Lynd Ward's silent woodcut art. Appupen sometimes uses speech balloons but, most of the time, tries to debunk the conventional definition of the sequential art form, the panel form of the graphic novels. He uses sketching, drawings and the black colour in his artworks. Modernist literature primarily focuses on the representation of the cityscapes. Lyn Ward depicts the moral dilemma, evil side of industrialisation in his graphic novels. Taking reference from him, Appupen has placed his characters in his imaginary, hyperreal Halahala land that acts as a warning against the consequences of the capitalist, consumerist postmodern culture. This essay tries to answer the questions: How does Appupen create dystopia in his Halahala land in this graphic novel? How does Appupen depict satire in his work?

How does the graphic novel become the piece/text of resistance in itself?



Appupen in his book criticises the urban, modern, capitalist society that allures humans in every possible way. He paints a dystopian city with follies and temptation. This is a lifeless city controlled by the ill-fated dream(s), temptation, lust for consumerist activities. The representation of golf club, café, shopping malls, television screens, billboards, posters of different kinds of advertisements in the book metaphorically depict the capitalist, consumerist culture of the present day of India. The man wears a suit, tie, trousers and, from his clothes, one can get an idea of the corporate employee. It also shows the bureaucratic urban spaces. He is running after the winged, devilish dream. This dream is the metaphor of the bad sides of the consumerist, ultra-modern society. He tries to grasp the dream but he fails. The chase is constant, on-going, depicting the competitive nature of life. Gradually, he becomes fatigued and starts looking like a vagabond, beggar. This chase makes him emotionally drained. This is the ultimate reality of this capitalist life where everything is based on projection, transaction and competition. The third act of this book shows the school-going girl of this man. In the school, the teacher draws the picture of the devilish dream. The students also try to draw the painting. Ironically, it unveils how capitalism runs through the nerves of the society. Then, the visual narration of the story focuses on the girl's face. She wakes up from the dream and starts dressing like a super (wo)man. It shows her entry into capitalism and acceptance of consumerism. Suddenly, she reaches the sea shore and finds the banished, original creator as well as the dreamer of this dystopian city. She fights against the devilish dream and kills it. The book ends with the picture of the devilish dream being exhibited in a room. The reference of factories, Underwoman, and devilish dream hints at the co-existence of humans and machines. These creatures are the metaphors of the degradation of the human aspirations, dream and mentality. Appupen's world is impregnated with conflict, subversion, corruption, fetishism, moral degradation caused by capitalism, ecological crisis, humanoid, awkward creatures. The binary between modern urban space and forest land is a satirical stance to depict the shift from primitivity to civilisation.

Appupen's graphic narrative is more of a silent novel with imagery and images. Through silence and the mode of invisibility, the creator discusses the bad sides of urbanity, urban habitats and cultures. His land of Halahala is a hyperreal space that is dominated by the evil dragon or a monster. The figuration of the evil monster is a satirical symbol of greed and dreams. He also depicts how human beings can attempt to eradicate the devilish intention, dreams, and aspiration from the mind of the inhabitants and bring forth the sense of stability and peace in lieu of chaos and dystopia. This is a portrayal of a dystopian society that is collapsing down under the threat of the evil of consumerism. In one scene, we can find that the male protagonist is chasing after the evil creature. This is the metaphorical, satirical depiction of incessant chase after success, money, capitalism. Basically, it draws the picture of the harsh competitive nature of the urban spaces. Like him, everyone is running after something that they cannot get.

Aspyrus is the satirical story against the alluring consumerism as well as the capitalist culture. In this book, the dragon like creature is the metaphor of the obsession for harmful dreams. Aspyrus signifies the aspirant souls and their obsessive dreams. The first and second parts show how the dragon like creature enters the city of Halahala and everyone starts chasing after the evil. The last part celebrates the story of the girl who dares to destroy the evil creature. Here, the city of Halahala is marked by shopping malls, tall buildings, television screens, brick walls, factories, galleries, robots. The agglomeration of the television screens projects the harsh reality that we all are living in the whirlpool of images and representations. These "images" blur the division between real and imaginary and create the hyperreal space. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is a postmodern condition that erases the gap between real and unreal things. The reference of the Underwoman indicates at the stories of Superman and the dystopian Gotham City. Through the lens of hyperreality, he creates the postmodernist version of India by mirroring the doomed future



world. This world is not the real world rather a simulated space just to criticise the modern day scenario of India.

To me, the graphic novel itself is a piece of resistance as it challenges high culture/high art. In any piece of resistance, the suppressed, oppressed, latent entities become the primordial voices as they defy the existing ideas and thoughts. This graphic novel does not follow the pattern of the sequential art forms. It celebrates the triumph of the good against evil. Through its unique visual storytelling, Appupen gives a social commentary on capitalist, postmodern India. This book is a complete package of illustrations and drawings focusing on the realities and possibilities of a doomed India. In his work, he tries to resist the danger fuelled by capitalism, greed, competition and extreme urbanity. Therefore, he gives life to the Underwoman in order to represent her "voice/ activity." She is the figure of a saviour and this land needs to be saved. The end of the dragon like creature brings back normalcy to the society and this becomes the "dream" of Appupen for India.

Satire, a literary-cultural tool of expression, is used in this graphic novel to criticise the ill effects of consumerism, capitalism and aspiration. The dragon like creature is the satirical image of the deep seated evil greed, aspirations, and dreams of the human beings. Satire is primarily used to create awareness along with the tendency of rectification. The reference of the Underwoman is also an intelligent move for satirising the society and how it can be saved. By implementing the figure of the Underwoman, the creator invokes a sense of resistance. She herself is a figure of resistance. The demolition of the creature is a must need for the preservation of the society as well as the human beings. His Halahala land is corrupted. He paints this land in his graphic novel which is devoid of words, speech bubbles. The illustrations, sketching set the satirical tone of the text. Though satire is the main focus of the text, it does not evoke out laughter. It creates a sense of warning and awareness. Thus, his graphic narrative acts as a wake-up call and consequently becomes the piece of resistance in itself.

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