

# LITERARY VOICE

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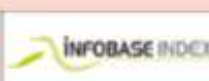
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## Editorial Note

*Literary Voice: A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies* (ISSN 2277-4521), Number 24, Volume 1, March 2025 comprises sixteen research papers, two book reviews and poems. The first seven research papers have their origin in the PAN-NIT Humanities and Social Sciences Research Conclave hosted by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the National Institute of Technology, Warangal, from May 28th to May 30th, 2024. True to its theme, “*Humanities at the Crossroads: The Convergence of Language, Literature, and Technology*,” the intellectual interaction centred on how Humanities and Social Sciences research can be more effectively aligned with the country’s social and economic development. The select papers that underwent a rigorous review process, offer an in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives on the dynamic interaction of language, literature and the humanities, and highlight numerous dynamics of ELT, Science Fiction, Environment, Disability and Identity in Indian and American literary texts.

Besides, two literary texts of English literature explore the intersection of identity myth, and insanity of Ophelia as it paves the way for sublimation of her repressed unconscious. A couple of research articles investigate the deleterious impact of Technology on Human Relationships and Environment, examine the architectonics of adaptation of myths in Indian English literature, and critically investigate the issues of Gender, Myths and Folk Culture in Nautanki.

Prof. Swaraj Raj’s incisive review of Lalit Mohan Sharma’s recent anthology of poems, *Inclusive Voids: One Hundred Poems*, and Sakshi Arora’s review of A. Revathi’s *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, have added riches to the current edition of the journal. With deference to our avowed objective of providing platform to the budding writers, two new voices in Indian English poetry are being introduced to the readers.

**Editors**

**Prof. Madhavi K  
Dr. Shaleen Kumar Singh**

# **Critical Pedagogy in English Language Classroom through Multiple Intelligences Approach: Theoretical Explorations**

**Kavya Rayala\***  
**Dr. K. Madhavi\*\***

## *Abstract*

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy that aims to foster critical thinking in learners towards their reality. Critical pedagogy has its base in critical theory, a school of thought propagated by German philosophers of Frankfurt school. There are critical pedagogies like Antiracist Pedagogy, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), Engaged Pedagogy and so on, the list is by no means exhaustive. Critical pedagogy questions the role of teachers, education and pedagogy in emancipating the oppressed. The base for this thought was laid by Paulo Freire in his thought-provoking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He stresses on critical consciousness or “Conscientisation” as the starting point of praxis. The paper tries to trace theoretical similarities in spirit and practice between critical pedagogy and multiple intelligences theory and explore how critical pedagogy can be fostered in an English language classroom through the use of multiple intelligences approach.

**Keywords:** Critical pedagogy, Critical consciousness, power structures, praxis, language classroom, multiple intelligences

## **Introduction**

A major concern of many social theorists and sociolinguists is the inherent power that is present in a language. For instance, concepts like identity, status, power, gender help in understanding the structures of society thereby providing a better understanding of the hierarchy in the society. Also, with literature comes an ideology, which in itself can act as an emphatic tool of soft power. This application of critical pedagogy in language classrooms further throws light on how language functions as an asset of soft power. Soft power, a concept by Joseph S. Nye's has garnered a lot of popularity in today's world scenario. Soft power is often seen in contrast to hard power where one gets what one wants/desires without resorting to violence, coercion or Repressive State Apparatus. Binaries like the “Repressive State Apparatus” and “Ideological State Apparatus” of Louis Althusser can act parallel to Nye's binaries of Hard Power and Soft Power respectively.

According to Nye, much of the hard power comes from a country's military while soft power comes from three assets. Nye identifies these three assets as culture, political values and the country's foreign policies and all these are constructed through language. Thus, language can be an effective asset of soft power that is often underrepresented and Critical Language Pedagogy could tap into this soft power of language through the use of multiple intelligences.

### **Critical Language Pedagogy**

Burbules and Berk in the article "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits" discuss the differences and similarities between critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Both these are similar in their ultimate goal or spirit, that is, to make individuals critically aware of their reality in order to enlarge the scope for liberation and emancipation. However, critical thinking and critical pedagogy differ in their approach, that is, the process. While critical thinking emphasises critical thinking skills, critical pedagogy emphasises collective action to achieve freedom from oppressive elements. In the words of Freire, praxis (action) should be at the heart of critical consciousness or "Conscientisation" (7-9). Aliakbari traces Freire's three consciousness levels. They are "intransitive, semi transitive, and critical consciousness." In the first one, people accept their lives without any attempt to change the injustices done to them and in the second level individuals are aware of the problems and only attempt to change. In the last one, people view their problems as structural problems by connecting with the outside world and actively try to change them (81).

Critical pedagogy progressed in a multifaceted manner by taking diverse views from theorists and educators. Jeyaraj & Harland point out these interpretations as follows: " 'border pedagogy' (Giroux 1988, 1991), 'liberatory teaching' (Shor 1987), 'pedagogy of possibility' (Simon 1987, 1992), 'postmodern pedagogy' (Kellner 1988; Kilgore 2004), 'empowering education' (Shor 1992), 'pedagogy of resistance' (Giroux 1983; McLaren and Leonard 1993) and 'emancipatory pedagogy' (Gordon 1985; Swartz 1996)" (588). Incorporation of critical pedagogy in English language classrooms is not new and teachers have been consciously aware of emancipation through language. To cite a few, Riasati and Mollaei paper "Critical Pedagogy and Language Learning" introduces critical pedagogy as a teaching method in EFL and ESL environments. Mishra. S contextualises critical pedagogy and language teaching in India, throwing light on the political nature of education and the influence of key figures like Freire and Hooks. Ordem E study provides an approach by training pre-service student teachers and stresses for a syllabus that encourages language proficiency development by asking critical questions, promoting discussions, collaboration, and critical thinking among language teachers (1508-1511).



Graham V. Crookes & Arman Abednia in *Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy* outline how critical pedagogy can inform changes to language skills like listening, speaking, writing, pronunciation, grammar and assessment. The book provides examples of how awareness on topics like equality, empowerment could be constructively blended into teaching skills like reading, writing or speaking. These changes add a critical element in terms of students' language development while countering the logic that critical pedagogy shifts attention from improving students' language proficiency.

Floyd. J looks at critical pedagogy as an instructional approach by outlining essential components of the approach such as community building, dialogic instruction, reflective teaching, and fostering critical thinking skills among learners (10). Rasheed A emphasises that English language teaching needs to look at the lived experiences of its learners in entirety if it tries to involve in a critical praxis pedagogy. For example, themes from marginalised sections of the society can be included in order to sensitise learners and make them aware of the unjust differences operating within a society. Also, it marks the shift/ change brought by National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 in education and its subsequent impact on English Language Classrooms in India. In this context, she quotes from the field work of Vaidehi Ramanathan, who looks at the initiatives of teachers and institutions to alleviate the "English-vernacular divide as a vernacularisation of English through various pedagogic practices. For instance, instructions on activities for a reading text in English may be given in the vernacular language" (212).

Crookes, G. V., & Ziegler, N. shows how task-based language teaching and critical language pedagogy can blend together in a mutually beneficial manner. According to them, tasks are "beneficial and adaptable tools that can provide educators with opportunities to integrate critical approaches in a manner that aligns with their unique classroom context" (16). The authors present a real world problem of a task-based short-term program, where they do tasks with content related to Palestinian control of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Thus, the integration of CLP principles into task-based language programs demonstrates the potential for promoting meaningful communication, critical thinking skills, and social consciousness among language learners.

### **Multiple Intelligences Theory**

Howard Gardner challenges the existence of a single intelligence that determines the IQ level of an individual. He asserts that the institution of education has defined intelligence too narrowly and the potential of any individual cannot be determined by an IQ test/score. Thus, Gardner proposed the theory of Multiple Intelligences or MI theory that validated the existence of eight basic intelligences (linguistic, logical, musical, visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic) which define the human potential

to solve problems.

The following is an overview of the eight multiple intelligences proposed by Howard Gardner from Thomas Armstrong's book *Multiple intelligences in the classroom*. Linguistic Intelligence is "the ability to use and apply language effectively, as a storyteller or a poet, coupled with the capacity to manipulate language for the purpose of creative engagement or critical analysis." For instance, use of rhetoric and metalanguage. Logical- mathematical Intelligence is the "capacity to use numbers for reasoning and other related abstractions." For instance, categorization, classification and calculation. Spatial Intelligence is the "ability to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately with sensitivity to colour, line, shape, form, space, and the relationships that exist between these elements." For instance, visualisation of ideas and graphical representation of ideas. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence involves "expertise in using one's whole body to express ideas and feelings." For instance, an actor, a mime, an athlete, or a dancer. Musical Intelligence is the "capacity to perceive, discriminate, transform, and express in musical forms." Interpersonal Intelligence shows the "ability to perceive the moods, motivations, and feelings of other people. For instance, sensitivity to facial expressions, voice, and gestures and the ability to respond effectively to others in a pragmatic way." Intrapersonal Intelligence is to have self-knowledge and the "ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge and to have an accurate picture of oneself with the capacity for self-discipline, self-understanding, and self-esteem." Naturalist Intelligence "involves the expertise to recognise and classify the numerous species—the flora and fauna—of an individual's environment" (Armstrong, 6-7).

Each of these intelligences have different developmental maps that cannot be generalised and require expertise in that particular area like a linguist for Linguistic intelligence or a scientist for logical- mathematical intelligence. Gardner records that certain intelligences could have been valued hundred years ago like bodily- kinesthetic when survival depended on hunting and some of the intelligences like spatial gained prominence with the emerging visual media of learning/ instruction. Therefore, in the context of visual literacy, visual intelligence implies that images are no longer mere decorative vestiges but rather creative artefacts that engage learners in critical and creative thinking processes. It marks a paradigm shift from being passive consumers of text to active contributors of experiential learning.

These eight intelligences work together in complex ways and do not exist in isolation. Every individual possesses these eight intelligences, although in varying degrees. Each of these intelligences can be further developed into competency levels depending on the biological endowment (hereditary, genetic factors or injuries to the brain), personal

life history (parents, family, teachers, friends who trigger the development or suppress it), and cultural and historical background (time and place of birth and the environment one lives in) (Amstrong, 27). For example, a child playing football requires bodily-kinesthetic intelligence and spatial intelligence in order to orient the movement of the ball. MI theory stresses the rich diversity of intelligences in every individual and children develop proclivities or inclination towards specific intelligences from a young age. However, Gardner sees this as only a tentative model where intelligence can be removed or added. For instance, Gardner explored the possibility of a ninth intelligence that he terms existential intelligence.

### **Critical Language Pedagogy and Multiple Intelligences**

From the above review of literature and concepts, it is clear that critical pedagogy is used in language classrooms and also plays a role in emancipation. However, there is no literature linking the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, H 1983) in practising critical pedagogy in the context of language classrooms. This study posits the possibility of such an exploration for two reasons. Firstly, Multiple intelligences theory negates the existence of standard intelligence and argues for eight different intelligences. Thus, it is a theory that negates any standard intelligence which is considered the status quo. Similarly, critical pedagogy not only negates the *status quo* but also acts upon the oppressive elements.

Secondly, both Critical Pedagogy and Multiple intelligences is learner- centric, hugely harbouring on inclusivity, providing equal learning opportunities to all learners. The former tries to be inclusive through content while the latter through form, that is, how a text is represented in a classroom inclusive to all learners' proclivities.

### **Learners as Active Agents**

Paulo Freire was skeptical of the "banking model of education" that views learners as passive receptors of knowledge transferred by teacher/instructor. In contrast to this, Freire proposed the "problem posing model of education" where learners are central not only to the teaching- learning process but are active agents of change (12).

Joldersma critiques the banking model of education as dehumanising since "it creates oppressive epistemological passivity in students... it mirrors the dominating structure of an oppressive society as a whole, where there is a deep division between a class of oppressors and one of oppressed" (132). A central idea of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy is a constructivist epistemology where teaching should ideally lead to knowledge enhancement of the students, "deepening inherent spontaneous curiosity into a deliberate tool of inquiry" (134). Geddada in his thesis titled "Enabling Learner

Autonomy in Writing through Multiple Intelligences in an ESL context: An Enquiry” quotes Holec’s (1973) description of autonomy. According to him, autonomy is the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” which is not innate but can be acquired and to say a learner is autonomous means to claim that he/she can take responsibility for his/her learning. Further, the thesis makes it evident that critical thinking and problem solving capacities, among others like creativity, interpretive skills, hypothesis formulation (25-26), can only manifest in someone who is an independent learner, in other words autotelic. Similarly MI mediated tasks/activities demand student’s to be active agents in the learning process. Thus, MI enhances learner autonomy making them autotelic learners. This is a step towards being an active learner which is central to critical pedagogy.

### **Use of Authentic Materials to Sensitise Learners**

Degener in the context of adult literacy programs emphasises that curriculum needs to be based on “the backgrounds, needs, and interests of students and should encourage a “dialogic” (as defined by Freire, 1993) relationship between teachers and students” (27). Also she points out that curriculum in critical pedagogy needs to be transformative in the sense that it should foster literary skills needed to make them better social critics of reality. Being aware and critical of surrounding reality or the reality one lives in is yet another central feature of critical pedagogy.

CP lesson plans can be drafted using authentic materials like advertisements, videos, movies, etc. which are indicative of the culture to be scrutinised and also serve as a tool for critical contemplation of that particular culture (Aliakbari 80). Aliakbari further goes on to say that “authentic materials can help students link their knowledge to existing problems in society and take necessary actions for its improvement.” Authentic materials when coupled with MI mediated activities provide the space and scope for a dialogue between teachers and students. For instance, an essay about equality might not interest a student of musical proclivity. Hence, if the theme/concept of equality is provided to the class as a musical activity, kinesthetic activity etc, it has the possibility of more active student involvement.

### **Role of Teachers and Students**

Giroux advocates for teachers as transformative intellectuals with specific political and social roles. They are not mere professionals involved in imparting knowledge to students, rather they have a pivotal role as “cultural workers engaged in production of ideologies and social practices” (224). Thus, teachers as transformative intellectuals in the counter- hegemonic classroom need to produce generative themes. In this context, Freire (1970, 1985) and Ira Shor (1992) proposed the notion of “generative theme” in

curriculum development. Kincheloe states: generative theme as a topic taken from students’ knowledge of their own lived experiences that is compelling and controversial enough to elicit their excitement and commitment. Such themes are saturated with affect, emotion, and meaning because they engage the fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams of both students and their teachers. Generative themes arise at the point where the personal lives of students intersect with the larger society and the globalised world (11).

On the other hand, generative themes can only be co-formed/ formulated with students. Students, as Giroux puts it, are active agents of the knowledge production and sensitisation process along with the teacher. They question the curriculum, discuss thoughts and ideas and challenge misrepresentations or blinkered representations that are one-sided. Teachers and students are co-creators of curriculum and generative themes. As Aliakbari sums up, “...by turning verbal and nonverbal means of education into effective instruments of self-affirmation, students and teachers will understand their roles as subjects of research and agents of change” (81).

**Embrace Inclusivity**

Both Critical Pedagogy and MI embrace inclusivity of people and their fears, anxieties and emotions, forms of text and content in the form of generative themes. According to the Freire Institute website (<https://freire.org/paulo-freire>) “A typical feature of Freire-type education is that people bring their own knowledge and experience into the process. Training is typically undertaken in small groups with lively interaction and can embrace not only the written word but art, music and other forms of expression”

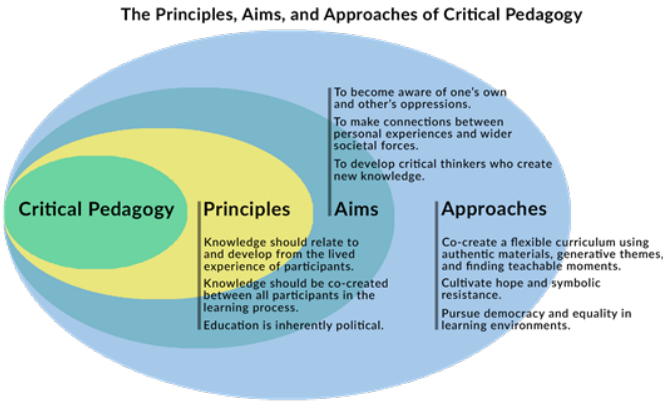


Image source:<https://sph.emory.edu/rollins-tlc/teach-learn-principles/critical-edagogy/index.html>  
From the above picture, the table below illustrates how Critical Pedagogy can be mapped to tenets of Multiple Intelligences theory

	Critical Pedagogy	Multiple Intelligences
Principles	Knowledge should come and develop from the lived experiences of the students. Education is innately political	MI mediated activities help in creating knowledge and awareness from the lived experiences of students
Aims	To become aware of oppression- one's own and others. To draw connection between personal experience and society To develop critical thinkers who are sensitive and sensible to others	For instance, activities centred around interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence can foster awareness of one's own and other's oppression
Approaches	Co-create a flexible curriculum using authentic materials and generative themes Pursue democracy and equality in a learning environment.	Generative themes presented in various forms like musical, spatial, kinesthetic could be more effective in reaching students with different proclivities giving a sense of inclusivity.

### Limitations of the Paper

The paper mostly focused on the theoretical explorations and uses of implementing a critical pedagogy approach coupled with Multiple Intelligences theory in English Language Classroom. However, there is a lack of quantitative and qualitative data to support the usefulness of this strategy in real-world educational contexts. While the components of critical pedagogy are defined, there is little discussion of the actual obstacles that educators may encounter when attempting to incorporate these components into their teaching methods. Also, generative themes have the potential to cause disagreements among students and teachers need to be cautious to handle the situation. Taking these limitations into consideration the paper provides scope for further research in terms of taking this study forward with empirical evidence

### Conclusion

Critical theory forms the foundation of critical pedagogy. However, as established above, it has evolved into diverse theoretical pedagogies incorporating narratives of the oppressed and other forms of oppression like class, gender and so on. Though critical theory and critical pedagogy continue to evolve, their primary goal remains the same. They question the status quo and any form of privilege that oppresses the “other”- the marginalised. For instance, critical pedagogy questions theories of Eurocentrism, patriarchy, elitism and so on. Use of multiple intelligences in language classrooms can foster critical pedagogy both in content and form.

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# Exploring Disability and Identity in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* A Study of Conjoined Twins

Swati Kolla\*  
Srinivasa Rao Nalamari\*\*

## *Abstract*

Indian Playwright Mahesh Dattani has been named one of the leading English playwrights by the International Harold Tribune. Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* delves into the intricate theme of disability with remarkable sensitivity. The narrative revolves around Siamese twins Chandan and Tara, who undergo a life-altering separation surgery. As they grapple with their newfound individuality and physical limitations, the play explores societal norms, familial bonds, and the perceptions of differences. Dattani critiques the prevailing patriarchal bias in Indian society, favoring male children over female ones. Through the lens of parental authority, he exposes how invasive decisions can impact the lives of children. The play's modernist narrative technique, including time shifts and memory, adds depth to the exploration. Ultimately, *Tara* invites us to question assumptions, challenge norms, and recognize the resilience of those who defy expectations. This study explores the play *Tara* from the perspective of disability studies and how Mahesh Dattani has selected a relatively uncommon example of physical differences.

**Keywords:** Disability, Physical limitations, Patriarchal, Parental authority

## **Introduction**

Mahesh Dattani's writings are very contributory to enriching the comprehension of medical humanities, especially from his exploration of complex human conditions in plays such as *Tara*. Dattani addresses the subject of disability, as well as the societal connotations attached to conjoined twins, and demonstrates the intricate balance between medical reality and personal stories. His work is necessary for its exploration of how societal attitudes can shape the lived experiences of marginalized groups, such as individuals with disabilities. Dattani not only captures the struggles of his characters but also critiques the often-reductive medical frameworks that seek to define them. Through the tapestry of family dynamics, societal expectations, and the rigid frameworks of the medical community, Dattani reveals what is often not considered: the emotional and psychological effects of disability. Through focusing on Tara's experiences, the play probes into societal perceptions of disability, challenging the audience to come

to terms with their assumptions of normalcy and difference. Consequently, this study poses keen questions of identity, agency, and the ethical dimensions involved in medical interventions, so that *Tara* is a critical text for the discourse on medical humanities that challenges us to introspection and empathy.

## Materials And Methods

The current study is Qualitative in the form of Descriptive research using Textual analysis; the relevant play is examined and discussed. The primary source of research for the textual analysis is the play *Tara*, written by Mahesh Dattani. Books, Journals, and other published studies are among the study's secondary sources.

## Disability Studies

In his article, Sarkar defines 'Disability' as a concept in which people give meaning and a social response to an impaired individual. Physical or mental disability or disabilities is a term that means one has a deficiency in something that might be as slight as the absence of a limb, a disease in the brain, or a condition that makes a person lack a particular ability (Sarkar).

According to 2024 Refworld- UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, Disability is a permanent physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory loss that, together with various barriers, restricts their ability to participate in society in a manner Equal to others effectively (4). Disability studies, as described by Longmore and Goldberger, states, "The physical effects of illness or injury constitute merely one dimension of disability. At its crux is the sociocultural meaning attributed to physiological conditions" (2000, p. 892). The term disability has many different meanings in different societies. We can find these beliefs everywhere in society and see them in Hindu mythology, to name a few. We have Dhritrashtra, who is blind, and Shakuni Mama, who has a minor locomotor disability due to which he walks with a limb.

Much of the current scholarly literature contains biographies and autobiographies of writers with disabilities whose ideas formed disability studies. Simi Linton's *My Body Politic* is a prominent and relevant book that changed the thinking of non-disabled writers in the UK about disability. The first known autobiographical work marked as pioneering in India is Ved Mehta's auto-biography *Face to Face*, published in 1957, a narrative of his experience of being a disabled person. In *Shame* by Salman Rushdie, published in 1983, Sufiya Zinobia has a psychic disorder and hearing impairment, and therefore her mother called her 'shame.' In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the protagonist Moraes or Moor has a medical condition that is rarely depicted in literature, and, indeed, in real life, he has progeria, whereby the physical structure of his body ages at twice the rate of his

actual age.

To some extent, Rushdie's portrayal of the disabled character demonstrates a multitude of impairments, ranging from the physical to the mental. Alu, who is presented as a troubled character throughout the narrative but born as Nachiketa, has a misshapen head and receives the attention of his uncle Balaram. This phrenologist deals in the 'study of skull' in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986). Dinu in *The Glass Palace* (2000) suffers from polio, which gives him a limp, and since he is a photographer, it adversely affects his activity. Brit in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1991) has brittle bones, a growth disability in which the bones do not grow much. Lenny is a polio victim in the novel *Ice-Candy Man*, penned by Bapsi Sidhwa in 1989. The novel locates the partition of India-Pakistan inside it and juxtaposes it with the character of Lenny. Julia can be seen suffering from the agony of the hearing impairment in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, published in 1999, and this may be as a punishment for her extramarital affair. *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha (2007) is a novel retelling the story of a man who walks on all fours after the Bhopal gaseous tragedy. As a result of the toxic effect, his spine got twisted, and his backside rose higher than his head. However, apart from his parents, many people were killed and affected because of that. The Bhopal gas leak made Khaufpur a village of the disabled for the surviving persons and a burial ground for the deceased.

## Discussion

This study explores the play *Tara* from the perspective of disability studies and how Mahesh Dattani has selected a relatively uncommon example of physical difference. *Tara* is a drama about two Siamese twins who are physically separated during infancy. Conjoined twins, often referred to as Siamese twins, are believed to be caused by problems with the development of an embryo (Diaz & Furman; Spencer). It is a rare event estimated to occur in 1 in every 50,000 births (Diaz & Furman). The majority of them are dead or stillborn within 24 hours. The twins in the drama survive and have developed into intelligent, well-spoken 16-year-olds. "The Patel twins made medical history today by being the longest surviving pair of Siamese twins" (355). They were born with three legs, and after the complicated surgery, one of them had to go with one leg. Bharati's father, an influential and wealthy man, was also heavily involved. Conjoined twins have captivated people for centuries because of their uncommon occurrence and intricate physical traits. Mr. Patel's dialogue with his young children reveals the playwright's intention:

A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl...The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive...On the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn't

asked to come...I couldn't believe what she told me- that they would risk giving both legs to the boy...The doctor had agreed...It was later I came to know of his intention of stating a large nursing home-the largest in Bangalore. He had acquired three acres of prime land-in the heart of the city from the state. Your grandfather's political influence had been used...Chandan had two legs for two days. It didn't take them very long to realize what a great mistake they have made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead fish which could have might have been Tara (378).

**Mahesh Dattani** in his interview with Mohanty says:

Tara is about a boy and a girl, Siamese twins, I have taken medical liberty over here because Siamese twins are invariably of the same sex and they are surgically separated at birth. It was important for their survival and the play deals with their emotional separation. The play Tara is also a metaphor for the conjoined and separated male-female entities and the male given preference over the female (134).

Chang and Eng Bunker of Siam is the most popular and probably the first documented case of conjoined twins in history (Mitchell). The brothers, born to Chinese parents in the kingdom of Siam, now known as Thailand, are the Siamese twins. These omphalopagus twins were babies of mothers Josephine Philbrook and Hannah Rice, born in 1829, who were conjoined at the chest by a band that could stretch to enable the two to stand with some distance between them. It is said that the twins were first spotted by a British merchant named Robert Hunter, who encountered them on a fishing vessel in modern-day Thailand. Hunter eventually teamed up with American Captain Coffin; the two purchased the twins from their family (Mitchell). The twins later moved to Boston in 1829, where they were displayed to the people. At first, the twins caused reactions of skepticism and were not popular among people. However, it soon found a way into people's acceptance and became famous. They were then displayed all around the globe in P. T Barnum's circus (Mitchell; Kokcu et al). They later changed their name to Bunker and moved to North Carolina, where they started to work as farmers and naturalized as United States citizens, (Cywes and Bloch; Mitchell). The brothers married two sisters and could father as many as twenty-two children in total. The two siblings were documented to have had a long-life span; they were among conjoined twins who survived for a long time before their deaths. When Chang reached the age of 63, and he died in his sleep, Eng also died soon after. It was then realized that the twins had fused livers with admixtures of the portal status (Cywes and Bloch; Mitchell).

The twins in the play Tara have some effects on their physical, mental, and social welfare. Each twin has one kidney due to separation, and follow-up surgeries are frequent. They joked with the reporters that "surgery for us is like brushing our teeth" (355). At the beginning of the play, Tara is seen waiting for a kidney transplant, which she gets from her mother, Bharati. Her mother does so to compensate for the injustice done to Tara

by the Patil's. In the beginning, when they arrive in Mumbai, Tara and Chandan are revealed with a limp and a pair of Jaipur feet but on different legs. "She slowly lifts the leg of her trousers to reveal her artificial limb, and she laughs in an ugly way" (332). She becomes a subject of curiosity among neighbourhood kids such as Roopa. They face awkward comments from strangers and new peers and are conscious of being looked at as if they are freaks.

Tara's mother Bharati bribes Roopa who visits their house for the first time, to be her best-friend, and once she is out of the house tell Prema and Nalini, "Oh, my God! Guess what? I went to her house! Yes. Right inside! I met everyone there... (Tara) is a freak of nature all right, but wait till you see her mother!... I'll never go there again" (342).

Drawing attention to the fact that life after surgery for the twins is not the same, Dattani explains that the twins are both provided with costly artificial limbs and professional medical treatment. Personally, Tara endures more pain physically than before while, on the other hand, Chandan's condition becomes better. Chandan prospers, whereas Tara's health deteriorates, and Bharati cautions that the disparity in their fate will not be limited to motor skills alone. "The world will tolerate you," and tell him, "But not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty or thirty is unthinkable" (349). As pointed out by Multani, "Bharati takes it for granted, and so does the world view of the text...that pain is inevitable for Tara, not because of her handicap, but because she is a woman" (121). Bharati's concern is Tara's future as a mother and wife. Dr. Thakkar tells the audience, "It would be impossible for either of the twins to reproduce" after the surgery. They are entirely sterile" (370).

Bharati dies of suffocation due to personal guilt and feelings for her affection, while Roopa's wickedness, deceit, and backstabbing hide her inferiority complex. These women are also disabled; they have stereotypical perceptions about women and their bodies; they are discharged from the play at the end, and thus, the audience can pay attention to Chandan alone. Thus, the title is misleading because this is Chandan's play throughout the entire process, and the man realizes it himself when he expressly states that Tara's story is his "my tragedy" (380).

To continue the discussion, Dattani highlights that life after the separation between Chandan and Tara is not equivalent. It is she who is increasingly physically ill, while Chandan's health is better than before; it is she who is increasingly socially outcast from Roopa and the other children's curiosity and disgust towards her. Angelie Multani says Tara ironically "chooses to attack Roopa on a point of anatomical 'abnormality', one that 'affects' Roopa's sexual status" (123).

### **Tara's Struggle for Independence**

Tara's struggle for Independence is a central theme in the play. She asserts her identity and fights against the societal norms that seek to marginalize her. Tara's struggle for Independence is not just physical but also emotional. She yearns for freedom from the societal expectations that define her as a disabled person. Her struggle for Independence is a metaphor for marginalized women who fight against societal norms to establish their identity.

### **Personal Independence**

The urge to attain personal freedom is Tara's primary theme. Tara, an intelligent and self-willed girl, is stunned by the fact that, owing to her gender and physical disability, the world has many a barrier to offer to her. The surgery that took Chandan away from her and the decision of her parents made her physically disabled due to the mentality of her family and society to give preference to the male child. It puts the decision and the consequences that follow it as a barrier that hinders Tara's process of becoming an independent woman who will be able to make her own decisions.

Tara's desire for individuality reflects her character's desire to live happily with her disability. She stands against the norms that capture her as a disabled woman who can do very little and one who requires the care of a man. This is the clash that many women in India face when seeking to redefine themselves in a society that seeks to cage them. Independence as a struggle can also be seen as a theme in Chandan's story, though in a different context. He experiences a feeling of guilt and obligation to Tara. He cannot truly separate himself and discover his self-identity apart from the tragedy he shares with Tara. His struggle as a man represents the situation of men in patriarchal societies where, on the one hand, they have to fight the expectations that are set upon them. On the other hand, we should appreciate and fight injustice done to women.

### **Familial and Societal Independence**

Family and societal relations are also depicted as an aspect of independence to grasp the notion entirely. This is evident in the way the Patel family decided to side with Chandan instead of Tara during surgery; this is a result of prejudices towards women.

Dattani employs the family as a miniature society, showing how it moulds and defines the roles of different members based on gender. The inability of the family to accept the decisions made and the consequences arising from it can be seen as the reflection of society's inability or even reluctance to shed off patriarchal structures and aspire for true gender equality.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Tara* is a significant contribution to disability studies and a powerful critique of gender discrimination and societal norms. Dattani's nuanced portrayal of the struggles of individuals with disabilities and the impact of societal expectations on their lives invites readers and audiences to challenge assumptions, question norms, and work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

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# **Deciphering Animal Cognition and Emotions in Garth Stein's Novel *The Art of Racing in the Rain***

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## *Abstract*

*The Art of Racing in the Rain* is a novel by Garth Stein. The story is narrated through the lens of Enzo, a pet dog. This paper aims to understand how animals too possess cognition and emotions; and the compassionate ways in which they comprehend things and adapt themselves to a harmonious-domestic life. Enzo, the protagonist, is a loyal companion of Denny, a professional race car driver. The role of Enzo in their life is commendable as implied in how he is treated by the family. The framework adopted here is the human-pet relationship and animal emotions as explained by Margo DeMello in *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* and Frans De Waal in *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Teach Us about Ourselves*. Observations of ethologists such as Cynthia Moss, Jane Goodall, and Irene Pepperberg help in understanding animal emotions in various situations. Ethologists admit that animals share with humans not only the primary human emotions of happiness, fear, anger, surprise and sadness but also secondary emotions such as regret, longing or jealousy. Enzo undergoes many of these primary and secondary emotions as has been vividly portrayed by Garth Stein throughout the novel. Enzo intuitively senses the illness of Eve (Denny's partner), way before medical check-ups and treatment are done. Animals can feel the energy of others and they are super-intelligent. Descartes considers animal suffering as a pseudo-problem by arguing that animals are mechanisms and therefore not sentient. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill showed their dissatisfaction with Descartes's strict dualism. They argued that animals are sentient beings too and proposed that the suffering of animals demands some kind of moral consideration and empathy from humans. **Keywords:** human-animal relationship, emotions, cognition, personhood, sentience.

## **Introduction**

Modern research in ethology and comparative psychology focuses on animal cognition, animal emotion and the question of animal self-awareness. De Waal (2017) states that today's evolutionary cognition is a blend of both schools of experimental methodology developed by comparative psychology and the evolutionary framework and observation

techniques of ethology. The contributions of each of these schools of ethology and comparative psychology are unique: the fusing of these complementary strands makes evolutionary cognition the promising approach. Ethologists like Jane Goodall have studied animal emotions and animal behaviour. She lived with chimpanzees in the Gombe National Park, Tanzania for decades and through in situ observation and experiments, discovered that animals possess reasoning skills and language abilities as well. Margo DeMello (2012) opines that “For those who have closely lived and worked with animals, there is no question. . . that animals share many of the same emotions that we do, although there is, of course, a question of whether or not we are correct in interpreting what those emotions are” (359).

Emotions and cognition are fully integrated. Frans de Waal (2017) defines cognition as the mental transformation of sensory input into knowledge about the environment and the flexible application of this knowledge. “Cognition relates to the kind of information an organism gathers and how it processes and applies this information” (73). According to him, cognition refers to the process of doing this and intelligence refers more to the ability to do it successfully. De Waal (2017) mentions Darwin’s excitement about animal emotions that instigated him to use “dogs to illustrate the emotional continuity among species” (115).

The novel *The Art of Racing in the Rain* begins with Enzo’s statement “Gestures are all that I have; sometimes they must be grand in nature. . . it is what I must do. . . to communicate clearly and effectively. . . to make my point understood without question” (Stein 1). The postures, gestures and facial expressions are cues to animal emotions. Reading the body language of others- be it an animal or a human- helps us to know about them. Enzo’s mind voice is captivating and it is profound throughout the novel. It is understood that Enzo yearns for the ability to talk like humans.

According to James Serpell, anthropomorphism is inevitable when living with a pet (Fudge, 47). The lives of humans and animals are interconnected—we understand animal behaviour through observation and convey the message through language. Most likely, the interpretation is right and human language is the only medium through which it could be recorded. It is not over-anthropomorphic such that the interpretation is based on commonalities of behaviour in humans and animals. Charles Darwin’s well-known observation is that “the mental difference between humans and other animals is one of degree rather than kind” (ibid., 30).

In her book *Through A Window: Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe* (1998), Jane Goodall says that when human emotions are ascribed to non-human animals, it is accused of being anthropomorphic - a cardinal sin in ethology (13). Here, “critical anthropomorphism,” a coinage by Gordon Burghardt gains importance; it is an ethological

perspective that uses scientific knowledge to generate a hypothesis. Animal language research, a new area that studies the communication systems of nonhuman animals has brought in exciting findings. Linguist Con Slobodchikoff observed that “prairie dog colonies have a communication system that includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives. They can tell one another what kind of predator is approaching—man, hawk, coyote, dog—and they can tell each other how fast it is moving” (qtd. in DeMello 366).

Irene Pepperberg is noted for her studies on animal cognition. She observed that parrots have a startling ability to use human language, and are the only animals to speak in human languages such as English. An African Grey parrot named Alex, who died in 2007, was trained by Pepperberg to speak and comprehend English. Alex had a vocabulary of over a hundred words and was able to identify objects by colour, quantity, shape, and texture (qtd. in DeMello 367).

In the history of Western philosophy, animals have been devalued and shown as lacking reason. In *Politics*, Aristotle (qtd. in Steiner 61) states that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals. Descartes considers animal suffering as a pseudo-problem by arguing that animals are mechanisms and therefore not sentient. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill showed their dissatisfaction with Descartes’s strict dualism. They argued that animals are sentient beings and proposed that the suffering of animals demands some kind of moral consideration and empathy from humans. In his work *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (2010), Gary Steiner talks about utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham and later elaborated by John Stuart Mill.

The empiricists, like most figures in the Western tradition, distinguish humans from animals on the basis of abstract rational thought; but unlike many of their predecessors, they argue that animals are capable of reasoning about particulars . . . When Bentham and Mill take up the empiricist standpoint, . . . they do not base their utilitarian moral judgments about humans and animals primarily on cognitive capacities. They conceive of “sentience” not in terms of capacities such as abstract thought, but in terms of sensation. They base all moral judgments on considerations of pleasure and pain, thereby making a place for animals in our moral considerations. (153-154)

Modern thinkers say there is nothing wrong with anthropomorphising. The novel includes subtle anthropomorphic elements. It is understood that Enzo loves human life and desires to be one in the next life. Though he is a dog, he identifies himself as a human for the quirky soul he possesses. Enzo’s fantasies about his next life as an adult are quite whimsical. He tries to learn human behaviour in various situations, to prepare himself for the next life. He is thoughtful about how to treat others and concerned about mannerisms. Animals have their unique character and Enzo has a personality that attracts

others. According to Fudge (2008), for many pet owners, the emphasis placed on access to the pet's inner being might not lead to a recognition of the humanity of the animal whereas it challenges the superiority of the human as it reminds us that we are incapable of imagining fully what it is like to be a pet because of our limitations. Fudge asserts that if humans cannot access an animal's mind, then "pet ownership becomes potentially meaningless, for without a mind for us to access. . . we cannot really say that a pet loves, as such a claim would be simply anthropomorphic" (50). In Stein's novel, the depth of the relationship between Enzo and Denny is quite fathomable. The pet guardian and his family have a great rapport with their animal companion and the mind of the animal is understood clearly by them and vice versa. Enzo exhibits various emotions as any other family member does. His thoughts are humorous and his perception is heart-touching. His creative thoughts leave the readers awestruck. Enzo's sarcasm reverberates in the narration many times which comes through in dialogic exchanges like the one below.

The next day, Denny came home. . .

"Do you see my little angel, Enz?" he asked me.

Did I *see* her? I practically *birthed* her! (Stein 27)

Animals are healers; they can heal the emotional pain as well as the physical pain of others through their affectionate presence. Empaths connect with animals and animals heal empaths. Empathy and understanding are key characteristics of Enzo. When Eve misses Denny during her delivery time, she opens up her worries to Enzo who is by her side. Eve seeks Enzo's comfort in her distress. It is an evident example that animal presence can soothe the pain one undergoes. Jessica Baron says ". . . because empaths are more vulnerable when it comes to trust, connection, attunement, and the potential for burnout in emotionally complex situations, animal interactions are especially soothing" (*spiritualityhealth.com*).

Pets also feel themselves as a member of the family and that enhances their identity. Enzo's sense of belonging to the Swiss family is obvious. "I hadn't realized how much I enjoyed having everyone bustling around the house for those first few months of Zoe's life. I had felt so much a part of something. I was an integral figure in Zoe's entertainment. . ." (Stein 31). Not only belongingness, but Enzo experiences loneliness and emptiness in the family when everyone is away. "But then everyone moved on and left me behind. I wallowed in the emptiness of my lonely days" (*ibid.*, 32). Animals also feel depressed when they are isolated from their companions. It is necessary to keep them in the loop for the sake of their mental and emotional well-being. Ethologists admit that animals share with humans not only primary human emotions of happiness, fear, anger, surprise and sadness but also secondary emotions such as regret, longing or jealousy. Animals can feel pain and they carry the emotional scars associated with that pain. DeMello (2012)

holds that “People who work with abused animals—chimpanzees whose mothers were slaughtered in the bushmeat trade, former circus elephants, once-abused or neglected dogs, and former laboratory rabbits—can also testify to the fact that animals will continue to suffer from that emotional trauma for years afterward” (362-363). DeMello explains various instances where animals have expressed grief through actions.

. . . Cynthia Moss (2000) has described the reactions of elephants when their relatives and friends die—from frantic denial . . . to partial burial of the body to a night-long vigil. Jane Goodall (1971) has written movingly of the grief of the chimpanzee Olly, who continued to care for her four-week-old baby for days after she died by carrying her, grooming her, and even attempting to nurse her before finally abandoning the body . . . Whales, dolphins, dogs, monkeys, rabbits, and other animals also appear to grieve over the loss of their loved ones. (363)

Enzo is quite sensible in the family sphere. He is a confident, self-assured dog. DeMello (2012) points out that animals possess selfhood. “Looking at animals that interact frequently with humans, such as dogs and cats, some researchers have demonstrated that these animals do have a sense of self, precisely because they are able to understand and react to the needs of the human partner” (372). De Waal (2017) mentions the American psychologist Gordon Gallup who first spoke of self-awareness in chimpanzees—a capacity that is lacking in species like monkeys since they failed in mirror test—he showed that chimpanzees recognize their reflection.

Animals could empathize, behave according to instinct, and change their behaviours according to situations. This indicates “not just behavioural flexibility but consciousness and an ability to monitor and update one’s own performance” (DeMello 372). Metacognition is another concept related to self-recognition— it is the ability of an animal to think about its own thoughts. It has been tested to check the knowledge of certain animals about something that they do not know- to check the uncertainty response. “Monkeys, dolphins, and apes have all proven that they know when they do not know something; in addition, parrots will mumble in private when they have learned a new word but have not yet used it in front of humans” (DeMello 371). The rationale behind catching, caging, and displaying animals in zoos and circuses for human pleasure is also questioned by DeMello. She throws light on the fact that animals possess self-awareness and as they share with humans many mental and emotional capacities, it is important to treat them well. Animals are living beings, blessed with a mind and a psyche of their own, have an identity much like humans and are not to be objectified. Enzo is also aware of how and when to respond to people and situations.

Gary Steiner indicates that behavioural ethology rejects the inner states of animal behaviour and reaction against this gave way to contemporary ethology. Donald Griffin developed cognitive ethology, which is based on the principle that the behaviour of

animals must be understood using an anthropomorphic vocabulary of consciousness and cognition. On the contrary, De Waal (2017) opines that “anyone who intends to conduct experiments on animal cognition should first spend a couple [of] thousand hours observing the spontaneous behavior of the species in question.” (64)

Steiner (2010) mentions Griffin’s perspective that attributing consciousness to animals is to recognize that animals are capable of thoughts on objects and events– and they might have memories of the past and anticipations of future events. Griffin’s argument is based on the analogy to the human experience that animals in all likelihood possess self-consciousness and intentional agency (20). To test and defend intentional cognition in animals, much research has been carried out in cognitive ethology. David DeGrazia notes that many animals possess intentionality which includes self-consciousness, conceptual understanding, and the capacity for intentional states such as beliefs and desires. Claims about animal cognition state that in the absence of intentionality, the behaviour and versatility of animals are incoherent. Animals can feel the energy and pain in humans. They sense the pain and can alleviate the pain and anguish in humans through their affectionate presence. The observation skills of animals are equally enviable. The following part illustrates an instance where the sensibility of Enzo is seen.

I couldn’t read their body language because I couldn’t see them, but there are some things a dog can sense. Tension. Fear. Anxiety. These states of being are the result of a chemical release inside the human body. . . I can smell the chemical release from their pituitary glands. . . the taste of an alkaline on the back of my tongue. (Stein 78)

According to Marjorie Garber (1997), dog love is love. Erica Fudge (2008) argues that “if dog love is love, the dog must have within it the capacity to be loved and must reciprocate –respond – with something that can also be called love” (64). Enzo was able to manage himself within the household by understanding the situation of the family. He had no complaints either. His sense of accountability to the family has been put to the test during difficult situations.

When I was locked in the house suddenly and firmly, I did not panic. I did not overcorrect or freeze. I quickly and carefully took stock of the situation and understood these things: Eve was ill, and the illness was possibly affecting her judgement, and she likely would not return for me; Denny would be home on the third day, after two nights.

I am a dog, and I know how to fast. It’s a part of the genetic background for which I have such contempt. (Stein 51)

In this self-centred world, people might ignore humanitarian concerns. They overlook instances as silly and take things for granted. Humans could learn humanity from empathic animals. Enzo’s empathetic attitude outweighs that of human capacity for empathy. He maintains a warm relationship with little Zoe. Animals too express emotions such as guilt, and embarrassment, as witnessed in the passage where Enzo feels guilty about

damaging Zoe's toys at an unprecedented moment.

I felt her pain because I knew her fantasy world intimately, as she allowed me to see the truth of it, and often included me in it. . . . How she trusted me but was afraid when I made faces at her that were too expressive and defied what she'd learned from the adult-driven World Order that denies animals the process of thought. I crawled to her on my elbows and placed my nose next to her thigh, tanned from the summer sun. And I raised my eyebrows slightly, as if to ask if she could ever forgive me for not protecting her animals. (Stein 58)

Enzo shares an intimate bond with Denny and they get along well with each other. Enzo considers himself a co-human and not a mere dog to Denny's family. From the novel, it is understood that Denny is an empath and his relationship with Enzo is special. Jessica Baron comments that animals might have empathetic characteristics too, and that could be the reason why they are drawn to people grappling with mental health issues. Some of the reasons why humans forge deep emotional connections with nonhuman entities are: that animals are authentic, they lavish affection once they trust someone, they live in the moment and they love unconditionally. Animal interactions are soothing indeed. Below is a conversation between Denny and Enzo that reveals how proud they are of each other.

"You're tough," he said. "You can do three days like that because you're one tough dog."

I felt proud.

"I know you'd never do anything deliberately to hurt Zoe," he said.

I laid my head on his leg and looked up at him.

"Sometimes I think you actually understand me," he said. "It's like there's a person inside there. Like you know everything."

*I do, I said to myself. I do.* (Stein 61)

Enzo was able to fill the gap where Denny could not fathom the pain that Eve underwent. When life is painful when it feels unsafe and insecure, there feels a need for comfort and affection to make it through tough times. A longing for a support system and to have people around us is felt. Cynthia K. Chandler (2005) holds that

And yes, sometimes we really need a dog. Or we need a cat, or a horse, or some other animal to help us through our pain and to move us toward a better place in our lives.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is one-way animals can be very helpful to people. (Chandler 2)

AAT embodies human-animal interactions into a formal therapeutic process. There is a natural tendency for humans and animals to form a relationship with each other, even if the animal does not belong to that person. This tendency fosters empathy and connection between the therapy pet and the client. People might be reluctant to open up to therapists, but the animal presence will make it easy. They may connect with an animal better since



animals accept them nonjudgmentally. The assistance of a therapy pet facilitates rapport, limiting their inhibitions, and enabling them to better share matters with the therapist.

The intense and arbitrary nature of Eve's affliction was far beyond Denny's grasp. The wailings, the dramatic screaming fits, the falling on the floor in fits of anguish. These are things that only dogs and women understand because we tap into the pain directly, we connect to pain directly from its source . . . (Stein 62)

Modesty in Enzo is revealed in many instances. It is quite fascinating that animals behave more decently than is expected of them.

I was in the kitchen, next to the dining room. I never stayed in the dining room when they ate, out of respect. No one likes a dog under the table looking for crumbs when they're eating. (Stein 77)

It is this researcher's personal observation that when I give cat food to a free-roaming pet-Millie, and her kittens, Millie would move away and let her babies have their fill. I was moved by her benevolent gestures many times, which showed her motherly affection. This prompts me to feed them more. Modesty, kindness, empathy and sacrifice are values revealed through this act of the mother cat.

Enzo is concerned about his identity and dislikes when he is not called by name. Depersonalization is disrespectful to him. A pet becomes a family member when it is named. De Waal (2017) points out that according to scientists, domestication has given dogs extra intelligence compared to their ancestors (146). The historian Keith Thomas observes that (qtd. in DeMello 148), pet keeping in England between 1400 and 1800 considered a pet as an animal that was named, allowed into the house and never eaten. Pets are referred to by Animal Studies theorists as 'companion animals', "a term that suggests human and animal relationships should ideally be conceived of more on the model of friendship than ownership" (Calarco 102).

Maxwell snorted and slapped the counter. I flinched.

"You're scaring the dog," Trish pointed out. She rarely called me by name.

They do that in prisoner of war camps, I've heard. Depersonalization. (Stein 85)

David Abram coined the term "more-than-human" which appears in the subtitle of his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World* (1996) (qtd. in Calarco). "It describes animals and nature in a way that avoids the denigrating language of "non-human" or "sub-human," terms that suggest animals and nature are less than, or inferior to, human beings in some fundamental sense" (Calarco 100).

Pets are adorable for they don't make us feel lonely. Denny's loyal pet Enzo is with him through thick and thin. According to Baron, some animals seem to be drawn to the feelings of empath. They tend to pick up sadness and pain by simply lying down next to the person. That is the kind of silent support pets show when empath are overwhelmed.



We sat on the berm for quite a long time, not speaking or anything. He seemed upset, and when he was upset, I knew the best thing I could do was be available for him. So I lay next to him and waited . . . Denny and I sat at length and watched them, the comers and goers, and did nothing more than breathe; we did not need conversation to communicate with each other. (Stein 99-100)

Animal presence is a source of immense relief during stressful times. Just gazing at them and observing their gestures can ease frustration and help one relax. Enzo is quite understanding and he adjusts himself to whatever situations he faces. He makes sure not to be a pain in the neck when the family undergoes a troublesome period.

Weekends were spent largely at the hospital. It was not a very colorful way to live. But it was efficient. And considering the seriousness of Eve's illness, efficient was the best we could expect. My walks were infrequent, my trips to the dog park nonexistent. Little attention was paid to me by Denny or Zoe. But I was ready to make that sacrifice in the interest of Eve's well-being and to preserve the family dynamic. I vowed not to be a squeaky wheel in any way. (Stein 108)

After witnessing the turmoil within the Swiss family, Enzo was doubtful about his intention of becoming a human. The thoughts of animals are not as complicated as that of humans. They take life as it comes. Humans have a lot to learn from the simplicity of animal perceptions and world views. De Waal (2017) states that when dogs tackle a problem they cannot solve, they look back at their human companion to get encouragement or assistance. . . (147). When adversaries come, they find solutions themselves or they try to cope with the situation.

I marveled at them both; how difficult it must be to be a person. To constantly subvert your desires. To worry about doing the right thing, rather than doing what is most expedient. At that moment, honestly, I had grave doubts as to my ability to interact on such a level. I wondered if I could ever become the human I hoped to be. (Stein 122)

Eve's demise has affected Enzo the way it affects any other family member. He says "Her last breath took her soul. I saw it in my dream" (Stein 162). He could not withstand the pain when Denny said "She's gone," and started sobbing. Enzo ran away. He was upset, sad, and angry. To overcome the sadness that engulfed him, Enzo had to unleash the animality in him by killing and devouring a squirrel. He had to find a way to release his frustration and that resulted in the hunt and kill. Later Enzo feels guilty about running away. "What I did in the park was selfish because it was about satisfying my basest needs. It was also selfish because it prevented Denny from going to Zoe right away" (Stein 166). It is an indication that animals also do conscious checks. Guilt may lead to introspection.

I felt strangely anxious that day, in a very human way. People are always worried about what's happening next. They often find it difficult to stand still, to occupy the now

without worrying about the future. People are not generally satisfied with what they have; they are very concerned with what they are *going* to have. (Stein 188)

Dr. Baron (2023) posits that animals live in the moment. She says animals can teach us that getting up and forgetting the past in a matter of seconds can be freeing. For the empathes who brood endlessly and report anxiety, animals can be good teachers when it comes to letting things go.

## Conclusion

As DeMello (2012) says, interpreting emotions and thoughts can be complex, but that does not mean they do not exist (355). Humans understand each other based on how they express themselves. Animals too have minds, feelings, and emotions. Their expressions and social behaviour are not invalid. They could be understood with the same common sense with which humans understand each other. Marjorie Garber (1997) signals that how we treat animals becomes a litmus test for “humanness” (15). If a person mistreats an animal, that shows how they treat others.

The cognition and emotions of pet animals are seen through Enzo, the protagonist. Enzo’s mind voice is incredibly portrayed by Garth Stein throughout the novel. It helps the reader to know how human-pet relationship works and those who have experienced it will attest to the truth of a happy and fulfilling life with pets. The immaculate love of animals is matchless and priceless. De Waal (2017) remarks that dogs engage in lots of eye contact with humans. “They have hijacked the human parental pathways in the brain, making us care about them in almost the same way that we care about our children” (147). It is observed that dog owners who stare into their pet’s eyes experience a rapid increase in oxytocin—a neuropeptide involved in attachment and bonding. Humans could experience joy in exchanging gazes full of empathy and trust with companion animals. De Waal (2017) considers dogs as a highly empathic and social creature and mentions that “dognition” is an up-and-coming field” (115).

Enzo’s loyalty is unparalleled and such is the kind of relationship animals have with humans. The posthuman world treats humans as co-evolving with other life forms and thus the human-animal relationship is pivotal for a harmonious and meaningful life.

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# Exploring Desire and Self Discovery: A Critical Study of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* and Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

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## *Abstract*

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942) and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) are landmark works that challenge patriarchal norms, highlighting the struggles faced by the women with desire and self-realization in oppressive cultures. Chughtai and Mehta gave voice to their female characters, granting them agency and individuality. *Lihaaf*, aims to challenge the social structures that systematically oppress women and suppress female sexuality. In *Fire*, Mehta, an Indo-Canadian director, adapts Chughtai's story, portraying women's journey towards self-realization within the confines of an oppressive patriarchal framework. Both narratives expose the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies and emphasize their agency in pursuing their desires and self-realization. The focus of this research will be to trace how, *Lihaaf* and *Fire* offer powerful narratives that challenge societal norms and shed light on the negotiation of desire and self-realization of the central female characters within oppressive cultural context.

**Keywords:** Desire, Self-Realization, Taboo, Narrative, Homosexual

## Introduction

*Lihaaf* (1942) by Ismat Chughtai and *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta stands out as notable narratives that challenge the prevailing norms of the patriarchal society and shed light on the negotiation of desire and self-realization of the central female characters in both the text, within the oppressive cultural context. *Lihaaf* (1942) by Ismat Chughtai and *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta focus on the development of the central female characters in achieving their identity while fulfilling their desires. The female characters, Begum Jaan and Rabbo in *Lihaaf* and Radha-Sita in *Fire* are given a voice of their own by Chughtai and Mehta respectively. Both Ismat Chughtai and Deepa Mehta had been victims of oppressive and repressive state apparatuses of their contemporary society. While Chughtai was tried in court for using obscene sexual words in her text, Mehta's work was censored for disrespecting the Hindu religion for naming characters like Radha and Sita, ones that have mythical connotations and the characters presented on the screen appeared to be in a homosexual relationship. *Lihaaf* (1942), by Ismat Chughtai, attempted to attack the social structures that systematically oppress women and repress female sexuality. In a society that keeps women behind the veil, Chughtai expressed

the unveiled reality of the treatment and location of women in the society through the narrative of *Lihaaf*. On the other hand, Deepa Mehta, an Indo-Canadian director, directed the movie *Fire* (1996), adapting and appropriating the story of *Lihaaf*, thereby presenting on-screen women's journeys to self-realization through negotiation of their desires within the oppressive patriarchal framework in which they are located. In *Fire* (1996), both the women characters Radha and Sita, bonded with each other over the common denominator of ill-treatments they received from their husbands. Their relationship grew stronger when both of them confronted each other about the same. Similarly, in *Lihaaf* (1942), Begum Jaan and Rabbo's relationship started to become mutual when Begum Jaan found possibilities of fulfillment of her physical desires (that were unfulfilled by her relationship with her husband) in the healing 'touch' of Rabbo, the masseuse. *Lihaaf* (1942) by Ismat Chughtai and *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta have been chosen for this research to trace the individual realization of these women against societal normalcy and towards self-attainment. When both these texts are analyzed thoroughly, several minute details can be traced that serve as a tool for understanding the identity formation that happened in the central female characters which helped them to regain their agency.

## Literature Review

To conduct this research, many articles, journals, and research works related to the area of research are consulted. Moreover, through the literature review, the focus of the research will not be divergent rather it will be more unified to limit its scope to various aspects and find out the possibilities other than the already existing outcomes. For this purpose, the researcher has deliberately consulted the following to relocate the position of the research:

"There is no sin in our love": Homoerotic Desire in the Stories of Two Muslim Women Writers" by Indrani Mitra, (2010): The stories of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942) and *My World of the Unknown*, by Alifa Rifaat of Egypt, where both the stories deal with women sexual desire, in the patriarchal society's belief of 'normalcy'. Both also silence the expression of homo eroticism by concluding the stories with the Quranic verse of "Ayat- ul Kursi."

Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak' to Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' by Rahul Gairola, (2002): Spivak's essay paved an innovative application of its idea in Mehta's visual narrative, which carves out a way for Hindu symbolism of Fire and South Asian patriarchy. The symbol of Fire instead of robbing life like sati, provides purity to Radha-Sita.

Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History, (2000), this book edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, discusses how the primary romantic and passionate

relationships between men and between women have been represented in history, literature, or mythology across time and space and societal reaction to such attachments.

### **Research Gap**

According to the research done, the question of individual desire is lost while attending to the consequences of homophobia. Further, the research can focus on the topics of marriage, and how the focus on self-discovery which is seen as a sin in society, becomes freedom for the women. What Chughtai depicts in a Muslim context, Mehta eroticises in a Hindu one. A woman's right to her body and sexuality is embodied and articulated in spaces of same-sex intimacy, wherein the intervention of any male actors is continually being negated.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The following research follows a qualitative method to analyze both written and visual media texts. Through the systematic study and textual analysis of both the written and visual text, this research will focus closely on the lives of the central female characters and their struggle to get back the agency in a heterosexual marriage, which turned into the negotiation of desire and self-realization as a result.

The study will be conducted under the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and feminist theories to study the short story *Lihaaf* (1942) and the film *Fire* (1996). Both texts can be critically analyzed by using Carl Jung's theory of "Individuation", Laura Mulvey's feminist film theories, and the notion of *L'écriture Feminine* by Helen Cixous.

### **Individuation**

Carl Jung's Individuation theory, from his *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959) refers to the exploration and integration of both conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. According to Jung, individuation begins with the recognition of the "Persona", the social mask we wear to fit into society. Individuation involves engaging in a process of self-discovery, reflection, and self-acceptance. It entails acknowledging and integrating the "Shadow", the repressed and undesirable aspects of the self. By facing and integrating these "Shadow" elements, one can achieve a more balanced and authentic sense of self. The "Anima/Animus" is the mirror image of our biological sex, that is the feminine or masculine tendencies, in the opposite gender. Where the psyche of a woman may contain masculine aspects (animus), and the psyche of a man may contain feminine aspects (anima). Then we have the "Self", for Jung, it is the ultimate process of achieving self-hood or self-actualization. Jung argues, because of societal barriers, men are discouraged to open up with their feminine side and women are discouraged

to open up their masculine side, which has given rise to the person's "Persona"(mask), which remains unattended and unnoticed (1959).

This particular discourse of the Jungian Individuation process will be the key method of this research to bring about the negotiation of desire in the women protagonist leading to self-discovery as a process. In Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942), the process of self-discovery happens in the layers of the jenamah and purdah behind the lihaaf, where Begum Jaan discovers her "Self", or the suppressed desire with the help of her massager Rabbo, who acted as her "Shadow", towards the "Persona", of her marriage. The Jungian process of individuation also becomes a process of self-discovery for Sita and Radha in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), where both the female protagonists, had to remove the "Persona" in the process of the negotiation of desire or the "Shadow", to realize their "Self."

### **Ecriture Feminine**

Influenced by Cixous's *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975), this research is focusing on Ismat Chughtai and Deepa Mehta respectively, where these women become a voice against the phallogocentric notion and "speak the body", instead of penis envy, through their central female characters. The representation of the central characters, both male and female in both the texts are the languages of Chughtai and Mehta against the masculinist writing, where the plight of women changes to the pride of women. Using the form of *Ecriture feminine* was not easy for both of them, as they had to face court trials and political back Fires, but their voices still remain loud and clear to the ears of patriarchy. Both Mehta and Chughtai have used metaphors, like in *Lihaaf*- quilt, purdah, elephant, frog, massage, etc. and in *Fire*, the name Radha and Sita itself is a metaphor that challenges the phallogocentric notion of Hindu mythological women characters in contrast. Both texts also challenge the notion of sexuality in accordance with the religious construct which is again a male construct.

### **Feminist Film Theories**

Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), opines that the presentation of a woman on the screen is made erotic so that she can attract the spectators. However, these women shown in films, do not only appeal to male spectators as sexual objects, but also these female figures are regarded as a menace of castration anxiety. As women are the objects that men look at, Mulvey transfers the term passive and active to the audience and narrative cinema, where the audience or the spectator with the active role as a subject, puts its gaze on the narrative film, which is the object with the passive role. In this process, Mulvey discovers that the impact of such a mechanism leads to scopophilia, "pleasure of looking at another person as an erotic object". Thus, applying

Mulvey's theories of gaze as noted in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) to the chosen texts, it can be analyzed that the representation of the female characters by the female writer and director, challenges the method of phallogocentric representation of the female body to the male audience causing castration anxiety and controversy.

### **Textual Analysis**

The research focuses on how the process of individuation differs in both the texts and how Mehta, stands out herself in contemporary India. In the subsequent analysis, the journey of self-discovery undertaken by the female protagonists in *Lihaaf* (1942) and *Fire* (1996) is explored, employing Jungian archetypes, Cixous's *Écriture Feminine*, and Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory. This examination will delve into intricate details, shedding light on the profound influence of these theoretical frameworks on the portrayal and empowerment of women in the respective narrative.

### **Analyzing *Lihaaf***

*Lihaaf*, when analyzed through the process of Individuation, the process of self-formation and self-realization becomes very prominent when we gradually know about the character of Begum Jaan and the relation both Rabbo and Begum Jaan share. Through the voice of the child narrator, Ismat Chughtai has tried to show us the reality of the Jenanah, and the erotic desire people of the aristocratic society hide behind the doors. In the case of Nawab, husband of Begum Jaan, the presence of homo-eroticism is already there. But for the Begum, being a woman of the typical patriarchal society, it turned out to be a difficult situation to recognize her own desires that earlier were thought to be fulfilled only by her husband's love, as being in a patriarchal society we are taught that heterosexual marriages are the only way of fulfilling desires. Later on, when gradually Begum met Rabbo and became aware of her sexual needs, she fell for the act of sin according to the society, they lived in. Their relationship was very open and extremely hidden at the same time. In one way, Rabbo is known to be the only person who could come close to Begum for massages, and on the other hand, nobody was aware of what was going on behind the doors and beneath the quilt of Begum Jaan. It was the narrator who witnessed the reality of Begum's room and her hidden desires through her innocent words and from a child's point of view. Being a reader, it became easy to mark Begum Jaan as a desperate woman, who cannot even spare the little narrator, but looking at her through the psychoanalytic perspective brings us closer to the character development of Begum from her conscious self to being aware and appreciating her unconscious self. It was difficult for Begum to recognize her desires. She waited long enough to receive the heterosexual marital bliss that society has taught to every individual. But unfortunately, her husband was a



homosexual too. It took her time to realize that the bliss is actually in knowing about the self and not in expecting the affection and attention of her husband. It was with the help of Rabbo, Begum became aware of her actual needs in a marriage where the need is of a partner not of a male or a female. Begum Jaan's "Shadow" negotiation was unintentional when Rabbo brought herself as a massager. But gradually, with their intense closeness, the bodily desire kept increasing. In the case of Begum Jaan the dominant function was of sensual passion instead of being rational and following the moral codes, unlike the Nawab. Begum Jaan and Rabbo's process of individuation was more dominated by their unconscious sensational feelings while Nawab's collective unconscious made him take rational steps towards choosing his self-desire. The process of individuation happens to these women and they stand out as an individual against the normalcy of society.

### **Analyzing *Fire* (1996)**

In Mehta's *Fire*, the process of self-realization happens to be a process of self-growth and self-acknowledgment as well. Mehta has portrayed Radha as a responsible and perfect housewife, who follows all the norms of society, except the fact that she cannot reproduce. It was due to the lifestyle she followed she had no time to acknowledge herself, and she was unable to have a situation where she could sit and recall her mother's words, until Sita, enters the house marrying Jatin Ashok's younger brother, becoming Radha's sister-in-law. It was a point in both Radha and Sita's life where both of them collided with their needs and desires suppressed behind the "Persona" they played in society. Sita's process of "Shadow" negotiation and the animus trait was visible when, she took out Jatin's jeans and wore them with just the blouse, took a cigarette, and started dancing on the music, when Radha entered the room, and reminded her that Biji was ringing the bell (*Fire*, 11:11-11:13). When Sita, in those clothes, went in front of Biji, she started ringing the bell, for which Radha reminded Sita that Biji was upset because of her dressing. But Sita is found to have no regrets, rather she praises her body and herself. We find Radha to be a victim of the suppressed society, where she herself becomes the one who keeps judging Sita's activities under the fear and suppression of the norms of patriarchy. The growth of Radha as an individual happened with the help of Sita's already practicing "Shadow" negotiation, where she has already recognized her unconscious desire which has turned her actions into animus, a trait of eros. Radha recalls her mother telling her to see things with the eyes of her mind in the mustard field (*Fire*, 36:47-36:49). This scene becomes evident for Radha in realizing her desires over her responsibilities, and then at night she wakes up to express her desire to Ashok, whose gesture disappointed her, this was the example of the "Shadow" negotiation which happened in a wrong place. The very next morning, Sita again made her move towards Radha asking her to oil her

hair, this particular scene explains all about the intense affectionate relationship they were getting into, putting their "Shadow" negotiation in place. Radha was also realizing her needs and requirements to have a fulfilling life. On the day of Karwachauth (the religious ritual of fasting for their husband's long life), Radha told Sita, not to fast if she does not want to, to which Sita replied her mother and Biji will not spare her if she does so, and she starts cursing the society for controlling their lives like a trained monkey (Fire, 42:05). It was at night when Sita could not control her sexual urge and when both their husbands were away and Biji was asleep, Sita went to Radha's room and both of them indulged in the lovemaking scene, after which when Sita asked, "Radha, did we do anything wrong, Radha replied, with a confident 'No.'"(Fire, 54:48). At that very moment, Radha recalls the same mustard field, and this time she could see the unseen. Thus, both the characters finally realize their individual self, their unconscious desire, and chose themselves over the responsibilities society puts on them.

### **Fearless Voice of Chughtai and Mehta**

The women writer, Ismat Chughtai and Director Deepa Mehta, in their infamous work that goes against the masculine treatment of women, rather than a women's own desirable act has described a lot about the Ecriture feminine of Cixous. Both Mehta and Chughtai, used language to showcase the homoerotic relation in their central female characters and these women chose their desire in the process of self-realization.

Both Chughtai and Mehta have used their technique in representing the suppressed voice of women to challenge male hegemony. With the help of writing and directing both of them showed the individuality of a woman. Cixous says that women are bisexual due to the disposition of their organs, whereas men have no ability to do so without losing the phallocentric masculine characteristic, thus she persuaded writing as bisexual and women should address both sexes.

### **Mulvey's Theory of Visual Representation**

Both Deepa Mehta and Ismat Chughtai, if traced through Mulvey's theory, have tried to go against the traditional method of putting females as sexual objects for the male audience only, these authors portrayed their central female characters, less as objects and more as subjects who presented their own desire for the same sex, that goes against the castration anxiety. When the directors and writers presented the female body as the desiring object by the male, Chughtai and Mehta took a step against this objectification and gave the position of the female characters a stature where they, by choosing their sexuality over the responsibility of the patriarchal society, chose the agency they were made distant to. On the other hand, this homoerotic relation of these central female

characters, was also problematic because the male audiences, according to Mulvey, who enjoyed and related to the action going on in the film could not do it anymore. Thus, the act of scopophilia can be found in the representation of the central female characters in both *Fire* and *Lihaaf*, where with the representation of the homoerotic relationship between Radha and Sita; Rabbo and Begum Jaan, the male viewers could not satisfy their narcissistic viewpoint by their intimate relationship rather, this created a distance felt by the male audience. Again, the direction of Mehta did not completely showcase the intimacy between both the female characters rather the intimacy was showcased through their gesture of affection in their daily household chores unlike Begum Jaan and Rabbo, whose intimacy was described by a child narrator, which could only be assumed by the reading audience.

### Conclusion

*Lihaaf* (1942) gives a glimpse of an aristocratic Muslim household, whereas *Fire* (1996), which was an adaptation of *Lihaaf* (1942), focused on a Hindu middle-class household. As the research brings us to the conclusion that the central female characters of both the written and visual texts had a step-by-step process of individuation, that helped them restore their agency by choosing their desire over the society's marital construct. Begum Jaan- Rabbo and Radha-Sita, took a different path, that goes against the societal norms, and thus they became corrupt not only for their fictional family but also for their readers as well. In *Lihaaf* (1942), both the women shared a homoerotic relationship, which was seen by the innocent eyes of the child narrator, who plays the role of the society, that somehow ignores and hides the reality that the man of the society can do freely, but women even after using a veil, get caught by the innocent eyes. Similarly, Biji in *Fire* (1996) has a similar role to play like the child narrator, which is that of the society. Hence, this is how the constant struggle of the central female characters to negotiate with their desire and attain self-realization became a form of resistance as represented by both Ismat Chughtai and Deepa Mehta. Therefore, this research has touched all its objectives by describing how Mehta and Chughtai differed in the portrayal of the negotiation of desire by the central female characters and how they strived to regain their agency. It also discusses how both Mehta and Chughtai's work included religious symbols that acted as a medium of subverting for the patriarchal manipulation of religion. It was interesting to notice that both texts went against the patriarchal religious practices but not against the religious books. Moreover, Mulvey's theory of gaze and visual representation also brings us close to the reality and intent of the artist behind the representation of all the characters, while changing our traditional perspective of looking through whatever the camera showed. With the help of this representation, both Chughtai and Mehta's voices

become audible throughout their work. Apart from that, the research is limited to focusing only on the homoeroticism and self-realization of the female characters, which can further be analyzed by visualizing the characteristic representation of the male, playing the role of husband. This particular discussion can be taken up for future research.

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# **Virtual Odyssey: Exploring the Posthuman Identity in *Ready Player One***

**Brinda Balakrishnan S\***

## *Abstract*

In the age of technology, transcending the boundaries of physical space is not even a question. The human mind and technology always cross the horizons of expectations and realities. Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* exemplifies this amalgamation of technology and imagination. This paper explores the posthuman odyssey of Wade Watts in OASIS and deconstructs the traditional concepts of space. The proposed study examines the new dimensions of human experience within the technologically saturated world by exploring posthuman identities created in the virtual world. Navigating the realm of boundless imagination, OASIS challenges traditional boundaries. This research paper will explore the emerging dimensions and posthuman spatiality as a literary discourse of the time. The protagonist Wade Watts and the gamified space of OASIS emphasizes the entanglement of human experience with the technologically configured digital environment. The characters and the setting of the novel pushed the boundaries of traditional space, redefining the human world's interaction with that of the virtual realm. *Ready Player One* is an embodiment of the limitless horizon of the human mind and imagination in which the writer explores the posthuman identity of the dystopian reality of 2045.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, OASIS, Ready Player One, Virtual Space, Technology, Aesthetics

## **Introduction**

In the era of virtual reality, space exists within a concept of fluidity that can blur the boundaries of real and virtual environments. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) paved the way for building virtual and physical worlds in the narrative universe. He equated this cyberspace as the new metaphor of the age. It was the budding period of cyberpunks. From *Neuromancer* to *Ready Player One*, the metamorphosis of the digital world was dramatic. The landscapes of virtual reality projected a world of infinite possibilities just like that of the human mind. Posthuman space is a broad term that encompasses multiple perspectives and approaches that criticize Western Humanism. It examines the scope of human interactions through the intricacies of different agents. Posthuman space intersecting with the virtual space in the novel *Ready Player One* (2011) by Ernest Cline can investigate the concepts of time, space, and body, which will

open up a new scope of study. Emphasizing the essential characteristics of the virtual space described in the text will highlight the role of alternate reality in redefining human experience and subjectivity.

Interlocking posthumanism and virtual space in the work *Ready Player One* involves an exploration of technological advancement as well as the juxtaposition of digital representation in literature. Interrogating the aspects of the physical world with the virtual offers a new landscape of posthuman subjectivity. The proposed study titled “Virtual Odyssey: Exploring the Posthuman Identity in *Ready Player One*” aims to examine the representation of posthumans in a gamified environment and reconfigure human interactions within that expansive digital realm. By drawing theoretical frameworks of posthumanism put forward by N Katherine Hayles, Donna J Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti this research paper will follow a close reading of the text and analyze OASIS as a posthuman space. Moreover, the study adopts textual analysis of the novel and understands the virtual gamified landscape through the backdrop of human experience through the narrative complexities of the text. This approach helps in identifying posthumanism in the virtual realm and explores the fluidity of blending physical and virtual realities. The textual analysis also helps in interrogating thematic complexities, cultural references, designed avatars, and simulated environments described in the text. Ernest Cline’s novel has been adapted into a science fiction movie of the same name directed by Steven Spielberg. Valentina Romanzi in her research article explored the representation of reality at three levels; utopian, dystopian, and retrotopian. Further, she explored nostalgia and utopian thinking presented by Spielberg as a diversion from approaching catastrophe (172). She emphasizes Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of retrotopia to examine the bleakness of modernity and hopelessness of the future represented in *Ready Player One*. Andrea Monteith in the 2022 article titled “Transhumanism, Utopia, and the Problem of the Real in *Ready Player One*” analyses OASIS from the framework of religious studies using Ann Taves’s concept of “special things” in the context of technological advancement. Through her research, Monteith examines the religious undertones within the secular narratives focusing on the transcending boundaries of space. Existing research on *Ready Player One* has mostly focused on utopian reality and transhumanism. This study is an attempt to analyze the novel through a posthuman lens exploring the virtual journey of the protagonist as a digital transformation.

### **Posthumanist Framework and OASIS**

The term posthumanism was coined by American literary critic Ihab Hassen in 1977 in his article “Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?”. Posthumanism as a philosophical concept emerged to decentralize humans from the center of thinking

and focus on interconnected relationships of everything including non-human, animals, and machines (Nayar 214). Therefore, this interaction and relationship of humans and nonhumans are crucial in the development of posthumanism. In the age of technology, the entangled embodied interaction of human and nonhuman questions the traditional concepts of ‘what is to be human?’. Technologically modified bodies, simulations, and virtual environments problematize the individualization of human identity. In the article “Posthuman Mimesis I: Concepts for the Mimetic Turn” Nidesh Lawtoo conceptualizes the mimetic turn in the posthuman subjectivity. This entanglement is demonstrated as “the power of hyperreal simulations online to retroact on posthuman subjects in the materiality of their bodies, affects, and actions offline” (Lawtoo 111). Therefore, posthumanism can be seen as metamorphism in the era of technological progress, “a humanistic ethical-spiritualist conception of technological progress” (Lamola 140).

In the framework of posthumanism and spatiality, a simulated virtual environment transcends the boundaries of the physical world and offers a new dimension of human-technology interface. This dissolution of boundaries can be particularly seen in ‘OASIS’- the gamified virtual landscape in Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One*. Ernest Cline in his 2011 novel *Ready Player One*, created a gamified virtual environment that transcends the traditional boundaries of human-machine interactions. This gamified landscape in the novel is called OASIS and it was created by videogame designer James Halliday. In *Ready Player One*, this virtual space is first portrayed as a giant platform that eventually grows into a labyrinth of online networks that create an alternate reality for people in their daily lives (Cline 1). Ernest Cline describes OASIS as an alternate reality to the physical world of 2045 Oklahoma. The death of James Halliday and the outbreak about his testament were meticulously caricatured by Cline. In the beginning itself, there is a clear presentation of the gamified environment and the stark contradictions between the real and virtual worlds. The novel starts with the depiction of two worlds, the first one Oklahoma, and the second, OASIS (a massively multiplayer online game). In the novel, physical and virtual space exist simultaneously; to escape the harsh realities of the physical world, Wade Watts spends his time in OASIS. Ernest Cline portrays the physical world as a space of atrocities where people struggle with hunger, scarcity of resources, and drastic climate change (1).

The representation of the physical space is alarming as it showcases the ongoing energy crisis, famine, and climate change. The living world has become a toxic place for the people. On the other hand, James Halliday’s massive gaming platform is an escape. The introduction of Halliday’s will through the short film ‘Anorak’s Invitation’ describes the billionaire’s eccentricity and obsession with 1980s pop culture creating this world of an alternate reality (Cline 2). Halliday arranging the revelation of his death will



through the short film clearly states the notion of an exploration of himself to transcend human perception. Even after death, Halliday challenges human perception through the advancement in technology and creates an alternate reality for himself as well as for others. In his will, he opens the multidimensional world of virtual reality. James Donovan Halliday announced his testament through a pre-recorded video that reveals the golden egg hunting for the inheritance of his fortune. His obsession with video games especially the “Atari q2600” made him a video gamer which in turn resulted in the formation of “Gregarious Simulation Systems” (Cline 28).

The protagonist Wade Watts and his avatar ‘Parzival’ find OASIS as a space of peace and hope from the dystopian physical world presented in the city of Ohio. There is an escapism from the real world and Wade Watts exploits the alternate reality for his existence as well as his home. OASIS functions as a simulated environment and the characters can experience different chronological periods. The journey of Wade Watts from the real world to the virtual realm is an exploration of his inner quest and finds OASIS as his second home. Halliday programmed it in a way that the virtual environment cannot be easily distinguished from the real one, “My virtual surroundings looked almost (but not quite) real... OASIS was beautifully rendered in three dimensions” (Cline 27). Each avatar in OASIS is materialized using a console, haptic gloves, and visor and has unique login credentials. This can be understood from Katherine Hayles's concept of cybernetic technologies and the unstable boundaries of real and virtual realms. The functioning of avatars in OASIS can be seen as the flow of information through the transcending boundaries of traditional systems offering a dynamic perception of an interconnected system (Hayles 160). There is a disruption between the boundaries but, that unstableness creates a fluidity of space. The fluidity offered by the simulated environment of OASIS transforms reality into an alternate experience and presents the space as posthuman.

Wade Watts questions his existence as a human in the twenty-first century and for him living outside of OASIS was chaotic. Social equivalency was there in the virtual landscape compared to the dystopian world. Haraway connects liberation through the lens of imagination as well as consciousness pointing out the potential possibilities of change (7). Wade Watts liberates himself from the stark realities of the real world by entering into the possibilities of the virtual world. For him, OASIS is a babysitter, school, life, and everything when depravity hits hard. In the real world, billions of people like the protagonist were experiencing human life as the most depressing and painful experience (Cline 1). In the age of the Global Energy Crisis, OASIS was a magical realm that could make anything happen and functioned as a source of sanity and learning. The improved reality offered by OASIS made a huge difference in the lives of common people and often Wade Watts is associated with the happiest moments (Cline 18). This work represents

a virtually simulated environment that provides a source of happiness and reason for existence in the physical real world. Therefore, the gamified virtual space redefines human experience and challenges the traditional notions of space.

The created digital environment has multiple layers and interconnected virtual worlds which are interacting with each other. Hence, augmented reality offers multidimensional spaces to explore and allows the user to experience multisensory experiences. Cline expands OASIS as “The Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation” which is an extraordinary giant realm (Cline 48). The entire OASIS is created as a separate universe which contains several different planets. As an agency this virtual space functions with simulations to produce limitless possibilities.

The alternate world created in the OASIS is magnificent and breath-taking; but, this environment is an example of a data-driven space. A transformative potential is associated with this digital landscape which showcases the temporal marking of technological advancement. The GSS programmers created a catalog of OASIS planets and gave a three-dimensional framework for them. There is a clear navigation, rules, and regulations for all the twenty-seven divisions of OASIS. Cline described the structural arrangement of OASIS with the division of each segment into twenty-seven following the geometrical shape of a cube for the convenience of the operation and the strategic movements of the players and each section occupies hundreds of planets offering a different realm of experience (49). The narrative exists as a speculation with spell-powered space where avatars of any level can gather experience points and complete the quests. Also, there is the depiction of shared synthetic environments which helped in massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). The coexistence of thousands of players in the gamified virtual landscape is made possible through the simulations. There is also clear-cut tracking of the evolution of the MMO concept from a two-dimensional window to the high-resolution three-dimensional worlds. The flexibility and infinite possibilities of the virtual universe are possible to the user entirely from their private space or just using a video console (Cline 57). The greatest videogame designer James Donovan Halliday and the brilliant programmer Ogden Morrow collaborated to create ‘Gregarious Games’, transforming into Gregarious Simulation Systems. Through this reformed brand, they introduced the signature product which is OASIS which contributes to the transformative potential of the virtual realm that differs from reality. By entering into the new world of virtual reality, players experienced the dynamic elements of technology which paved the way for a new lifestyle. This evolution was quick and changed the entire dynamics of global politics through the gamified environment (Cline 56). The OASIS exists as a conglomeration of technology, possibility, identity, human and machine capabilities. The possibility of the entanglement of thousands of human players across the shared synthetic environment

reveals the mesmerizing power of this virtual space.

### **Easter Eggs and Gunters**

James Halliday's eccentric behavior of transcending and transforming the limitations of being human can be understood from the beginning. His obsession with the endless possibilities of video games and the virtual realm results in his creation of a pre-recorded video testament. James Halliday's experience with "Adventure" a video game created by Warren Robinett introduced him to the world of video game's secret rooms and its labyrinth. Warren Robinett hid his game as a video game Easter egg which opened another world within the video game world. As a kid Halliday entered into the secret world within the video games, he created his own Easter egg and kept it in his popular video game OASIS. One who finds this Easter egg of Halliday will be the inheritor of his fortune of billions of dollars. Everyone was fascinated by the testament of James Halliday and this resulted in the rise of a fresh subculture that was immersed in 80s pop culture and everyone was suddenly searching for an 'Easter egg' with the tag of "gunters" (Cline 8). The narrative flows with the search for the Easter egg and explores the simulated environment with all its possibilities. The remarkable input of Cline is the human-machine interactions in a gamified landscape amalgamated through the 1980's pop-culture reference. The rise of 1980s subculture and egg-hunting created a space of transformation which again resulted in an alternate reality. The hunter who is in search of the golden egg navigates their avatars through a posthuman space and experiences themselves as posthuman identities.

Finding the Easter egg is the game-changer which involves the discovery of three keys (the copper, the jade, and the crystal) to open three secret gates. Each stage for the online avatars is carefully constructed by Gregarious Simulation Systems. Even though external forces are trying to take control of OASIS the GSS strongly resisted. Innovative Online Industries (IOI), a capitalist conglomerate is one such example that wants to monetize OASIS by finding a gap in Halliday's final testament (Cline 33). IOI aims to make a profit by charging fees for simulation and further, they have created a special department with the name "Oology Division" which only aims at finding Halliday's Easter egg and the egg searchers of IOI are referred to as "sixers" (Cline 33). The most important factor is how IOI visualizes the open-source virtual utopia which is OASIS to be a dystopia only for the wealthy.

### **Avatars and Pop Culture References**

The fascinating feature of OASIS is its customizable avatars in the virtual realm. This customization of avatars is the epitome of the redefinition of space and human identity

from the notions of traditional concepts. In the digital gamified landscape, OASIS users customize their avatars offering the possibility of constructing new identities which was impossible in the real physical world. This ability and possibility is one of the main functionalities of the labyrinth of OASIS technology which transcends the boundaries of human-machine as well as virtual and physical realms. The escape and expression of the new persona in the malleable online universe represents the liberation and nonconformity of the existing limitations in the physical world. The power and possibilities offered to the players to create their personas are magnificent which provides them an identity that is lacking in the real world. They can explore their creative power to produce an entirely different person which they like and there are no restrictions of any kind such as name, age, ethnicity, race, or gender. They can delve into the horizons of literature and mythology for their creative persona (Cline 57).

The OASIS visor and haptic gloves are essential for the avatars to overcome physical shortcomings that cannot be expressed or experienced in the real world. The development of innovative linking devices such as “visor and haptic gloves” by the GSS marked the matchless victory of the OASIS (Cline 58).

Everyone in OASIS can become what they want; Wade Watts took inspiration from the Arthurian legend ‘Percival’ and created his avatar Parzival, and Samantha chose the Greek goddess ‘Artemis’ to have the avatar Art3mis. Further, Aech who is the close friend of Wade Watts chose her avatar as a white male. In the real world, she is Helen Harris, an African-American woman. All these customizations of avatars point out the individuality and escapism. This expression of self in the virtual world can be seen as the representation of posthuman identities in OASIS. Therefore, avatar customization is an exploration of posthuman identities that will break the traditional boundaries of individuality. By entering into the virtual world of OASIS players are exploring their own identities that are restricted in the physical world.

James Halliday’s avatar Anorak is a deeper integration of his eccentricity as well as an obsession for a virtually simulated environment that holds randomness as well as an embodied reality offered by the conception of posthumanism as a tool for the reconceptualization of human-machine relationship (Hayles 287). Therefore, the customizable avatars in the virtually simulated environment in the text represent the possibilities of posthuman subjectivity and redefine the concept of traditional concepts of time and space.

James Halliday’s obsession with video games coexists only with 1980’s popular culture. The shared virtual experience in the OASIS functions with this pop culture references and the clues to the Easter egg lies in ‘Anorak’s Almanac’: “a collection of hundreds of Halliday’s undated journal entries” (Cline 7).

The narrative spans through 2041-2045, but Halliday's fascination with 1980's pop culture takes the novel to the next level. His fascination for wilderness structured the finding of the golden egg which needs a thorough understanding of Halliday's fantasy. The gateway to this accomplishment involves the successful finding of the keys and gates by exploring every reference in the Almanac. The framework of egg hunting exists with thousands of books, video games, and sitcoms which were Halliday's favorites. Wade Watts finds the Easter egg only through proper research based on the 1980s cultural references made in the Almanac. He goes through books and authors and collects all the data for inheriting the OASIS. James Halliday created a separate universe with the references in the text of Anorak's Almanac. Exploration through the tombs, Arthurian legends, and hyperspace in the gamified landscape for the hunting of the golden egg mentioned in the final will is the representation of unique temporal and spatial experiences. All these factors intertwine with each other to offer a posthuman space that challenges a homogenous reality and provides a beautiful framework of a virtually driven space of possibilities.

## Conclusion

Ready Player One is a novel of digital transformation that showcases the fluidity of human identity in the virtual environment. OASIS in the novel can be seen as a place of interrogation of human identity. Wade Watts as Parzival explores his self with his full potential through egg hunting. His virtual odyssey parallels his self-discovery and redefines the traditional concept of space. By entering into the posthuman world of OASIS and embracing the posthuman identity as an avatar, Wade Watts mirrors the transformation of human identity. In conclusion, the present study highlights the digitization of human subjectivity in the gamified environment and challenges the norms of the real world. The players in OASIS experience infinite possibilities offered by the data-driven space that shatters embodied reality. Wade Watts's journey can be seen as a new dimension to the classical Odyssey in the era of technology. This imagination of the hero's journey can be seen as the profound exploration of human imagination and virtual reality.

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# **Eco-Trauma and Eco-Activism: A Reading of Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale***

**Shabana Nasreen\***

## *Abstract*

The anthropogenic activities have resulted in the severe degradation and degeneration of nature, thereby contributing to the generation of eco-trauma. According to Anil Narine, eco-trauma is the “harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings” (9) and in this process, “a traumatized earth begets traumatized people” (13). By applying the concept of eco-trauma, the paper aims to study Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*. In the novel, the reckless use of the harmful pesticide, Endosulfan makes the idyllic landscape of Enmakaje to experience eco-trauma and in return, the humans and non-humans of the land face death, disease and decay in an unprecedented way. The prolonged exposure to Endosulfan forces the natives to protest against the dominant forces that perpetuate environmental degradation. By adopting the path of environmental activism that aims to protect or aid the environment, the paper also intends to analyse the way the natives fight for environmental justice.

**Keywords:** eco-trauma, Endosulfan, environmental activism, environmental degradation, environmental justice

## **Introduction**

In 1939, Paul Muller, the Swiss chemist introduced an insecticide named DDT in order to control pests. In the same year, as the World War II broke out, DDT became an important agent in killing typhus-carrying lice and malaria-carrying mosquitoes and save the lives of the soldiers in the battlefield. However, the rampant usage of DDT in the next few years became detrimental to the environment. Paying attention to the spraying of DDT, in 1962, Rachel Carson published her seminal text, *Silent Spring* where she warned against the reckless use of DDT and other cognate pesticides that pose serious threats to the life of humans and non-humans. However, she received harsh criticisms from the agricultural and chemical industry and they blamed her for being too indifferent towards human need:

Hunger, hunger, are you listening,  
To the words from Rachel's pen?  
Words which are taken at face value,



Place lives of birds 'bove those of men. (qtd. in Lear 151)

The eventual banning of DDT in 1972 marks a remarkable achievement for American environmentalism. However, in the same decade, India witnessed the aerial spraying of a harmful pesticide named Endosulfan that posed a serious threat to the ecosystem of the land. The Kasaragod region of Kerala suffered due to Endosulfan that was being sprayed for over twenty -five years in the cashew plantations and can be regarded as the worst pesticide disaster of India. In the early sixties, the agricultural department of Kerala took the responsibility of planting cashew trees in Padre village of Kasaragod district. In the year 1978, the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) gained control of these cashew estates and started the spraying of endosulfan up to three times a year. In order to tackle the tea mosquitoes that destroy the growth of the cashews, the company began by using an insecticide named endrin. However, the PCK slowly shifted towards endosulfan for pest control and the prolonged spraying of the pesticide culminated in severe environmental and health concerns. In 2005, the Kerala Government finally restricted the usage of Endosulfan and the Supreme Court of India ordered the Kerala government to provide the victims of endosulfan tragedy with monetary aid in 2017.

The modern agricultural system is practicing and promoting the use of harmful pesticides at an alarming rate. In *Who Really Feeds the World* (2016), Vandana Shiva points out, "We are all exposed to pesticides and carry measurable amounts of these harmful chemicals in our bodies" (41). Hence, the prolonged exposure to these chemicals corrodes the lives of humans and non-humans and their ecosystem gets permanently altered due to the spraying of the organochloride pesticide. According to the recent studies, a drastic change in the natural environment can result in the generation of eco-trauma and the humans and non-humans can experience a deep sense of loss, grief and pain.

By focusing on the concept of eco-trauma, the paper aims to study the novel *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* by Ambikasutan Mangad that deals with the adverse effects of endosulfan on the humans and non-humans of Enmakaje.

### **Eco-Trauma**

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud probes deeper into the concept of trauma and his works preoccupy with traumatic neurosis. To have an in-depth understanding of trauma, Freud focuses on the sixteenth-century epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, 1581) by Torquato Tasso. A part of the epic poem deals with the story of Tancred and Clorinda and Freud interprets the story in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920):

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic



forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (qtd. in Caruth 2)

According to Freud, Tancred's wounding of his beloved twice can be considered as "repetition compulsion" (2) which is an intrinsic part of trauma. However, Cathy Caruth takes a step forward and mentions through this story that trauma can resurface at any point of time and even the subjects experiencing trauma cannot grasp and comprehend trauma holistically. Cathy Caruth's work on trauma is groundbreaking in the field of modern Trauma Studies. While the traditional trauma theorists considered the site of the wound or the event that led to the formation of the wound to be traumatic, the modern theorists shift from the main event that caused the wound to the consequences of it. The modern viewpoint of the trauma theory can be applied to analyse whether our environment can experience trauma or not. In the era of the Anthropocene, as the trauma theory took a post-humanist turn, Anil Narine, in his book *Eco-Trauma Cinema* ushers in the concept of eco-trauma:

the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations. The term encompasses both circumstances because these seemingly distinct instances of ecological harm are often related and even symbiotic: The traumas we perpetuate in an ecosystem through pollution and unsustainable resource management inevitably return to harm us. (9)

Human beings are an inextricable part of its own ecosystem and the damage inflicted by them on nature contributes to the generation of eco-trauma. At the receiving end, the nature "sustains and endures trauma" (13) and in return, the humans too suffer from a deep sense of ecological grief and loss. Thus, according to Narine, "a traumatized earth begets traumatized people" (13). Therefore, moving beyond the traditional approach of trauma theory, Ashlee Cunsolo and Landman propounds the need to "disrupt the dominance of human bodies as only mournable subjects" (16) and emphasize the way non-human entities too can experience trauma.

### **Swarga or Naraka?**

*Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* written by Ambikasutan Mangad showcases the drastic transformation of Enmakaje, a small panchayat in the Kasaragod district of Kerala after being exposed to the toxic pesticide endosulfan. In the novel, the initiative taken by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) to spray endosulfan on the cashew plantations to kill pests cause severe pollution to the land and disrupts the ecological balance, thereby bringing massive changes in the lives of the humans and the non-humans.

Following the concept of eco-trauma as propounded by Anil Narine, the natural world of Enmakaje returns back the “injuries” (Narine 9) inflicted upon it. Prior to the usage of endosulfan, “the soil was so rich, so well endowed with water resources” (112). Years ago, the natives always had access to abundant fresh water. Even in summer, there was no water scarcity. However, the spraying of endosulfan turns the fresh water into poison. Enmakaje being “the land of surangams” (90) make the area more vulnerable. Due to the aerial spraying of endosulfan, the harmful poison easily reaches the mouth of innocent natives and cause severe health hazards. In the novel, the ill-effects of the poisonous endosulfan are manifested in the form of “sick bodies” who suffer from “cancer, epilepsy, mental aberrations, low intelligence, deformed limbs, skin diseases...” (120). A character named Srirama mentions,

Twenty-five yea’s, the poison’s been sprayed on these waterbodies! If it wer’ a well, you coul’ cover it. Bu’ the poison tha’ falls on the hills, it gets int’ the surangas an’ reach you’ home. Isn’ tha’ why this place is full of sick peopl’? (126)

Ambikasutan Mangad also records the harm brought onto the innocent wildlife species of the land. The horrifying effect of the toxic pesticide endosulfan has been portrayed through the presence of calves that were born with only three legs. These calves could only survive for one or two weeks. In the village, there was a Sindhi cow and “er calf ha’ two heads. Wa’ dead b’ fore its head touched the groun’...” (92). Many other animals and the aquatic species simply perished from the face of the land. Mangad writes, “Enmakaje was once the leopards’ own country” (121) but slowly, leopards too ceased to exist. Small yet crucial insects like bees had terrible consequences. As the organochloride pesticide was sprayed, the bees could not survive and the birds vanished from the region.

The severe ecological crisis in Enmakaje makes the natives develop a deep sense of loss while surviving in a land that is experiencing eco - trauma. In an article in *Nature Climate Change* (2018), Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis ushers in the concept of “ecological grief”. Ecological grief is “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (275). Srirama, the native of the village also experiences “ecological grief” and laments, “the plants are poisoned too...They don’ yield like befor’...they aren’ as healthy. Some ar’ shrivellin’ up fas’...” (127). Trees like mango and jackfruit that were widely found in the region were replaced by cashew trees. The development of the monoculture plantation destroyed the biodiverse forests of the land. The introduction of the cashew plantations led to the spraying of the harmful endosulfan in order to control the pests. In Enmakaje, Aryavappu trees, “the world’s best natural pesticide” (141) were widely dominant. Yet the trees that acted as a biopesticide were destroyed to pave the way for chemical pesticide like endosulfan.

Inhabitants of a land are inextricably bound to their surrounding ecosystem and an infringement upon it leads to the deterioration of their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. In the novel, *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*, the natives face a serious disruption of their bond with nature and as a result, suffer from eco-trauma. Tina Amorok, in her essay “The Eco-Trauma and Eco Recovery of Being” (2017) focuses on the three concepts- eco-being, eco-trauma and eco-recovery. For Amorok, eco-being is a realm where human beings and the natural world are intrinsically connected to each other. They develop an intimate bond, and this bond instills “a transformative reverence for life” (29). However, Amorok discusses that any disruption in the bond with nature can generate eco-trauma. According to her,

This traumatic loss of intimacy with the Earth and the cosmos creates a deficit in the realm of eco-Being and is a core cause of human-upon-nature and human-upon-human violence. This is the eco-trauma of Being and the cyclic nature of trauma and violence. (29)

Hence, Amorok suggests the need to heal from eco-trauma and take steps towards eco-recovery. She says, “Healing this deficit through the recovery of eco-Being is an essential process in transformation of individual and collective human consciousness” (29).

Renouncing their city life, the arrival of Neelakantan and Devayani, the protagonists of the novel in Enmakaje is marred with unsettling revelations. In the new land, they observe serious environmental degradation. They get to see the natives struggling for their lives in the ecologically vulnerable region. In the novel, Devayani decides to adopt a child whose parents died years ago. After bringing Pareekshit home, Devayani nurses the sick child. When she saw Pareekshit for the first time, his body was covered with sores and “some of them lay open, spewing blood” (35). In a jarring way, Devayani finds out that the child’s hair is slowly turning grey. As the Neelakantan decides to treat the child and find a cure for his disease, he gets to know that the entire region is filled with children and adults suffering from incurable diseases. Neelakantan comes across a girl of thirteen or fourteen and he gets tremendously shocked to see her “big tongue jutting out through her mouth” (69). In the novel, he points out,

I saw a child today covered with sores, like ours. His name is Anvar...not a child...his mother said he was twenty -six. But he looks twelve. His fingers are strangely long and thin...like octopus arms, all curled up. His eyes are all white...with no pupils... (74)

Neelakantan notices another child whose arms and legs were covered with reddish body hair and did not look like a human child. The horrifying images of the natives of the place suffering made Neelakantan and Devyani really contemplate the reason behind it. When they decide to take their son to a doctor, the doctor looks at Pareekshit and mentions that the child’s birth parents had delusions and ultimately committed suicide. The doctor goes on to lament,

This lan' is ful' of disease haven't seen in medical books and journals. My med'cine isn' workin'. Thi' boy's paren' ha' delusions... 'ad given the' med'cine. Both killed themselves. Ther' 're fifty mental patients I' the small numbe' o' 'ouses just aroun' 'ere. Lots o' abortion, cancer. (83)

Overwhelmed by the visuals, Neelakantan attempts to seek the reason behind the distressful condition of people. The simple villagers of the land think that they are undergoing immense suffering because of the curse of Jadadhari. For them, "it is Jadadhari's curse, they console themselves" (77). However, the dire situation in Enmakaje makes one think that "no God will be so wrathful towards children" (77).

Neelakantan struggles to cope up with the condition of Enmakaje and faces "anxiety arising from the perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency". (Buell 31) Therefore, he decides to take active steps in order to stop the degradation of the environment and strive for eco-recovery of Being.

### **Eco-activism**

Realizing the extent of environmental degradation, the natives of Enmakaje protest against the use of the poisonous Endosulfan. Following the path of environmental activism that propagates the belief that "environment should be protected from the damaging impacts of human activities" (Willow 1), a committee named Endosulfan Spray Protest Action Committee (ESPAC) takes the leading role and fights for ecological justice in the novel. Environmental activism stems from the need to protect the environment from anthropogenic activities. Human beings' relationship with its environment plays a predominant role in its treatment towards nature. The Western environmental scholars often consider the emergence of environmental activism as a phenomenon of the contemporary times. However, several anthropologists have delineated the non-western, indigenous and local communities have long standing history of environmental activism. The indigenous communities coexist with nature and their local belief system, traditional eco-friendly practices and sustainable way of living preserves and protects nature. However, these local communities when met with outside threat that aims to destabilize their relationship with nature, rise up in protest and rebellion. North America witnessed environmental activism as early as nineteenth century. In India, the history of environmental movement can be traced back to 1770s when the people of the Marwar region of Rajasthan protested against the cutting down of khejri trees. The Bishnoi movement can be considered as the earliest example of eco-activism in India.

In the novel, *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*, Neelakantan comes to know about the Plantation Corporation of Kerala and their use of the harmful pesticide named endosulfan in the cashew plantations to kill the tea mosquitoes. Along with the ecologically conscious

people of Enmakaje, Neelakantan becomes a part of the Endosulfan Spray Protest Action Committee. The committee takes the responsibility of making all the common people aware of the ill-effects of endosulfan. They make them realize that the Plantation Corporation of Kerala is responsible for their suffering. By taking the support of the visual media and the print, they try to expose the reason behind the endosulfan tragedy. Protesting against powerful bodies like the PCK results in terrible consequences. However, the eco-activists do not give up. They plan to showcase the plights of people by bringing the victims of the endosulfan tragedy in front of the higher authorities:

Sir, please look at them once...these ugly-looking creatures are the children of our land. They are the living martyrs of endosulfan spraying in the cashew plantations of the PCK in Kasaragod. Please have some compassion for them. (158)

However, the entire incident makes the minister react in a violent way. He manipulates by saying, "Endosulfan is no poison, it is medicine" (158). The members of the ESPAC becomes the target of the state machinery and gets ruthless treatment from them. In the novel, Neelakantan and Devayani's past is resurfaced and used against them, their home gets demolished, Dr. Arun Kumar faces severe brutality and Jayaranjan gets murdered. However, their rebellion against the state machinery and the fight for environmental justice creates history in Enmakaje's struggle against the use of endosulfan.

## Conclusion

Translated from Malayalam by J. Devika, Ambikasutan Mangad's *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* becomes a testament of heinous acts committed by human beings towards nature and portrays the plight of the people who are victims of the horrifying endosulfan tragedy in Kerala. In the novel, he also attempts to draw attention to the unethical human practices that aggravate environmental degradation, thereby generating eco-trauma. In a succinct way, he points out that human beings and nature are intrinsically related to each other and any change in the natural environment would have a grave impact on the humans as well. They can develop eco-trauma, ecological grief and a deep sense of loss.

In the novel, the Plantation Corporation of Kerala recklessly sprays Endosulfan, a harmful pesticide in order to multiply the growth of cashew plants. The toxic pesticide seeps too deep into the land, polluting the groundwater, causing death of fish and other aquatic bodies, killing the small insects and bees and obliterating the native trees permanently that were once a part of Enmakaje's ecosystem. The human beings too battle with varied diseases after being exposed to endosulfan. Hence, Neelakantan, the protagonist of the novel utters, "This was no Swarga – heaven – but hell – Naraka" (112).

The novel, *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* is also a record of human strength and resilience in the face of a crisis that disrupts the harmonious balance in an ecologically sensitive

land. The formation of ESPAC, the relentless struggle of its members to stop the spraying of endosulfan, their unflinching dedication to save their native land and take part in eco-activism plays a pivotal role in restricting the aerial spraying of endosulfan in the Kasaragod region of Kerala.

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# **Witness Consciousness in Trauma Narratives: A Study of the Select Novels on Indian Partition**

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## *Abstract*

Drawing on the narratives of Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's seminal work, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* discusses the complexity of bearing witness to trauma. They posit the idea of "unwitnessability," the inherent difficulty that trauma survivors are confronted with should they want to recount their experiences. Cathy Caruth discusses the "unrepresentability" of the traumatic event which causes a rupture in the victim's consciousness. This paper, through a juxtaposition of two texts, Anjali Enjeti's *The Parted Earth* (2021) and Aanchal Malhotra's *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* (2022) analyses the representation of trauma in two texts of Partition literature. It examines how the authors use narrative techniques, multiple perspectives and an interplay of language, silence, and remembrance, to evoke the survivors' experiences and repressed memories. Witness consciousness, becomes a literary device for confronting historical trauma, a form of resistance against collective forgetting and erasure.

**Keywords:** Witness Consciousness, collective memory, Partition literature, trauma narratives.

## **Introduction**

In the areas of history and literary studies, memory and trauma have become indispensable frameworks for understanding the complexities of the past; especially when the past is fraught with violence, disruption and aggression. These concepts enable scholars to examine how individuals and societies deal with or come to terms with their historical experiences. They encompass coping mechanisms of mourning individuals and societies, who build memorials and monuments or record testimonies to transmit collective memories to the next generations. These studies, which grapple with the fluid and evolving nature of memory and trauma, have become a subject of academic interest to literary scholars since late twentieth century.

Tracing the genealogy of trauma theory, which has its origin in the mid-nineteenth century milieu of industrial Europe, the cataclysmic event of WW-II, i.e., the Holocaust can be



considered an inflection point. Since then, trauma scholarship till early twenty-first century focused on individual experiences of Holocaust survivors. Autobiographies/testimonies, memoirs, and novels started shedding light on the experiences of those who were persecuted and tormented in pogroms and concentration camps like those of Auschwitz. These narratives contributed to the discourse of trauma, foregrounding the psychological and emotional repercussions of the atrocities on the survivors.

Foundational theories in trauma studies, proffered by scholars like Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman etc., have largely drawn on the experiences of holocaust survivors. Their theories, however, have been contested by scholars like Steve Crepes, Michael Rothberg, and Roger Luckhurst who critique that traditional trauma theory is rooted in Western experiences, and tends to globalize the experiences of the white subject. It neglects the experiences of subjects from other cultures. Traditional theory has failed to consider how cultural contexts and historical events like colonial violence, slavery, wars or genocide could shape trauma.

Roger Luckhurst advocates for a more nuanced, inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of trauma. Such an approach would offer a more authentic representation of the complexities of human suffering and an understanding of the diverse ways in which individuals grapple with and navigate the aftermath of a traumatic event in their lives. It is in this context that the paper undertakes to explore and analyse two partition texts from India; *The Parted Earth* by Anjali Enjeti and *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* by Aanchal Malhotra.

The study aims to study how Enjeti and Malhotra depict the intergenerational transmission of trauma resulting from the 1947 partition of India. Dwelling on the concept of 'witness consciousness,' the paper explores the complex interplay of memory and trauma, associated with the disruptive event in Indian history. Of specific interest, are the themes of resilience and reconciliation that manifest in the stories and interviews of Enjeti and Malhotra.

### **Political Context for the Two Texts**

The bifurcation of India into two nations on 14th August 1947 is one of the most violent and gory historical events of the twentieth century, which resulted in sectarian violence, displacement and trauma for those affected. In the brutal massacres that ensued, "...at least one million Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. Hundreds of thousands of children were lost and abandoned; between 75000 and 1,00,000 women were raped and abducted apart from the families that were torn apart" (Tiwari 2013 50). Even after seventy-seven years of its occurrence, its impact is quite tangible on the subsequent generations. While depicting the psychological trauma experienced by people on both sides of the border,

writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Khushwant Singh have raised questions of identity, nationhood and citizenship. Their works dwell on the complicated ways in which the politics of the partition shaped the people's consciousness. Manto writes:

The Partition of the country and the changes that followed left feelings of revolt in me...when I sat down to write ...I tried hard I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India...my mind could not resolve the question: what country did we belong to now, India or Pakistan. - Manto 1950 (as quoted in Tiwari 2013 51)

More recently writers like Urvashi Bhutalia, Ritu Menon and Gyanendra Pandey have focused on how memories of the partition have often been suppressed by survivors, who find reliving those traumatic memories emotionally overwhelming. With the passage of time, the trauma they underwent and their narratives remain buried, and the scope for capturing these experiences gets lost. It becomes even more challenging when oral histories, that rely mostly on memory and testimony, serve as the only available sources of the event. In an interview with *The Michigan Daily*, Anjali Enjeti asks, "What happens when we lose so many stories from a significant world event? We lose so much when we lose our family histories when we lose our stories when we don't know the struggles of our ancestors" (March 2021).

By examining Enjeti's novel, *The Parted Earth* and Aanchal Malhotra's collection of oral testimonies, *In the Language of Remembering; The Inheritance of Partition*, the paper claims that both fiction, as well as oral testimonies have the potential to represent the complex world of emotions arising out of political upheavals like the partition. Malhotra says, "I can only hope that there may come a day when the pain of Partition is no longer veiled by fear or shame or anger but is replaced by a sense of survival over... the most cataclysmic event in contemporary history of the subcontinent" (Malhotra 34).

### **Witness Consciousness**

Giorgio Agamben (2017) speaks of the difficulties faced by victims of atrocities in articulating their suffering and providing testimonies. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have dwelt on the aspect of 'bearing witness.' The concept of 'witnessing' in trauma literature is a kind of consciousness that involves bearing witness to individual and societal pain. It suggests to individuals, the importance of not just being able to cope with and survive the pain but also the responsibility of testifying on behalf of others, to contribute testimonies for shaping the collective memory of a historical event.

'Witness consciousness' in literature as well as nonfiction like memoirs, autobiographies and oral testimonies becomes an essential narrative device to capture the complexity of the trauma experience; to illustrate the intricacies of memory, healing and recovery.

It positions the survivors as both participants and witnesses to the collective as well as individual experiences of pain and suffering. Owing to this dual role, they are able to speak for people who have been silenced by violence and record their testimony for posterity. By creating non-linear, fragmented narratives that mimic the disturbance trauma brings to memory, writers frequently represent the shattered selves of the survivors.

Thus, 'Witness Consciousness' as a narrative tool not only enables the telling of the story of trauma but also asks readers to become secondary witnesses, thereby expanding the narrative's influence into a shared memory. This way of rendering is a moral requirement, as it guarantees that tragic events are not lost or forgotten from history. Witness consciousness highlights the emotions of fear, horror and confusion of the victim in a visceral way, and tends to put on stage the character's internal struggle as he/she tries to come to terms with it.

The method also looks at how intergenerational trauma is passed down, demonstrating how survivors share their memories with subsequent generations, who then become witnesses to the experiences they never underwent personally but feel bound to respond to. Another manifestation of witness consciousness is silence, which reflects the indescribability of a traumatic event. The manifestation of silences through elisions and narrative gaps conveys the potency and depth of trauma in a way that words cannot convey. To summarize, 'witness consciousness' as a literary device enables writers to negotiate the difficulties of trauma, memory, and testimony, making sure that trauma is recorded and maintained in both individual and collective consciousness.

### ***The Parted Earth***

In Enjeti's novel, *The Parted Earth*, the sixteen-year-old Deepa Khanna navigates her home's shifting politics, as riots break out in the old city of Delhi with the declaration of India's independence and its partition into two separate nations. She finds solace in the elaborate origami letters written to her by her boyfriend Amir: "India, Pakistan, Independence, the world around her was crumbling and shaping itself anew. She would purge her mind of the chaos, fill herself only with thoughts of him" (Enjeti 52).

In an incident of arson, her parents' hospital is set ablaze and Deepa becomes an orphan. Soon afterwards, her beloved Amir is also forced to flee to Pakistan. A traumatised Deepa leaves the subcontinent, as her life in Delhi falls apart.

Adjacently, the story begins in Atlanta, USA about seven decades away. Deepa's granddaughter, Shan has been grieving over the loss of a pregnancy and the subsequent breakup with her husband. Having grown up in USA, she had visited India a few times but had only hazy memories of the country. Shan feels that her present unhappiness in life has its roots in her father and her grandmother's traumatic past. Shan's neighbour Chandani

Singh, who lost her spouse a year ago is also coping with the grief and guilt of being a failed witness to her husband's trauma. Chandani shows a deep concern towards her, and Shan gradually opens up to her. She discloses about her abortion and subsequent divorce. Chandani reveals to her about her late husband, Harjeet and his haunting memories of having narrowly escaped persecution after partition. For most of his life, Harjeet had lived with his psychological wound. He had lost his sister, Simran to the marauding mob during the partition riots. Whenever he recalled that fateful night, Harjeet would break out in cold sweat and be overcome by guilt. He held himself responsible for his sister's death in the refugee camp. Had he not fallen ill on that fateful night, his family might have reached Rawalpindi sooner and she would have escaped. Those disturbing memories like phantoms from the past kept haunting him all through his adult life: "The screams from that night—they never left him. They invaded his dreams every night for years" (Enjeti 199). The traumatic incident leaves a deep scar in his psyche and disrupts his sense of self. La Capra would refer to this condition of Harjeet as "acting out," how a person revisits the original site of trauma over and over again, unable to come to terms with it. Such a compulsive behaviour blocks a person's recovery (2008 36).

Chandani tells Shan how, "The circumstances of his sister's death had weighed on Harjeet with each of Simran's birthdays, each anniversary of her death. Harjeet's guilt and grief had been one in the same, entwined so intimately he couldn't tell where one emotion ended and the other began" (200). Harjeet's trauma is further intensified after a startling disclosure by his dying father. It was not the Muslim marauders who had slaughtered his sister that night, but his own father, in order to save her honour: "...the truth came to him like a bitter pill and Harjeet couldn't digest this. Harjeet felt sick. He could hardly breathe. He had heard stories like this one, some of the darkest chapters of Partition, where husbands, brothers, and fathers killed their own wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters, for fear they'd be kidnapped, raped, and converted" (201). Unable to forget and unable to come to terms with this revelation, Harjeet spends sleepless nights brooding over it. Harjeet manifests a cluster of symptoms, what Luckhurst describes as intrusive flashbacks and recurring dreams persistently experienced by the trauma victim (Luckhurst 2008).

Shan stumbles upon a video archive, where partition survivors had recorded their testimonies of loss and guilt. She finds Harjeet's oral testimony in it. He sounded deeply disturbed by the thought that, "... Sikh women at the camp were not murdered by the raiders. The Sikh men decided ... decided to ... martyr their own women and girls" (210). Harjeet confides: "Ever since my father told me this, ... I have had great difficulty getting out of bed. I've been in therapy, on antidepressants, sleeping pills. I can't ... I can't seem to get the image out of my mind. It's ... it's killing me (210). Unable to

process his trauma, Harjeet commits suicide. Chandani grieves for her husband. She feels, “He had given his voice to one of the darkest and most painful chapters of Partition” (222). She wished she had borne witness to Harjeet’s trauma by being a more empathetic listener to him.

Shan also finds her grandmother, Deepa’s testimonial, who recalls the painful day her parents’ hospital was set ablaze. She confesses, “I regret, some days, that I didn’t force my way into that building, not so much to rescue them, but to die with them” (194). Shan begins to empathise with her grandmother. She decides to piece together the murky details of her family’s volatile past. She decides to search for her estranged grandmother, whom she had shown little interest in knowing as a child. She approaches Gertrude who had once been close to Deepa. Gertrude wonders what she could possibly tell Shan, how much she really “knew of her grandmother, ...understood what trauma could do to a person, how it could make them unknowable” (177).

Deepa has suffered multiple losses; the loss of her parents, her beloved Amir and finally her homeland. In London, Deepa leads a detached and reclusive life. Her son, Vijay’s queries about his father were responded only by silence. Shan is able to imagine, what her father, Vijay would have endured as a child, owing to his mother, Deepa’s chronic depression rooted in her traumatic memories of the past. Shan comes across her grandmother’s book on poetry titled *Exodus*: “The horror, the despair, the fragility, in the years since the British drew a line that ruptured a people embodied every verse of Exodus” (225). What Deepa could not verbalise, she learns to express in poetry. Growing up, Vijay partakes in her trauma and grows up into an emotionally dysfunctional person. He is unable to cope with the stress of married life and bringing up a child of his own. Shan grows up yearning for his love and time.

Eventually, when Shan finds Deepa, she asks her about her grandfather, Amir. She felt a sparkle ignite Deepa’s life. Shan ponders, “...a hint of what kind of life she had before Partition, a childhood of innocence, of laughter. Love. It had been many years, perhaps decades since she had known that kind of joy” (217).

With Chandani’s assistance, Shan travels to Lahore and meets Laila, her grandfather’s sister. At the Lahore Museum, where Laila’s sculptures were on display. “Flight, escape and creation were important themes for her. Sculpture like Amir’s Origami signifies the kinds of transformation that refugees must make to start a new life. They must create something new, something beautiful, from a blank page” (237). Shan’s search keeps her anchored, gives her a purpose. “She wanted to find Amir, ... the feeling of interconnectedness between her family members, between the generations, the knowledge that she was a part of a larger story of the people she loved and their histories” (235).

Shan learns that Amir had passed away 70 years ago. Thus, Shan encounters her own

trauma when she discovers her family's past and the traumatic events that impacted her grandmother's life, later her father's and then her own. By actively participating in their trauma, Shan finds closure for hers as well as their pain. Thus, the novel delves into the effects of trauma on the lives of three generations impacted by India's Partition.

### ***In the Language of Remembering***

In her preface to the book, *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* (2022) Aanchal Malhotra recalls the Holocaust researcher, Dan-Bar-On who says, "there are "historical truths" that explain "what happened" but there are also "narrative truths" that depict "how someone tells what happened". It is through such "intergenerational transmission" that one generation's story can influence and shape the stories of the next generation" (Malhotra 22).

Malhotra's book, is based on a corpus of interviews with the third and fourth-generation descendants of the survivors of the 1947 Partition. Through a collection of oral testimonies from her interviewees from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, Malhotra underscores the importance of keeping the memories of Partition alive. She offers a glimpse into how the lives of the individuals whose families were affected by the 1947 partition, continue to be shaped by the event in unexpected ways.

Her first interviewee, the reputed Indian-Canadian actress Lisa Ray admits to having a visceral connection with the Partition as an inheritor of her family's experiences: "The tensions were growing, the whispers were growing, the underlying panic had started to manifest into its own kind of ...monster, almost,' Lisa says, with wide eyes" (Malhotra 23). She remembers her father telling her of the culture shock "on arriving at the Sealdah station in Calcutta, because ..., there was complete commotion...the communal anxiety and fear surrounding Partition" (24). Lisa Ray shudders while she explains, "I know that there's a generation of Indians today who don't want to look back but, for me, the past has always been essential. [...]. The past both fascinates and consumes me... when it comes to Partition, I feel that resonance [...]. It may not have a language yet ... It is like a phantom language [...]. What I feel about Partition, even though I haven't lived through it, is real. It's very, very real" (25).

Another interviewee, Ali Abbasi from Dubai reveals to Malhotra that, "the tangible link to Partition was his maternal grandmother, Hashmat Siddiqui [...] it was such an important part of her life...her migration from there during Partition. It is an identifying moment for her, when they chose to become Pakistani (65). Abbasi is rueful about how his family got scattered and disconnected from their cultural moorings: "Everyone is concerned about their history – you know, where you're from, who you are, your land, your language. In Pakistan, I have no village, no place that is my own, no place that I



can trace the roots of my family to. For the Hindustanis in Pakistan, everything before Partition is now unreachable” (66). He finally admits that, “I have come to understand that the term ‘belonging’ is both complex and multidimensional. It comprises not only physical belonging – a sense of ownership over land and tangible space – but also cognitive belonging, a psychological landscape of solace and familiarity, which is not necessarily always within reach” (66).

The Partition is sometimes like a festering wound impacting the consciousness of the descendants of the survivors. Amitoj Singh recalls his grandmother telling him that she had once returned to the street in Lahore where she had lived, “...she was horrified to see that not only had her house burnt down in the fires of Partition but it had also remained in that state since then. She didn’t like it and wanted to leave immediately (99). Chayya Syal, another interviewee reveals that she was thirty years old when she learnt about her “paternal grandmother’s family not being originally from Punjab, as she had always assumed, but from Peshawar in the erstwhile Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa),[...]Having grown up in London, this discovery makes her re-evaluate her identity, which till now has been understood to be part of the Indian diaspora” (110). Through these testimonies gathered from the diaspora, Malhotra traces the moments through which Partition, and the memory of it emerges and re-emerges in the quotidian lives of her interviewees. She is not merely interested in recording the macro moments of the historical event. She captures it through vivid descriptions, like the whiff of a recipe carried over or a quaint accent or dialect, the name of a street or a community, powerful silences or memories brushed aside, denoting the pre-Partition past of its residents. By evoking the presence and absences, the remembering and forgetting, Malhotra lingers on the diverse responses to Partition and its impact seventy-five years on. After all, Partition is a legacy, not a bygone historical event.

Malhotra’s book becomes “the passage of memory.” It encapsulates “a relationship between a generation that has lived through a historical trauma and a generation that has inherited the memory of that trauma” (*In the Language xxx*).

### **Interplay of Memory and Trauma**

While writing of the second generation or post-memory of the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch, touches on the close proximity to tragedy, “Second-generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the...pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma ... Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world ‘bleed’ from one generation to the next (Malhotra 3).

Every time Malhotra asks her grandmother about partition, she comes up with something

more.

Malhotra wonders whether it "...is the inherent nature of memory to be cavernous? It is never chronological, often sporadic, a latticework of images, requiring gentle nudges and cues for remembrance, but always offers more" (367). Malhotra empathises with her grandmother, "How many times she has revisited the memory of a home left on the other side. How many times she has felt the same pain, the same sadness, the same loss in renewed ways. And how many times I have felt a shade of that loss" (367).

Malhotra adds, "In this way, as my grandmother shares her memories, she bequeaths the images to the next generation – 'bleeds' them, in Hirsch's terms. Thus, the intimate way in which I, and many others, receive and feel the consequences of Partition is evidence of the fact that the memory of trauma does not end at the generation that witnessed it. It can be passed down, sometimes purposefully, but most times subliminally and in quiet, unspoken and even unintentional ways" (368). As a listener, Malhotra is a witness to her interviewees internal struggles to attain some catharsis through processing. It becomes the centre stage of her trauma narrative.

When Malhotra asks her aunt, Thanuja Bhuva about the conversations she had with her sister, her aunt finds it unspeakable, too painful to recall the past. Her memories and recollections were always fragmented: "She was never emotional or sad, and it was never one long story; always sporadic and in bits and pieces if ever anything related came up. But these exchanges were brief, she hardly ever elaborated..." (Malhotra 40). Caruth would interpret it, as the unrepresentability of trauma (1995 37).

### **Narrative Technique**

Countering Caruth's notion of unrepresentability, Michelle Balaev argues that authors of trauma narratives use silence as a rhetorical device so that readers are free to decipher the meaning and determine its value for themselves (Balaev 12). He thinks, it has nothing to do with trauma's unrepresentability. It's a narrative trope common to trauma fiction. Enjeti's protagonist, Deepa, goes through severe anguish after her parents are killed. To her son, Vijay's enquires about his father, Deepa responds with an air of dejection. Vijay had considered his mother strong, but realized that "it was a mask, a disguise for the feelings she needed to hide in order to survive, to be able to raise him on her own" (Enjeti 183). Though removed in time and space from the original trauma site, Shan experiences the ripple of this inherited trauma.

Witness consciousness in Enjeti's novel concentrates on depicting the traumatic experiences of people who underwent it, through the perspective of other characters. Witnessing, however, does not refer to the physical observer but to the fragmented self, where a part of the traumatised person's consciousness observes the trauma both of the



self as well as that of the others. In other words, “the witness” here is distinct from the ‘self’ that is experiencing the trauma. Thus, the characters in Enjeti’s novel witness the historical occurrence vicariously through the tragic stories received from their elders. Enjeti uses nonlinear narration to make the readers witness trauma’s impact on the characters who belong to various places and times. The technique helps readers to understand the disjointed nature of the character’s thoughts and intricately connect with them. Positioned directly in the mind and senses of the traumatized character, the reader partakes in Shan’s emotional journey, as she pieces together her ancestral story of partition and its aftermath. Bearing witness to her ancestors’ trauma, in a way becomes cathartic for Shan.

In her epilogue Malhotra says “Listening to others is perhaps the first step in building empathy, . . . , it is to remember that we originated from a shared history, once experienced a shared pain, and thereby carry through our generations a shared loss” (2022 670).

### **Act of Bearing Witness**

In their collaborative work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman and Laub attempt to understand the function of testimony, witnessing and memory in the context of the Holocaust. They define the devastating event of the holocaust as a radical crisis of witnessing the “unprecedented historical occurrence of . . . an event eliminating its own witness” (1992). The partition of India is one such analogous event. Enjeti says, “What I find most interesting about major historical events are how they are known and remembered by the descendants. . . . my interest lay in how trauma from the past affects later generations, especially those living in the diaspora, far away from the site of the trauma” (2021).

Both, Enjeti and Malhotra reflect on the relation between the knowledge of the event and the event itself. While Enjeti presents her account of witness consciousness through fiction, Malhotra does it through oral testimonies gathered from the second and third generation of partition survivors. Like Felman and Laub, Enjeti and Malhotra would also assert: “we can only bear witness to what we can bear to witness.” One cannot remain a neutral or detached observer to such horror or monstrosities that the 1947 event signifies. Partaking in these accounts, the readers experience what La Capra refers to as “empathetic unsettlement” (La Capra 40). They become “tainted” by the partition horror, which they witness. They begin to ponder how individuals and societies cope with such experiences. The coping mechanisms may involve remembering the past or transmitting the memories to the next generation. “People were stories, and every part of their stories influenced their physical and mental health” (Enjeti 22).

## Conclusion

Literature, thus becomes a medium for bearing witness. By documenting the psychologically disruptive experiences of the partition survivors, both Enjeti and Malhotra create avenues for the readers to comprehend the experience of trauma which would otherwise be simply unfathomable. The texts encourage readers to interact with Partition's intimate, human aspects by illuminating the intricate connection between trauma, memory and storytelling. By bearing witness to the event through these narratives, we ensure that the knowledge and insights from the past are retained.

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# **Ecological Empathy: An Ecocritical Analysis of Ranjit Lal's *The Trees of Medley Gardens***

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## *Abstract*

In exploring the relationship of literature and the environment, ecocriticism throws light not only on how literature treats environment, it also throws into sharp relief how humans relate to their environment. In doing so it also raises environmental concerns and hence, it prompts action-oriented approach to pressing environmental issues. Children's literature that deals with environmental issues employs different strategies to sensitise young minds to how ecocide impacts us. Ranjit Lal's fantasy novel *The Trees of Medley Gardens* transports its child readers into the world of trees. Vish, Tadpole, and Zafia in their innocent yet knowledgeable conversations with the trees learn about the biology of the trees. Such a dialogue tends to erase the distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. The present paper analyses how the novel *The Trees of Medley Gardens* becomes a tool of ecoliteracy focusing on environment related issues in a manner that also sensitises its implied reader.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Sustainable Living, Ecoliteracy.

The present research paper seeks to study Ranjit Lal's concerns about ecological co-existence and the vitality of this co-existence ingrained by a child. For this purpose, Ranjit Lal's novel *The Trees of Medley Gardens* (2017) has been studied from the ecocritical perspective. Ecocriticism calls for analysing the aspects in the literary texts that may make the readers value the symbiotic relationship that exists in the natural world. Showing children in a wildlife setting has been vital to children's eco-centric literature all around the globe. In India, early examples include the stories of *Panchatantra*, which are collections of stories in which animal fables have been employed to teach moral values and ecological co-existence to children. However, unlike *The Panchatantra* fables, Lal has conjured a domain where the trees of Medley Gardens do not act as an allegory for the human estate and the novel does not have the didactic thrust that ancient children's literature of India has had been associated with.

The novel *The Trees of Medley Gardens* (2017) is an example of low fantasy genre. Gary K. Wolfe in *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to*

*Scholarship* (1982) defines Low Fantasy genre as “which contains supernatural intrusions into the “real” world” (52). Ranjit Lal has tried to educate the child readers about the flora and fauna of a diverse ecosystem in a humorous manner with metaphors drawn from the human society. However, objections can be made regarding the fact that he has ultimately anthropomorphised the natural world to reach his purpose.

In the novel, Lal has created a secondary world of Medley Gardens where the trees can speak with the humans. R. R. Tolkien in his work “On Fairy-stories” (1947) talks about the fantasy world that the writer creates. As per Tolkien, the writer “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (37). In Tolkien’s terms, Lal seems to have achieved his purpose of transporting the readers into the world of trees.

Medley Gardens is a parallel universe where the trees and animals welcome the human beings (children) and build a dialogue about the existence of both. It might be said that the trees are the protagonists in this corresponding world. Vish, Tadpole and Zafia are the child protagonists who represent the human world in its harmless stage where they place no monetary value in their friendship with the trees. The primary concern of the novel is to create awareness about the biology of trees to the child readers in a very entertaining manner. The child protagonists get scientific knowledge about the flora and fauna around them and the usefulness of the trees for the ecological health. Through their dealings with the trees, the children learn about various species of plants and about how the humans have had been maltreating nature. Hence, in this sense the novel can be considered as environmentally oriented children’s literary text.

The novel presents three children, Vish, Tadpole and Zafia, who are directly experiencing nature and are not just spectators. Their behaviour is in sharp contrast with that of their age mates who reside in urban areas. The text briefly mentions the schoolmates of the protagonists who are distant from nature and are not even conscious of the trees around them. Vish believes that if the other school children come to know that he and Tadpole talk to trees, they would tease and rag them. When they share this with one of the neem trees at their school, the tree informs them that those other children would be stupid to think so because “there are people who actually hug us too” (Lal 44). So, the children get enlightened about the fact that trees try to communicate only if human beings are sensitive enough to listen and form relations with them.

The narrative also presents the child protagonists as imaginative and full of wonder regarding their experiences within the natural world. They are reasonable enough to understand the healthy difference between humans and their non-human world, which is actually more than human world. If they had never had any chance to be with the

trees, then probably they too would have remained aloof from the natural world. Thus, Lal has deliberately made them appear different. This might have been done to show that the majority of the children in the society are aloof and oblivious of nature and its beings. The reasons might be the upbringing that children get during their childhood, or that the scholastic pursuits or future planning get more of their time and ultimately throttle the instinct to connect with nature. The text shows that the parents' approach directs how their children would relate to nature in today's world. Instead of putting their children to computer or TV, their parents take Tadpole and Vish to National Parks to let them experience the wild nature and ultimately connect with it. Exposure to natural world makes the child protagonists sensitive and considerate about the ecology and this makes them take the action.

Rachel Carson in her essay "The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children" (1956) expounds the significance of engaging the children with nature at an early age. She stresses that if children learn to empathize with nature, then they will eventually get to know nature too. Such a relationship will be the beginning of a long-lasting relationship with the ecosystem. According to Carson:

The emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning (Carson 33).

Carson's viewpoint emphasizes that if parents guide their children to become receptive about the surroundings, then only the children could develop an inclination towards a better understanding of a more than human world. In *The Trees of Medley Gardens*, the parents let their children explore the mysteries of natural world by allowing them to visit the Medley Gardens. Zafia's mother, Zaheeda Aunty, a history lecturer makes Zafia and Vish use her library and investigate the history of Medley Gardens in order to protect the property from being sold for construction. On seeing her active participation in saving the Gardens, Vish feels that Zaheeda Aunty and the children "were equal partners in an important research project" (Lal 91).

Apart from the Medley Gardens, the teachers take the children on a school trip to Lodi Gardens also. They also explore the flora and fauna of the Rajbagh National Park where their parents also take them during the Christmas holidays. In the National Park, the children get to know about various tree species and their living conditions. From the trees they learn about the significance of co-existence in the entire ecosystem. Ajay Singh, the guard and caretaker of the Park, takes the children on the expedition and makes them "stop and . . . listen to the sounds of the forest" (148). He observes children's love for

nature and says “that he’s never seen children who are so...empathetic and sensitive and receptive to Nature, and so observant” (151). By suggestion and example, it seems that the prime duty lies with the parents or the older generation to take the initiative and make their children develop close associations with natural beings.

Tadpole, the youngest child character of the novel, demonstrates how children are capable of making selfless relations with the natural world. From the very beginning, she considers trees as akin to herself. She fights and laughs with the trees and is curious to know everything about them. She cries whenever a tree dies or an animal falls prey to another animal. Apart from this, she also understands what is good and bad for the ecology. When the grasses tell the children about the importance of food chain and life cycles (130), she raises her query as to why one being has to die to give life to the other. When the tiger hunts the chital, she sighs that “. . . it’s so mean! . . . Everyone’s eating everyone else!” (130). Her questions to the trees bear a testimony to how nature mystifies and amazes the children which ultimately makes them curious to know more. The text aims at igniting the same level of wonder in its child readers who would eventually want to connect with the natural world correspondingly.

The narrative is inherently a dialogue between nature and the three child protagonists. Through a humorous exchange between Tadpole and the Bunyan Tree, the narrative informs the young readers about the National tree of India and its history. The Big Bunyan introduces itself as the “wish-fulfilling tree” (11) to the kids. The Neem tree gives knowledge about how it sprouts through seeds. Roaming through the gardens, the children come across various birds. The parakeet introduces them with the other trees in the garden. Vish and Tadpole come to know that the Neem trees have been in the garden for 80 years now. One of the Neem trees informs them that “we’ve been disinfecting, fumigating, pest-controlling and medicating this place ever since” and are “high class organic pharmaceutical trees” (16). In response Tadpole informs the Neem tree that she uses them in her “toothpaste and the dentist says my teeth are very white and straight and strong!” (16). Thus, the children get to know about the importance of the trees for the ecosystem.

On their second visit to the Medley Gardens, the trees disclose to Tadpole about how they can talk to the children: “We can’t help it if most of you don’t know how to listen. We’re talking all the time . . . we do communicate” (14). The trees tell the kids that all the trees communicate, if only the humans would listen to what they have to say. The narrative stresses that trees also are living beings just like humans. However, humans consider them as only resources meant for fulfilling the needs of humankind. The kids learn from the trees that there is a sacred grove in the gardens. No human is allowed to pick any branch or leaves from that reserved area. Only a portion of the gardens was

open to the villagers for taking the twigs for their homes. This sacredness implies the need for preserving the forests from human exploitation.

Through the forays of the child protagonists into the Gardens and the National Parks, the narrative provides a first-hand experience about the various species of trees and lives of animals. The kids learn about the names of many trees and thus gather knowledge about various species. By giving importance to the names of the trees, the narrative goads the children to acknowledge the agency of the trees. One can observe Gérard Genette's external focalisation narrative technique at play in the novel, whereby the narrator is lesser than the character (Marchand n.p.). Although, Vish is the first-person narrator in the text but at the same time the trees and birds have their own voice in the narrative. In this way, the trees are shown to have agency over their existence. At the same time, rather than being a first-person monologue, the narrative is a dialogue that presents varied human and non-human viewpoints. Hence, it can be deduced that the novel is a polyphonic text that gives voice to not just children but most importantly to the trees and birds and the poor couple who maintain the sacred part of the gardens. The landscape of the Gardens provides a setting for autonomy to each and every resident. Along with this, the voice of dissent also finds space in the form of the arguments between the Neem and the Banyan tree.

However, from the ecocritical standpoint, one may object to anthropomorphising of vegetation. Like humans, trees are also shown to be fighting for dominance. However, use of such allegories in children's literature are introduced to make the young readers find resonance with the characters who are very different from them. Such a narrative technique prompts the readers to take cognizance of the existence of other than human life forms that are an equal part of the ecosystem.

The narrative shows a difference between tamed and wild forests. The trees in Medley Gardens had been planted by the owners of the palace. On the contrary, in the National Park, the children witness the wild and untamed nature. Lal has exposed children to the brutal side of nature too. While visiting the National Park, Tadpole learns how one animal kills another for food. She is unable to accept the cruelty and then Vish makes her understand that "Tads, if the tiger doesn't hunt them, the chital will eat up all the grasses" (Lal 129). A section of the grassland also explains this phenomenon in detail to Tadpole that ". . . it's very important for tigers and leopards to eat deer and nilgai and keep their numbers under control. . . . That's the way Mother Nature works" (131). After being thus informed about the importance of the food chain, Tadpole starts trying to fathom the harsh realities of the ecosystem.

The narrative also foregrounds how the urban areas are becoming increasingly devoid of natural spaces. In order to have direct contact with nature, humans now have to visit



national parks, zoos, and other distant places. As a result, children growing up in urban areas remain distant from other-than-human aspects of an ecosystem and tend to live a de-natured childhood. Richard Louv in *Last Child in The Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2008) observes that “[T]he disappearance of accessible open space escalates the pressure on those few natural places that remain. Local flora is trampled, fauna die or relocate, and nature-hungry people follow in their four-wheel-drive vehicles or on their motorcycles” (37). Urban people in search of natural environment travel to faraway places to fulfil their need to relate to nature. However, their eagerness to travel often inadvertently ends up in spoiling the natural habitats.

The author has particularly focussed upon the sense of hearing of the children. Tadpole, Vish and Zafia first listen to every being in the Gardens talking and are then drawn into the world of the trees. They become curious to know the minutest details about the trees and the birds that inhabit the Medley Gardens. Here the text becomes extremely imaginative and artistic piece of adventure. Richard Louv asserts that “Parents, educators, other adults, institutions—the culture itself—may say one thing to children about nature’s gifts, but so many of our actions and messages—especially the ones we cannot hear ourselves deliver—are different. And children hear very well” (25). The character of Tadpole shows that every child has the inherent curiosity to fathom the mysteries of nature around it. However, as it gets older the political, economic, and societal forces limit its relationship with the natural world. At first, Vish, the older brother of Tadpole, was apprehensive about going near the trees. He even forbids his sister from entering the Medley Gardens. This behaviour represents the fear of humans for unexplored spaces. Another important aspect to ponder is that the text is based in Delhi, the capital city of India. The book represents the times when the capital has the highest pollution ratings. The context of the novel charts the conversion of Delhi from a green city to an exceedingly polluted metropolis. It makes us think about the human generation that transitioned from a nature infused lifestyle to urban territories where nature seldom finds its existence in the form of parks and roadside trees. Louv calls it “generational break from nature” (39) and this break has its roots in changing economic regimes and social mores and norms. Earlier when the human occupation was primarily related to agriculture, we had organic connection with nature and land. However, with the advent of industrial civilization, we started moving to urban settlements and eventually broke our bonds with land and nature. Talking about the generation that has distanced itself from the outdoors, Louv says that, “[F]or a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear—to ignore” (17). Thus, the transition from the rural to urban spaces has resulted in Generation Z’s dissociation from nature. The narrative also talks about scientific modification of nature. In this connection, Louv

expresses his concern about how the twenty-first century children would not be able to witness the beauty of nature that their parents or older generations did. Referring to the latest inventions, Louv says that the “researchers flood trees with genetic material taken from viruses and bacteria to make them grow faster, to create better wood products, or to enable trees to clean polluted soil” (32). The text mentions the plant species that are called as foreigners or ‘firangis’: the non-native species that are not beneficial for the local environment. Ranjit Lal gives the example of eucalyptus trees and *Prosopis juliflora* (vilayati keekar).

Vandana Shiva’s take on how our relationship with nature has been altered by profiteering is worth pondering in the present context. She writes in *Staying Alive* (1988) that eucalyptus trees that we grow extensively destroy the rich nutritious soil and water of India. She reasons that “Industrialists, foresters and bureaucrats loved the eucalyptus because it grows straight and is excellent pulp-wood, unlike the *bonge* which shelters the soil with its profuse branches and dense canopy and whose real worth is as a living tree on a farm” (74). The child protagonists in Lal’s text also understand that the eucalyptus trees are not good for the underground water level of the region that they grow in. The guide-birds Myna and the Parakeet inform the children about the species of shrub that is not native to India. They get to know that the trees *Prosopis juliflora* are “‘foreigners’ and are the ‘colonials from South America!’” whom “[E]veryone thinks they’re Acacias and they invade every place they can. . .” (Lal 19). Thus, the narrative gives the young readers information about the weed plants and the alien lands from which they were imported.

In addition to this, the text also teaches the protagonists which plants are good or bad for the ecosystem native to a particular place. The native trees complain about the behaviour of these foreign species and put the onus on the human beings. Ustadji or the Bunyan tree informs the child protagonists that *Prosopis juliflora* “were brought over from Mexico – sometimes I despair of the human species; they do such asinine things” (24). The narrative however leaves the question open-ended as to why these invasive species were imported and why they are not eliminated.

Ecocritics believe that sustainable living is the solution for saving the planet earth from further damage. This, they maintain can be achieved with ecoliteracy. Capra in his book *The Web of Life* (1996) explains the idea of ecological literacy or ecoliteracy. According to him, the ecological communities since the evolution of time have been organizing themselves sustainably. He is of the view that the same principles of sustainability can be applied to human communities also. For this, he says that the humans need to become ecologically aware of the ecological principles. The first of these principles is interconnectedness. In an ecosystem, “everything is connected to everything else” (Capra

41). This same principle is evident in Lal's novel. Capra's definition of sustainability is applicable to the representation of the trees in the Medley Gardens that are shown to be a community in themselves and are connected with each other.

The child protagonists learn about interdependence as a way of life from their conversations with trees. Naniji, the oldest and biggest banyan tree in the Rajbagh National Park inform the kids that the banyans "belong to the family called strangler figs . . . we get deposited by birds on the high branches of other trees where we stick . . . We're just made that way. We strangle our foster parent and then we try and make up by growing big and wide and giving everyone food, shelter and wood . . ." (Lal 132-134). This symbiotic relationship is explained as the law of nature to the children. Moreover, the trees are also not portrayed as separate from the human community. This is evident from the relationship that is shown between the children and the trees and all the other creatures that live in them. Capra voices the same notion when he says, "a sustainable human community is aware of the multiple relationships among its members" (Capra 298). So, in this way Lal has depicted child characters as interconnected with their ecosystem and living sustainably where they are concerned about the existence of the trees as an intrinsic part of the ecosystem.

In the essay "The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children" (1956), Rachel Carson poses the ultimate question that is similar to the objective of the present research too. She questions, "What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper? (Carson 56). Ranjit Lal seems to have an answer; to him, presenting stories that actually provide some practical solutions to the environmental concerns of today's times are the solution. Richard Louv also hopes that providing proper knowledge to children about nature can ultimately make them "more inclined to cultivate a deeper understanding of their fellow creatures" (Louv 33). The compassionate behaviour of Lal's protagonists towards nature makes us believe that a child's sense of curiosity in the mysteries of cosmos can make them learn co-existence that could protect nature from annihilation.

To conclude, the narrative is a dialogue between the trees, the birds and the child protagonists. Through the dialogues, the text foregrounds that destruction of ecology and how it can be stopped. The trees inform the child protagonists that forests have had been felled for the so-called development of the human world. The trees become the narrators of their own painful story, thus Lal imbues them with agency. Hence, Ranjit Lal's ecological manifesto ends in hope for an ecologically inclusive world.

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# Exploring Struggles of Gen Z in Netflix's *Kho Gaye Hum Kahaan*

Dr Rashi Srivastava\*

## *Abstract*

The contemporary digital age is the new era of scientific advancement, where the media is integrated in to the daily life of the people. The merger of youth and technology has had a significant impact on numerous facets of life, including communication, education, career and relationships. At the same time, it is also acting as a developmental context in the lives of Gen Z, integrating into their day to day activities. For any kind of active or passive interaction, creative expression, maintaining relationships, a digital platform is the first choice of the Gen Z. This results in blurring of the boundary between real and virtual in their lives. In the field of cinema, filmmakers and script writers are now focussing on this contemporary issue where they intend to portray Gen Z and the kind of role media plays in their everyday lives. *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* (2023), an Indian film released on *Netflix* deals with the intermingling of digital media and the lives of three Gen Z friends Imaad, Ahana and Neil. The personal struggles of relationships, careers, emotions intertwining with social media applications such as Instagram, Snapchat as well as Tinder, increases the difficulties of the already complicated lives of the trio. In the backdrop of social comparison and belongingness theories, the paper explores the contemporary digital world of the three characters where digital media acts as a developmental context in their real life.

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Gen Z, Youth, Social Media

## **Introduction**

The world is driven by rapid technological developments and revolutionary advancements in media and communication. With the arrival of internet, the world is connected through digital platforms and devices. Access to information, connectedness, education, business and entertainment through digital medium has become a common notion in an individual's life. The most significant consumer of digital media in the contemporary times is the youth. Gen Z is the term used to denote the digital generation, a generation which has grown up in a hyper connected world, streaming and sharing content online, using internet for educational purposes, entertainment and socialization. S, Sumadevi discusses in her research article, stating,

The youth utilize the digital media for any kind of cultural engagement as well. In another words, there are incredible possibilities for education, social interaction, and improving oneself on a personal level in numerous ways. In present times, internet plays an important role in for any kind of decision making, related to career, health, finances and even relationships. (S, Sumadevi 287)

Thus, social media platforms have become indispensable tools for fostering connections, enabling young individuals to bridge geographical barriers and engage in constant interactions with their peers, friends, and family.

Additionally, the abundance of information available on these platforms has transformed the way youth access knowledge, granting them an array of educational resources at their fingertips. Miriam Arnold states about information overload, "It is possible to conveniently and actively access diverse information, and we also passively receive large amounts of information and messages. Despite the different channels of information, information is mostly consumed through screen displays." (Arnold et al 1). Wide scale availability and access to information have additionally brought its challenges, especially for the Gen Z. *YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn* and even *Tinder* have been the digital platforms amidst which the youth juggles and consumes information. The smartphones and tablets are the quick mediums for accessing these platforms. Therefore, credibility and complexity of information also becomes a pertinent issue in the lives of the Gen Z. This study analyses the merger of digital media with the lives of the modern-day youth, through the film *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* (2023), applying the belongingness theory by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Lear and social comparison theory by Leon Festinger.

## Literature Review

Researchers suggest several theories to understand the kind of influence the media and communication have on the Gen Z: positive, negative or neutral or a combination of all. Chia-chen Yang et al in his work "Social Media and Psychological Well-Being Among Youth: The Multidimensional Model of Social Media Use" have categorised the different social media activities and the kind of influence it has on the youth. In order to understand the current digital context in the lives of the youth, the existing canon of literature must be analysed. One of the early predecessors of examining and critiquing media and technology was George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). *Neuromancer* (1984) written by American-Canadian writer William Gibson paints a bleak picture of a world where virtual realities, cybernetics and Artificial Intelligence dominate. *Feed* (2002) a novel by M.T. Anderson and *Little Brother* (2008) by Cory Doctorow that explores the negative and positive impact of the digital technology on the youth, respectively. *The*

*Circle* (2013) written by American writer Dave Eggers deals with digital technology and its repercussions. *Fangirl* (2013) written by American writer Rainbow Rowell depicts the usage of digital media in a positive/ neutral context. The world of cinema has also explored the relation between youth and digital media. Films such as *The Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), *Cyberbully* (2011), *Disconnect* (2012), *Men, Women & Children* (2014), and *Ingrid Goes West* (2017) Japanese films *Perfect Blues* (1997) and *Pulse* (2001) and *Searching* (2018) deals with the digital world.

The book *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* (2008), edited by David Buckingham discusses the different aspects of digital media in integration in youngster's worlds. Research article "Digital Media and Youth: Unparalleled Opportunity and Unprecedented Responsibility" written by Andrew J. Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger illustrates about the numerous opportunities for learning, interaction and communication offered by digital media for the youth. "Media Literacy, Social Connectedness, and Digital Citizenship in India: Mapping Stakeholders on How Parents and Young People Navigate a Social World" (2021) written by Devina Sarwatay and others investigates children's difficulty in navigating the digital and social world. The paper "Social Media and Psychological Well-Being Among Youth: The Multidimensional Model of Social Media Use" (2021) written by Chia-chen Yang and others gives a comprehensive multidimensional Model of Social Media Use (MMSMU), that helps in understanding the relation between social media usage among youth and their psychological well-being.

"Constructing young selves in a digital media ecology: Youth cultures, practices and identity" (2022) by Liza Tsaliki examines digital media in the formation of popular culture, identity and cultural practices of the youth. Another research paper titled "The role of digital media in creating a parallel culture: an enquiry based on the current cultural and socio-political scenario in Kerala, India" (2019) investigates the role of digital media in giving voice to the voiceless. "Media and Youth Audience – A Comprehensive Review" (2022) written by Velita Sibon Lobo and others is a review paper that explores the relationship between media and the youth, assessing the influence of media from physical and mental perspectives, in positive and negative ways.

Research article "Cinema and the Digital Revolution: The Representations of Digital Culture in Films" by Hasan Gürkan and Başak Gezmen analyses digital culture in films. The four significant films *War Games* by John Badham (1983), *Perfect Blue* by Satoshi Kon (1993), *Pulse* by Kiroshi Kurosawa (2001) and *Life in a Day* by Kevin Macdonald, Loressa Clisby, Tegan Bukowski (2011) portrays various different aspects of digital culture according to the temporal landscape. "Statistical Style Analysis of Hindi Biopics: Exploring the Genre Conventions in Recent Years" written by Neerja Vyas & Sushila Shekhawat attempts to review different approaches which are used to analyse biopic films.



“India In-Between: Culture and Nation Representation in Jean Renoir’s Film the River (1951)” by Shrija Srinivasan and Sushila Shekhawat illustrates the cinematic analysis of the film *The River*. “Women in refugee camps: reel representation of marginality in the extremes” written by Pooja Chatterjee, Sushila Shekhawat and Sangeeta Sharma is an elaborate study women refugees through the films *Pinjar* and *Shikara*. It focuses on the marginalised women in refugee camps, irrespective of caste, class or religion, employing shot-by-shot approach.

This paper analyses the film *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* (2023) that portrays the contemporary world of the young people, whose lives are intertwined with the digital media. The film accurately mirrors the lives of the contemporary Gen Z living in metro cities of India, struggling with their personal problems and navigating through life’s challenges. In the review of the film written by Debosmita Saha and Aditya Kumar Shukla states that the film portrays how the Gen Z and late millenials are so lost in the online world that they are not able to comprehend the reality of an offline world. Noli B. Ballara, in research article “The Power of Social Validation: A Literature Review on How Likes, Comments, and Shares Shape User Behavior on Social Media” examines the impact of social validation on people’s behaviour through social media. Using social media people feel a sense of belongingness, a boost in self-esteem, social identity and increase in happiness quotient. At the same time negative commenting can lead to disappointment. The writer also uses social comparison theory by Leon Festinger which is applicable on social media also. Another theory that can be applied is belongingness theory popularised by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary that suggests that having a sense of belongingness is a major human motivation. A lack of belongingness may have severe consequences. According to them, “In view of the metatheoretical requirements listed in the previous section, we propose that a need to belong, that is, a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships, is innately prepared (and hence nearly universal) among human beings.” (Baumeister 499) The theory of social belongingness and social comparison can be applied on the film as Gen Z uses social media to identify and express themselves. They tend to act in a manner in order to feel a sense of belongingness. Their connections are being made online to belong and compare, feel elated and sometimes disappointed. In a contemporary digital society, the theories are applicable on the youth.

### **Kho Gaye Hum Kahaan: Lost in the Illusionary Online World**

The film released on Netflix in December 2023 marks the directorial debut of Arjun Varain Singh. It is produced by Zoya Akhtar, Farhan Akhtar, Reema Kagti, and Ritesh Sidhwani. Set in Mumbai in the contemporary times, the story revolves around three



Gen Z youngsters Imaad Ali (Siddhant Chaturvedi), Ahana Singh (Ananya Pandey), and Neil Pereira (Adarsh Gourav). Ahana has earned her MBA from London School of Economics and works in corporate firm. Imaad is a stand-up comedian and Neil is a personal gym trainer.

The three best friends represent urban youth navigating their professional struggles and personal complexes in a digital dynamic environment. Ahana's boyfriend Rohan wants to have a break from their relationship for no reason that troubles her. She creates a fake Instagram account in order to stalk Rohan, discovering that he is posting picture with a new girl Tanya. Confused and perplexed, she creates fake scenario to grab Rohan's attention. Imaad, spends his time on Tinder under the fake name of Zeeshan to search for potential one-night stand candidates. His routine is to find a girl on *Tinder*, spend the night with her and then blocks her, as he is commitment phobic. While on *Tinder*, he finds a mature photographer Simran with whom he feels genuine connection. He spends time with her, but continues with his *Tinder* affairs. He is also seeing a therapist for his intimacy issues. Neil wants to open his own gym but due to his humble background, he is still struggling. In order to earn money and fame, he tries to catch the high-profile clients. Always comparing himself with other trainers by seeing their posts online, he feels a sense of inferiority complex. In addition, he is in a secret relationship with an influencer Lala.

Ahana quits her job to invest in Neil's gym along with Imaad. But in a one of the stand ups, Imaad jokingly calls Neil and Lala's relationship fake, creating a rift between them. Imaad's relationship progresses and he moves in with Simran. Ahana's fake posts attracts Rohan and at a friend's Sangeet party, the two meet and spend the night together. But in the morning, Rohan is gone and he has blocked Ahana's number. Neil on seeing Lala with another man online, confronts her. She says that she never took him or their relationship seriously. She also files a complaint against him because of which Neil loses his job. Aggressively, Neil hacks Lala's account and exposes her lies. Simran on knowing that Imaad is still using *Tinder*, breaks off their relationship. Ahana confronts Rohan at his birthday party and exposes everything to his girlfriend Tanya. When Rohan starts to insult Ahana, Imaad and Neil rescues her. Imaad in one of his Stand Ups reveals that he was sexually abused as a child by his father's business partner, which led to his intimacy issues. The three friends open the gym and decide to depend less on social media and understand the reality of life.

### **Ahana, Imaad, Neil: Digital media as a developmental context of Gen Z Trio**

In the film, digital media acts as a developmental context in the lives of the three characters. It means that majority of their life is driven by activities on digital media.

Chia-chen Yang et al states “Adolescents and emerging adults use social media to engage in the developmental tasks that members of these groups typically encounter, such as developing and maintaining friendships, negotiating autonomy, and portraying themselves to the public (Yang et al 631)” The digital media acts as a medium for Gen Z to understand their problems, which at times becomes too complicated to be solved, leading to psychological and physical health issues.

The first character Ahana struggles in her relationship and uses social media as a way to solve it. When Rohan wants to take a break from the relationship, Ahana is not able to process it. Rohan is not replying to her calls or messages. As a result, she becomes obsessive and starts stalking him online (Singh 00:17:20). She creates a fake account on Instagram so that her identity remains unknown and she can decipher every move of Rohan online. Imaad in one of his gigs says “Recently I read a survey that on average, a person checks his phone 224 times a day. You know, if you do something 224 times, it stops being an activity, it becomes an addiction. And we have become addicted to other people’s lives.” (Singh 00:20:38) It is a subtle remark on Ahana. The belongingness theory by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary is applicable on Ahana as she no longer belonged to Rohan. The lack of that serious romantic relationship has severe consequences on her mind and she starts doubting herself, questioning her self-worth. (Singh 35:29) Despite having her best friends, she feels lonely. On seeing Tanya’s photo on Instagram, Ahana has a sudden urge to post her photo. Her photo receives many likes and comments and she is instantly getting a boost in her self-esteem (00:43:19). This reflects that Ahana is comparing herself to Tanya and therefore the social comparison theory is applicable on her.

She starts posting her pictures on Instagram, to deceive Rohan that she is enjoying her life without him. She also post her picture on a date night (Singh 1:18:12). On confronting Rohan, he says that she looked happy without him. Her reply was “I was just pretending. Looking at your super happy life, your perfect girlfriend, I am fed up Rohan... All I ever wanted was your attention, Rohan” (Singh 1:52:14). It demonstrates that her entire life was driven by the fake scenario she was putting online for Rohan. Her need to be with him and comparison she was drawing with others made her lost in the online illusion, even forgetting her own identity.

Neil, who comes from a humble background, uses social media to gain fame and subsequently earn more money. Deep down, he aspires to be like other famous gym trainer, so he tries to imitate them. He buys expensive sneakers and other products like other trainers. His father advises him to save more rather than buying twenty pairs of shoes (Singh 00:10:29). He’s also in a secret relationship with Instagram influencer Lala, and feels that may be he can also benefit from her. But scrolling through Instagram,

he feels disappointed in himself, as other are doing better and having a luxurious life. While conversing with Imaad he says “Good doesn't cut it anymore, bro. These days you need to have your own brand and celebrity clients.” (Singh 00:13:44). The Social Comparison Theory by Festinger is applicable on Neil as he is constantly comparing himself to others on social media. Social media has increased the urge to have social validation. Likes, comments, shares, and other metrics are frequently used in the context of social media platforms to quantify social validation. These virtual exchanges function as means of social validation, signifying acceptance or acknowledgment for the posts, images, or concepts that an individual has shared. Users are driven to look for social validation because it boosts their sense of belonging, establishes their social position, and improves their self-worth (Ballara 1852).

Neil represents the youth of today, who constantly compare their lives on social media with others and try to outwit each other. In a digital age, everyone is putting an online façade, basically to demonstrate their happening lives. They are stuck in a loop. In a scene, a friend of trio says that she was not happy when her fiancé asked her to marry in a parking lot. She specifically took him to Maldives for this proposal and pictures were then posted online. (Singh 00:33:28) The influencer culture is fuelling this loop. Lala presents her lavish lifestyle online and the youth aspires to become like her. Although everything is paid, her life completely revolves around posting and creating fake scenarios. Imaad makes a sarcastic joke on her in his stand-up “I mean people have used the Internet to cause revolutions. And this madam is all, "Hey, guys. I'm off to the Maldives to chill at my exotic beachside villa." "But keep enjoying the petty pleasures of your middle-class life."” (Singh 00:59:41)

Imaad understands the challenges of a digital age. He is not obsessed over social media apps. But he's addicted to another digital tool of Tinder, a dating app. In order to suppress his emotions and childhood trauma of abuse, he uses sexual activity. He immediately blocks every girl he spends time with, as he is not able to handle any intimacy. He is also going to a therapist who advises him, “I think you've built a wall around yourself. And you won't let anyone in. But you deserve a healthy, loving relationship” (Singh 00:18:08). He begins to have a healthy relationship with Simran, but is still using Tinder, to which Ahana objects as well. (Singh 01:08:51). Neil who knows Imaad's habits reveal everything in a fight, “Talk about your Tinder mania! He can't handle the slightest bit of intimacy. You're emotionally stunted, bro” (Singh 01:03:31). Imaad is suppressing his inner demons and using a digital tool to deal with it. He represents another facet of youngsters, who use digital media to escape their inner demons and the reality within oneself.

## Conclusion

The youth in the contemporary digital age are navigating life through digital media tools. They are living in dual worlds, online and offline. The line between the two often blurs, where they tend to believe entire happenings in the virtual world. The online social media and other digital tools have become a medium to fulfil innate needs of belongingness, expression and social validation. Identity construction, self-esteem and cognitive ability are highly impacted by using digital media in terms of positive and negative aspects. Kho Gaye Hum Kahaan is a film that critiques the contemporary digital era. The three Gen Z characters Ahana, Neil and Imaad are engrossed in digital world. From work to personal lives, digital world has taken a hold on to their lives and they are lost in the online illusion. Ahana's personal relationship, Neil's inferiority and Imaad's intimacy are indirectly controlled by digital media; which often is manipulated against them, resulting in depression, insecurity, identity crisis and stress. The film helps in understanding the complexities of digital age, amidst which the youth is fixated. It portrays a picture of the youth of a metropolitan city, who are paving their paths in a digital context.

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# Mythologising the Self: An Exploration of the Intersection of Identity Myth, Cultural Heritage, and Resistance in Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship*

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## *Abstract*

The intersection of identity myth, cultural heritage, and resistance is a significant theme in literature, particularly in novels dealing with immigrant experiences. Immigrant families often construct myths about their past to attain a sense of identity and social prestige in a new society. However, with the passage of time, these myths become oppressive, and consequently, individuals feel constrained by the expectations and ideals imposed upon them. In such cases, resistance becomes a crucial weapon for the assertion of self and personal freedom. The present paper explores the intersection of these three themes in Jan Lowe Shinebourne's 1947 masterpiece, *The Last Ship* (2015). The paper takes into account the study of two female characters, Clarice Chung and Joan Wong, to examine the tension between the fabricated nature of identity and heritage and the act of resistance. It also showcases how individuals must navigate the burden of identity myths and cultural heritage to assert personal freedom.

**Keywords:** Identity myth, cultural heritage, resistance, fabrication, self, immigration

“I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me” (Virginia Woolf 96)

The concept of identity is very crucial in understanding human experiences. It not only involves how one perceives oneself but also how he/she is perceived by the society. Whenever personal development is taken into account, then addressing the question who am I? is obvious. The question may seem simple, but the nature of identity is complex and intricate. Throughout the course of one's life, identity is shaped by a myriad of influences and experiences. Identity is formed by the complex interplay between internal self and external influences. Thus, it is a personal as well as social construct.

In the simplest form, identity is the medium through which individuals understand themselves and present themselves before others. The concept of identity is not static, but it is dynamic. It continuously keeps evolving based upon personal experiences, social

interactions, and cultural contexts. Walt Whitman's (1819-92) oft quoted lines from *Song of Myself* (1855) vividly illustrates the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (180, sec. 51). Whitman's declaration is indicative of the fact that a person can embody various identities simultaneously, without necessarily being confined to a single and consistent image of oneself. According to Whitman, individuals may contain multiple and opposing aspects, but these contradictions contribute to a broader understanding of who they are.

Multiple factors such as gender, class, religion, and nationality are responsible for shaping an individual's identity. Identity helps individuals in establishing a sense of belongingness in the society. According to the renowned psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-91), the formation of identity involves a lifelong process which is influenced by the personal experiences as well as social contexts. He propounds: "In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (130). This definition illustrates not only the importance of identity in fostering a sense of belonging but also highlights the purpose of individual within a community. At its core, identity is deeply personal which is associated with an individual's self, but it is shaped by the collective units with which an individual interacts throughout his/her life.

In literature, the concept of identity is a fundamental element which helps in understanding the development of a character. Literature reflects the relationship of the character with himself as well as the external world. With the emergence of the postcolonial literature, the concept of the portrayal of the individual's identity has become more complex. As postcolonial literature also deals with the issue of multiculturalism, characters are often seen navigating the multiple layers of race and cultural heritage. Many of the postcolonial novels showcase the fact that the process of identity formation is quite complex. Characters in such novels struggle with an internal desire for authenticity. At the same time, they face external pressures to conform to societal norms. Consequently, they can be seen presenting a fabricated version of themselves. This fabricated or manipulated version of their identity is referred to as identity myth.

Identity myth are stories or narratives which individuals create about themselves. It basically refers to the idealised version of one's background or heritage. Social, cultural, and historical influences affect these myths. These myths can be created either consciously or unconsciously with the aim to meet personal aspirations or social standards. Whenever an individual feels that he wants to gain social prestige, avoid racial discrimination, or find a sense of belonging, these myths come into existence. More often than not, people exaggerate certain parts of their background, hide others, or act in certain ways that meet social expectations—all these are part of identity myth. However, there is a difference



between identity myth and falsehood. These myths are not necessarily lies; it is a way of presenting one's self strategically to fit into a particular society. These are constructed for the sole purpose of gaining acceptance in the society. Thus, it is not a matter of personal choice but is shaped by larger cultural and societal forces. These forces place emphasis on certain behaviours over others.

A person's identity is also influenced by cultural heritage. Cultural heritage includes values, traditions, and historical legacies that are inherited by the individuals from their ancestors. It forms the foundation of how individuals view themselves in connection to their communities. Though cultural heritage can provide a sense of pride and belonging, it may also impose certain expectations upon individuals. These impositions include how they should behave, what they should value, and how they should present themselves to others. In a multicultural society, every person considers his culture to be superior than that of others. It is this society which pressurises individuals to conform to the ideals associated with their cultural heritage. This tension between carving a personal identity and preserving their own cultural heritage results in the creation of identity myths. This forces individuals to fabricate or exaggerate certain aspects of their culture; it helps them in gaining social prestige and avoid marginalisation. Hence, the role of cultural heritage in identity formation is quite complex in multicultural and postcolonial societies. In such societies, identity myths are constructed as a response to broader societal expectations about race, class, gender, and cultural purity.

The pressure to conform to identity myths and preserve cultural norms hampers personal growth. Furthermore, one cannot express himself or herself in an authentic manner under this pressure. However, if individuals resist such myths, it allows them carve out a space for themselves. It also helps them in breaking free from the limitations of tradition and cultural expectations. It also paves the path towards the liberation of self. This act of defiance is not just about rejecting cultural heritage—it is a necessary step towards discovering one's true self.

The interplay of identity myth, cultural heritage, and resistance can be seen in the writings of many postcolonial novelists. This intersection is particularly evident in the novels which come under the gamut of Caribbean literature. In these novels, one can encounter numerous characters who manipulate their self and create identity myths. In this way, they try to preserve their culture. Moreover, in these novels, one can also find those characters who do not favour the support of such myths. By resisting these myths, they assert their own self. Jan Lowe Shinebourne (1947- ) is one such name amongst the list of those prominent novelists who explores the complex themes of identity myth, resistance, and cultural heritage in her works. This Guyanese-born novelist is a dominating voice in Commonwealth literature as well as Caribbean literature. In her works, she throws



light upon the tensions between personal identity and the external pressures of cultural expectations. Her literary corpus includes four novels, namely *Timepiece* (1986), *The Last English Plantation* (1988), *Chinese Women* (2010), and *The Last Ship* (2015) and a short-story collection entitled *The Grandmother and Other Stories* (2004). Though limited in number, the quality of her work surpasses the quantity.

Shinebourne is best known for presenting characters who manipulate their identities and fabricate certain aspects of their cultural heritage in order to gain social acceptance and escape marginalisation. This identity myth helps them in surviving into a completely new environment. This issue is vividly portrayed by Shinebourne in *The Last Ship*. The novel is cantered around an old lady named Clarice Chung who is Chinese by birth. In the late nineteenth century, she came with her family to British Guyana to work as indentured labourer. Ultimately, she settles there and struggles to find a place in a new country. Her family becomes the victim of the racial discrimination as their neighbours ridiculed them. Since Clarice Chung was a strong woman, she faced all the odds of life bravely and made people aware of her rich cultural legacy. She was proud of her Chinese nativity and instilled the same spirit in her children. The plot of the novel reaches to its climax when her granddaughter, Joan Wong, visits Hong Kong. There she was informed that her grandmother did not belong to North China but rather she was a Hakka-Chinese. Joan was thrilled to know about the reality of her family ancestry as she always hated the cultural legacy which the rest of her family always boasted of. Thus, the novel, *The Last Ship*, explores the theme of identity myth by showcasing the multigenerational journey of the Chung family.

Throughout the novel, Shinebourne demonstrates the fact that identity myth can serve as a protective shield, especially through the character of Clarice Chung. For Clarice, the myth which she constructs about her family's rich heritage is not just a survival mechanism, but it acts as a defence against the racial prejudices which she and her family face in Guyana following immigration. It helps them in asserting cultural superiority and gaining an acceptable place in a society that would have marginalised them. As Abigail Persaud Cheddie asserts, Clarice uses "her Chineseness overtly to construct her identity" (141). The character of Clarice embodies the tension between preserving her Chinese heritage and adapting to the pressures of discrimination and marginalisation. As an immigrant, she experiences pride as well as pain in maintaining her cultural legacy. She knew very well that life would be difficult in British Guiana, and therefore, she exaggerates the facts about her origins and takes pride in her Chinese roots. The social environment forces her to create an identity myth to navigate the challenges. Her interactions with her customers and neighbourhood illustrate how she fabricates aspects of her Chinese culture to maintain her dignity. For instance, her silence in the shop, her

refusal to acknowledge Winston as her grandson, and Frederick's constant insistence to the customers that she speaks only Chinese can be viewed as strategies to make a place in an alien country:

To excuse her, Frederick would even tell people, "She can only talk Chinese", though he knew that while she rarely spoke English, she could communicate perfectly well in Creole. He would remind them she came from China, though he couldn't be sure if that was true. One thing was certain, if you told people she came from China and she spoke Chinese, they became overawed and kept their distance. Who knew what was true? Only Clarice knew the truth, and in Canefield she remained a mystery so no one could take advantage of her. (Shinebourne 14)

Clarice's actions create a sense of superiority and mystery about her Chinese origins. By detaching herself from the local population, she makes an attempt to preserve her cultural heritage in a hostile environment where her identity is under threat. Through her character, Shinebourne reveals how people like Clarice manipulate their identities to preserve their culture in a foreign land.

Throughout the novel Clarice emphasises upon the fact that she is a pure Chinese. This idea of purity becomes a powerful myth that helps her in defining her own self. She always distinguishes her from the Hakka people and she views them as inferior, but in fact she too was a Hakka Chinese. This fabrication or manipulation of her identity and culture help her in elevating herself above others, particularly Susan Leo and her daughters. Her assertion that she is a descendant of a royal family also exemplifies identity myth: "We Punti had land and property in China. Dem Hakka people dat come here din have nothing, nothing! Me family was royal Chineese! Emperor Chengzong was me family" (Shinebourne 22). This claim is a key part of Clarice's identity myth, as it allows her to transform her family's story into a grand narrative that gives her a sense of superiority. This mythologising of the self allows Clarice to see herself and her family as part of an exclusive cultural group, though in reality they are shopkeepers in a foreign land. To Clarice, this myth helps her cope with the loss of her homeland and the sense of dislocation that comes as a result of being part of the Chinese diaspora.

The identity myth presented in the novel can be viewed as defence mechanism for those individuals who face cultural marginalisation. The identity myth allows Clarice to distance herself from the socio-cultural and socio-economic struggles faced by the Hakka people living in China. The Hakka group of people, who are generally referred to as guest families in China, have historically been marginalised. Clarice's denial of her Hakka heritage and her creation of a false but more aristocratic lineage can be seen as an attempt to rewrite her personal history: "When I come here from China with me family, dem people laugh an mock we Dem Hakka Chineese 'pon deh boat, dem had pigtail. Me family, we was not Hakka Chinee, we was Punti" (Shinebourne 66). By doing so, she

is trying to create an identity myth associated with power and wealth which provides her a sense of psychological refuge from the hardships of her reality. However, this construction of the false identity creates a tension between the authentic representation of cultural heritage and its idealisation. If Clarice would have accepted her true Hakka heritage, it means she is accepting the socio-economic struggles faced by that ethnic group in China. By creating a narrative of the nobility and associating herself with the Punti, she distances herself from her cultural heritage. Though the myth gives her a sense of pride and dignity, at the same time, she keeps the authentic connections to her heritage at stake. It shows how cultural heritage is often idealised or exaggerated to overcome the challenges of living in a foreign environment.

In *The Last Ship*, identity myth also takes the form of family myth. This is evident in the myth which was constructed by Clarice's uncle, Arnold Chung. Arnold Chung constructed a myth that they come from a Chinese family which has a rich aristocratic background. This myth helped the entire family in justifying their social position in British Guiana. It also distinguished them from the rest of the population. This myth served multiple purposes: it provided the family an opportunity to establish a place for themselves within the social hierarchy. The colonial system always privileged European norms and values, and hence this myth acts as a tool for survival. Arnold's constructed identity myth is used by Shinebourne to highlight the struggles faced by the first-generation immigrants. This also points to the emotional and psychological burdens faced by these immigrants. These burdens include cultural displacement, racial prejudice, and the desire to preserve their cultural heritage. This fabricated version of the identity helps Arnold in elevating his family's status. The fact that the family is trying to climb the social ladder is evident in Clarice's elaborate. Arnold tried his best to show that the wedding looked pure Chinese. The wedding displayed the family's cultural and social prestige publicly. The local press reported that the family is culturally elite and socially significant. Arnold's efforts in mythologising the family's heritage are not just centred around preserving cultural identity but is also a strategy to command respect and authority within the colonial structure. The newspaper coverage of the wedding, though half true, symbolises the external validation that is required for such myths to be sustained. The grand Chinese wedding placed the Chungs as not only successful in British Guiana but as carriers of a grand Chinese legacy. By performing the wedding ceremony in a traditional manner, Arnold reclaims a sense of cultural heritage that he believes will set his family apart from the rest of the elite class living in Georgetown.

The concept of identity myth in *The Last Ship* is presented in quite a complex manner. There are certain characters who appreciate Clarice's rich cultural legacy, but at the same time, her granddaughter, Joan, hates the Chineseness of which her entire family felt

proud of. For instance, Sussan Leo's daughter idealises Clarice Chung as a symbol of success, wealth, and respect. They believe that these are the qualities which their mother lacks, and therefore, they appreciate Clarice despite her brutal nature. Though they were fully aware of the difficulties which Sussan encountered in nurturing them, but they were captivated by Clarice's constructed image of an aristocratic and successful lineage. In this way, they distance themselves from the reality of their own socio-economic and cultural background. This myth offers them a psychological escape from the hardships and perceived failures of their mother. It also allows them to elevate their status by claiming connection to a woman whom they perceive as superior. The daughters' adherence to this myth reflects their internalisation of societal values that considers material wealth and social status as superior.

However, resistance to this identity myth emerges through the character of Joan. Even at a very young age, she is mature enough to understand the harsh treatment which her mother, aunt, and maternal grandmother received at the hands of Clarice. Though "she came too late to receive the good luck blessings from Clarice", she knew that Clarice treated her daughters-in-law with cruelty, rejected them for not being fully Chinese, and was more inclined to wealth and class (Shinebourne 83). There is also an incident in the novel when Joan refuses to use her Chung connection to gain social favour when she was posted in a bank. It is also an act of personal resistance. Despite understanding the benefits that will come with identifying herself as part of a prestigious family, she rejects this form of identity to climb the social ladder. By distancing herself from the cultural norms that prioritise class, wealth, and status, Joan resists both the identity myth associated with the Chungs and the class snobbery prevalent in Georgetown. Furthermore, her conversation to Jonathan Greene about the experiences and struggles which forced the immigrants to take up a new and fake identity confirms her doubts, though to a little extent. Thus, she resists the pressures to conform to a false narrative of identity.

Joan's search for truth begins when she visits Hong Kong and meets an American historian. She enquires about the Chungs who left for British Guiana in 1879, and his responses confirm Joan's suspicions that her family's so called prestigious image is based on falsehoods. The historian reveals that the Chungs were not northern Chinese aristocrats, but rather Hakkas from Guangdong, a group historically known for being marginalised in China. In order to receive better treatments, they fabricated their identity and cultural heritage. Subsequently, she throws the artefacts into a sea and frees herself from the burden of the myth which her family had carried for generations. In this way, she abandons the false legacy of the Chungs. Hence, she does not follow the same path as that of her ancestors.

Thus, Shinebourne's monumental work, *The Lat Ship*, offers a deep reflection on the ways

in which myth is responsible in shaping identity and cultural heritage. It also teaches the readers that resistance to such identity myths can help in achieving personal liberation. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that identity myths may provide a sense of dignity and superiority in the face of adversity, but true freedom can be achieved only when these myths are dismantled.

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# **Impact of Technology on Human Relationships: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Study of Ravinder Singh's Novels**

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## *Abstract*

Technology has significantly reshaped modern relationships, with virtual communication becoming essential in forming and maintaining connections. Matrimonial sites, dating apps, and social media platforms have altered how individuals engage with one another, influencing emotional intimacy and societal perceptions of relationships. Ravinder Singh's novels, *I Too Had a Love Story*, *Write Me a Love Story*, and *Your Dreams Are Mine Now*, explore these evolving dynamics, illustrating both the opportunities and challenges presented by digital interactions. This study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach to examine the impact of technology and social media on identity, emotional bonds, and social interactions in Singh's works. By integrating Freud's psychoanalytic theory, it investigates how digital communication serves as a medium for expressing unconscious desires, anxieties, and repressed emotions. The study also contrasts traditional and digital communication, highlighting the psychological implications of virtual interactions on human relationships. Through an analysis of Singh's narratives, this research explores the intersection of literature, digital technology, and psychoanalysis, offering insights into the evolving nature of love, intimacy, and emotional expression in the digital age. **Keywords:** social media, technology, digital use, modern communication, psychoanalysis, relationships, literature

## **Introduction**

Modern Indian literature has transformed with the rise of digital media, allowing authors to share their work globally through platforms, social media, and e-publishing. Readers now find stories via online recommendations and social media book clubs, which has led to new forms like flash fiction and webcomics. Digital spaces also foster literary communities where writers and readers engage.

Freud's psychoanalysis theory can be applied here, exploring how digital characters express unconscious desires and emotions. The anonymity of digital platforms allows characters to engage in behaviors or thoughts they might suppress in traditional settings. Ravinder Singh, a prominent Indian author, utilises digital media to reflect the evolving

nature of communication in his stories. His debut novel, *I Too Had a Love Story*, exemplifies the power of digital media. Self-published through Kindle Direct Publishing, it reached a global audience, with Singh engaging personally on social media to connect with readers. His use of digital platforms boosted the book's popularity and created a vibrant reader community. This approach allows us to examine how technology impacts storytelling and characters' unconscious drives in modern literature.

## Objectives

*To explore the impact of Human-Technology Interaction (HTI) on modern relationships.*

*To assess technology's role in broadening relationship possibilities.*

*To examine how digital platforms address human emotions and social changes.*

*To analyze the role of social media and technology in Singh's novels.*

*To investigate how technology shapes interpersonal relationships and societal interactions in Singh's works.*

*To understand how virtual communication influences identity, relationships, and society.*

*To explore the intersection of narratives, digital media, and Freudian psychoanalysis in evolving human connections.*

*To reveal how literature and technology intersect with social issues in contemporary society.*

## Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze relationships and emotional connections in Ravinder Singh's works, applying Freud's psychoanalysis to explore unconscious motivations and conflicts shaping the characters' experiences in a digital world.

## Literature Review

The integration of social media and technology is a key theme in contemporary literature, allowing authors to explore modern communication dynamics. Ravinder Singh, renowned for his narratives on love and relationships, often weaves these elements into his works, reflecting shifts in interpersonal communication.

Imam and D.S.M.T. (2023) highlight how social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram impact youth relationships in the Patna district. Micunovic et al. (2016) explore the transformative role of digital technology in Croatian literature, while Våljataga and Fiedler (2014) examine the rise of digital textbooks in education. Spjeldnaes and Kalsen (2022) investigate how digital devices such as e-books and audiobooks influence reading habits.

On media ethics, Arora (2019) and Kumar (2016) analyze sting operations in electronic journalism, emphasising the balance between media accountability and privacy. Seth and Patnayakuni (2008) explore how online matrimonial platforms are reshaping traditional

arranged marriage practices in India.

Despite extensive research on digital media's societal influence, there is limited focus on its impact on literary storytelling. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining Singh's novels, exploring how social media and technology shape character relationships and narrative progression, thereby offering insights into literature's evolving role in the digital age.

### **Research Design**

This study explores how technology shapes relationships in Ravinder Singh's novels through a qualitative analysis. It examines virtual communication, evolving identities, and societal impacts, highlighting the interplay between literature, technology, and modern social challenges.

### **Discussion and Findings**

Digital media plays a significant role in modern relationships, influencing communication, connection, and emotional closeness. Tools like text messages and voice chats help couples stay connected and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Ravinder Singh's *I Too Had a Love Story* explores communication in a pre-social media era, depicting a long-distance relationship sustained through emails, texts, and calls. Published in 2008, the novel uses limited digital media to deepen the characters' bond while also highlighting Human-Technology Interaction (HTI) and the complex dynamics of human preferences, cultural differences, and algorithmic predictions. Understanding how people use these platforms reveals how digital connections are changing. Nainika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni have rightly stated,

"The use of online matrimonial services provides an interesting illustration of the social construction of technology" (347).

Over the course of their conversation regarding marriage, Ravin and his friends debate matrimonial websites and the benefits that they provide. It is through the matrimony website Shaadi.com that Ravin is introduced to Khushi. Nainika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni have precisely stated,

Online personals, e-dating, and matrimonial websites are changing the rules of how relationships are formed and maintained in communities all over the world. In societies where dating itself is taboo according to social and religious norms, online matrimonial services are filling the gap left by the absence of social networks in societies transitioning to urban and modern culture (347).

Ravinder Singh highlights the use of Human-Technology Interaction (HTI) from the start, with the search for the perfect partner on a matrimonial website, to interact with each



other during the course of the night, either by phone call or by text messages. Nainika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni have exactly stated,

Perhaps the biggest change that online matrimonial services have introduced to arranged marriage is opportunity for interaction” (343).

He highlights Human-Technology Interaction (HTI), showcasing that even a relationship can be maintained at a substantial distance via the utilisation of technology. In the article *The Impact of Social Media on Modern Relationships*, Brody Wooddell quotes Sherry Turkle, a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, who says,

Social media has fundamentally changed the way we relate to one another, and this includes our romantic relationships. One of the downsides is that it can create a sense of ‘always-on’ connection, which can be exhausting and make it harder to disconnect and be present with our partners. However, social media can also create opportunities for self-expression and connection, especially for those in long-distance relationships (BLOOM Tampa Bay, 2023).

In Ravinder Singh’s novel, *I Too Had a Love Story*, Ravin’s interactions with Khushi through phone calls and text messages reflect a complex psychological struggle that can be analyzed using Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Ravin’s obsession with Khushi, evident when he states, “I don’t know why, but I felt like calling her up again” (Singh 24), can be interpreted through the lens of Freud’s concept of the id, which represents unconscious desires and impulses. Ravin’s compulsive need to initiate contact with Khushi, despite his attempts to control his urges, suggests an internal conflict between his unconscious desires and his conscious self-restraint, representing the dynamic tension between the id and the *superego*. In his book *"The Ego and the Id,"* Freud makes the valid observation that,

The division of mental life into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise on which psycho-analysis is based; and this process helps in understanding the mental level of the characters. (9)

Freud’s model of the *ego* comes into play when Ravin struggles to reconcile his impulses with socially acceptable behaviors, as he refrains from calling Khushi in the middle of the night and instead contemplates a more socially acceptable form of communication the following morning. This reflects the *ego*’s attempt to mediate between the *id*’s primal desires and the reality of social norms. His agitation and desire for Khushi to reach out, followed by his inability to resist sending the first message, further underscore the dominance of the *id* over the *ego* in moments of emotional turmoil. Ultimately, this psychoanalytic interpretation reveals how Ravin’s communication with Khushi serves as a reflection of his internal struggle between desire, social expectation, and self-control. The above-mentioned scenes draw attention to the statement of Shields-Nordness in *Social Media, Relationships and Young Adults*, which notes,

One of the more interesting concepts on the rise with social media and text messaging is how young adults form relationships without ever having to have face-to-face contact with one another (14).

Digital media plays a crucial role in sustaining long-distance relationships, as shown in Singh's *I Too Had a Love Story*. Despite their physical distance, Ravin and Khushi stay emotionally connected through calls and chats. Ravin's yearning for Khushi is evident when he prioritises talking to her over settling into his hotel. The line, "I missed her in my US days, and she missed me in her Indian nights" (Singh 137), highlights their mutual longing. Singh demonstrates how platforms like Yahoo Messenger allow long-distance partners to bridge the emotional gap. Their communication, though interrupted by work, strengthens their bond, especially as Khushi shares photos with Ravin, making them feel "virtually together."

From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, Ravin's obsession with Khushi and his continuous desire to communicate with her can be seen as a manifestation of his unconscious yearning for emotional fulfillment and intimacy, reflecting the id's drive for pleasure. Freud elaborates the working of the ego as the law that works on fulfilling the pleasure

Moreover, the ego has the task of bringing the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality-principle for the pleasure-principle which reigns supreme in the id. In the ego perception plays the part which in the id devolves upon instinct. The ego represents what we call reason and sanity, in contrast to the id which contains the passions. (29-30)

According to Freud, the id's impulses are often driven by unconscious desires, and Ravin's constant preoccupation with Khushi represents a desire to satisfy his emotional needs. His urge to connect with her reflects the psyche's need to seek gratification through virtual closeness while also highlighting the tension between his conscious efforts to control his emotions and the unconscious drive to maintain connection. Shipan Yu aptly states in *The Influence of SocialMedia on Interpersonal Relationships*,

Social media also facilitates the deepening and strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Through social media, people can keep in touch with each other more frequently and share the details of their lives in a timely manner. This is especially important for maintaining long-distance relationships (92).

The shared photos deepen Ravin's longing for Khushi. Singh emphasises that in the modern era, digital communication helps sustain relationships despite physical distance. At the end of *I Too Had a Love Story*, Ravin's anguish over losing Khushi is intensified by Shaadi.com commercials, which once symbolised hope but now amplify his pain. Her promise of a shared success story becomes a reminder of what was lost, deepening his emotional distress. Nainika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni state in *Online Matrimonial*

*Sites and the Transformation of Arranged Marriage in India,*

As marriages do not happen in a vacuum, the search-matching-interaction framework integrates the context in which the relationship dyads are embedded with the interpersonal processes involved in the formation of the relationship. The second aspect involved observing the ongoing appropriation of the online service by users as reflected in the profiles and success stories documented on these websites. These success stories are obviously intended as testimonials by other users for the service, but they provide an additional source of information and details on how the partners decided to adopt the service, how they used the service, and the role of other family members (336).

From a Freudian perspective, Ravin's suffering can be understood as the conflict between his unconscious desires and the reality of loss. The matrimonial website, initially a symbol of hope, becomes a symbol of unattainable desire. Ravin's pain is intensified by repeated exposure to Shaadi.com ads, reflecting his repressed yearning for a future with Khushi. According to Freud's pleasure principle, Ravin's anguish arises from his frustrated desires and the impossibility of fulfilling them, highlighting the role of unconscious conflict in shaping his psychological state. Freud, in his book *'Beyond the pleasure principle'*, asserts

In the psycho-analytical theory of the mind, we take it for granted that the course of mental processes is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle'; that is to say, we believe that any given process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with a relaxation of this tension, i.e., with avoidance of 'pain' or with production of pleasure.

In *Write Me a Love Story*, Ravinder Singh highlights the role of digital media in modern publishing, enhancing writing, marketing, and collaboration. While traditional methods still hold value, digital tools help authors stay organised and creative. Singh's use of digital media reflects unconscious desires for innovation and creative expression. Freud's theory of sublimation suggests that authors channel their inner urges for recognition into their work, using digital platforms as an outlet for repressed emotions and fantasies. Spjeldnæs and Karlsen state in *How Digital Devices Transform Literary Reading: The Impact of E-books, Audio Books and Online Life on Reading Habits*, Digitalisation makes text reading easily accessible. Experienced readers have developed strategies to maximise the combination of work of literature, reading format, and situation. They swap seamlessly between paper, e-books and audio due to altered habits and their circumstances. To great consumers of literature, advantages like availability, weight and the possibility of personal customisation make digital literature a better option for daily reading than paper (13).

In the novel *'Write Me a Love Story'*, Asmita gets the manuscripts of Abhimanyu via

email and makes the editing process faster and easier. Singh highlights that, of course, sending papers to publishing houses is no longer the only way to get a book published. Many self-publishing platforms have sprung up because of digital media, letting authors print and spread their work on their own. E-books, in particular, have become very popular because they let readers immediately access a huge collection of books. Digital platforms like e-books, Kindle, and others have made writing and reading more accessible, letting both established and new writers share their stories with readers all over the world. It has been demonstrated that digital novels are an important educational resource that enhances social interaction, motivation, and reading skills in youngsters. As Kimberly Benway states in *Using Digital Novels to Enhance the Reading Experience*, “The digital novel proves its importance as a useful tool in the classroom to promote social interaction, motivation and as a learning tool that students can use to develop their literacy skills” (40).

Digital media has transformed book marketing, allowing authors to engage with readers on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. These platforms create communities where readers can interact with authors, share feedback, and build excitement for books before their release. Singh's *Write Me a Love Story* shows how social media amplifies competition, as seen in the rivalry between authors Abhimanyu and Rizwan, whose public dispute over book sales sparked online debates and fan interactions.

This rivalry reflects unconscious desires for recognition and power. Freud's concept of the id explains the authors' actions as driven by a need for success and validation. Social media serves as a space where these repressed desires are played out, heightening the emotional stakes of their competition.

In *Write Me a Love Story*, Ravinder Singh explores how social media shapes modern relationships and careers. Asmita uses Twitter to share her job search, while her virtual interactions with Abhimanyu reveal his emotional state through his posts. Asmita absorbs Abhimanyu's feelings, forming a stronger bond. Additionally, her idea for an e-book launch reflects Freud's sublimation, where unconscious desires for success are channelled into a productive digital project, demonstrating how digital media serves as an outlet for repressed emotional and professional drives. Sinha accurately states in *Information Technology and Its Impact on World Literature*,

Technology is advancing at a high pace and literature is changing with it. With the advent of social media, quick digital interactions appear to be the future of social communication. Because readers' emotional, temporal, and spatial relationship with books is changing rapidly (par. 22).

In *Your Dreams Are Mine Now*, Ravinder Singh highlights the impact of digital media on relationships, ambition, and social change. The story revolves around Rupali Sinha,

an intelligent and hardworking student from Patna who is admitted to a prestigious university in Delhi. While initially hesitant about social networking, Rupali eventually creates a Facebook account at the request of her friend Saloni. This marks a shift as she enters a new environment, reflecting the growing importance of social media in connecting individuals and navigating new spaces.

Singh further explores how digital media enables the characters to address larger societal issues. Rupali's encounter with Professor Mahajan, a respected college figure, leads her to witness a horrific act of abuse. When she secretly records the incident on her phone, she realises the power of technology in documenting and exposing wrongdoings. Despite her fear, Rupali is motivated by her father's advice to fight evil, and she decides to act. Although she initially plans to report the incident publicly, she employs a strategic approach to protect the victim by pretending to make a call for political reasons, ultimately allowing her to intervene discreetly.

The use of technology extends to Rupali's efforts to bring Mahajan to justice. She enlists the help of Arjun and his friends Madhab and Prosenjeet, who work for his political party, to upload the video online. The video goes viral, quickly spreading awareness of Mahajan's actions and ultimately leading to his exposure. Singh's novel illustrates how digital media is used not only for personal communication but also as a tool for social activism. By showcasing how young people leverage technology to challenge corruption and injustice, Singh emphasises the growing role of digital platforms in shaping modern society and encouraging social change. As discussed in *Role of Media in Sting Operation: An Analysis*,

Successful sting also tends to end with an arrest or crackdown, where evidence recorded by the operation is enough to warrant an arrest or the target actually engages in a crime (Chaddha).

From the web, the video made its way to Facebook and then to DU's pages and websites. For more attention, Madhab sent a DVD of the film to a local news station, and it worked. They then said it was a "sting operation." It has been highlighted in the paper *Role of Media in Sting Operation: An Analysis*, that technological progress allows the media to carry out sting operations to uncover corruption, immorality, and exploitation by powerful persons and businesspeople. While these operations benefit the public, some believe they boost viewership, resolve political conflicts, damage business interests, and tarnish reputations. As Chaddha states,

By using technological opportunities media does sting operations to expose corruption, immorality, exploitation, flouting the rule of law by those holding public offices, influential persons and businessmen. On one hand, electronic media by way of sting operation serves the public interest by strengthening the democratic framework by disseminating information about fact of vital interest to the society and on the other

hand some incident focus on that point that electronic media has done sting operation only to increase channel viewership, settle political scores, harm corporate interest, malign reputation, etc. (Chaddha).

The novel cleverly uses current technology to reveal Mahajan, the antagonist's dubious behavior while emphasising interpersonal relationships. The characters of the novel deliberately use social media to spread Mahajan's acts. This section examines how the protagonists use social media's virality to expose the antagonist's actions, highlighting its influence on public opinion and awareness. Khan states in *Sting Operations: The Role of Media as a Vigilante*,

Sting operations have been an incredible instrument in uncovering wrongdoing and defilement in the public arena. We have seen various situations where sting operations have assumed a noteworthy part in securing justice for all (71).

Ravinder Singh highlights the influence of digital communication on human interactions as one of the novel's main topics. Rupali and Arjun's relationship, shaped by texting and calls, reflects the clash between love, ambition, and societal expectations. Shields-Nordness aptly states in *Social Media Relationships, and Young Adults*,

Smartphones have extended social media use because they have put social media in the pockets of young adults. They have also met communication faster with the introduction of text messaging (2).

Freudian psychoanalysis highlights this as a conflict between their unconscious desires for intimacy (*the id*) and societal pressures (*the superego*), with digital communication serving as an outlet for these repressed emotions. In his work "The Ego and the Id," Freud makes the following assertions,

The considerations that led us to assume the existence of a differentiating grade within the ego, which may be called ego-ideal or super ego, have been set forth elsewhere. They still hold good. (34)

Ravinder Singh demonstrates how Rupali and Arjun engage in a phone conversation where Arjun attempts to develop a romantic relationship with her. Rupali is conflicted, struggling with her emotions and thoughts, unsure if she should end the intimate conversation. Ultimately, her desire to be loved prevails, and she continues speaking with Arjun. Despite the intimacy of the conversation, she feels self-conscious during the call. Here, Arjun's desire for intimacy and connection with Rupali could be seen as driven by *the id*, while Rupali's hesitation might represent *the superego*, shaped by her internalised values of how relationships should behave. *The ego* would mediate between these desires, possibly resulting in complex decision-making processes and relationship dynamics.

Rupali helps Arjun with his political campaign by suggesting the use of social media. A page is created to address issues like unclean kitchens and poor Wi-Fi in DU hostels.



Students share their concerns and photos, while party workers comment and encourage others to propose creative, affordable solutions. Regarding the significance of young people and social media in elections, the *ACE Project: The Electoral Knowledge Network underscores*,

For many young people, social media is their first point of contact with friends, family, news, research, and information... tools to inform young people about all aspects of elections, including in real-time (“Youth and Elections”).

The statement highlights the need for Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to engage young voters and combat misinformation. These platforms can be effective tools for delivering real-time election information to youth.

Ravinder Singh explores the role of technology in seeking justice, particularly through social media protests against Mahajan's actions and the crime against Rupali. The novel raises ethical questions about using digital platforms to expose crimes, with characters discussing the morality of their actions and the risks of self-justice. Singh also highlights the significant impact of Indian media, empowered by advanced technology, in shaping public opinion and promoting justice in society; it is aptly mentioned by Arora in *Investigative Journalism and Sting Operations by Electronic Media Vis-a-Vis Right to Privacy*,

Indian media has played a critical role for stirring the conscience of the people. Media has achieved great heights with the latest technology. The presence of media in our society assures us, the justice in every way (45)

## Conclusion

Ravinder Singh's integration of digital media into his novels offers a contemporary lens through which modern relationships are explored. His portrayal of love, friendship, and identity in the digital age reveals the complexities of human interactions mediated by technology. From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, Singh's characters' emotional journeys, navigating the unconscious desires for connection and intimacy, reflect the tension between their inner desires (id) and the societal pressures (superego) that shape their actions. The digital platforms—emails, texts, and social media—serve as an outlet for repressed emotions and provide a means of reconciling their conscious and unconscious desires.

Singh's careful balance of traditional narrative elements with digital tools enhances the emotional depth of his stories, making them relatable to a generation deeply engaged with technology. By depicting characters who interact through digital communication, Singh captures the essence of contemporary romance, where the boundaries between



virtual and real-life intimacy are increasingly blurred. His novels not only engage with personal relationships but also reflect on broader societal issues, such as the ethical implications of digital media, the role of technology in shaping identity, and the potential for technology to both strengthen and challenge human connections. Through this thoughtful engagement with both technology and psychology, Singh creates narratives that resonate with readers, prompting them to reflect on the role of digital media in shaping modern love and friendships.

### Limitations of the Research

This study offers insights into Singh's use of social media and technology but is limited to his works. Different authors portray digital interactions uniquely. The qualitative focus excludes quantitative data, which may limit the findings' broader applicability.

### Possible Further Research

Comparing authors' use of social media and technology can reveal storytelling trends and societal shifts. Examining technology's role in literature highlights changing narrative techniques and cultural perspectives, showing its evolving influence over time.

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# Ophelia's Madness: An Unconscious Revolt

Nida\*

## *Abstract*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is considered his masterpiece, leaving literary scholars intrigued and psychoanalysts baffled on account of its great psychological underpinnings. While Hamlet's indecisiveness and madness become topics of literary contestations, the character of Ophelia remains subdued to him throughout literary history. This paper focuses on the character of Ophelia, her madness, and the bawdy and wistful songs that she sings, not as a woman's pastime but at the height of her insanity. It explores her masked sanity behind her insane voice, with a primary focus on the extravagant metaphors and free associations that she employs, thereby unravelling her repressed unconscious psyche, on which societal impressions of womanhood and chastity have been cast in diverse ways. Furthermore, it also delineates how her insanity and death bestow her with power and agency in the ways sanity cannot and how her madness becomes a means of sublimating her repressed unconscious. The paper employs textual analysis of Ophelia's sections in the play, with an underlying framework of cognitive approach to metaphors and Freud's ideas of unconscious and repression.

**Keywords:** Ophelia, madness, songs, repressed, unconscious, metaphor.

Ophelia's character has been neglected in terms of its individuality for long. She is reminisced particularly for her explicit femininity and subservience to her associated males in the play – Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet. Her obsession with flowers and poetic death scene, immortalised in the painting of the famous Pre-Raphaelite painter, Sir John Everett Millais, also reinforces her feminine charms. Only with the later scholarly study of the feminist critics is her characterisation revisited; however, their studies usually reflect her presentation and representation in the play in tandem with the gendered aspect of the social history of early modern England. The feminist readings critique her objectification at the hands of the male figures in the play and tackle the question of female sexuality and madness. For instance, Carroll Camden attributes her cause of madness to Hamlet by analysing her songs, and she substantiates her arguments with respect to the Elizabethan notions of “passio-hysterica brought on by erotomania” (254). Psychoanalysts attempt to unravel the mysteries of Hamlet's madness by examining Ophelia's descent into madness in the play. Ophelia's character becomes a secondary source of study, wherein “lies a key to the mystery of what ails Hamlet” (Lidz 33). Lidz

contextualises Ophelia's insanity as a "careful apposition and opposition" to Hamlet's "antic disposition" and elucidates how the play gains both "balance and resolution" through Ophelia's madness (35). Similarly, Jacques Lacan begins his psychoanalytic seminar on "the tragedy of desire," announcing that he would speak about "that piece of bait named Ophelia" (11). However, he diverges from his promise and proceeds to speak at length about Hamlet. To him, Ophelia is "obviously essential," only because "she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet" (20). Ophelia is thus a bait not only for Polonius but also for psychoanalysts and literary critics, who delve into the hero's psyche by attempting to study her character. While Ophelia's madness gets eclipsed by Hamlet's "antic disposition" (Shakespeare I.V.170), it is nevertheless crucial to understand the evolution of her character and the consequent ushering of her individuality amidst the loss of her sanity.

Initially, the play showcases Ophelia as a subservient sister and an obedient daughter who is prescribed extreme caution and dictums concerning chastity, virginity, and honour. Laertes's sanctions on Ophelia to restrain her from the "dangers of desire" are laced with metaphors of diverse kinds like religious- body as a temple; military- "out of the shot"; nature- "the canker galls," "liquid dew of youth," et cetera (Shakespeare I.III.10-44). He also uses the metaphor of "A violet in the youth of primy nature" to put forth Hamlet's youthful and inconsistent nature and "chaste treasure" to indicate the importance of her virginity (I.III.5-31).

He goes on:

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,  
And keep you in the rear of your affection  
Out of the shot and danger of desire.  
The chariest maid is prodigal enough  
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.  
Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes.  
The canker galls the infants of the spring  
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,  
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth  
Contagious blastments are most imminent.  
Be wary then: best safety lies in fear,

Youth to itself rebels, though none else near (I.III.32-43).

In this departure speech, he directs Ophelia to exhibit "fear" and "safety" about Hamlet's "unmastered importunity" lest she "unmasks her beauty", implying unmasking her virginity in the bedchamber. While Laertes banks upon the metaphorical and hortatory style to preach virtue to his sister, Polonius largely embarks upon direct exhortations

– “You do not understand yourself so clearly | As it behoves my daughter and your honour” (I.III.95-96), “Marry, I will teach you: think yourself a baby” (I.III.104), “Look to’t, I charge you, Come your ways” (I.IV.134). In such a societal set-up where female subservience is expected as per the whims of men, Ophelia is projected as a typical feminine heroine who succumbs to the men’s dictums – “I shall obey, my lord” (I.IV.135). She is literally used as a pawn by Polonius, extending her objectification to another level when he hatches a plot of a staged meeting to confirm that Hamlet’s apparent madness is caused by his love for Ophelia and her rejection of his advances.

In her staged confrontation with Hamlet, she receives his misanthropic tirades as he grows vituperative and pronounces his misogynist curses in his “Get thee to a nunnery” speech (III.I.120-51). The usage of the term “nunnery” is ambiguous as it could refer to the convent, a religious community vowed to chastity, or in Elizabethan slang, a brothel, implying Hamlet’s disillusionment and bitterness with women, which he projects onto Ophelia. He goes on:

If thou dost marry, I’ll give thee this plague for  
Thy dowry; be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,  
Thou shall not escape calumny. Get thee to nunnery (III.I.134-136).

The terms “nunnery”, “chaste as ice”, and “pure as snow” in Hamlet’s harsh speech again reflect the pressures placed on Ophelia to embody the ideals of purity and chastity, making her a victim of both Hamlet’s turmoil as well as the patriarchal expectations placed on women. Later, during the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet, while conversing with Ophelia, employs sexual innuendoes through puns and metaphors, exhibiting his wit – “Lady, shall I lie in your lap”, “Do you think I mean country matters?”, “That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’s legs”, and “It could cost you a groaning to take off mine edge” (III.II.108-243). Lying in the lap, between the maid’s legs and groaning carry an overtly sexual connotation, while “country matters” is used as a vulgar reference to female genitalia, with a pun on ‘cunt’. Ophelia perceives the innuendoes, yet she cannot retort or object to him; she only acknowledges his keenness – “You are keen, my lord, you are keen” (III.II.242).

All these harsh treatments by the male figures in her life exacerbate Ophelia’s emotional distress, contributing to her eventual mental breakdown. After Polonius’s murder, Ophelia appears on stage in a distracted state, signifying her madness. The gentleman describes her speaking “much of her father.” He labels her speech as “nothing,” carrying “half sense” yet moving the “hearers to collection.” (IV.V.7-9) Despite being “nothing,” he gives a hint to the reader on how her “words,” “nods,” and “gestures” could help one sense “thought” in her forthcoming quips and songs.

...They (the hearers) aim at it,  
And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts,  
Which as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,  
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,  
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily (IV.V.9-13).

While it is already evident that Ophelia has lived her life according to culturally prescribed notions of feminine chastity and obedience, her “words” and “gestures” in the state of madness throw light over her repressed unconscious psyche.

Freud’s conception of the unconscious entailed that it is a much larger component of our psychic structure and serves as a reservoir of our repressed thoughts, traumatic memories, and unchanneled drives. Repression, according to him, entailed a primary defence through which people put traumatic emotions or experiences at gulf from their reality and awareness. He found that “when his patients failed to consciously remember what they had repressed, they would unconsciously enact and re-enact their history” (Johnson 12). Repressed feelings re-surfaced through diverse media like dreams, parapraxis (Freudian slips), phobias, et cetera. Modern psychoanalysis also explores the link between the unconscious realm of the mind and music. Musical inspiration is deemed to have its “origin in an unconscious incubation” (Sterba 104). Susanne Langer holds that music articulates and reveals deep-seated feelings unlike language, for “its significant forms have that ambivalence of content which words cannot have” (qtd. in Nass 304). As a madwoman, Ophelia’s songs and gestures are seen as mourning for her deceased father. However, they are instrumental in understanding her unconscious realm, as it is through them that she re-enacts her repressed feelings in her irrational state.

Ophelia employs extravagant metaphors and lyrical free associations within her songs, which further reveal her repressed unconscious. With the development of the cognitive approach to metaphors, metaphor was seen beyond its ornamental aspect as ubiquitous and an intrinsic part of human cognition, thought, language, and culture (Gibbs 3-4). Borbely pointed out the importance of metaphor in psychoanalysis. He notes that “key psychoanalytic dynamic concepts such as psychological trauma, neurotic defense, normal defense, transference, free association, and interpretation are directly related to the mind’s metaphoric and metonymic functioning” (412). Considering this model, the metaphors within Ophelia’s songs are crucial to fathom her internalization of societal dictums concerning honour and chastity and her repression of feelings concerning the forbidden realm of desire.

The "Saint Valentine's" song that Ophelia sings is full of metaphoric euphemisms and sexual innuendoes like "do't," "By Cock", "tumbled me," et cetera. (IV.V.48-63) They help



the reader unravel her psyche, fed earlier with metaphoric tirades of societal propriety by the male figures of the play. Ophelia, as a chaste maiden, cannot speak about her desire openly; however, it is through her metaphoric innuendoes that her repressed and frustrated desire for Hamlet unfolds. The line "And I a maid at your window | To be your valentine" (IV.V.50-51) also echoes Laertes's use of the phrase "chariest maid" in his departure speech and Hamlet's use of the word "maid" in *The Murder of Gonzago* scene, in its connotations of female chastity and sexual vulnerability. While all her songs project her frustration at unrequited love and forbidden desire, "Saint Valentine's" song explicitly highlights betrayal in love as the lover abandons the woman after robbing her of her chastity. The mention of "owl was a baker's daughter" also alludes to the motif of loss of chastity/virginity (Jenkins 533). Her words echo Laertes's earlier threats, Polonius's concern about honour, and Hamlet's Nunnery Speech which Ophelia seems to have internalised deeply. Earlier in the play, Ophelia submits to her father and brother's rulings, indicating her subservience and obedience. In her madness, she employs free associations, enabling her to speak about whatever comes to her mind without any concern for societal and courtly propriety.

Ophelia's addresses to the court members during her utterances are also significant in understanding her repressed psyche pertaining to the larger surfeit of secrecies surrounding King Hamlet's death. Sofia Lopes argues how the phantom of King Hamlet unleashes an atmosphere of distrust, unease, and secrecy in the play. She notes that Ophelia remains "trapped in the threshold of knowledge: a disquieting state, where she has an inkling of the horrors around her, but can never grasp them in their entirety" (Lopes 308-309). Ophelia has been a spectator to *The Murder of Gonzago*, plotted by Hamlet to enact his revenge. Her specific addresses while singing indicate her inkling of the mysterious circumstances. Jenkins points out how the first song about "the dead but mourned lover" is addressed to Gertrude, and the Saint Valentine's song, "a song of seduction," is addressed to the "seducer, Claudius" (530). Through her songs and addresses, she pronounces specific indictments and allegations. Ophelia's insanity allows her to voice socially unacceptable opinions about Claudius's seduction and trickery and Gertrude's adultery, which are otherwise forbidden within the constraints of the social and courtly order. She sings and speaks ambiguously through puns, riddles, innuendoes, and metaphors. Her madness allows her to sublimate her repressed opinions as they get disguised in the acceptable form of songs.

Ophelia's songs engage with the popular broadside ballad form. Caralyn Bialo looks at Ophelia's songs in terms of gender and class dynamics as Ophelia, an elite woman, is taking recourse to an otherwise non-elite form of broadside ballads, sung generally

by lower-class women. Her songs contain excerpts from popular ballads like the "Walsingham Song," "The Miller in His Best Array," "Saint Valentine's Song," et cetera, and they foreground common concerns about women stuck in a patriarchal set-up. Bialo points out: "Ophelia's songs do align popular performance with madness and femininity, yet the popular nature of songs simultaneously draws the audience into the tragedy of her madness and provides a discourse through which her madness critiques the gender hierarchy in Elsinore and beyond" (306).

Ophelia also distributes flowers to the members present in the court. In a way, this act of distributing symbolic flowers can also be interpreted as a re-enactment of her life-long subservience to others. The act becomes a poignant expression of her repressed emotions, as her fractured psyche surfaces in a final, symbolic gesture of compliance and despair. She presents rosemary and pansies to her brother signifying "remembrance" and "thought" (IV.V.173-175). She seems to allocate fennel and columbines, signifying marital infidelity to Gertrude, and rue and daisy, signifying repentance and doomed love to Claudius (Dane 417). In the end, she offers violets but mentions – "they withered all when my father died" (IV.V.182-83). The withered violets, while ostensibly symbolizing the loss of Ophelia's father, also evoke her connection to Hamlet. Previously, Laertes employed the metaphor of fragrant yet ephemeral violets to underscore the transient and insubstantial nature of Hamlet's love. Ophelia's reference to withered violets in her madness reflects the unmasking of her repressed unconscious. Whether metaphoric or direct, the rigid societal prescriptions about the codes of honour, duty, chastity, and virginity, long embedded in her psyche, find expression in her fractured mental state, allowing her a symbolic act of defiance and liberation.

Ophelia's insanity lends her power in a way sanity cannot. Initially, she is a subservient sister, a dutiful daughter, and an obliging lover. However, her descent into madness allows her to exercise agency by challenging authority and defying socio-cultural codes of propriety. Her poignant ballads and witty banter grant her a moment of self-assertion and access to a different experience altogether. While the male members in her life previously dictated and constrained her sexuality as per their whims, her madness allows her to reclaim autonomy by venting her repressed desires and indicting the court members for their failures and moral corruption. However, despite these subversive acts and her newfound, powerful voice, Ophelia is ultimately infantilized; Laertes diminishes her subjectivity by reducing her to mere "prettiness" (Shakespeare IV.V.186).

The ultimate self-assertion that Ophelia exerts is through her death. Gertrude informs Laertes of her drowning scene. That Ophelia wears nettles, daisies, weedy trophies, and phallic long purples to her death is another indication of her sexuality and sensuality that

cannot be obscured by Gertrude's elegy (Showalter 81). Ophelia's drowning scene in the brook, with vivid imagery of nature and flowers, also links up with her unconscious. Polonius calls her "a green girl" (I.III.101), and Laertes labels her as the "Rose of May" (IV.V.157). Hamlet, prior to his Nunnery speech, addresses her as "The fair Ophelia Nymph in thy orisons" (III.I.89). Though Hamlet intends to mean a young woman in her prayers, the denotative meaning of "nymph" is a spirit/deity of nature as per Greek mythology. Nymphs are represented as beautiful and young maidens who frequent rivers, woods, trees, et cetera. The image of the nymph stands relevant in her drowning scene as Ophelia seems to re-enact this image underlying her unconscious. Gertrude mentions her "mermaid-like" appearance in the brook (IV.VII.175). Therefore, her obsession with flowers and nature in her death also indicates her internalisation and repression of the nature images and metaphors previously employed for her.

Whether Ophelia's death was accidental drowning owing to her madness or an intentional suicide is not explicitly specified in Gertrude's elegy. Only in the Gravediggers' scene do readers get the hint of Ophelia's death being an intentional suicide since the gravediggers question her Christian burial (V.I.1-30). Considering it a suicide, Ophelia's death can be seen as her autonomous choice. Through her suicide, she asserts command over her body and life, which her male associates hitherto governed. Her death can be viewed as a resistance to the stifling constraints of patriarchy and even religion since suicide is a grave sin in Christianity. Through her suicide, she offers an answer to the existential crisis tormenting Hamlet throughout the play. Gabriel Dane notes - "Reflecting on the rotten state that robs her of viable alternatives, Ophelia decides that in order "to be" she must choose "not to be"" (423). In that sense, she exhibits a courageous choice.

Ophelia's madness thus becomes her "unconscious revolt," wherein "all men merge in her mad imaginings – all the controlling voices of her life, her conscience, her psyche- all the outside forces determined to manipulate her for their own ends" (Dane 412). It offers her an escape from all the unbearable patriarchal and societal constraints that circumscribe her boundaries as a woman and a subject. Her madness is liberating as her enforced repression unfolds in her bawdy songs and witty banter in the court. It empowers her as she is no longer forced to remain silent and obedient. She speaks without interruption, indicts Claudius and Gertrude through her addresses, highlights their moral failings, and expresses the vices and corruption that engulf Elsinore. She exhibits reason in her madness and sanity behind her insane voice. Ophelia's madness gives voice to her struggles as a suppressed, elite woman shackled by patriarchal expectations. Eventually, her traumatic unconscious motivates her for her ultimate liberation, her death, wherein she again exerts sensuality and agency forbidden to her as a woman.

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# Transformation and (Re)creation: Analyzing the Graphic Novel *Aranyaka* through Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation

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## *Abstract*

Adaptation is far from being a recent phenomenon; it has manifested in diverse and multidimensional forms since antiquity. It is a process to engage in “(re-)interpretation” (Hutcheon 8) and “(re-)creation” (Hutcheon 8) of existing works by transforming it into a new narrative. Adaptation from diverse domains into graphic novels is a compelling and rapidly developing field. Such adaptations combine both verbal and visual codes, offering a unique fusion of storytelling that appeals to a wide range of readers. In adapting characters from ancient Indian treatise, the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* and ideas from the Vedic world, authors of *Aranyaka* creatively engage in the process of “(re-)creation” (Hutcheon 8). Drawing upon Linda Hutcheon’s theory of literary adaptation, this paper accentuates the techniques involved in adaptation. This paper further attempts to analyze the interplay of visual and verbal codes in the selected graphic novel, which facilitates the process of adaptation.

**Keywords:** (re-)interpretation, adaptation, (re-)creation, graphic novel, transcoding, transformation

## Introduction

An artistic creation may exist as an autonomous entity, independent in its essence, or as a product inspired by pre-existing works, which does not necessarily replicate them but instead engages in a process of creative (re)envision and “(re-)interpretation” (Hutcheon 8). The process of storytelling throughout human history reflects the influence of adaptation, shaping narratives to align with societal contexts and audiences. In relation to adaptation, creation—especially the “(re-)creation” (Hutcheon 8) of a work—transcends mere imitation, involving a dynamic “transcoding” (Hutcheon 7) of the source materials to reflect new meanings, values, and perspectives. Such “transcoding” as Hutcheon mentions, “can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation” (Hutcheon 7–8). Graphic novels are increasingly recognized “as a postmodern reworking of traditional literary forms” (Nayar 6) effectively engaging with political, historical, mythological

and cultural themes. During the process of “(re-)creation” of pre-existing literary works into graphic novels, the amalgamation of both visual and verbal codes provides a complex and unique layer that enriches the newly formed narrative. In Western contexts, the transformation between mediums or genres—such as from literature to film or conventional novel to comics and graphic novels or vice versa—is an already established domain. A similar pattern can be observed in the Indian context, where the adaptation and “(re-)creation” of mythology and ancient texts, such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, have played a significant role in shaping the development of graphic novels and comics. Beginning with the first publication of *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1967, audiences have witnessed the graphic adaptation of *The Mahabharata* featuring depictions of great sages, kings, gods and goddesses. While explaining what gets adapted Hutcheon asserts “Characters, too, can obviously be transported from one text to another” (Hutcheon 11) and the selected graphic novel, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* serves as evidence, wherein characters such as Yajnavalkya and Katyayani are adapted from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*. After adapting these two characters, the graphic novel perfectly follows the process of “transcoding” as it involves a shift in genre, medium and context to present a completely distinct story. Both the visual and verbal codes presented in the selected graphic novel facilitate the process of “(re-)creation,” as these codes serve as tools for producing meaning.

### Defining Adaptation

Adaptation is certainly not a process of producing replicas, rather “it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own” (Hutcheon 20). The phenomenon of adaptation, according to Hutcheon, cannot be understood in isolation, rather, it can be comprehended through three interconnected viewpoints: adaptation “*as a formal entity or product*”, “*as a process of creation*” and “*process of reception*” (Hutcheon 7–8). When adaptation is considered “*as a formal entity or product*” it overtly acknowledges the relationship to the source materials, while also involving significant alterations—such as changes in medium, genre, framework, or context. Adaptation “*as a process of creation*” revolves around the concept of “(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation”, a process that creatively preserves and revitalizes the story to make it relevant. Lastly, when adaptation is viewed as a “*process of reception*” it becomes a form of intertextuality, where the reader or audience engages their memory and connects the adapted work with other works. In this context, adaptation functions like a palimpsest—layers of meaning built on previous works, with each adaptation echoing past works but with some differences. In a broader sense adaptation is both a process and a product. Adaptation can also be identified as “a process of appropriation” (Hutcheon 18) wherein the author first interprets the source

materials and then fabricates a new narrative with their creative ability.

### **Adaptation “as a formal entity or product”**

The process of adaptation generally involves openly acknowledging the connection between the source materials and the new adopted work. *Aranyaka* also transforms the concept of the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* in a subtle and innovative way. The author’s confession “Aranyaka is littered with ideas from across the Vedic World” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*) openly establishes its connection to pre-existing concepts. Characters of the source text serve “as a silvers of inspiration” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*) to the authors of *Aranyaka*. Lines from the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* confirm the existence of Katyayani and Yajnavalka — “Now Yājñavalkya had two wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyani. Of these Maitreyī used to discuss Brahman, (while) Kātyāyani had then an essentially feminine outlook” (MĀDHAVĀNANDA 772). The graphic novel features two characters with a modified version of Yajnavalka’s name, simplified to the single-word designation “Y.” The *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* offers a detailed account on the sage Yajnavalkya, dedicating an entire section to him: “This great *Upaniṣad* consists of three kāṇḍas— the first being called the Madhu-kāṇḍa, the second the Yājñavalkya- kāṇḍa or the Muni- kāṇḍa, and the third the Khila- kāṇḍa” (MĀDHAVĀNANDA ix) but provides limited information about Katyayani. With the intention of transforming the narrative the authors allocate greater prominence to Katyayni over Y, leading to the “(re-)creation” of the source materials. also adapts several additional characters, such as Maitrayee, known as the Weaver, The Fig, and the Upakoshala, among others. Linda Hutcheon’s idea of “transcoding” is essential in her adaptation theory, emphasizing the shift of themes, ideas and narratives across many formats, genres and contexts. “Transcoding” in adaptation is not solely the act of imitation, it is an act of reinterpretation and transformation, wherein the source documentation acquires new meanings through the perspective of the adaptor and the selected medium. Commenting upon this Julie Sanders also expresses that adaptation is “frequently a highly specific process involving the transition from one genre to another... It can also involve the making of computer games or graphic novels” (Sanders 24). Beyond genre, a shift in medium also plays a crucial role in the process of “transcoding”. The adaptor also participates in the processes of expanding, cutting, or enhancing the text’s relevance to the audience. *Aranyaka* not only demonstrates a shift in genre — from nonfiction to graphic novel that presents a complete story — but it also exhibits shift in medium. Authors’ choice of incorporating a hybrid medium (graphic novel comprises both visuals and verbal codes) is another aspect of “transcoding”. In a graphic narrative, visual imageries and words intermesh together to produce a powerful narrative. Being



a graphic adaptation, *Aranyaka* not only tells a story but also shows through its visual layouts. The visual varieties represented in the novel hooks the reader.

### **Adaptation “as a process of creation”**

Adaptation of the characters from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and their transformation according to a new context remain at the core of adaptation as “*as a process of creation*”. Hybrid formation of a graphic narrative places words and pictures at a single stage, where meaning is generated at the intersection of these two units. Thematic diversity, along with vibrant imagery and textual explanations in graphic narratives, has effectively engaged both teenage and adult audiences. The selected graphic novel, in the process of “(re-)creation,” illustrates a range of diverse themes; “beneath its surface are many narrative undercurrents — the ecological one, the feminist one, the one where food is really a stand-in for many other sorts of human appetites” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*). Among these themes ecological one holds significant relevance at the age of ecological decay, as Amruta Patil expresses “to put *aranya* back in people’s consciousness seemed like an urgent responsibility at this time in our collective history. I see this as ‘earthing’ and ‘grounding’ in their truest sense” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*). The selected graphic novel attempts to emphasize the significance of *aranya* and to reaffirm the human-nature interconnectedness. The *aranya*, is primarily projected as a space of learning that engages physical sense while also serving as a realm for metaphysical learning and enlightenment. Indian culture recognises *aranya* as a potent realm where individuals are exiled, serving both as a form of punishment and a pathway to understanding the deeper truths of life. The Ramayana, provides a comprehensive account of Rama’s *vanavasii* and his experiences in the forest “*The Ramayana and The Mahabharata* speak of the forest exile of princes” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*). *The Manusmriti*, an ancient Indian text, reveals the ashrama system and mentions that “The first quarter of one’s life, one is a student. In the second quarter, one is the householder. Then, we retire and finally we walk away into the forest and prepare for death” (Pattanaik). Sages have found *aranya* “as a home and a source of revelation, exaltation and creativity” (Krishna, ch. 2) and a muse who inspires them to compose Vedas and other texts. In the case of Katyayani, the human-nature interconnectedness is primarily reflected through the sensory experiences she acquires during her stay in the *aranya*, while Y achieves metaphysical knowledge. Katyayani obtains the lessons of survival from the *aranya*, as she uses several resources from the *aranya* to protect herself from the predator “I began to paint myself to be more invisible or daunting. My old clothes were replaced by strips of beaten bark, pelts of dead animals. I rubbed my skin with animal fat to mask clues of my fear and my sex” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik

028). She receives lessons from insects and animals, with the majority of her lessons focused on food and bodily hunger. In her venture for food, she steals food “from those smaller and weaker” and before consumption she offers “food on hapless animals” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik 024) to ensure food safety. She also learns the importance of storing food for rough days “I kept reserves buried, tucked away in crevices for future hungers” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik 032). She prepares food using natural resources like “aromatic roots” and “turmeric leaf” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik 068) that she gathers from the *aranya*. Driven by an insatiable yearning for spiritual enlightenment, the character of Y makes the deliberate choice to “leave the herd” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik 037) and enters the *aranya* to seek knowledge from it. In perfect natural surroundings, beneath the sprawling canopy of a Banyan tree, he arranges his classroom as a space to practice his knowledge of metaphysics. The profound serenity and calmness of the *aranya* not only provide an ideal sanctuary for the expansion of his metaphysical understanding but also underscore the intrinsic interconnectedness between human intellect and the natural world, where the forest becomes both a mentor and a mirror to his inner quest. The visual portrayal of Katyayani underscores her profound symbiosis with the *aranya*: her physical appearance and exceptionally long hair reminiscent of tree roots, symbolically associate her with nature or *aranya* and the cover page further reinforces this connection by depicting her face as an embodiment of the *aranya*, rendered in a vibrant, lush green hue.

### **Adaptation as a “process of reception”**

The “*process of reception*” in adaptation emphasizes the role of the reader or spectator, where they engage in a process to recall the previously experienced materials with the newly encountered one and draw connections. Adaptation as “*process of reception*” frequently invokes Intertextuality, as Hutcheon utters “adaptation as adaptation is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text” (Hutcheon 21). *Aranyaka* subtly employs intertextuality by drawing on “ideas from across the Vedic world” (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Making Aranyaka*), as well as the Upanishads, myths, and folklore, reinterpreting them within a contemporary narrative framework. Traces of Intertextuality is evident in the visual elements of *Aranyaka*. The depiction of Katyayani, 'frolicking in the forest pool,' is shaped by classical mythological images, such as the narrative of Leda and the Swan, together with the imagery of the Egyptian deities Nut and Geb. Similarly, the visual depiction of the character Weaver evokes the “Dancing Girl” sculpture from the Harappan Civilisation. The representation of the black panther is influenced by the jaguars seen in Meso-American imagery. Furthermore, visual depiction of the character Fig, embodies aspects of Karaikal

Ammaiyar's iconography, as acknowledged by Amruta Patil in the section "Making Aranyaka". If a reader is familiar with imageries or iconographies presented in *Aranyaka*, they attempt to connect their previously read materials with their current encountered one.

## Conclusion

Adaptation is evident in every form of artistic expression. It is a process that involves reinterpreting and recreating a new narrative by transforming the source materials. It can occur across mediums or genres or inside the same genre. Hutcheon's theory of Adaptation discusses the originality and significance of adaptations, emphasizing their creative agency and distinct qualities. The selected graphic novel draws from multiple sources and presents a new narrative through "(re-)interpretation" (Hutcheon 8). The growing number of graphic novel adaptations across the globe reflects the increasing popularity and versatility of graphic storytelling. Not only classics, but modern novels are also being adapted into graphic novels. For example, the widely recognised novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, originally published in 2003, is adapted into a graphic novel. Throughout the storyline, *Aranyaka* subtly, rather than explicitly, exhibits its connection to multiple Vedic ideas as well as to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The selected graphic novel is narrated in such a way that the source materials do not overpower the new narrative. The hybrid medium that involves both visual and verbal codes further enhances the representation of the new narrative. Thus, the graphic novel *Aranyaka* "is second without being secondary" (Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik 9). A graphic novel invites the reader to actively participate in decoding the visual and verbal clues to form a complete understanding. In this context "the reader/viewer, therefore, becomes a collaborator while bringing his or her own interpretations to the reading of the adaptation" (Saltzman 2). Intertextual elements in *Aranyaka* evokes the reader to immerse themselves in the pool of memory, establishing connections between the adapted work and previously read works. The process of adaptation is not a "slavish copying" of the source materials; rather, it is a unique and creative process that deconstructs and reconstructs a distinctly new narrative. In the process of "(re-)creation," *Aranyaka* invokes ecological consciousness and seeks to reestablish human-nature interconnectedness by placing the *aranya* at the heart of discussion.

## Notes

Sanskrit word for forest  
Exiled in forest

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# **Navigating The Inner Self: Unravelling Dialogism and Self-Awakening in Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening***

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## *Abstract*

In the 21st century, there has been a notable surge in the reconstruction of Indian epic narratives from alternative perspectives, particularly focusing on marginalized characters, especially women, whose voices have historically been overshadowed by patriarchal ideologies. Ahalya, a subdued character in the Ramayana, epitomizes this narrative dynamic, having been marginalized in the name of female virtue. This paper aims to delve into Kavita Kane's redefinition of the conventional portrayal of women in the Ramayana, transforming Ahalya from a victim into a symbol of liberated womanhood. The study seeks to examine the awakening of Ahalya employing the Bakhtinian concept of Dialogism in the gynocentric narrative of Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*. By interrogating Ahalya's journey through Kane's lens, this study also contributes to a deeper understanding of feminist retellings within Indian mythology and their implications for contemporary discourse on gender and power dynamics.

**Keywords:** Marginalised voices, Indian epic narratives, Ramayana, Gender dynamics, Liberation.

## **Introduction**

Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* reflects the contemporary trend to reimagine the roles of women characters, whose voices were often overshadowed by themes of war and male dominance. Here, Kane has delved into the story of Ahalya which was only briefly mentioned in the *Ramayana* solely to highlight the divinity of Rama. Kane elevates Ahalya from a character condemned for female infidelity to an extraordinary figure who transcends her curse on a journey towards self-discovery. The work has successfully redefined the traditional image of Ahalya, shifting her from passive victim to an empowered individual. This paper seeks to examine the awakening of Ahalya employing the Bakhtinian concept of Dialogism in the gynocentric narrative of Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening*.

Ahalya, featured in the epic *Ramayana*, is a character whose story reflects the complexities of societal norms and gender dynamics. She is depicted as a woman whose fate is intertwined with themes of morality, temptation, and redemption. Her character

is subjected to an endless stringent moral assessment, particularly regarding her chastity and loyalty for ages. However, in this captivating Post-modern reinterpretation of a timeless legend, Kavita Kane has given voice to a character who had long been silent, even before her transformation into stone. Following Ahalya's path from a curious child to a devoted princess and later the cherished wife of Rishi Gautam, *Ahalya's Awakening* delves deep into the inner workings of a woman determined to shape her own fate.

### Analysis

In *Ahalya's Awakening*, Kane delves deep into Ahalya's profound journey towards her self-realization. Ahalya encounters Indra, driven by his insatiable thirst for gratification, in the hour of her ultimate desperation when she was bereft of her husband's attention completely and all the life's joys, including her cherished aspiration to become a Rishika. Hence, despite recognizing Indra's true identity beneath his disguise, Ahalya finds herself unable to resist the allure of her own desires. Even upon realization, Ahalya yearns to experience him as Gautam, seeking to recapture the intimacy she once shared with her husband rather than succumb to the fleeting pleasures offered by Indra. Upon discovering the infidelity, Gautam leaves Ahalya advising her to embark on a journey to her true self. The paper employs Michael Bakhtin's theoretical concept of Dialogism to analyse the awakening of Ahalya. However, the term 'Dialogism' is not coined by Bakhtin but a later contribution of Michael Holquist for "categorizing the different ways he meditated on dialogue" (Holquist, 15). According to Bakhtin, Dialogism suggests that within a text, various characters, perspectives, and ideologies engage in a constant dialogue with one another. This interaction creates a dynamic and multi-layered network of meanings, rather than a single, authoritative voice. Bakhtin argued that this multiplicity of voices mirrors the complexities of real-life communication and contributes to the richness and depth of literary works. Moreover, acknowledging that dialogue extends beyond human-to-human interactions to include relationships with ecological surroundings or internal dialogues with multiple inner voices expands the scope of dialogism. This broadens our understanding of communication and interaction beyond the confines of human-centric perspectives, recognizing the interconnectedness between individuals, their environment, and their inner worlds. In essence, this reframed perspective emphasizes the pervasive and multifaceted nature of dialogue in shaping human experience and meaning-making processes, extending beyond interpersonal communication to encompass a dynamic interplay between individuals, their surroundings, and their internal selves.

The chapter titled, "The Meditation" depicts the life of Ahalya years after her abandonment by Gautam. She is depicted as "motionless" and "senseless" to the world outside (330). The chapter portrayed Ahalya in a whirlpool of emotions and questions

regarding her own identity. She who lost her family, carrier, hopes, dreams and her desires, was petrified like a stone not in defense of the cutting remarks and subtle jabs thrown her way, but for embracing a hopeful pursuit towards inner tranquility. It was as if she underwent a metamorphosis, a transformation akin to a figurative death. The hidden advantage of being unnoticed by the scrutinizing gaze of society has transformed into a boon for Ahalya. Freed from the pressure of external judgment, she has embarked on a profound introspective journey, meticulously examining the trajectory of her life. This solitary reflection has become her sanctuary, enabling her to break free from the confines of societal expectations imposed upon her gender. In this process, she has unearthed her authentic self, shedding the layers of roles she once played to conform to societal norms. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism can be seen vividly in Ahalya's development of a dialogic relationship with herself. Isolated and abandoned by Gautam, Ahalya is left to confront her inner thoughts, engaging in an inner dialogue that becomes the catalyst for her profound transformation. She is left with no choice but to turn inward. This physical isolation creates a space for her to engage in an internal dialogue where she scrutinizes her past actions and experiences. This recollection is not a passive reminiscence but an active engagement with her memories. She critically evaluates her life, questioning the identity that has been imposed on her due to a single mistake, "...does that one lapse of judgment define a person?" (331). She realizes that her entire identity has been overshadowed by a single transgression, condemning her to an eternity of shame and isolation. Through this internal dialogue Ahalya reconnects with her true self. She recalls her original dreams and aspirations, which were centered on a quest for knowledge. This process of self-examination reveals how she had been deviated from her true path by the weight of socially imposed expectations and the roles she was expected to play. In her solitude, she delves deep into her consciousness, seeking answers for her plight and the true motivations behind her actions. She wonders whether her insatiable desire was the cause of her fall, pondering if it was merely a bridge from ignorance to knowledge. She reflects on how her idealized conception of her husband clashed with the reality of his inability to meet her desires, leading to her transgressions. Through this internal dialogue, Ahalya navigates her internal conflict, striving to resolve the dilemma by acknowledging the necessity to stop looking for her family. Her introspection is marked by a constant debate with her inner voice, which reflects the societal values she has internalised over her lifetime. This ongoing dialogue not only helps Ahalya to grapple with her past but also fosters a deeper understanding of herself and her place within the societal framework.

Her frequent conversations with her inner self gradually led her to a profound understanding of gender imposition and male dominance in society. This allowed her



to recognize her own autonomy and power over her body and life. Ahalya asserted her own agency; by fiercely rejecting the societal notion that her redemption should come from a man as her transgression and retribution did. She decided that she would not wake into a world that dictated her fate through male authority.

Embracing her newfound authenticity, Ahalya has stepped into a realm of self-awareness, realizing that her true companion in life is none other than herself. She has come to understand that the myriad roles she once inhabited were transient, while her essence remains constant and unwavering. Through introspective meditation, she carved out a sacred sanctuary for inner exploration, where she could engage in profound conversations with herself. Within this intimate space, she delved into the depths of her life's narrative, reflecting back on her past actions and choices and finally she discovered her authentic self, "... I found myself. I found the truth that is *me*. I lived the life given to me as a woman with all honesty, true to my instincts and faithful to my impulses, eager and yearning..." (349).

According to Lynne Pearce in "Bakhtin and the Dialogic Principle" "... dialogue in the colloquial conversation served as a theme for thought production in general. Therefore, all thought became a matter of 'dialogue' and 'difference'. Dialogue requires pre-existence of differences which are connected by act of communication to generate new ideas and positions" (Pearce, 18). Ahalya's thought production is a result of her dialogue with her own self in her meditative form. Difference, here, symbolises the difference between her desire and the social expectations. When she ultimately decided to succumb to her desire, to satisfy her natural sexual urge, a decision to be herself, she was condemned by the outer world. She says, "... my crime was that I succumbed to desire, to feel a little alive again..." (345). This arose a difference leading her to indulge in a dialogue with the multiple inner-voices through which she analysed herself. "It was my self-discovery. It was my rebellion against myself..." (347). Hence, the curse has turned into a blessing for her as she was able to be away from "Man's rules and falseness" (349).

The epilogue of the novel has consumed a pivotal encounter of Ahalya with Sita, another subjugated woman from the epic subjected to moral trials in terms of chastity and fidelity. This meeting symbolises Ahalya as an enlightened woman who possesses a profound awareness of her actions and their implications, demonstrating a courageous acceptance of her own fallibility. She advised Sita not to be bothered by the world's accusation and their definition of her. But for Sita, it matters to her as she still lives inside the limitations of her identity as a queen, mother and wife.

The stark contrast between Sita and the liberated Ahalya is depicted vividly through the dialogues between them in the novel. Sita, deeply concerned with societal norms and perceptions, struggles with the weight of public opinion and societal judgment. She

expresses her frustration and anguish saying, “I hate it when I am seen as a victim. I am not one!” (341). Sita’s identity is entwined with her role as a queen and her relationship with Ram. Her sense of duty and loyalty compels her to defend Ram’s actions, including his action of banishing her from the kingdom, “What they say matters to us – I am a queen and Ram is a King... That world is not just society, it is the citizens, the subjects of the kingdom” (341). She internalises the blame, believing she has failed to live up to the ideal of an impeccable queen. Sita’s adherence to societal expectations and her fear of being perceived as a victim highlights her struggle to find personal freedom and self-acceptance. Her attempts to justify Ram, manifests her desperate attempt to justify her fate as a social being. Sita places her duty and responsibility, which is a social imposition, above her own individuality.

In stark contrast, Ahalya represents a liberated woman who has transcended societal constraints. Her journey of self-discovery and introspection has led her to embrace her true self, independent of external judgements. Ahalya perceives, “... the world... defines you as someone who has been born a daughter, to live as a wife and die as a mother. Who sees the woman behind that daughter, that wife, that mother? (340). Her liberated mind is evident in her perspective on society and external judgements. In her dialogue with Sita, she offers profound advice, challenging the importance Sita places on societal opinions. She points out the paradox of Sita undergoing the *agnipariksha*, a trial by fire, to demonstrate her purity, only to face continued suspicion and criticism, “It’s that same world in which you give your *agnipariksha* to prove your blamelessness; it’s that same world which cast despicable aspersions against you...” (341). Through this statement, Ahalya underscores the futility of seeking validation from a society that is inconsistent and often hypocritical. Ahalya’s viewpoint reveals her detachment from societal judgements and her belief in inner strength and self-worth. Her liberated mindset allows her to rise above the opinions and expectations of others. She has reached a level of self-awareness where external judgements no longer dictate her sense of identity or worth. This internal liberation is what she wishes to impart to Sita, encouraging her to find peace and freedom within herself rather than seeking it in the approval of an unstable society.

Ahalya also expresses her deep disillusionment with the double standards and hypocrisy that women often face in society. She points out to Sita how the society places women on pedestals, idealising their virtue, chastity and fidelity and simultaneously subjecting them to moral trials. When a woman is perceived to have fallen short of these constructed ideals, society expresses disappointment and condemnation, further perpetuating her subjugation. She recognises that these societal expectations are not only unrealistic but also serve to control and oppress women. They create a cycle where women are constantly judged and scrutinized, forcing them to conform to rigid standards of behaviour and

morality. This cycle is both unfair and dehumanising, reducing women to a mere symbol of virtue rather than acknowledging their individuality and humanity. By highlighting this hypocrisy, Ahalya challenges the very foundation of these societal norms. She urges Sita to see beyond the superficial judgements and to realise that true worth and identity do not lie in meeting these impossible standards. Instead Ahalya advocates for a liberated mindset where women can define their own values and worth, independent of societal expectations.

Ahalya has become liberated to embrace herself as flawless and unblemished. She realised that a woman's role does not pertain to the roles of a daughter, wife and mother. There is a bigger world "of freedom, of knowledge ... of passion, of ambition ..." waiting for her (340). She ascertained, "I searched all these years for myself – and I only found Ahalya, the woman I was supposed to be born as..." (345). She proclaimed, "I don't need anyone's sanction or blessing. I had to seek my own salvation" (344). She also apprised that she was pardoned by Ram and not redeemed by him as world believes and that she had redeemed herself long ago.

Ahalya's enlightened mind is evident in her approach to awakening and redemption. She chose to end her meditation and reveal herself to the world in the presence of Ram and Rishi Vishwamitra, not because of their gender, but because they were enlightened souls. Her decision highlights her commitment to seeking wisdom and truth in the presence of those who embody justice and enlightenment. This choice underscores her discernment and the depth of her spiritual journey. However, she clarifies that her redemption was not dependent on these enlightened men, "It was my decision. You may call it a mistake, but it was my mistake and I was ready to suffer the consequences and obtain my redemption myself" (345). This reveals Ahalya's profound sense of personal responsibility and autonomy. She acknowledges her decision and their outcomes, demonstrating a willingness to accept the consequences of her actions. This acceptance is a key aspect of her enlightenment, showing that she understands the importance of self-reliance and inner strength.

The protagonist further emphasises that her happiness and unhappiness are not dependent on any external factors or individuals. She says, "Just like my happiness or unhappiness need not depend on any man – or anyone else. Both come from within: the joy and the sadness" (345). She recognises that true contentment and peace arise from within, independent of external circumstances. Her enlightened state is also characterised by a lack of resentment or anger. She states, "I have no anger against anyone... I am beyond all that anger and bitterness and rancour. I am happy" (346). Ahalya's ability to move beyond negative emotions and embrace happiness demonstrates her transcendence of worldly attachments and judgements. She has reached a state of inner peace, free from

bitterness and resentment.

Ahalya's perspective of gender and power dynamics is evident in her discussion with Sita about war and its consequences. When Sita expresses that she desired for Ram and his army to wage war against Lanka and defeat Ravana, framing it as a matter of personal pride, Ahalya points out a stark reality that while wars often elevate men to the status of heroes, women invariably suffer the consequences. They are the silent victims whose stories of pain and loss are frequently overlooked. She challenges the notion that men fight wars to protect the women's honour. She asserts that the true motivation behind these actions is not the protection of women but rather the preservation of men's own inflated sense of honour. Thus, the concept of honour in this context becomes a tool for maintaining and asserting male power and dominance while continuing to marginalise and control women.

Ahalya's transformation, as depicted through her dialogue with Sita, reveals a profound shift in her understanding of relationships and her own identity. This transformation is not an abstract concept but is concretely embodied in her actions and decisions following her awakening. One of the crucial moments illustrating this transformation is her refusal to accept her husband's offer to take her back to his life. This decision symbolises her newfound strength and perception evolving beyond her previous concept of love and relationship. She recognized that love is not enough in a relationship. Besides love, there should be mutual respect and trust. She remarks, "- all this – the tests and the enquiries – means distrust. Trust comes above love..." (346). She highlights the devastating impact of distrust, portraying it as a more severe and lasting wound than any formal accusation of guilt or innocence. Ahalya realised that they can't be the same two persons they once were, that they have undergone a transgression and that these changes have altered their relationships irrevocably.

Further, Ahalya's transformation has fundamentally altered her understanding of the concept of desire. Her evolved perspective views desire as a dynamic and integral part of human experience, capable of changing and evolving over time. This understanding aided in her self-acceptance and empowerment. By recognising the legitimacy of her desires and rejecting societal pressures to suppress them, Ahalya embodies a liberated and authentic existence. Her insights offer a powerful message about the importance of embracing one's true self and the natural evolution of desires as part of the journey towards self-fulfillment. She asserts,

Desire, like other emotions, can change, and change means evolving... I think all of us are aware of our desires – the range and depth of them. We are aware of our right over our bodies and our pleasures, but yes, it is easier for some of us to deny this to ourselves based on supposed virtuousness (348).

For Bakhtin ““self” can never be a self-sufficient construct ... for him “self” is dialogic, a relation” (Holquist, 19). Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism emphasizes that individuals are fundamentally shaped and transformed through their interaction with others. For him dialogue is not just a means of communication but a dynamic process through which people develop and evolve their consciousness and perspectives. In the novel, besides the transformation of Ahalya through her dialogic relationship with herself, Kane also depicts the beginning of the transgressive journey in Sita as well, resulting from her interaction with Ahalya. Sita says “In the forest here, I find myself doing what you are doing, Ahalya. Seeking my answers. The forest is a more truthful place; there is something brutal in its honesty” (348). Here, Sita’s engagement in dialogue with Ahalya, encounters her with different viewpoints, challenging her to reconsider her assumptions and beliefs. Ahalya’s insights into life, trust, relationship, gender and power dynamics in the society encouraged Sita to reconsider her own beliefs and experiences.

## Conclusion

In brief, the exploration of Ahalya's awakening through the lens of Bakhtin's theoretical concept of dialogism reveals the profound impact of internal dialogue on personal transformation. Ahalya's journey towards self-realization is depicted as a process of engaging in an inner dialogue with herself, wherein she confronts her own experiences, desires, and societal expectations. Through this introspective dialogue, Ahalya navigates the complexities of her identity and experiences a profound awakening, transcending the confines of her past actions and societal constraints. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides a framework for understanding the intricate interplay of voices within Ahalya's psyche, highlighting the dynamic nature of self-reflection and personal growth. By delving into Ahalya's narrative, this paper illuminates the transformative power of internal dialogue in facilitating individual awakening and self-discovery. Ahalya's journey serves as a testament to the capacity of dialogue to transcend boundaries and catalyse profound personal change. Ultimately, the exploration of Ahalya's awakening underscores the enduring relevance of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in understanding the complexities of human experience and the potential for inner dialogue to inspire personal transformation. Ahalya's story stands as a poignant reminder of the transformative power of self-reflection and the profound insights that can emerge from engaging in an ongoing dialogue with oneself.

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# From Anarkali to Sultana Daku: A Study of Gender, Myths and Folk Culture in *Nautanki*

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## *Abstract*

Folk theatre like *Nautanki*, originating in Uttar Pradesh, comprises music, song, dance, and storytelling, and it is an integral part of India's folk narrative. Communicating through mass-oriented and popular stories, often in a melodramatic manner, cements the bond among different members of the community. Many stories of *Nautanki* display a retelling from the woman's perspective, visualizing her as an epitome of courage, one who is not a silent victim to social atrocities. Traditional *Nautanki* had informative resources that narrated stories of myths parallelly with those of emboldened women. In the thematic contexts, we have love stories of *Laila* and *Majnu*, and *Nautanki* is also a more secular way of dealing with burning socio-political contexts in India. *Nautanki*, as part of cultural and performance studies, also has a significant influence in cementing communication across regions and interpersonal communication patterns and multilayered segments addressed through acts, performances, and narratives. There is a constant need for archiving major scripts of *Nautanki* in this regard. Further, this paper emphasizes the gender-based narratives in *Nautanki* that depict the stories of resilient women to a changing Indian audience.

**Keywords:** Indian Theatre, Nautanki, Folk Drama, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies

## **Introduction**

Any pluralistic cultural pattern is a consequence of several connected and often disjointed factors – including social, political, religious, economic, and more. The concept of 'folk' is multilayered, and it occupies a whole range of traditional, customary, ritualistic, and socio-linguistic practices that affect the growth of any individual and community within a large area or geographical space. It is about the haunting memories and cultural articulation that are crucial in understanding the myths, legends, taboos, oral traditions, stories, and even performative aspects of a certain segment of the population. It is important to note that the study of folklore in India is very different from how the Western popular idea of folklore is, and the nomenclature, acceptance, and reliving of folks and traditional narratives vary from one place to another. On close scrutiny, however, it can also be seen that there are several juxtapositions of folk elements in the Oriental and Occidental forms of cultural encounters. Hence, the knowledge of folklore studies

becomes one of the integral segments of academia.

“Knowing the history of folklore studies is essential in identifying the direction of folklore research. It is crucial to recognise the prejudices that have impacted previous folkloric research. The folklore scholars should shield themselves from the demands of the activists and should bring more impartiality to their research. The folklorist needs to be in contact with researchers, tools and inquiries of the related fields – literature, anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, music, sociology, psychology and others.” (Luhar 2)

The whole idea of exploration addresses certain pivotal questions like what to explore, how to explore, and which unexplored parts to bring to the fore when it is about the preconceived tradition of folklore studies. For instance, if we consider several Indian dramatic forms, there is a methodological way in many of them to highlight the folkloric tradition with the help of fluidity of performance, scene variations, impressionistic characters, plot construction, and calamities and conjectures that test the regulatory motif of the dramatic acts. The traditional models of theatre are very different from what was enjoyed by the urban elite, and disseminating folkloric structures, themes, identifiable notions, and social hierarchies through the *angik* (movement of the limbs) and the *vachik* (speech used in drama) really demanded insightful contributions on the part of the dramatist and the performers. The focus of this paper is on Nautanki, a popular folk theatre that had its origination in Uttar Pradesh in the late halves of the nineteenth century. For a long time, this rural form of *natakam*, or *abhinaya*, through song, dance, and often phases of histrionic articulations, appealed to a mass audience as a popular form of folk theatre. Although initially, the male performers could perform as the female characters like the goddesses, later, with the advancement of women’s education and cultural reforms in the northern parts of India, women were invited to be a part of this folkloric consistency. As Surest Awasthi writes in his research article *Nautanki: An Operatic Theatre*:

“There is a range and variety in the themes of Nautanki plays. They are drawn from all possible sources: epics, myths, folklore, legends, historical episodes, social events, and topical, often local stories of romance, of bravery and sacrifice. The tradition has always been alive to socio-political questions such as child marriage, dowry, untouchability, and has also depicted episodes from the freedom movement. This theatre has freely used tales of romance and bravery from Islamic tradition and thus contributed towards a cultural synthesis with the Hindu heritage.” (Awasthi 28)

In fact, while we start studying the gender paradigms of *Nautanki*, we find how the nomenclature of *Nautanki* goes back to the story of Shahzadi Nautanki, a beautiful woman who was the beloved of Phul Singh. There are episodes of attention-seeking, family squabbles, complicated overtones from the society, and instances of non-reciprocation

of love, despite all of which the hero and the heroine finally unite. The princess Nautanki occupies a high pedestal here, and the performance explores grand imagery, metaphorical approaches, and sound effects to match the introduction and conclusion.

### **Performance and Fluidity: Of Actions and Performers**

It is true that as a fluid form, *Nautanki* had an indomitable role to play in pre-independence India. Instead of polished urban dialogues, dialects and melodrama were two of the essential components that made this folkloric tradition special among the audience. It has a rich and variegated history of storytelling and communicative ability, dating back to the records of the 16th century text called *Ain-e-Akbari*, which was a work produced by Abul Fazal in Emperor Akbar's court. The legends and myths surrounding Lord Krishna, Radha, groups of Gopini, and Kangsa were some of the most popular folkloric forms that were prevalent in Mathura, Vrindavan, Hathras, Kanpur, and in many other parts of North India. Through folklore, *Nautanki* served not just the role of a potential cultural vehicle but also worked to produce an alternative sense of reality through communication. Burning social issues that proliferated all across the country were addressed through satire, comedy, melodrama, song, dance, and the sound of the drums played on the nagara (an Indian percussion instrument). *Nautanki* offered more fluidity and clarity in terms of stage expressions, narrative style, and layers of communication. Folk theatre as an independent discipline is addressed in terms of the preliminary *Doha*, which is not accompanied by any musical instrument; the second part includes the *Choubola* which is the main stanza of the *Nautanki*, and the *Daur* or *Udhan* forms the third part from which the actual speed of the story can be gauged till it reaches the denouement, fades, and enhances the cathartic appeal of the play. Another significant observation is the essential encomiastic appeal that many of the Indian folkloric *Nautanki* display. The stories of the Indian kings, Rajputs, and their victories are celebrated through songs, where their beloved women dream about their heroism, and they are transported into a world of dreams with their endearing enactment of love and freedom. For instance, in the famous *Nautanki* Maharaja Surajmal Bharatpur, the women narrators sing about the coming of the victorious king. The lady pines for a brilliant king who will be the prince charming of her dreams, and he will mount on horseback and will carry her as his queen to his palace. These stories are nothing short of the fairytale and legendary narratives that sustain the exploits of the king, the Rajputs, and the narrations of their bravery. Raja Surajmal in this *Nautanki* has been described as the 'sapon ka Raja' or the king of dreams, an ideal manifestation of what a ruler should be. In this process, the sense of community building and collective identity formation is encouraged and restored. Krishna Kumari Mathur, a veteran Nautanki artist from Uttar Pradesh, sings

soulfully in one of her recordings:

“bairi baapu, bitiriya bihahi daite ne chah kar ka ho / Umar jaiyo mere” (Sanjay Maharishi)

This is a folkloric song depicting the intense pain of the daughter who is requesting her father to get her married, as she keeps on getting old each day. For a successful Nautanki Guru-shishya Parampara or the teacher-student tradition to be carried forward, the students go not just through storytelling sessions, but they are also taught literature, voice and limb modulation and music.

### **The Expansive Domain of Cultural Studies and Nautanki in India**

Performing a *Nautanki* is the primary thought because through that performance, it will be the aesthetics of the folk element that gets generated among a larger audience. Plays like Satya Harishchandra or Bhakt Moradhwaj are exemplary cases of myths, miracles, and devotional elements that range across a specific cultural sphere. In this connection, it will be worthwhile to study three essential aspects of cultural studies. The first is about the non-reductionism of a particular culture, whereby the specialty, roles, significant folkloric tradition, storytelling, and narrative methods cannot be reduced to a general articulation. It is not a vague or a parochial general societal formation, but each specific culture has its own anecdotes and communicative procedures that are solely its own. In case of the Indian *Nautanki*, similarly, it encompasses mechanisms of cultural formation and production that solely and invariably highlight and categorize the Indian soil, culture, rituals, identities, and existence. Simon During, in his seminal work *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, points out specific instances of cultural mapping across various nations and nationalities:

“Culture is not a thing or even a system: it’s a set of transactions, processes, mutations, practices, technologies, institutions out of which things and events (such as movies, poems, or world wrestling bouts) are produced, to be experienced, lived out and given meaning and value to in different ways within the unsystematic network of differences and mutations from which they emerged to start with.” (During 6)

It is true how *Nautanki* proposes a definite set of transactions, social processes, and progress, alterity as per the regions and states of India, and provides a clarion call to how technology must not affect the cultural essence of this art form that tends to deteriorate fast. *Nautankis* such as *Sultana Daku*, *Jalianwala Bagh*, and Amar Singh Rathore, for instance, are plays that are variegated with a strong insistence on the national fervour, subtracting the gender bias or critical concept of sexualities. Any type of class, gender, sexuality, race, and the variations of nation study cannot be done only on the basis of a political economy. As Vyomika Bhardwaj points out in her work ‘Nautanki- Folk Theatre: A Study of Women Performers and Audiences in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh’, women in

Nautanki exist in multiple relationships: “A female unrelated to male characters, however, scarcely exists; she is always some man’s daughter, sister or spouse and may act in more than one familial role.” (Bhardwaj 23)

The second concept found in the cultural study that will make a reading of the Indian Nautanki easier will be ‘power’ and ‘articulation.’ In many notable Nautankis of India, the power hierarchy and subjugation of the marginalized classes, castes and sexes have been analyzed with the intention to bring the prevalent social evils to the surface. *Nautankis like Maharana Pratap, Anarkali, Sita Harana, Draupadi Chira Harana, Savitri-Satyavan, Nala-Damayanti, Manjha Rani, Sohni-Mahiwal, Dhola-Maru, Anmol Grihasti, Beti ka Sauda* all deal with several social, mythological, and historical issues where, at some frame or the other, the critical question about gender, women, and their role and status in the society and female subjugation becomes prominent analytical discourses. Now the question arises what is articulated through these Nautankis? Is it power or powerlessness? Sita and Draupadi are not just strong women characters that we find in these performances, but after independence, it is also an important vehicle that transfers the historical progression of women’s empowerment to reach out to the great Indian literate and educated intelligentsia who had dreamt of an independent, progressive India. Regarding articulation in cultural studies, it is used under specific contingencies and specific contexts in shaping up and analyzing the relationship between a dominant/inclusive/exclusive culture and the working political economy. In terms of *Nautankis* in India, understanding this nature of exclusivity and inclusivity through cultural studies is important. For instance, in the famous *Nautanki Indarsabha*, there is a reference to Indra, the king of the Gods and his kingdom proceedings, where among the female fairy dancers, there is the *Sabz Pari* (emerald fairy) who falls in love with Gulfam, a prince on the earth. With the help of a Kala Deva, or the black genie, she is able to lure, protect, and bring Gulfam to heaven, at which Indra is annoyed, and he cuts the wings of the emerald fairy and punishes Gulfam by throwing him into a well. The lady’s undaunted, unadulterated love, however, does not deter her from camouflaging herself as a mortal, wandering female minstrel and mendicant. She keeps on articulating her love through soulful tunes till Indra lifts the curse, blesses both and *Sabz Pari* and Gulfam live happily ever after. What does this *Nautanki* show? Articulation of power/powerlessness? Articulation of the female spirit and resilience? Love and peace in terms of national and regional distress. The most suitable answer will be all three together. The popularity of this play was due to the intense operatic tenor that included dance, music, colourful costumes, the set-up, and the enactment of the spectacle, or the *drishyam*, that included the epic dimension of both heaven and earth. It was a huge success in Lahore, Bihar, Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta.

The third concept is solely about the infringement upon and the spread of what is known as popular culture. What is known as popular culture, and what composes it? What does popular culture target as groups? How does drama as a form of art address burning social issues or the problems that a marginalized group faces? There is a constant tussle between what is considered to be universal truth, and to what extent hegemony can be applied. A specific ideology, for instance, that was prevalent in the pre-independence Indian *Nautanki*, was the freedom of the country from the clutches of British rule. There are always active social groups that utilize existing systems of power through images, systems of dramatic organization, communicative techniques (including sign and spoken languages), and interpretative methods that often tend to become popular culture later on. It is noteworthy how the entire stage set-up, ground decoration, and arrangements were made in Uttar Pradesh for the Nautankis to be performed. Kapila Vatsyayan, in her book *Traditional Indian Theatre*, explains:

“What is it like? This roving theatre? What is its name, do you know? This is Nautanki. That’s right, Nautanki! The chief attraction of village fairs in Uttar Pradesh. Several days before the fair starts, the tents and trappings arrive on a truck and are set up at a fixed spot. A large tent is stretched out to form a hall. At its head, a good-sized stage is erected and adorned with curtains. All the arrangements are made for the lighting. In front of the stage, places are fixed for the audience to sit. A big gate is put up outside, and a signboard attached to it with the name of the Nautanki. As soon as the bustle of the fair gets underway, the main performers arrive on the scene.” (Vatsyayan 144)

It is also a matter of great concern that in the larger domains of academia, theatre, song, dance, performance, and the studies of Indian aesthetic tradition, Nautanki has never been given much intense or profound scholarly importance. Dr. Umesh Chandra Sharma, *Nautanki* maestro, while conducting one of his workshops and classes in the National School of Drama, explains that for a long time, the contents of a *Nautanki* script have been considered to be of inferior value, consisting of lewd, sarcastic remarks, ironies, loud gestures, and unpredictable melodramatic occurrences. However, if it was not despised and was accepted as a part of any course module, it would have been beneficial to the learners and practitioners of aesthetics. In fact, at times, the *Nautanki* and its folk elements have also been seen as the intermediary theatre that had its origination primarily in the agrarian Indian background but gradually advanced to the semi-industrialized, more urbanized changes brought among the audience through stagecraft, dialogues, and lyrics. As Kathryn Hansen points out in *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*,

“Theatre by its nature is concerned with illusion, disguise, and even duplicity, in many societies it evokes distrust and hostility. But in rural India, the suspicious enterprise of theatre is made stranger still by differences in power, culture, and status that

separate city and village. The arrival of any citydweller in the village arouses a fear of exploitation and degradation.” (Hansen 20)

### **Gender Narratives, Folk, and Position of the Women Performers in the Nautanki**

When we go back to the historical evidence suggesting feminist writings and female entrapment in the pre-colonial and post-colonial Indian context, we find that the anti-colonial struggle of the Gandhian era was evident in many of their acts. Amidst the plurality of themes that demarcated most of the post-war Nautankis in India, the women-centric performances were mostly targeted either at the historical and mythical stories of salvation, austerity, chastity, and the penance of the woman or the more modern ones, celebrating the love stories like *Heer-Raanjha* or the female performers in *Anarkali or Daku Phoolan Devi*, emphasizing the subjugated and tortured roles of the women who rise up to terrible occasions as resilient female figures. Another example can be of the doting mother and the tragic character of Rani Taramati, played by Nautanki stalwart Gulab Bai, at the age of fifteen. It is interesting to note how North India had been a melting pot of wars, conspiracies, loss of lives, plotting, exploitation, and resistance from the marginalized classes for a long time. And the female in these cases suffered from a dual form of marginalization: one, if they belonged to a lower class or caste and had to perform the role of a strong woman on the stage, and two, if they were to perform alongside their male counterparts. With the exaggerated details, loud make-up, and dazzling costumes, they were also to largely prove their acting capability. Gulab Bai's rising success as the cultural icon in the early parts of the twentieth century in India was not sudden, but it definitely induced a new ray of hope as far as the position of female actors as part of traditional folk theatre in India was concerned. As Deepti Priya Mehrotra elaborates in *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*:

“Cultural mandarins zeroed in on Gulab Bai as on fixed point they could focus attention on. They offered her awards and accolades and paid lip service ‘to the greatest folk art of Uttar Pradesh’ but did little to ensure its survival.” (Mehrotra 6)

For a long time, male actors played a major role in the performance, songs, and dances when it came to enthralling the audience. When the gendered paradigm was more closely analyzed, it was about the types of antagonism that the women faced in terms of their class and caste position. There could be studies of both affirmation and denial on her part when it came to representing the folk element through a performative module. The characters of Sita, Savitri, Lakshmi, Parvati, and religious heroines are replete with the finer essence of femininity and compassion, which makes the audience believe more about the supreme, elevated power of the women. However, in the northern belts of India, the changes that were to be introduced in terms of women's empowerment were multifaceted, often complicated, and not always very practical on the level of



implementation. The mythic prototypes could be seen in those Nautankis that were specially aimed at presenting the religious scriptures with song, dance, an invocation to the muse and God, divine miracles, and retribution if the case arose. Then, the more modernized versions concentrated on de-professionalizing and de-mystifying the concept of women in theatre, ushering in more realistic, crude pictures of what the society actually composed of. The stringent ways of dealing only with plot, catharsis, and moralistic philosophy were to be questioned, as now, it was the turn of the female protagonist, who was inquisitive and resilient and provided resistance to all odds faced by her. For instance, the Sangit scripts of the Nautankis always had certain female prototypes, like the contrast between the seductress and the docile, submissive pativrata woman. The performative aspect of gender is essential to scrutinize in this respect because in Indian theatre, drama, and folk performances are not restricted to narrow and commercially organized categories. Since a traditional folkloric performance is handed down from one generation to another, understanding burning social and sexual issues becomes easier in the long run. Apart from Gulab Bai, prominent names in the circuit of women performers include Sukhbadan, Chahetan, Kamlesh Lata, Mona, and Neelam Suraiya, who played dominant roles in nurturing and propagating Nautanki among a greater number of enthusiastic audiences. For instance, Nautankis like *Bhikharin* (The Beggar Woman) and *Bahu Begam* (The Bride) raise pertinent questions about profession and poverty, and through spells, curses, and the charming beauty of the woman and curses, the Nautankis move on to their ends. The prostitutes and the fallen women in these plays, quite contrary to the western counterparts who have a heart of gold, are avaricious and extremely materialistic women.

Detrimental to what the condition of the earlier *Nautanki* has been, In fact, as Deepti Priya Mehrotra records in her work *Nautanki's Leading Ladies: The Rise of the Stage Heroine*, the Great Gulab Theatre Company had seen a worthy successor in Madhu Agrawal, the daughter of Gulab Bai, who acted as the female protagonist in *Dahiwala* and *Teen Betiyan urf Dehleez ke Paar* was praised by the audience of Kanpur and other states for enacting the excruciating pain of women through suicide, dowry, and domestic violence cases. Another daughter of Gulab Bai, Asha was a known name in the acting circuit, and she gave one of her stellar performances in *Aurat ka Pyar urf Bahadur Ladki*. Through an invocation to the Gods, the sound of drums, colourful costumes, an epilogue, and the use of prose and poetic style, women in the Nautankis try to make the audience aware of the exploitative patterns of injustice, grievance done to the body, and the insinuations that often prove to be detrimental for the women. However, the fate of the female performers of *Nautanki* was also like that of the other general women of the states. Once they were married, they gradually lost connection with the stage and

the entire performance arena. The study of women who stage resistance via plays also takes into consideration specific possibilities of how and for what purpose they deploy their bodies.

## Conclusion

Folkloric assimilation through the strenuous aspects of drama is a complex and continuous process. Nautanki involves poetry, chanting, prose, doha, dance, music, the sound of nagada, soratha, and a passionate storytelling motif. The collective unconscious of one or more generations is witness to these narratives that can be serious, ludicrous, didactic, profoundly sentimental, or a combination of all of these. Legends, historical stories, debatable social modes, regressive violence-based incidents in the states, and current affairs – variety and multiplicity are the hallmarks of *Nautankis*. Through the tradition of folk drama and performance, there is an incessant knowledge sharing that happens in terms of demography, regionalism, art, culture, ethnographic distribution, fairs, cultural festivals, celebrations of rites and rituals, and a whole trajectory of belief systems. With the changing times, the professional *Nautanki* performers and the *naqqarchi*, or the *dhol*-players, have also suffered the onslaught of technology and more advanced and sophisticated forms of proscenium theatre. Also, with new genres of feature films being made, instrumentalization and the use of super-advanced software in negotiating musical tunes, the old flavour of *Nautanki* has already been lost. Also, the advent and development of multiculturalism have led to the sandpapering of several regional dialects, tonal shifts, and dialogue modifications. Hybrid forms of Western influence have affected the course of storytelling methods through drama, and folk aspects of Nautanki have also been a victim of it. In spite of the conceptual and performative grids, layers, and ranks, it can be an anticipation if this less-promoted art and aesthetic form can be resuscitated for future generations to cherish.

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# Dichotomous Relationship Between Physical Body and Inner Self: A Queer Reading of *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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## *Abstract*

Queer literature focuses on the experiences, identities, as well as LGBTQ+ community issues. Although it challenges and empowers social conventions, it has been censored and marginalised. In South Asian countries queer's visibility is challenging due to homophobic demography and contemporary sexual politics. The paper explores the dichotomy between the physical body and inner self from a queer perspective, focusing on the complex problems of queer estrangement in the novels *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It explores the internal conflict experienced by main characters Arjie in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Anjum in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, who navigate societal pressure and familial opposition to understand and accept their identities. The study uses qualitative research methodology, focusing on thematic analysis and textual interpretation of proposed literary texts using Queer theory.

**Keywords:** Queer literature, LGBTQ+ community, dichotomy, estrangement, Queer theory

## Introduction

Queer literature is a multifaceted genre that delves into the various experiences, identities, and topics of the LGBTQ+ community. It encompasses a wide range of literary genres, such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, dramas, and other forms of writing. Queer literature serves as a means of empowerment and a catalyst for societal transformation, enabling individuals with queer identities to articulate their own viewpoints, question prevailing social conventions, and campaign for parity. Queer spaces in continental literature have been marginalized and subjected to taboo and censure within mainstream culture. The presence of Indian queer individuals in the literary world has faced challenges due to the prevailing homophobic attitudes within the population, which are influenced by colonial ideals and a limited understanding of gender diversity. In modern culture, the dynamics of sexuality reveal that the presence of the LGBTQ+ community is perceived as a challenge to the prevailing norm of heterosexual conformity. Paul Johnson says Heterosexuality is a mostly "silent" collection of identities and practices that are supposed to be present everywhere but frequently go unrecognised and unexplored" (2). It is upheld and cultivated by social institutions such as marriage or the daily behaviors of individuals.

Heterosexuality is an invisible influence that determines the range of assumed sexual orientations and even regular social relationships. Sexual orientation encompasses an individual's attraction, expression of sexual feelings, and self-identification in terms of their sexual preferences. Individuals with uncertain or unclear sexual orientations exist outside the normative societal framework. They experience marginalization, exploitation, and prejudice. The sexual minority in South Asian society has been epistemologically portrayed as 'others' among heterosexuals or cisgenders. The proposed research aims to raise awareness about the concerns and obstacles experienced by LGBT community and their existential crises.

The term 'queer' first denoted 'peculiar,' but it garnered prominence when a collective of individuals who did not conform to heterosexuality revolted against the stringent societal norms that suppressed their orientation and sexual identity. At the beginning of the 1800s, this name was used to denigrate those who found themselves attracted to other people of the same gender. Nevertheless, in the latter part of the 20th century, as the LGBTQ+ community rights campaigns gained momentum, the term "queer" started to be reappropriated and redefined by certain individuals within the LGBTQ+ community as a means of empowerment and self-identification. In his research piece "The Normalization of Queer Theory," David Halperin argues that a word that used to be typically associated with negative connotations such as "strange," "odd," "unusual," or "sick" and was frequently used as an insult against lesbians and gay men, now suggests intricate and validated possibilities. To attempt to define queer is to potentially restrict its capacity and its enchanting ability to bring about a transformative era of sexual radicalism and flexible gender possibilities (339). The word "queer" refers to a wide range of identities and experiences that do not conform to the traditional societal norms of cisgenderism and heterosexuality. According to David Halperin's 1995 essay "Saint Foucault's: Towards a Gay Hagiography," "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence. Queer then demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (62).

The term 'queer' currently refers to a lack of opposition to heterosexism and the oppression that arises from societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality. A queer background often encompasses an individual's personal encounters, past events, and sense of self in relation to their membership in the queer community. This may encompass their process of publicly acknowledging their sexual orientation or gender identity, their romantic or interpersonal connections, encounters with prejudice or inclusivity, participation in queer advocacy or social groups, and many aspects of their lived experiences. It involves recognizing and discussing the distinct difficulties and encounters that individuals may

have encountered as a result of their non-traditional sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

The sexual awakening of the 1960s denotes a notable epoch characterized by a substantial societal transformation and a heightened acceptance of sexuality. During this era, there was a significant breaking of societal norms and an increase in debates surrounding sexuality. This led to more open conversations about themes such as pleasure and non-traditional types of relationships. These changes were influenced by the emergence of the queer rights movement, the feminist movement, and other counter-cultural movements. Literature has seen considerable changes in its portrayal of LGBT individuals, mirroring societal shifts and enhancing the visibility and comprehension of queer experiences. The purpose of the proposed research paper is to examine the dichotomy between physical body and the inner self from queer perspective. Dichotomy is a phrase used to describe situations, ideas, or beings that create a division or contrast between two things that appear to be opposed or conflicting. *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy explore the profound consequences of the conflicts between sex, gender, and desire. These novels provide a comprehensive examination of the intricate challenges faced by LGBT individuals on a worldwide level. The novels delve into the profound internal turmoil experienced by the protagonists, Arjie and Anjum, respectively. These novels with queer themes focus on the protagonist's quest to comprehend and embrace their identities, frequently in the midst of societal coercion and familial resistance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. *To explore self-estrangement through the representation of characters in the selected novels.*
2. *To examine how cultural settings and societal norms affect people with diverse sexualities.*
3. *To analyze the metamorphosis processes and resiliency needed by characters to connect the dots between their outer identities and inner selves.*
4. *To gain profound insights into the complexities of identity, particularly concerning gender and sexuality.*

### **Research Methodology**

The current study employs a qualitative research methodology that focuses on thematic analysis and textual interpretation. It entails a methodical examination of literary texts authored by Shyam Selvadurai and Arundhati Roy, using the critical perspective of queer theory. Queer theory is a philosophy that questions the notion that cisgender and heterosexual identities are considered the norm. Queer theory in literary criticism

questions conventional standards, dismantles heterosexual conventions, and redefines the concept of gender as a binary system. The text delves into the influence that various sexual orientations and gender identities have on the process of storytelling and the way stories are understood and analyzed. Building on Judith Butler's theories, this perspective highlights the performative aspects of gender and sexuality, which are expressed through repetitive actions.

Feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase 'queer theory'. She argues that the theory challenges heterosexuality, lesbian and gay analyses, and race-based sexual prejudicial relations. Queer theorists argue that identities are not static because they are composed of diverse elements, and to classify an individual solely based on one attribute is a complete misreading. Their primary focus is on the issue of categorizing people according to their gender. Consequently, queer is not so much an identity as it is a critical examination of identification. Queer theory, derived from LGBT studies, highlights the malleability and subjective nature of sexuality, questioning societal standards and binary classifications. This work questions and contests the established worldwide systems of categorization and the clear divisions in politics, while also critically analyzing and questioning the social and political norms, with reference to gender and sexuality.

### **Queer Reading of *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

The birthplace of Shyam Selvadurai is Colombo, Sri Lanka. Published to great acclaim in 1994, *Funny Boy* won both the Lambda Literary Award for homosexual literature in the US and the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Selvadurai experienced violent battles between the Buddhist Sinhala majority and the Hindu Tamil minority. *Funny Boy* tells his story as a young man growing up gay in Sri Lanka. Deepa Mehta directed a film adaptation of it. The novel follows Arjie, the protagonist as he grapples with the conflict between societal expectations and his authentic identity as a queer individual in Sri Lanka while embarking on a journey of self-exploration. In this context, the physical body symbolizes the embodiment of cultural authority and societal rules, whereas the inner self represents an individual's authentic truth and personal wishes.

Arjie is wrestling with his sexual orientation while residing in a conventional Sri Lankan household. The patriarchal atmosphere in Arjie's household strongly enforces traditional gender roles, resulting in a constant conflict between his physical appearance and his true identity. The narrative provides an intricate examination of sexual and ethnic identities, portraying the challenges and achievements of individuals as they navigate these intricate facets of their being in the midst of society's pressures and expectations. Shyam Selvadurai uses Arjie's narrative to clarify the complexities of forming one's



identity and emphasizes the significance of accepting oneself and being resilient in the quest for genuine identity and a sense of belonging.

*Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age novel that delves into the exploration of sexual and racial identities in Sri Lanka. The story chronicles Arjie's progression from childhood to adolescence, emphasizing the significance of self-acceptance and resilience. The novel explores the fraught and aggressive interactions between the Tamils and Sinhalese, which ultimately led to a civil war in 1983. The word 'Funny' alludes to those with sexual ambiguity, serving as a representation of Arjie's process of reclaiming his own identity and accepting his queer orientation in Sri Lanka. Although Arjie is sarcastically called 'Funny' by his family, the story explores the internal struggle he experiences in relation to his own identity, his family, and society as he comes to terms with his homosexual orientation.

The introductory chapter, titled "Pigs Can't Fly," provides readers with insights on the patriarchal organization of Sri Lankan Tamil culture, where genders are segregated into distinct inner and exterior realms. Males have greater accessibility to the front garden and field, while females have restricted territory. Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young individual, reflects on his grandparents' residence, a place where children engaged in the sport of cricket and participated in a make-believe wedding game called "bride-bride." His sexual orientation enables him to take charge of the girl's domain and coordinate the bride's responsibilities. Everything goes according to plan until Tanuja, a new relative who the other participants refer to as "Her Fatness," turned up and tries to take Arjie's place as the bride. Due to Arjie's insistence to be in that role only, her mother, Kanthi Aunty, proudly displays Arjie in a sari to her estranged relatives and aunts. Arjie's uncle chuckles and humorously refers to him as "funny due to his inclination towards feminist aspect of his personality." But, Arjie declines to partake in the boys' cricket match despite the desire of his parents (Amma and Appa). When crossing limits, desire appears to be the exclusive means of doing this. Throughout the story, Arjie's family consistently attempts to assign him to the masculine gender, excluding him from interactions with girls and promoting his engagement with boys. Even before Arjie becomes aware of himself, the reader can see that his family is apprehensive about his homosexuality. The family's steadfast efforts to impose Arjie's assigned gender role demonstrate their loyalty to social norms. Arjie's first transgression of social standards is his desire to play 'bride-bride' with the females rather than play cricket with the males. Arjie's disobedience to social norms has led to the blending of his private and political spheres.

In the following month, Arjie skillfully devises a plan to reclaim his role as the bride. Contrarily, Arjie preferred to engage in play with the girls, and his vibrant imagination consistently led to him being assigned the crucial role of the bride in their game. In

this context, Saswata Kusari, in her work *Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy: A Critical Companion*, also analyzes "Arije's participation in the game of bride-ride, and indeed, the way he masters the role of the bride by wearing a sari and other 'feminine' ornaments and make-ups also acts as a point of subversion in the text. Though unconscious of the fact, the subversiveness stems from the fact that Arije's performance as a bride makes him a kind of drag queen" (66).

The depiction of a young person choosing to wear a sari also represents their suppressed desire for sexuality. His nonconformity to societal norms regarding sexual orientation was a cause of shame within the cultural context in which he resided, rendering him more susceptible to harm and alienation from the dominant social group. In *Gender Trouble*, According to Judith Butler, Arjie's portrayal effectively mocks both the idea of an innate gender identity and the common conception of gender expression. The restrictive and heteropatriarchal notions of sex and gender are thus called into question. Drag, according to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, is merely an imitation of an equally imitative structure rather than the imitation of a "real" or "original" gender. Drag, as Butler notes, "reveals the distinctions between those elements of gendered experience that, through the regulatory illusion of heterosexual coherence, have been mistakenly naturalised as a unity." Drag subtly reveals both the contingent nature of gender and its imitative structure" (Butler 175). Arjie is transformed into an icon via the use of clothing and make-up, becoming "an elegant, kind, perfect being that the world's loving eyes landed upon" (5). As Arije explores his sexuality, his gay identity challenges cultural norms, particularly those related to masculinity. "To describe a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that presupposes that a stable sexuality expressed through a stable gender—male expresses male, female expresses female—that is appositionally and hierarchically defined through the mandatory practice of heterosexuality is necessary for bodies to cohere and make sense" (194).

Arjie is forcibly enrolled in the Victorian Academy by his family with the intention of cultivating masculine characteristics in him But Academy served as blessing in disguise for Arjie.. He encounters his male classmate, Shehan, who embodies contradictory cultural beliefs. Both homos are excluded from society because of their distinctive principles. Arjie recognizes that their connection possesses unexplored potential and acknowledges that it is the pinnacle of his emotional state. Shehan serves as a channel for Arjie's process of self-discovery, ultimately resulting in their reunion. Ethnicity significantly contributes to the estrangement of individuals, depriving them of the ability to marry and pursue their sexual preferences, as well as forcing them into exile from their own land. The relationship between Shehan, who is Sinhalese, and Arjie, who is Tamil, has caused considerable strain in their lives, particularly for Arjie. This strain has

resulted in Arjie's withdrawal from both his family and society.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy, a perceptive observer of several aspects of modern Indian society, authored the novel. This novel is an exceptional work that explores the themes of unexplained, alienated, and underappreciated *Hijras*. The novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* delves into the lives of Intersex Anjum and other marginalized individuals who struggle to reconcile their authentic selves with the societal constructs of their identities and physical forms. The transformation of Aftab into Anjum highlights the clear discrepancy between societal gender conventions and personal identity. Through the novel Arundhati Roy examines the *Hijra* population in India, specifically exploring their sense of isolation within discussions surrounding gender. The characters are categorized as neither male or female and grapple with issues related to communication and longing. Though they are awarded the 'Third Gender status by the supreme court of india. But societal attitude towards them is far from compassionate. They encounter social hierarchy and challenges related to their sense of self in an intricate social, sexual, and categorization system established by elites or ruling class. The author presents a concise overview of the daily challenges faced by the *Hijra* community while also integrating important texts from the field of gender studies.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy delves into the experiences of marginalized individuals, including Anjum, whose journey vividly illustrates the complex interplay between identity and physicality. The transformation of Aftab into Anjum is a significant aspect of the narrative. The tension between personal identity and societal gender norms is underscored by her decision to embrace her hijra status by altering her physical appearance. Her physical form serves as both a site of exclusion and a source of empowerment. Due to her identity as a Hijra, she faces both violence and marginalization. Additionally, her physical appearance serves as a clear indication of her rejection of the rigid gender binary. Anjum exhibits a robust sense of self that transcends traditional gender norms within her inner being. The strength of her character and the authenticity of her self-perception are reflected in her inner thoughts and emotions. Her inner life is evidence of her fortitude and the sincerity of her self-image. Anjum finds a place where her inner self and her physical identity are more closely aligned. Her desire for belonging led her to join the community of *Hijras*. This creates a sense of acceptance and belonging, where she can engage in their established practices and traditions. This fosters a feeling of inclusion and camaraderie.

Anjum, a transwoman who is born intersex, narrates the tale. She is a person who has alternating feelings of hope and despair and is considered part of a group referred to as the marginalized section of society. Transgender individuals are those who challenge the societal expectations associated with their biological sex and deviate from traditional

gender norms. The writers explore numerous individuals with intricate gender backgrounds. The protagonist, Anjum, born Aftab with both male and partial female reproductive organs, embarks on a journey of self-discovery in which the societal norms and concepts of otherness are revealed. Anjum, the fourth of five children, was born in Delhi on a chilly January night. Although the midwife initially mistook her for a boy, she later found a small, undeveloped, yet unmistakably female genitalia under the male genitalia. Jahanara Begum, Anjum's mother, was astonished by her daughter's enigmatic sexual preference. She was surprised to discover that the baby's sexual orientation was ambiguous. When she asserts that each word in Urdu is assigned a meaning based on an individual's gender, she experiences emotional distress and intense agitation, while her toddler becomes entangled in-between situation. . "She screams, "Everything was either manly or feminine, man or woman. She knew that people who looked like him were called hijra, or Kinner. However, a language is not made of two words. Was it feasible to exist without speaking the language? This inquiry, of course, did not come to her in words. It spoke to her in the form of a silent, developing howl." (8). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler also writes:

A baby is considered human when the question "Is it a boy or girl?" is addressed. The gender marker seems to "qualify" bodies as human bodies. The physical forms that do not correspond to one gender or the other are outside of humanity and, in fact, represent the domain of the dehumanised and the abject, against which humanity is defined. How can we talk about a human becoming its gender if gender is always present and predetermines what constitutes a human? It's as though gender were a cultural afterthought or a postscript? (142).

She persists in her pursuit of self-identification despite the opposition from her family and the challenges posed by societal expectations for personal growth. She ultimately finds herself in the hijra society, specifically known as Khawabgah, as she searches for a sense of belonging. Additionally, she underwent gender reassignment surgery. The vagina constructed by the unqualified physician proves to be inefficacious, even subsequent to the extraction of the male reproductive organs. Nevertheless, she contended that she was a member of the family in which her species resided. She is really satisfied with her transition from Aftab to Anjum. dressed in a red saree Anjum becomes accustomed to sustaining herself by soliciting alms at pedestrian crossings and intermittently performing dance routines on festive occasions. However, the dreadful Godhra train event in Gujarat, when some of her acquaintances lost their lives and she was on the verge of being stabbed, exacerbated her anguish. An authoritative voice said that the act of killing a Hijra or eunuch is deemed abhorrent, as it is regarded as a criminal offense in morality deemed to get retribution. With that incident, she lost her popularity as a hijra and became a remorseful person.

After that, she left Khawabgah and went to the graveyard to find refuge. She built and oversaw the Jannat Guest Home, where she offers funeral services to the underprivileged, and lived out the rest of her life. She perceives graveyard as an intermediary realm since it does not pertain to either the realm of the living or the realm of the deceased. For Anjum, the cemetery is the location where she has experienced utmost happiness. Paradoxically, she has been compared to "a clown without a circus and a queen without a palace."(8)

## Conclusion

Studying the contrast between the physical body and the inner self in the novels provides deep insights into the intricacies of identity, societal conventions, and personal genuineness. These works examine gender, sexuality, and the search for self-acceptance within different cultural and political settings. An analysis of *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from queer perspective examines how politics, religion, family, and culture intertwine, emphasizing the difficulties experienced by gender-nonconforming persons due to society's gender hierarchy. The article highlights the necessity of using a multimodal approach, which encompasses education, supporting environments, and legal reforms, in order to advance equality and inclusivity. Queer literature focuses on the real-life experiences, many identities, and prominent topics of the LGBTQ+ community. The presence of LGBT individuals in South Asian countries is impeded by a demographic that is unfriendly towards homosexuality and by prevailing sexual politics. This article explores the juxtaposition between the physical body and inner self from a queer perspective, specifically analyzing the complex themes of LGBT alienation depicted in the novels *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy explore the inner conflict experienced by the main characters, Arjie and Anjum, as they encounter cultural norms and familial opposition while seeking to understand and embrace their true selves. The study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, specifically employing thematic analysis and textual interpretation to evaluate literary texts from the perspective of queer theory.

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**Lalit Mohan Sharma's *Inclusive Voids: One Hundred Poems:*  
A Review**

Astitva Prakashan, Chhattisgarh, pp. 122, Rs. 299

**Prof. Swaraj Raj\***

When I received this anthology of one hundred poems penned by Lalit Mohan Sharma, a well-known poet with ten books of English poetry, one of Hindi poetry and an English translation of Zahid's Urdu poems to his credit, it was the title *Inclusive Voids* that fascinated me first. Apparently, an oxymoron, it alludes to the Buddhist idea of *sunyata*, the voidness that does not represent negation of existence or nothingness but constitutes ultimate reality, a kind of inclusive, undifferentiated void out of which all apparent phenomena, entities, dualities and distinctions arise. On reading the poems in this anthology, I realised that in the overall context of this anthology, the phrase 'inclusive voids' suggests not only a yearning for a life of stillness and voidness, but it hints at the gaping holes left in the mind by various traumatic events, both personal and impersonal. It is, as if, in questing for some private moments of stillness in the continual flux of life, the poetic self moves from the personal to the universal, underscoring the violence – both overt and covert – unleashed by powerful dictators, demagogues and oligarchs on unsuspecting people in different parts of the world. A brutalized society that ours is today, divided into ethnic, racial, caste, class and other such identitarian ghettos, enacts a politics of exclusion, fear, hatred and contempt.

The last poem in this anthology entitled "Inclusive Voids", after highlighting with some concrete images the blows delivered to human sociality by the Covid pandemic ends with a question: "Little voids surround us, or that we now / Inhabit in voids all inclusive to ourselves?" This theme of inhabiting the voids works in two ways in the poem; as an ironic reminder of the Buddhist idea of *sunyata*, and as the void being that space where there is place only for the personal ego to the exclusion of everything else. Narcissism and morbid preoccupation with one's own self define our existence today, making the poet raise many pertinent questions:

*Are we now too self-centered to worry  
On what doesn't touch us directly? Can  
We afford to be so independent in mind  
That emotionally we turn so exclusive?*



Running parallel to this awareness of a crumbling society is the dream of a tranquil life. In fact, this dream is ruptured continuously by the overwhelming awareness of our dystopian times. This tension is palpable in most of the poems and gives them a disturbing topical immediacy even as they embody aspirations for an uncluttered existence, that is, an inclusive void.

The very opening poem “Cult of the Nazi” conjures up the spectre of Nazism that is raising its head in many countries. There are clear references to the devastation in Gaza and Ukraine where “homes are turned into rubble” and stories are leaked to “the media in order / To orchestrate narratives of noble intent”. The phrase ‘noble intent’ brings out the chilling reality of how even the blood and gore are made presentable by the spin doctors with their verbal chicanery. The difference between demagoguery and statesmanship, between truth and untruth is erased. The poem warns that the irredentist dreams of the popular leaders galvanize the gullible masses in the name of patriotism: “For them the Nazi cult is a way of life...” If not checked, the Nazi cult will force many more holocausts, much more violent and devastating than the one perpetrated by the Nazis during the course of the World War II.

The image of Gaza and Ukraine appears again in the poem “A Diwali Night”, bringing into relief the ironic contrast between the celebratory Diwali fireworks and the bombing of Gaza and Ukraine. The poem begins with a plea for a noiseless Diwali. However, this plea takes the form of the poetic self asking those who explode crackers to give him “cotton balls” to stuff his ears “Before you launch your game / Of exploding bombs!” The Diwali crackers are a grim reminder of the bombs exploding in Gaza and Ukraine: “Suddenly as if I were carried / Away to Gaza or / To streets of Ukraine ...” The poem “My Thirst” that begins with the gustatory image of “lemonade”, the liquid that turned “lyrical”, and visual imagery of “birds of paradise”, ends on a sombre note: “I look as far as the eyes do catch sights, / My countrymen agitate, the youth protest / Crying kids and wailing women in Kiev / Or on Palestine land ... My rage is impotent, avers my thirsty self.” What the poet seeks is tranquility and silence, people living in peace and not at each other’s throats.

Sadly enough, the kind of life we are leading, a life that prioritizes digital propinquity over physical nearness, virtuality over reality, a life obsessed with speed, cannot bring comfort and solace to us. The poet bemoans this in the poem “Triumph of Indifference”: “Not just different from others but also / Quite often indifferent to others are we / And each as if in the privacy of cellphone / Stands clubbed and confined a long time ...”

In many other poems too, similar ideas and themes recur in different forms; alienation of people from each other and their withdrawal into their narrow selves, gnawing feelings of existential angst, communal violence, issue of siege mentality and inflated pride arising

from parochial nationalism, ephemerality of youth and love, and the unease at unethical rabble-rousers gaining power and exploiting people. Dissatisfied with the present, the poetic persona's pursuit of a dream of life of conviviality makes him cast nostalgic glances at the slow, idyllic life in the past. But the past is what it is, unattainable and irretrievable past. Hence, the void.

All said and done, most of the poems deal with human concerns. The authorial voice is charged with energy, though it is at times a shade pedantic too owing to its intertextual ambitions. This tendency is likely driven by the author's avidity as a reader, which leads him to refer to many thinkers and authors. This is no fault per se, but it tends to lend a certain depth and density that needs some probing by a reader who may not be initiated into plumbing such depths.

In conclusion, while the typesetting, line spacing, and formatting could have been better, the poems are immensely readable. Proper formatting would have made them even more aesthetically pleasing to the eyes. Yet, despite these minor editorial niggles, the book remains a compelling read.

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***The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi  
(Trans. V. Geetha).**

Penguin Books, 2010. Rs. 350. Pp. 304

**Sakshi Arora\***

The word ‘Queer’ originally translates to ‘strange’ or ‘weird’. Later the word was used for the homosexuals who defied heterosexual norms, which was disparaging. (Merriam-Webster, 2024) Being queer wasn’t always considered abnormal. Ancient narratives and mythologies accepted queerness without naming it such. Though the term, “transgender” came later, gender transformation and fluidity were always pervasive in mythologies including that of Greek, Chinese Taoist, Aztec, Cuban Santeria, Viking and the fascinating Japanese Shinto mythology where Inari sometimes becomes a male and sometimes a female. Even in the Middle English period, we find writers like Shakespeare referring to homosexuality in his sonnets. Michel Foucault, a French theorist and philosopher, highlighted in his book, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, how labelling makes certain people visible. His book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Asylum* shows how asylum institutionalised homosexuality by declaring homosexuals as abnormal or deviant. It was in the nineteenth century that homosexuality was considered a crime. However, this institutionalisation gives rise to a new consolidated “queer” identity. They became an empowered group that defied societal norms and celebrated their queerness. Further, in 1969, the Stonewall riot in the USA was a turning point for the LGBTQ community, and also for Queer Studies and Literature. It was the large-scale response against the police storming the LGBTQ bar and further oppressing the people. After this, many books narrating explicit queer experiences started getting published. Many authors like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich shared writing about their black lesbian experiences. Simone de Beauvoir, a feminist theorist articulated the sex-gender distinction. Later, Judith Butler described gender as a performance that people enact daily.

The NALSA judgement of April 2014 was the turning point for transgender people in India which declared them as the ‘Third Gender,’ affirming their fundamental rights. The judgement acknowledged that transgender people have an identity other than the biological sex. The physical transition was not the key requirement for being considered as a transgender. It is seen as a definitive moment for Transgender Studies in India. After 2014, many Indian transgender autobiographies have been published, including A. Revathi’s second autobiography, *A Life in a Trans Activism*, as well as Dr Manobi

Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* and Laxminarayana Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. These writers came out of their shackles to share their journey of oppression and survival.

*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an autobiography written by the Transwoman, A. Revathi. Originally written in Tamil, the text was later translated into English by V. Geetha. A. Revathi, in her work, tells the readers that she was born as a male, named Doraisamy, in a small village in a district of Tamil Nadu. She is very vocal about her identity, her bitter childhood experiences and the trauma she went through, throughout her life.

Revathi shares her childhood experiences of emotional trauma. A child follows their heart but society tries to fix a person in certain parameters. She was always tortured in her school, especially by male students. They used disrespectful names for her, like, 'No.9' and 'female-boy.' Once a PT teacher spoke to her in a very disrespectful manner and asked her to pull down her trousers to check whether Revathi was a girl or not. Other boys laughed. It must be so painful for a child to hear such harsh words and go through something emotionally exhausting but could not even make out the reason for such torture. This highlights the suffering of children who not conform the societal norms.

Revathi tells the readers that once she got an opportunity to dress up as a woman for a play in grade seven. People praised her like a real woman which meant a lot to her. She writes, "To the world it appeared that I am dressing up and playing a woman but inside I felt I was a woman" (12). Wearing men's attires again, she felt that she had disguised herself. She was not acting like a woman but she was being herself. It was natural to her. She writes, "I was not trying to be a girl, I was actually one" (14). Her brothers snatched Revathi's domestic space because she did not perform the 'expected male roles'. Just because she was not masculine enough like her brothers, she became an object of mockery and torture. She suppressed all her emotions; there was a constant fight between her body and soul. This repression of the gust of emotions is traumatic.

Revathi ran away from her house when she couldn't take it anymore. She started accepting her true self after meeting people like her. Those people told her that if she wore a saree, jewellery, and wig and underwent 'nirvaanam' (Sex Reassignment Operation), she would look like a real woman. Like many other transwomen, she survived by money collected from shopkeepers like beggars. Nobody accepted her and so she had no other option but to be a part of the space, the socio-cultural 'Hijra' community where she found belongingness. When she came back to her home, her brother hit her hard with a bat. She writes,

I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing, warm (55).

A feminine person becomes an object of violence. A person who doesn't fit the societal norms of being a lady or a man is tortured by society. She was treated as an object to be destroyed or dry grass to be trampled. Later, she went to her people, to the hijra community, where she could be the way she liked, without any mask. A fellow Hijra told her, "It's not easy to be a woman. You have to suffer to be one" (82). She says multiple times in her book that her life as a woman is not easy. She writes, "I realised that I was merely going through all that a woman does, all the time" (229). A woman suffers as she is a puppet in the hands of this patriarchal world. At the same time, she is thought to be a house of reproduction and if she cannot produce babies, her body is considered a mere flesh to be devoured.

Revathi later entered into sex work and witnessed the brutal treatment against hijras and women. Men enslaved them and gave them bruises with knives or sometimes bit them and prostitutes could do nothing but suffer. She regularly endured physical torture by men. Once she was travelling by bus and the driver started touching her thighs. She didn't speak in fear that people would know she was a Hijra. Revathi writes, "There was no safety for women who travelled alone. I wondered how I was going to survive as a woman in this world" (157). She had access to public transportation but was not safe there. Once, while walking on the road, she was stopped by a police van and was taken to the police station. They charged Lathi on her for nothing. She was asked to take her clothes off. She was not safe anywhere; she could not even trust the caretakers of the law. It is not her story; it is the story of each person who identifies themselves as a woman. The degree of suffering may vary, but it exists. Being in contact with the authors facilitated a deeper understanding of their community. Currently A.Revathi has become a dedicated and renowned activist, living a life of dignity. She travels to prestigious universities worldwide for performance. She accepts that writing has a transformative power, she has empowered and uplifted her entire community. From begging, performing 'badhai' (dancing while congratulating people on occasions like marriage and child birth) and engaging in sex work, she now stands among the reputed writers and academicians. Revathi is not afraid to spew her confessions. I believe that writing is therapeutic, it heals open-cut wounds, and at the same time, it empowers not only a marginalised person but also the entire community. For transgender people, the struggle for equality and justice goes beyond the mere physical space, they yearn for opportunities and acceptance as they always have been relegated to the margins. I recommend this autobiography to everyone as it challenges societal norms, dismantles this spatial injustice and helps to create an inclusive society. These narratives should get the deserving impetus.

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**Dr. C. Shahin Banu\***

*A Night in Forest*

A night in Dark depth forest,  
where a lovely mountain stand!  
View at a distance a lonely hut,  
where a hunch-back granny lights the lantern!  
Hefty trees guard the place,  
Quiet breeze comforts me!  
Nature's light guides the way,  
set my shelter with canvas cover!  
fireflies' flashes blazing everywhere,  
showcase the beauty of shaggy plants!  
pick the sticks to make fire,  
which warmth me to sit aside!  
twinkling stars winkle at me,  
wonder my stay in the divine earth!  
wind whispers something to trees,  
bending the heads and respond to it!  
insects sound escorts my mind,  
which quests an adventurous day!  
time passes with thrilling night,  
Sentinel moon waits for day-shift sun!  
Birds and animals welcome the rays,  
Which drive the chariot of Day angel,  
glows and glitters like a golden ball,  
Which shutters the entrance of darken night!

## *Eternal Love*

Imperial Sky fell in love with gorgeous Earth,  
wished to be united by wedlock!  
Shock-wave trembled the Almighty,  
when they solicited consent from the Might. He-  
with great joy in expression but not in cognizance,  
admitted their proposal with a condition -  
Nuptial time must be before the sunrise!  
If it happens, wedding will be cancelled.  
He bothered for all the living creatures,  
If Earth weds Sky, no one will survive on earth.  
The God plotted in his mind by a trick,  
agreed them to prepare for wedding, but  
demanded the sun to rise earlier than usual!  
Innocent couple arranged everything!  
Sky threaded, twinkling stars as wreath,  
sparkling moon, as a pendant for bride!  
Earth picked Saffron Crocus and Juliet Rose  
to make garland and bouquet for bridegroom!  
On the day of wedding, in front of the Almighty  
Pretty lovers ready to exchange garlands with ecstasy!  
Sky initiated to decorate her with the glittering jewel,  
Sun rose on the day as instructed, with  
Distress in mind and smile in face,  
Lovely twosome conceded the God's condition,  
with heavy heart, looked at each other!  
Thunder shattered Sky's Gray clouds,  
Downpour from eyes, fell on the endearing earth!  
She piled droplets on her, as ocean!  
A token of love, she preserves it!  
All the beings on the earth stooped  
their heads, with gloomy heart.  
Pure love is realised in duos' sacrifice!  
Both are apart but not their love,  
looking at and longing for each other!  
When anguish arouses, sky tears as rain,



screams as thunder, swifts as horrible whirlwind!  
The earth accumulates all, like embracing the Sky!  
The agony, she stores as Eternal Love!

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**Dr. G. Saratha Lakshmi\***

*Fifty Years, Still You're Here*

Today I turn fifty,  
a milestone, they say,  
but the ache in my heart  
has not faded away.  
For you are not here  
to witness this day,  
to laugh at the wrinkles,  
to cheer me, to stay.

I see you in mirrors,  
in the lines on my face,  
in the way I hold silence,  
in the warmth I embrace.  
Your voice still whispers  
in the wind's gentle sigh,  
and your hands guide me still,  
though you're not nearby.

I remember the mornings,  
the aroma of your food,  
the stories you told me  
before I went to bed.  
You were my compass,  
my shelter, my guide,  
and though you are gone,  
you're still by my side.

The years have passed quickly,  
yet slowly, it seems,  
like a river that carries  
both sorrow and dreams.  
I've lived half a century,

learned, loved, and grown,  
but I'd give all my years  
just to hear you on the phone.

Oh, Mother, I miss you,  
your laughter, your grace,  
the way you could light up  
the darkest of space.  
But today, as I stand here,  
with tears in my eyes,  
I'll honour your memory  
beneath these vast skies.

For fifty years,  
you've been my guide, my star,  
and though you are gone,  
you're never too far.  
So, here's to you, Mother,  
on this bittersweet day—  
I carry your love  
in each step of the way.

### *The Quiet House*

The echoes linger in the hall,  
Where laughter once did freely call.  
The walls, once loud with youthful cheer,  
Now hold a silence, sharp and clear.

The table set for two, not four,  
A rhythm changed a different door.  
The chairs that held their weight, now bare,  
A stillness hangs in the air.

The calendar, with marks erased,  
No games to watch, no time to chase.  
The fridge no longer stripped and bare,  
No muddy prints upon the stair.

Yet in this quiet, something grows,

A tender peace the heart now knows.  
For though the nest may seem too wide,  
It holds the love that won't subside.

The years of chaos, joy, and strife,  
Have shaped a life, a home, a life.  
And though they've flown to skies unknown,  
This nest remains their stepping stone.

So here I sit, in softened light,  
Embracing change, both day and night.  
For empty nests, though bittersweet,  
Are filled with love, both deep and fleet.

### *A Rainy Day's Rhythm*

The clouds roll in, a heavy, grey parade,  
The sky now wears a cloak of shadowed jade.  
A droplet falls, then two, then countless more,  
A symphony begins—a downpour's roar.

The rooftops hum, the gutters start to sing,  
A rhythmic tune the rain is orchestrating.  
Puddles form, like mirrors on the ground,  
Reflecting skies where silver streams are found.

The trees sway low, their leaves in whispered prayer,  
As raindrops dance in patterns through the air.  
The earth drinks deep, its thirst now satisfied,  
A quiet joy beneath the stormy tide.

Inside, the fire crackles soft and warm,  
A shelter from the chaos of the storm.  
The windows blur, the world a watercolour scene,  
A fleeting peace, serene and evergreen.

The clock ticks slow, the hours stretch and bend,  
As time itself seems paused, a fleeting friend.  
The rain's refrain, a lullaby so sweet,  
It lulls the world to rest beneath its beat.

And when the clouds part wide, the sun breaks through,  
The sky is washed in shades of gold and blue.  
The rain's last note, a whisper soft and low,  
Leaves behind a world that's fresh, aglow.

So let the rain fall, let it cleanse and play,  
For every storm gives way to brighter days.  
In its rhythm, life finds a quiet grace,  
A rainy day, a gift of time and space.

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**Dr. M. Renuga\***

*The 'Meaning' of Life*

Like the three syllables in 'Meaning'  
Life is a Triad;  
Family, career and society -  
An artwork made up of three pieces,  
one cannot be better than the other,  
a band of three musicians,  
playing the rhythm of Life.

You must be happy in one part  
To be successful in the other quarters.  
Planning in one segment  
brings prosperity to the whole.  
Sacrifice in one faction  
Enhances the value of other units.

There is a lot of meaning  
in the mean of the three values.  
The whole, as they say,  
will always be  
'Greater than the sum of its parts.'  
The zest in every zone  
Lights up the 'ing' of existence.  
That gives meaning to life  
and Life to Meaning.

## *The Twin Cake Story*

This year I happened to cut  
A couple of cakes  
Because I was turning 55,  
One each for one five.  
Five plus five is not ten,  
It is fiftyfive, the modern Maths says.

All through the five decades and a half  
perception of life has been singular.  
Lessons life taught are a plenty!  
From the self-pitying child  
to a philosophising teacher  
I owe to my experiences.

Sermons of Life were revelation  
not to jump over joys,  
and scream at trials,  
yet I persisted  
but later realized  
both shall pass  
to halt at the next client's gate.

Come what may,  
appreciate what you get,  
enjoy the deserved blessings  
Life offers, with a bow to His grace,  
every day will be a boon,  
and each moment a benediction!  
Five plus five is not ten  
Wisdom weighs,  
Five plus five fiftyfive!

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