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Metropolis And Margins:
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Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in India

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Editors
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Editorial

It gives us immense pleasure to present the much-awaited issue of the *IACLALS Journal* (Volume 9, Issue 2023): "Metropolis and Margins: Shifting Perspectives in Literary and Language Studies." The range and scope of the articles in this volume showcase a variety of topics and diversity of views and observations pertaining to literature, art, film, culture, politics and contemporary events, thus rendering the journal a vibrant voice in literary and cultural contexts. The articles that figure in this volume of IACLALS journal were presented in the association's annual conference (online) held in April 2023, in collaboration with the Janaki Devi Memorial College, Delhi. The papers are on varied subjects and by scholars from different parts of the country, which consist of students, young faculty and senior established academics. The articles have been subjected to a rigorous system of peer review, a process that is the hallmark of the *IACLALS Journal*.

The papers explore multiple configurations of power-relationships through the binary of 'metropolis' (centre) and 'margins' (peripheries) across shifting historical and cultural axes. The articles deftly articulate new configurations that emerge when earlier/existing paradigms are challenged and new paradigms are imagined and espoused. There is a particular emphasis on the dichotomy of metropolis/margins perceived in literatures produced in both the mainstream and the marginal Indian languages that uphold the rich cultural diversity of India. The aim of the conference is reflected in the articles compiled in the present volume: to engage with an impressive assortment of discourses that further highlights the multifaceted nature of the dynamics between metropolis and margins.

The editors are thankful to all the contributors, who, with their research insights, patience and dedication, have played a key role in upholding the legacy of IACLALS. This volume is being published later than expected due to several unexpected circumstances which were completely beyond our control. We would like to acknowledge the support received from members of the Editorial Board and the office-bearers of IACLALS. We express our thanks and appreciation for Ms. Jasminder Maolankar for her expert
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copyediting which has helped this volume acquire a better, more sophisticated look. We invite the esteemed members of IACLALS as well as general readers, researchers, and independent scholars interested in exploring the problematic interfaces of metropolis and margins to go through the articles compiled in this volume and share their discerning yet constructive feedback on the scholarly value of the submissions and possibilities for further research in the areas of investigation.

Editors

Rural Aesthetic in the Modernist Novel: A Study of an Interaction in Tamil

Alston M

Abstract

In the first half of the 20th century in Tamil Nadu, the novel established itself as the prominent art form of the emerging urban middle class. The cultural world of the urban space and its aesthetic conceptions had a notable impact on the new writers' conception of the genre of the novel. However, during the second half of the century, there was a shift in the aesthetics of the genre. This shift occurred when the rural cultures of Tamil Nadu, along with their orality and scent of soil, began to utilise the novel for expressing themselves. This paper aims to throw light on this aesthetic reconfiguration through an analysis of two Tamil novels, *Oru Puliyamaratin Kathai* (*Tamarind History*) by Sundara Ramasamy and *Gopalla Gramam* (*Gopallapuram*) by Ki. Rajanarayanan. *Oru Puliyamaratin Kathai* is an urban novel that engages marginally with the rural aesthetic, while *Gopalla Gramam* emerges as a tale directly from the village soil. This encounter of the urban and the rural within the genre causes interesting interactions between realism and folk-mysticism, between logical writing and oral utterance and between individualism and collective existence.

Keywords: the novel, folklore, urban and rural, aesthetics, Tamil novel, orality, regional literature, village legends, folk-mysticism, storyteller

Introduction

The rise of the novel in Tamil Nadu was concomitant to the dissemination of print culture during the first half of the 20th century. The novel became a major art form of the middle class situated in urban centres. Over a period of time, the genre formulated its aesthetic conceptions through the ideologies of the middle class. The 'hegemonic aspirations' of the urban middle class, with the conflicts and the resolutions therein, contributed to the making of the novel as the 'bourgeois art form par excellence' (Venkatachalapathy 2015: 75). Therefore, the focus of the novels written during the first half of the

20th century was majorly life in metropolitan spaces, the conflicts in urban human relations and the worldviews arising out of such situations. However, after the 1960s, a major turn in the trajectory took place in the Tamil scene. Writers from non-urban, rural villages began to engage with the genre of the novel for the purpose of representing the life of the village soil in a new art form. But the aesthetic visions of the rural space were strikingly different from the requirements of a realist novel. This caused an interaction between the genre of the novel and the folk-aesthetic of rural life within the produced texts. This paper aims to explore this interaction as it emerges in the novels, *Oru Puliyamaratin Kathai* (*Tamarind History*) and *Gopalla Gramam* (*Gopallapuram*), written respectively by Sundara Ramaswamy and Ki. Rajanarayanan.

The Novel and the Story

The most important folklorist genre that comes close to the genre of the novel is the story. The practice of storytelling is a remarkable aspect of rural arts across the world. It faced severe challenges with the advent of modernity. In the West, when the novel established itself as the primary literary form of the modern age, Walter Benjamin observed:

> …the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (Benjamin 2006: 362)

The loss of the ability to exchange experiences is the result when storytelling is set to decline and the novel is, somehow, a major actor in this cultural loss: 'The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times' (Benjamin 2006: 364). Though there was no notable discussion on the fate of storytelling in Tamil when the novel emerged as the primary genre of literary production, it is clear that the early Tamil novel sought its roots in the West rather than in the traditions of the rural soil of the Tamil landscape. Therefore, the rural-Tamil storytelling, something that is 'inalienable to us', an inextricable part of the folk tradition, began to slip into a precarious state of decline, as the urban novel, which was going to be the seminal literary form of the age, had no contact with or relation to it.

Another important aspect that deserves attention in Benjamin's observation is the dichotomy between the novel and storytelling. The important difference is that the aesthetic of the novel is oriented towards the material phenomenon of the printed book and a solitary reader, whereas the art of storytelling is largely influenced by the situation in which an oral utterance is delivered to

the reception of a particular audience. This throws both genres in different directions, to almost irreconcilable poles. This is why Benjamin sees the loss of one in the rise of the other. However, in the Tamil scene, writers ventured to attempt a reconciliation between the genres and struggled to secure a place for both. The following analysis will show how the chosen realist novels engage with the genre of folktale and find a place for it within the form of realist fiction. Let us begin with an analysis of Sundara Ramaswamy's *Oru Puliyamaratin Kathai* (*Tamarind History*), published in 1968.

Sundara Ramaswamy's *Tamarind History*

Tamarind History depicts the story of a rural landscape in the Kanniyakumari district of Tamil Nadu that is slowly transforming into an urban commercial centre. The tamarind tree, around which all the events of the novel take place, serves as a symbol for rural life, its human relations, worldview and art forms. One can assume that the narrator, who is only a passive and marginal character in the novel, is narrating the entire story from his memory in 1968, the time of the Tamil novel's publication. The novel begins with the narrator's memory of Damodara Asan, a storyteller in the village around the tamarind tree, with whom he spends most of his time during his college days. He hears from Asan legendary tales about the tamarind tree and the lives around it. After a few chapters, Asan disappears from the village and the narrator grows up to see the destructive changes that take place. Changes of modernity introduce a new commercial system in the village and make it a municipality. Through the Indian freedom struggle, new characters emerge and come to decide the fate of the village. Finally, the enmity among the petty bourgeoisie causes the felling of the tamarind tree as well as the demise of an age.

Our point of discussion here is the character of Asan, which plays a prominent role in the first half of the novel. Within the novel, Asan represents the art form in decline: folk storytelling. Yet, the narrator of the novel is more attentive to Asan than his own art: 'Asan began to tell the story. He had told the same story many times before, and all of us had heard it. As if we could get bored! He was ready to tell it again, and we were always ready to listen' (Ramaswamy 2013: 9). Thus, the narrator gradually creates a space for Asan in the novel, and at a striking moment, he assumes the role of Asan and magically transforms a few paragraphs or pages of the novel into a folktale. This shift occurs overtly through the technique of dialogue, in which Asan is presented as a speaker. In the exchange of dialogues, Asan appropriates a space for him and begins to tell a story. But covertly, another pertinent event takes place in terms of style. The style of Asan's narration invokes the orality of the folktale while the style of the narrator flows as realist descriptions.

Orality is an important aspect of storytelling and other folk-art forms. Tamil folklorist S. D. Lourdu observes:

> Oral literature is that which is expressed through oral utterance to an audience or spontaneously without an audience. Presenting through the medium of oral utterance means that oral literature transmits itself primarily through the sound of words and reaches the ears of the audience and captivates them then and there. Only after that, the meaning and the logicality of the words will begin to do their work. (Lourdu 1997: 45, translation mine)

It is the 'sound of words' that plays a major role than the meaning of the words. The realist narrator's major quest is to produce different meanings and images through a particular sequencing of words. But, as Asan narrates his story in the novel, the sound of words and the intonations appeal immediately to the ears of the reader as his eyes run through the printed words. Though the rurality or the folk-quality of this sound is graspable at its fullest only in the Tamil original, one can feel the essence of it in Blake Wentworth's English translation too: 'I ran after him too. If I had only got my hands on that guy, don't you think I would have ground him into the dust right then and there? But even if you were running as fast as you could, you couldn't have caught him walking. Who would have believed it? His pace was incredible, just incredible…' (Ramaswamy 2013: 11). It is the sound and tone of Asan that comes to the reader faster than the meaning of the words presented. This is an instance in which the narrator of the realist novel slips to the position of a storyteller and the reader of the novel to the position of being a part of the folk audience.

However, the realist novelist does not give up entirely. He pulls the narration back from Asan to the aesthetic requirements of the genre of the novel. Logical analysis, sarcasm and philosophical musings are presented to the solitary reader, who is sitting alone with a printed book in his hands. When Asan finishes telling the tale in which he saves the tamarind tree from a villager who tries to cut it down out of enmity towards it, a philosophical analysis begins. Asan manipulates the villager to cut only a branch of the tree so that his revenge is taken, and the legendary wrath of the tree remains unprovoked. And the realist narrator begins to think:

> The tamarind tree had protected itself by giving up a single branch… Isn't it the wisest course to give up one thing, whatever it might be, in order to stay safe? ... A lizard has a tail to lose, a woman her honour, a man his ideals, God his mask… In a crisis, or in times of trial, forfeiting a bit of yourself, and getting a little of something else back, absorbing what we gain as we try to keep moving forward without vanishing into nothing, isn't that just what languages try to do, what cultures try to do, what religions try to do? (Ramaswamy 2013: 30)

This oscillation between the novelist and the storyteller happens until the disappearance of Asan from the village. After that, modernity enters the village.

The soil witnesses a war of commerce and a struggle for political power. To describe this modern phenomenon, the writer has to depart almost entirely from Asan and his methods of storytelling. Therefore, the realist narrator gives an open declaration about his departure from Asan and his adherence to empiricism. As he is about to describe the modernisation of the village, the narrator asks: 'Treat the stories that Damodara Asan used to tell as nothing more than his fantasies if you want, and brush them aside. Sneer at everything that I have heard until this point as deluded lies. But will you refuse to believe what I have seen with my own eyes?' (Ramaswamy 2013: 50). After this, the novel decisively takes the course of realism.

True, the role played by Damodara Asan and his folk-aesthetic have only a limited space in the novel since the major task of the novel is to depict the decline of a social organisation that sustained the art of Asan. Nonetheless, as a pioneering modernist novel, *Tamarind History* has shown how the aesthetic of storytelling can find a place within the form of the novel. The tensions arising between these opposing frameworks have been well played out in Sundara Ramaswamy's experimentation. As the example is set, eight years later, in 1976, Ki. Rajanarayanan publishes his first Tamil novel *Gopalla Gramam* which, in the text, brings the form of the novel to the framework of storytelling rather than doing the opposite. This marks a stellar turn in the history of the Tamil novel.

Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*

The plot of *Gopallapuram* is structured in three different frames situated in different timelines. The first frame comes out in the first and the last chapters. Its time can be in any decade after the proper establishment of British rule in India. No individual action takes place in this frame. It only shows, through a realist description, the picture of a village and whatever is visible to the eyes of the one who witnesses it. The village has lost its past affluence and is slowly moving towards decay.

In the second chapter, the narration comes to the second frame in which action takes place in a time when 'the rules of the Palayapattu had lost their power and were slowly shifting into the hands of the colonists' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.1). The major action of the novel takes place here. Though there is no protagonist, attention is drawn to the people of the Kottayar house, a wealthy family in the village. Meanwhile, a woman is murdered by a highway robber, who is then brought to the village council for judgement. The council decides to punish him by impalement. What happens after that can be understood only after a discussion of what happens in the third frame.

Woven throughout the second frame is the third frame of the novel's plot in which a folk-narrative is presented. Mangaiathaaru Ammal, a 137-year-old

woman, narrates the story to Govindappa Nayakkar, the head of the Kottayar house family. The events of the folk-story happen in the third frame but the oral performance of it takes place in the second, in which the storyteller, Mangaiathaaru Ammal, performs the story for the family with Govindappa Nayakkar being the most rapt listener. As the narration in the second frame goes, Mangaiathaaru Ammal's telling of the story is not to be taken lightly. What is going to happen is the performance of a ritual for which the reader of a printed book is not yet prepared: 'Mangaiathaaru Ammal's smiling face would darken. Her eyes would contract and she'd stop focusing on anything in front of her and gaze back at some faraway memory. Then slowly she'd brighten up, then again dissolve into her emotions, clear her throat and begin her narration' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.6). More importantly, the audience of the folk-narration here is not the reader of the book but a character in the novel for whom the ritual of storytelling means a lot more than a simple narration: 'Govindappa Nayakkar loved to listen to her stories; he'd ask for his favourite ones to be retold. The old woman was an ocean of experience' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.5). Govindappa Nayakkar is clearly aware of the ultimate purpose of the ritual, 'the exchange of experience'.

The novel re-creates a situation that has been lost, a situation in which storytelling takes place as an art of exchanging experiences. Thus, it transports the modern reader to a situation in which the story is performed. Now, the reader is less concerned about what the folk-story means to him than as he is about what the story means to the actual listeners, Govindappa Nayakkar, his family, and by extension, the entire village. The invocation of this situation and the reader's transportation into it is further ensured by preventing the reader from identifying with any single character. Firstly, there is no protagonist or major character. Secondly, the novel does not explore the psyche of any of the characters presented. Only the actions of multiple characters or the collective action of various characters are presented in the second frame. This mode of characterisation does not allow the reader to go into the minds of the characters but plants him in the material situation in which the introduced characters live. Therefore, as the folk-narrative begins and moves forward, the reader of the book is not in his solitude but is placed as one among the village community.

The story told by Mangaiathaaru Ammal is of importance to a modern historian. It tells the history of the Kammavar community of the village, from their origin in the Andhra region, their journey of exodus and the making of their life in the present village. The first part of the tale has a heroine named Chenna Devi, whose beauty is divine, and for that, she is worshipped even by highway robbers. When the Muslim ruler of the land asks her hand in marriage, her family and relations flee from the region and begin a journey of exodus

southward. The soldiers of the king chase them as they try to run away. Through divine intervention and supernatural events, they escape and reach, after heavy losses and ordeals, the southern part of Tamil Nadu. There, as per the instructions of their deity, they burn down a forest and create a living space. Gradually, they produce in the fields, interact with other villages in the region and establish themselves as a living community.

This story, which seems like a history of a community, has, rather, a different function in the memory of the community than what a modern history is expected to do. Since it happens entirely in the folklorist framework of storytelling, several supernatural events take place within it, and it is these events that define the validity of the story in the community's life. For example, as the family runs away from the soldiers, they come to the banks of a river, which if they do not cross, they will soon be at the hands of the soldiers. Right then, a magic happens, as Mangaiathaaru Ammal narrates: 'On the other shore was a peepal tree, as tall as a temple tower, bent down towards us. Initially we thought the tree was about to break and fall into the river. But the tree bent low enough to touch our shore and became erect again. That is when we realised that this was divine intervention' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.8). Using the tree's help, they cross the river. Later, when they shelter themselves in an old temple, the deity of the temple appears and makes all of them invisible when the soldiers come to look for them inside. This deity becomes their *kula deivam*, a god to be worshipped forever.

The events narrated in the story fit neither into the requirements of modern history though they speak of the history of a community, nor into the framework of realist fiction though they are situated within a realist novel. But the story gains complete sanction from the listener and the reader, who is now one among the listeners. It fits perfectly into the folk genre of local legend, which S. D. Lourdu defines as follows: 'Local legends are closely related to the territory in which they are born. They were created to explain the extraordinary quality of a particular landscape. They are transmitted through different generations without any change in the content. They would be known only to the people of that territory' (Lourdu 1997: 183, translation mine). However, Mangaiathaaru Ammal's tale absorbs the realist narrative technique as well wherever it is necessary. For example, the description of the forest being burnt down follows a realist mode of narration. This absorption of novelistic realism into the folk-story gives to it a historical sanction apart from the divine sanction it already has. Thus, in the story, one can witness the working together of history and memory re-created through different aesthetic frameworks.

In the end of the second frame of the novel, the impalement of the murderer takes place. Now, the reader realises that the punishment was given to him by

the villagers who are aware of their history as recalled and performed by the storytelling of Mangaiathaaru Ammal. After this point, the second frame, which has been following a realist narrative method, moves slightly into the framework of folklore. The impaled murderer suffers enormous pain and realises all the mistakes of his life. He sees in his mind the image of the deity *Amman* before dying. In the last moments of his life, a few children sing a kummi song and dance around him as asked by him. The children of the village, who see his corpse, fall severely sick and one of them dies. Ridden by fear and the need to mitigate the wrath of the dead, the villagers make him and the woman he has murdered into deities. The narration points to the birth of two local gods. Thus, the plot in the second frame also becomes a folk-story told by the novelist, to a reader, who is now trained enough to be an audience to a local legend. Thus Ki. Rajanarayanan brings the genre of the novel into a folklorist framework.

The synthesis of folklorist aesthetics and novelistic realism, attained in *Gopallapuram,* drastically alters the function of the genre of the novel. Engaging with Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel* and the function of the art of storytelling, Walter Benjamin explicates the difference between the ends of both the genres of our concern:

> The "meaning of life" is really the center about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life. Here "meaning of life" — there "moral of the story": with these slogans novel and story confront each other, and from them the totally different historical co-ordinates of these art forms may be discerned. (Benjamin 2006: 372)

As a genre, the novel is oriented towards a quest for the 'meaning of life'. Despite its engagement with the art form of storytelling, *Tamarind History* strives to impart on the reader a complete worldview and an absolute meaning. The folk-story and the associated life around it comes as one of the voices structured within the novel's realist scheme. No doubt, it plays a major role in the reader's making of the meaning. However, it is the meaning, not the usefulness of the story, that is of interest to the novelist and his readers here. But the reader of *Gopallapuram*, who is metamorphosed to be an audience of a tale, is drawn more toward the 'moral of the story' than toward a meaning of life. Two examples can be provided here.

Towards the end of the novel, a swarm of locusts attack the vegetation of the village, destroying every speck of green on the plants, trees and in the fields. This causes a famine, and the villagers have no food supply. At this time, Govindappa Nayakkar and his family distribute the stocks in their granary to all the villagers equally. When asked about the generosity of his family, Nayakkar says: 'Why do you say so? Things don't become ours only because they belong to us. Don't forget that our ancestors joined hands to level a

shrub forest to make the fertile fields' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.37). This instance shows how the memory preserved through the folktale play a huge role in a time of crisis. Govindappa Nayakkar extracts from the tale a moral that is useful: joining hands for the common good of the community.

When the second frame of the novel takes up a folklorist aura, the novel delivers the moral through the tongue of the murderer: 'Dey sinners, don't kill… don't kill… the curse of a woman is dangerous…' (Rajanarayanan 2016: ch.28). From the mouth of a dying, guilt-ridden sinner, a useful message is transmitted to the reader of the novel. Both the examples show how *Gopallapuram* pulls the readers of the novel into a moral universe rather than suggesting to them any definitive meaning of life. By welding the folk-aesthetic together with the realist narration, Ki. Rajanarayanan alters the very function of the genre of the novel.

Conclusion

The changes the novel as a genre undergoes when it comes into contact with the aesthetic frameworks of rural artistic practices are striking. The novel, which began in Tamil as an art form of the emerging urban middle class, grew to serve different functions, which the genre's practitioners in the urban centres had never anticipated. Firstly, as seen in *Tamarind History*, the rural storyteller becomes a character and through him the oral aesthetic of folklore infiltrate the realist narration of the novel. And then, the folklorist aesthetic attains a remarkable position in the novel's framework and makes a phenomenal impact on the novel's quest for the meaning of life. In a later work, *Gopallapuram*, the realist novel is used as a site to re-create the material conditions in which the art of storytelling can be invoked in its original performativity. By achieving this, the novel transports the solitary modern reader to the situation where the rural art is performed and consumed collectively. As the reader is prepared for the relishing of this distanced art form, the rural writer skilfully brings the modern genre into the aesthetic framework of fork-art. The shifting of the genre to the folklorist framework results in the transformation of the novel's primary function from searching for a 'meaning of life' to the deliverance of a 'moral of the story', whose contemplative value is much lesser than the immediate use value it has in the community.

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Unrooted Voyages: Coolie Migration and Peripheral 'Chini-dad' in Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*

Antara Adhikary

Abstract

Displacement and migration affect centre/periphery spatial dichotomy. Indian societal definition of centre/periphery was completely shattered with the advent of European colonial expansion. The colonisers retained the centre, and the subjugated colonised were placed in the periphery. The peripheral experience of colonial atrocity and exploitation led many Indian commoners to undertake voyages across the '*kala pani*' ('black waters'). As a part of the indentured system many Indians were transported to distant plantation sites across the globe. For many of these 'coolies,' it was a journey from the periphery to the 'unknown.' The transported coolies were even denied their erstwhile identities as they crossed the '*kala pani*,' and lost their castes and homes. They were fraught with their being 'other' in the displaced land where they were supposed to discover a 'new' home. While the struggle of the indenture identity might have occurred on the planes of a foreign land, but it all began with the shared experience of the '*jahajis'* or shipmates the coolies were traveling with.

This paper takes hold of Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) as case-study. The narrative depicts indenture migration to Trinidad, or 'Chini-dad' as the coolies used to mispronounce the name. The paper explores the peripheral experience of the Indian coolies abroad. How peripheral affairs coerced the labourers to experience spatial crisis will be investigated in this paper. Examining the role of memory, shared-experience of the '*jahaji bhai-bahin*' ('brethren of ships'), and lingual transformation, this paper will venture into exploring the home-space and in-between identity of the indenture labourers. Finally, this paper will draw its conclusion by arguing what kind of hope the coolies might have nurtured from the tussles between peripheral space and denied roots.

Keywords: Indo-Caribbean migration, indentured labourers, centre/ periphery, home-space

> On that mad ocean, we came to life… We crossed seven seas: seven shades of water, shades of darkness and light, light that died and darkness that was born, darkness somehow extinguished and light rekindled.
>
> (Bahadur 2014: 62)

Introduction

'Migration' and 'displacement' are often uttered in a single breath. There is an intertwined connection between migration and displacement. Migration is what leads to displacement. Nevertheless, there is a connotative distinction between these two words. While both the words imply certain movements, 'displacement' essentially suggests an inward journey of 'un-becoming.' 'Displacement' does not simply mean physical movements in between places. Rather, the word is evocative of deprivation whereby, a person is forcefully disowned and uprooted from a place s/he has been strongly and emotionally attached with—a place known to him/her as 'home.' Thus, migration might be voluntary or involuntary, but displacement always implies a forceful, and often unwilling, detachment. There is another unavoidable aspect in the tangled relations between 'migration' and 'displacement.' Although the word 'displacement' contains the root-morpheme 'place' (and the negational prefix 'dis-'), the word itself has more to do with space than with place. Displacement means not only a journey far from one's home-land, but also a state of denial. Displacement costs one's comfort, security, memories, attachment, and every other aspect which outlines one's home-space. Although 'home' is often identified as a private space, but from a wider perspective, 'home' defines 'the larger geographic space where one belongs: country, city, village, community' and 'the imagined location which can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography' (George 1996: 9). It suggests 'the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal,' altogether creating an image of 'home' (George 1996: 9). In other words, homelessness is as much a personal loss, as a communal one for the displaced community. Furthermore, the displaced migrants in foreign land have often to encounter ethno-cultural exclusion from the native people. They have to experience peripheral life as long as they cannot find a new home for them. In the context of coolies in Indian indentured servitude, however, the peripheral offence was experienced both before their dislocation and after their displacement.

Colonial atrocity towards the Indian villagers in periphery was what forced many Indians to becoming the coolies. They undertook voyages across the '*kala pani*' ('black waters') to avert frequent droughts and epidemics. As part of the indentured system many Indians were transported to distant plantation sites across the globe. For many of these 'coolies,' it was a journey from periphery to the 'unknown.' The transported coolies were even denied

of their erstwhile identities as they crossed the '*kala pani*,' and lost their caste and home. According to Vijay Mishra, 'the Kala pani is transformed into something more than just the crossing of the Black Waters; it is a signifier of the collapse of caste and social difference' (Mishra 2022: 21) The coolies were fraught with their being 'other' in the displaced land wherein they were supposed to discover a 'new' home. Struggle of the indenture identity might have occurred on the planes of a foreign land, but it all began with the shared experience of the '*jahajis'* or shipmates the coolies were traveling with. For coolies, prevailing cultural entanglements were subjected to the 'ethnic enclave' in the hostland. Shared cultural attributes of coolie community were uniquely different from the native culture of the host land. In order to adapt the hostland culture they had to negotiate with their former cultural practices. As a result, the coolie-culture emerged as a spatiality of in-betweenness wherein, the coolie self could neither completely ignore its former cultural attachments, nor solely indulge in practising the 'new culture' of the sugar land. In most cases, the coolie-self suffered between two spaces—one was related to their former homeland, and the other was an 'imaginary home' recreated on the hostland. The conflict led towards a spatial crisis over a place they were neither born on, nor could fit themselves with a solace of 'belonging.'

The Indian coolies had ethno-cultural, and linguo-societal diversities, among other sets of differences. But through the shared in-betweenness of the fellow shipmates the indentured labourers continued their journey of finding a 'home' even after their journey across the seas came to an end. For them, the new place was neither completely foreign, nor explicitly familiar. It was the distorted version of the name of the place that might have created a sense of linguo-cultural ties between the Indian coolies and the place of their indentureship. In the transformation of 'Trinidad' in 'Chini-dad,' or, 'Surinam' in 'Sri Ram,' the coolies sought Indian affinity in a different continent. For them, 'Chini-dad' was an 'other' India they tried to re-discover their home, root and belonging. In the context of how oversees Indian indentured identity is formed as a community Brij V. Lal opines that 'the indenture experience led to the creation of a new kind of society among Indian communities overseas...The progenies of the indentured Indians differed significantly from their forebearers in terms of thought and behavioural patterns, worldview and values. They were more individualistic and pragmatic, more self-oriented, more egalitarian, sometimes extravagantly proud of their ancestral cultural heritage, but not enslaved by its rituals and cultural protocols' (Kumar 2017: 8). In the peripheral 'Chini-dad' coolies augmented the former 'home' values in a different environment and cultural surrounding. This 'imaginary home' was meant to configure a new surface to live on. Coolie voyages, on one side, speak of cultural conflicts, un-rootedness, and unbecoming, but on the other side,

these voyages generate hope wherein the deported coolies found new ways of living along with their new kinsmen—the '*Jahaji-bhais*' and '*Jahaji-bahins*.'

Objectives

This paper takes hold of Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) as case-study. The narrative depicts indenture migration to Trinidad, or 'Chini-dad' as the coolies were used to mispronounce the name. The paper would explore peripheral experience of the Indian coolies abroad. How peripheral affairs coerced the labourers to experience spatial crisis would be investigated in this paper. Examining the role of memory, shared-experience of the '*jahaji bhai-bahin*' ('brethren of ships'), and lingual transformation, this paper would venture in exploring home-space and in-between identity of the indenture labourers. Finally, this paper would draw its conclusion by arguing what kind of hope the coolies have nurtured from the tussles between peripheral space and denied roots.

Peggy Mohan, a writer from Trinidad in West Indies, did her doctoral research from the University of Michigan. She has taught Linguistics in Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia. Her specialisation in Trinidad-Bhojpuri language symbolically became the research area of the unnamed narrator of the novel. While discussing about *Jahajin*, Arnab Kumar Sinha finds that the novel is 'structured on a dialogic interaction between a researcher and a research subject, where the researcher seeks to study the linguistic nuances of Bhojpuri dialect critically focusing on the kinds of variation that may be found in the use of this dialect by the coolie women' (Sinha 2022: 199).

Coolie Experience and Becoming 'Girmityas'

The plot of the *Jahajin* renders the journey and experience of the coolies or '*girmityas'* from India to Trinidad. The narrator of the story is a doctoral student of the University of Michigan, much like the author herself. While doing her linguistic research on Trinidad-Bhojpuri dialect, she has encountered with the protagonist of the novel, Deeda, whose actual name is Parbati. From her, the narrator comes to know about the first-hand experience of indenture journeys. Although the narrator had not met her earlier, but during her interview the narrator came to know that she had a strange family ties with Deeda. Deeda was traveling on the same ship along with the ancestor of the narrator, named Mukoon Singh and her daughter, Janaki. In fact, it was Janaki who affectionately gave the name Deeda,

> *Janaki asked me my name, and I told her, Parbati. She thought for a minute. What should I call you? she asked. Well, you could call me Didi, I said, big sister. No, she said. Too common. I know, I'll call you Deeda!* (Mohan 2007: 24, original emphasis)

Deeda was from Basti, a place presently in Uttar Pradesh in India. She signed the 'indenture' or contractual bond and boarded on the indenture ship

'Godavari'. She was traveling with her son Kalloo. She left behind her husband, family, home and belongings. Her indenture journey has been documented by the narrator. Inspired by the story, the narrator made her visit to India to explore Deeda's ancestral home, as well as her own ancestral ties. This journey could be seen as an oppositional coolie-trip from Trinidad to India—an individual journey to fulfil the collective aspiration of the coolie-communities.

The coolies or the Indian indentured labourers were part of the colonial system which was introduced as a substitute to the declining Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Slaves were an integral part in the colonial world—a commodified human object which colonisers would 'use' in plantation sites, or mines. Anne-Marie Lee-Loy finds the hardships of the system as 'the dehumanization and commodification of the individuals who were often violently coerced into embarking on the ships for the colonies' (Lee-Loy 2011: 3). In the context of post- slavery labourer recruitment, Joseph Beaumont opines that the new system was 'rooted upon slavery, grown in its stale soil…emulating its worst abuses' (Beaumont 2011: 35). The free labour of these slaves would otherwise be used in humiliating and rationalising colonial domination over the 'pejorative' colonised peoples. The discontinuity of African slave transportation directly impacted the plantation owners. Labour crisis had to be filled with a substitute community who would be more docile, productive, and less violent than the Africans. The colonisers found their answer in the South-East Asian colonies, mostly in the Indian subcontinent and China. In colonial view, these Asian coolies were part of an agricultural community which would make the plantation owners easier to use them in the farms than the African slaves who used to belong mostly to the hunter-gatherer tribal communities. However, unlike the erstwhile slavery system, colonisers put on the mask of indentureship in order to cover their naked inhumanity. Many of the simple-hearted villagers decided to accept the colonial contract because, in most of the cases, they found two options for them—either to die in hunger or epidemic, or to take a voyage towards the unknown, and challenge their destined future in colonial India.

However, little did the coolies know about the destination or the consequences. Indian indentured servitude started in 1834, when hundreds of Indians boarded the first coolie ship 'Whitby', and moved towards the British Guiana. The system existed till 1917, when Lord Hardinge, the-then Viceroy of India, announced the discontinuation of indenture-system, declaring '[n]o native of India shall depart by sea out of British India for the purpose of or with the intention of labouring for hire in any country beyond the limits of India…' (Mahase 2021: 12). In between 1834 and 1917, however, millions of Indians were transported as 'coolies' to work in various plantation sites in different islands of the world—Mauritius, Jamaica, Surinam, Fiji and the Caribbean Islands. Looking at the rapid and huge number of communal dispersions from

India, Hugh Tinker has compared the Indian indentured servitude with Trans-Atlantic slavery, declaring it as a "new system of slavery." To work in the plantation fields of Trinidad indentured labourers were mostly transported from 1845 and continued till 1917.

Dislocation of these coolie migrants from India to other countries might appear as a willing decision because, the villagers had signed with thumb impression, and accepted the colonial agreement before boarding the ship. But to consider the crisis of homelessness as a consequence of unthoughtful decision by the villagers would be to ignore the entire colonial shrewdness in the process of coolie-recruitment. Firstly, the context in which the poor villagers accepted the indentureship was under complete colonial responsibility. Various land reformation policies, most notoriously the Permanent Land Settlement and Ryotwari System, were imposed over the villagers so that the colonial authority would get more revenue with less agitation. It was a systematic process of exploitation that created a new landlord class of 'zamindars' who became colonial agent of inhumanity and savagery. Due to the excessive demand from the 'zamindars' and the colonial rulers the peasants had to maintain regularity of taxes even if there were natural calamities like drought and flood. Rosa, a female companion of the narrator in Peggy Mohan's novel says that '[d]riven by famine, large numbers of farmers from the United Provinces and Bihar, in north India, were coming forward as migrants, putting aside their age old reluctance to cross the kala pani, the black water of the Bay of Bengal, which meant losing caste' (Mohan 2007:12). In case of Deeda, for example, she recollects that prior to her decision of becoming a coolie '*... a drought came. Last year's rice crop was bad, and now no rain for this year's crop to grow, and no money to buy food to eat*' (Mohan 2007: 17, original emphasis). She also adds that '*[s]ome people had already gone from our village, said the village was no kind of place to stay now, best to get out of there*' (Mohan 2007: 17, original emphasis).

In addition to economic crisis, the villagers had to survive both the colonial atrocities and epidemics. Death and loss became constant companions for the villagers prior to their decision of becoming coolies. Secondly, there were several '*arkatiniyas*,' or coolie recruiters who would meet and convince the villagers to leave their home in India and travel to distant lands across the seas where they would get ample food and wages to live happily. The '*arkatiniya*' whom Deeda met, for example, tried to convince her in becoming a coolie by saying that '*[o]nly one year there [Trinidad]... and then they bring you back [India], Plenty of money*' (Mohan 2007: 18, original emphasis). In most of the cases they never explained the villagers about the hardship of the voyages, or the harsh conditions in the foreign land. The villagers did not know that their servitude would become less of a coolie, and more of a slave. Even, these

recruiters would not directly approach the male members of the family. Cunningly, they would meet and lure the females, and ask them either to travel alone or, influence their other family members for signing the indenture contract. Thus, the recruiters were mostly females themselves so that they could easily enter in the inner household, and as a manner of village gossiping, they would meticulously convince the housewives to become '*jahajis*' (ship-boarders) and travel for 'Chini-dad.' When Deeda was of a younger age in India, she '*met the arkatiniya, the lady who was recruiting people to go with her as migrant*' (Mohan 2007: 18, original emphasis). That recruiter told Deeda that '*...they were looking for labourers to go to a place called 'Chini- dad', a land of 'chini', sugar. In Chini-dad there were big estates where they made sugar. They wanted labourers to work in the sugarcane fields*' (Mohan 2007: 18, original emphasis). The same recruiter also told Deeda that '*... they were especially looking for women to go*...,' and she gave Deeda '*... an extra advance'* if she signed up the contractual bond (Mohan 2007: 18, original emphasis).

Interestingly, the distortion of the word 'Trinidad' as 'Chini-dad' serves both to describe the purpose of Indian indentureship, and reduce the fear of foreign land. It would be easier for the recruiters to explain the villagers that instead of cultivating food-crops in India, they would have to farm sugarcane in 'Chini-dad' or 'Land of Sugar.' The distortive word 'Chini-dad,' closer to Hindi language and its various dialects, seems to assure the villagers that in spite of their distant travel they would probably find a place with lingual affinity. In their simple deduction the villagers might have thought that if the name of the land is understandable then probably the people and culture native to this distant land would not be foreign after-all. 'Chini-dad' seems to incorporate the entire coolie-world, including all the islands in different locations of the globe. In other words, whether Mauritius or Fiji, the name of the place was not mentioned clearly before the signed coolies would board the ship. All the topographical details of these islands seemed to have submerged within the sugar-world of 'Chini-dad'. According to Deeda, '*[t]hey [arkatiniyas] brought all of us [indentured labourers] from India. They caught us one by one and told us a lot of lies'* (Mohan 2007: 16, original emphasis). However, the most equivocal half-truth which the recruiter agents might have said to the villagers was the possibility of returning to India. Often the recruiters would assure that after some years of constant servitude in 'Chini-dad' the coolies would have an option either to stay there or, return India.

'*Kala pani*' Crossings and Coolie Identities:

But to prevent the homecoming of the villagers they would instantly narrate all the consequences of '*kala pani*' crossing. '*Kala pani*,' in Hindu belief, simply states that if one would cross the 'black-waters' the person would be

deprived of his/her caste. Loss of caste would unquestionably remove all the ties between the indentured labourers, and their family members left behind in India. The kinsmen would not accept the coolie migrants even after they would return their home. The coolies would lose their home when they would board the ship, and they would never reclaim it even when they would return their villages. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the colonial agents were more successful in compelling the entire village-communities to sign the 'indenture' contract, than any individual of a village community. The saddening thoughts of Deeda during her time on the ship clearly reflect the tragic realities '*kala pani*' crossing,

> *So, this was the kala pani, the black water that was supposed to change you forever, Turn you into an outcaste. Water all the way to the end of the world! Now our boat started to pick up speed, and head out straight towards the dark water of the open sea…I was never going back, that I would live and die across the kala pani* (Mohan 2007: 33, original emphasis).

Realising her perilous condition, Deeda put her arm around her son Kalloo, because she realised that except her maternal ties with her son there was nothing she could carry with her from the past to the uncertain future. For her, it was like '*we were leaving behind us'*— becoming homeless to find a new home (Mohan 2007: 33, original emphasis). If the sky would remind her of the past life in her village, and the sea as her present, then the meeting point between the sky and the sea might have given her the idea of all uncertainties in future. Thus, she reflected, and then seized abruptly in her thoughts, incorporating the sense of perpetual loss while crossing the '*kala pani*' in the incomplete sentence— '*I turned to face forward and sat looking at the sea stretching out forever and ever in front of us, and I stifled the panic rising inside me, and tried to think—'* (Mohan 2007: 33, original emphasis).

Coolie migration is more of a communal dislocation, than an individual journey. The idea of equating the '*kala pani*' with the voyages to 'Chini-dad' is clearly a colonial invention, whereby the colonisers wanted to retain the coolie members in specific plantation sites. Interestingly, the politics of '*kala pani*' as a segregative policy was also employed in case of the freedom fighters who were sentenced to life imprisonment in the Cellular Jail in Andaman. As a result, '*kala pani*' and the Cellular Jail often have synonymous implications in the history of Indian independence. As with the Indian coolies, the colonial rulers wanted to isolate the freedom fighters from the mass on the basis of lost-caste and identities. '*Kala pani*' became a spatial purgatory for 'criminals' whereby the colonial rulers afflicted the hardest punishment on the convicts by tearing off all the identities and social affinities from the convict. Apart from the inhuman physical atrocities, the coolies were treated no better than these convicts.

Being home-lost and casteless, the coolies were left only with memories with which they could re-discover their home but only through recollection.

In between their unavoidable uprootedness and inevitable quest for home there are memories and nostalgia with which the coolie migrants hope for a new home in the unknown land. Deeda's account painfully narrates how the coolies, knowing they would lose their home-ties during the '*kala pani*' voyage, defiantly bring with them those objects which might have little economic value but, unparalleled nostalgic importance. Thus,

> *Ramsukh, who was carrying different kinds of mango seeds to plant when we reached…He said he didn't want to go to a new place khaali haath, empty-handed…one of the women…was carrying some damp soil from muluk, and growing in that soil was a root of hardee, turmeric* (Mohan 2007: 64, original emphasis).

Deeda recollects in her reflection that inside the ship *'[w]e stayed quiet, and tried to fill a new current starting. And we hoped that something good would be around the corner for us migrants now*' (Mohan 2007: 64, original emphasis). For them, birth of a girl on the ship was a sign of hope because, the girl would be a true '*jahaji'* who was born on the ship that was crossing through the '*kala pani*.' She would symbolise both the spatial void of the '*kala pani*,' and the in-betweenness of Indian origin and Trinidadian belonging. The girl was named as Bhagmaniya, or the one who brings good luck. At her birth all the members of the coolie community on the ship rejoiced because Bhagmaniya '*had brought the boat safely through the storm. And she would keep us safe for the rest of the journey*' (Mohan 2007: 69, original emphasis).

Conclusion: A Space of New Beginning

The dream and aspiration of the indentured labourers were, however, as much communal as individual. Faced against collective loss, each individual coolie saga had its own contribution in the shared coolie-narrative. The sense of togetherness with which the indentured labourers fought against rootlessness and fraught with displacement was developed not after their reaching to the islands, but inside the chambers of schooner they were traveling in. In the voyages across the '*kala pani*' the coolies would make new kinship with their fellow transportees. Gradually, mutual affinities would develop between the casteless and homeless people waiting for a similar fate. Deeda's account seems to give words to the collective voice of the coolie-migrants for their fellow '*jahaji bhai-bahin*' (the brethren of the ship),

> *We stopped looking back. I think we had finally crossed the kala pani, in our minds, changed from being the people we were before… Now we were looking at everybody else on the boat with us as our family, apan palwaar. And we started calling each other something new: jahaji bhai and Jahaji bahin, ship-brother and ship-sister, and speaking of each other as jahajis, shipmates. People who had travelled across two big oceans on the same ship had seen too much together to be anything but family.* (Mohan 2007: 82, original emphasis)

At the face of all kinds of loss, the transported coolies realised that they became the ship-boarders or, the '*Jahajis*,' and their only companions were '*jahaji bhai-bahin*.'

There is a strong note of parallelism between Mohan's novel and Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*. Much like Mohan's narrative, the shipmates in *Coolie Woman* suddenly had a self-realisation of the '*jahaji*-self.' Amidst the high waves of '*kala pani*' the ship began to toss, and the transported coolies realised that they 'became new. The moorings of caste had loosened, and people who had left behind uncles, sisters, husbands, and mothers substituted shipmates, their '*jahajis*,' for kin. Unraveled, they began, ever so slowly, to spin the threads of a novel identity' (Bahadur 2014: 62). There seems one significant clarification behind the title of Peggy Mohan's fiction *Jahajin*. From one perspective, crossing the '*kala pani*' robbed everything from the transported labourers, but the unknown routes through this spatial void seemed to help the coolies to find new roots. The new home they were hoping to discover in the islands across the black-waters was nestled on the ship itself. In between their unbecoming of native Indians, and turning into the coolies there was their life as '*Jahajis*,' wherein they lost their home only to find a new space of belonging.

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The Margins Within the Metropolis: A Reading of Manto's Representation of Bombay

Apoorva Dimri

Abstract

Most well-known for his Partition-related stories like 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Thanda Gosht' ('Cold Meat'), 'Khol Do' ('Open It'), and so on, Manto's short stories set in the city of Bombay also constitute a significant share of his literary corpus wherein the writer explores and represents the murky underside of the city that often remains concealed beneath the façade of success and progress usually associated with the urban. The universe of Manto's stories is that of men and women working in factories, struggling actors and directors engaged in an endeavour to survive in the world of Bombay's burgeoning film industry, sex workers and their agents inhabiting overcrowded and cramped dwellings set amidst heaps and piles of the city's waste and refuse. The aim of this paper is to explore the representation of Bombay in the stories of Manto as a city divided along the lines of class with Manto's characters interacting with the spaces occupied by them in specific ways. This paper also seeks to understand how Manto, while portraying the material realities of the living and working conditions of the people occupying the margins of the city, is also able to psychologise the city and humanise its peripheral people who emerge as the central characters of his tales. The proposed paper seeks to focus on the representation of the city and its discontents or the various contradictory and conflicting aspects of city life and the way they shape the lives of its inhabitants, particularly those at the socio-economic and cultural margins of the metropolis. Moreover, a significant question of study pertains to how the city of Bombay, as available in his short stories, had shaped Manto's sense of self as an individual and as a writer. This can be seen in relation to a reading of Manto's life in Bombay and the writer's distinctive experience of and relationship with this city where he had spent an important part of his life in its chawls and streets amidst the characters and spaces portrayed in his stories.

Keywords: representation, cultural margins, metropolis, class

Introduction

> '…and I won't mention the nearby high-rises because they have nothing to do with this story…' –Manto

When Manto in his short story 'Siraj' says, '[…] I won't mention the nearby high-rises because they have nothing to do with this story…' (Manto 2014: 199), the writer gives an insight into his politics wherein his choice to not concern himself with the 'nearby high-rises' stems from his decision to be a chronicler of Bombay's slums, chawls, its various streets and alleys, localities designated as the city's 'red-light' areas, and so on. This line can be taken as a point of departure to delve deeper into the world of the author's short stories that are set in and prominently feature the city of Bombay as it presents Manto as a storyteller of the seemingly small things in the great city. The writer's literary and political choices take him to the haunt and the habitat of those who survive at the margins of the city, that is, the factory workers, the sex workers, their agents, and others trying to find ways to survive in the industrial city of Bombay in the early part of the 20th century, or the time in Bombay in which Manto's stories are set. Thus, Manto takes his reader to the margins within the metropolis.

In 'Siraj', Manto is able to view the high-rising buildings from the vantage point of his location in the impoverished lanes of Bombay. In search of a sex worker, the titular Siraj, Manto arrives in the locality she stays in, '…near Byculla Station in an extremely dirty neighbourhood dotted with garbage heaps that served as an open toilet' where 'the city had built tin shacks… for the poor' (Manto 2014: 199). The nearness of the buildings of the rich to the settlements of the poor and the very visible contrast of wealth and poverty created by the geographical proximity of these two kinds of spaces mean that the writer is forced to acknowledge the presence of the buildings, even if he decides to dismiss the same after a momentary consideration. That the tall buildings that symbolise the narratives of success and progress, growth and development associated with the big city cannot be ignored by the chronicler of the city, or even by a lay observer, reveals what Henri Lefebvre argues is the logic or the rationale behind such buildings; in *The Production of Space*, he argues that, 'The arrogant verticality of skyscrapers, and especially of public and state buildings, introduces a phallic or more precisely a phallocratic element into the visual realm; the purpose of this display, of this need to impress, is to convey an impression of authority to each spectator. Verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power' (Lefebvre 1991: 98). That Manto, the chronicler of Bombay, is not carried away by this spectacle of wealth and power created by the high-rises of Bombay but continues to write about the streets and slums of the city, the

huts and hovels of the city's dispossessed, reiterates his position as a storyteller of the places and people located at the margins of the metropolis.

The spatial and temporal setting of the stories of Saadat Hasan Manto allows the reader to venture into the Indian city of Bombay of the 1930s and 1940s. The centrality of Bombay as a significant metropolis in the colonial and subsequently in the postcolonial times can be traced back to its development as a port city by the British colonisers. The 19th century also witnessed the growth of the city as a major industrial centre, particularly with the setting up of the cotton textile mills while the establishment of the cotton textile industry in Bombay paved the way for various large and small-scale industries directly or indirectly related to the former. The mills and factories of Bombay created a demand for labour, which was met with a mass exodus from villages across India wherein young males, struggling against agrarian crises and rural poverty, started moving to the urban centre in search of new modes and methods to survive. The workers who had migrated from the rural parts of the country to the city in search of new and better opportunities of life and work more often than not found themselves at the margins of the metropolis, struggling to survive under alienating and exploitative living and working conditions. While most of the workers were employed in the cotton textile mills and its ancillary industries including other factories in the city, many remained unemployed or dependent on the forces of demand and supply of labour.

The migrants' efforts to grapple with the novel and harsh urban realities they had to encounter in the great city were accompanied by coming to terms with being uprooted and displaced from their homes and communities, resulting in a loss of a sense of anchorage offered by the countryside. Gyan Prakash in *Mumbai Fables* observes that, 'With social and cultural ingenuity, the working-class immigrants forged strategies to survive and fashion an urban life in Bombay. They coped with their uncertain and difficult circumstances by maintaining their rural links…' (Prakash 2010: 66). Moreover, the dominant strands of the Indian freedom struggle and the literature of this context prioritised and celebrated rural India and the Indian village as the site of a 'true India' and 'Indianness' that had to triumph over foreign rule. In the light of the same, the absence of the rural stands out as a distinctive feature of Manto's writing.

Manto writing about the city and the urban experience seems to be disturbing this pitch of replicating the village mode in the city and that of the predominance of rural themes and imagery in the dominant literature of his times. This can be partially explained in relation to the predominantly urban experience characterising his life. Moreover, it can be argued that the focus in his Bombay fiction is on the here and now of the city, that is, on the most visible and immediate urban experiences and encounters of his characters.

This leads to a focus on the psycho–social aspects of the lived urban experience of the city's marginalised inhabitants. Thus, Manto's Bombay is revealed in its complexity as a place providing the refuge of anonymity and the gift of freedom even as the space of the metropolis is marked by an atomised, isolated existence exacerbated by a brutal indifference characterising people's relationship with one another even as those at the margins share a common destiny of surviving and resisting the harsh and exploitative urban machinery that routinely grinds them to maintain the façade of growth and progress, concealing the poverty and squalor of the city.

Manto's love for Bombay is well known as it was this city that provided the non-conformist in him the space to pursue his literary career while he could sustain himself by working in the Bombay film industry. This was the place where he could live and enjoy life to the fullest, in the precious company of literary friends and rivals who formed a vibrant intellectual circle of which Manto was a controversial yet a significant member. Bombay was also the place where the writer could roam around in the company of pimps and workers and could freely associate with sex workers and courtesans as he traversed the dirty and disreputable alleys and lanes of the city while residing in Bombay's chawls in close proximity to his characters. In stories like 'Rude', Manto's love for Bombay manifests itself in the form of an impulsive desire to leave Delhi for the city of Bombay, which endlessly enthralled and excited him. The following lines from the story 'Barren' suggest a celebratory tone with which Manto describes his flânerie by the sea in Bombay thereby revealing his fondness for the freedom and anonymity offered by the city:

> On this side of the Gateway of India, I walked past the first bench where a man was getting his head massaged and sat down on the second. I looked out as far as I could see over the broad expanse of water… The sounds of the waves and the voices of the beach crowd merged into a humming sound that disappeared into the evening air… I enjoy smoking at times like these'. (Manto 2014: 26)

Thus, the city of Bombay was celebrated by Manto in both life and literature for its offering of freedom and liberty, which were extremely dear to the writer and the person that Manto was.

Manto's celebration of Bombay in his stories coexists with his portrayal of the underside of the city characterised by grim realities of vice, corruption, exploitation, and the alienating urban experience resulting from the same. The experience of loneliness and isolation, related to the characteristic indifference that marks the urban condition, is summed up by Manto in the story 'Mammad Bhai' in the following words: 'If you haven't been to Bombay, you might not believe that no one takes any interest in anyone else. But the truth is that if you are busy dying in your room, no one will interfere. Even if one of your neighbours is murdered, you can be assured you won't hear about it… who

in Bombay cares about anyone? No one gives a damn if you live or die' (Manto 2014: 232, 235). These lines suggest that the freedom and anonymity offered by the city often translate into a perversion of the same, that is, into a freedom to live and die alone without being meddled with in conditions of a brutal anonymity premised on society's indifference. According to Georg Simmel, '…metropolitan man is "free" in a spiritualized and refined sense, in contrast to the pettiness and prejudices which hem in the small town man… It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd' (Simmel 1950: 5). Herein, Simmel reveals the contradiction inherent in the promise of freedom that the city symbolises by highlighting the underside of this freedom that exists in the form of loss of collectivity and the consequent loneliness and isolation.

Manto's portrayal of the city in its alienating and celebratory aspects can be seen as premised on the writer's knack for a realism, which made him represent the world around him as it existed. Manto's representation of Bombay in his stories can also be read in relation to the following observation made by Shirin Kudchedkar:

> Literary responses to the city can be said to pass through three stages. The city is first seen as the centre of civilization, the source of order and enlightenment… But as cities grow ever more huge and more crowded, as crime, dirt and squalor increase, they come to represent the exact opposite. The city serves as the symbol of all that is worst, of greed and indifference. It has been transformed into the monster city, the city of nightmare. Then people come to accept that the monster city is their habitat, the only home they have known. And they embrace the city with all its ugliness and violence. They rejoice in its vitality, its multifariousness, and the human warmth and courage that endure in the face of monstrosity. (Kudchedkar 1996: 126)

Herein, it can be noted that Manto's love for Bombay exists with and despite all the flaws of the city.

The urban condition represented in the stories of Manto can be further comprehended in the light of an understanding of the physical infrastructure and spatial organisation of Bombay of this time, which was a city divided along the lines of both race and class. The racial divide was manifest in the physical and social organisation of the walled town or the Fort characterised by '… an invisible dividing line between the European southern half and the Indian northern half' (Kosambi 1996: 8). The divide between the privileged and the marginalised was systematically reproduced in the physical infrastructure of the city, which was marked by the segregation of areas and localities distinctly inhabited by people divided along the lines of class. For instance, the establishment of the cotton textile industry led to the concentration of the industry's workforce in the areas surrounding the mills. So, the urban

working class came to inhabit the north-east, east and central parts of the city in the vicinity of the factories, docks and workshops that employed them whereas the privileged of the city came to occupy the southern parts, particularly what was called Girgaum or Girgaon. The relationship between the physical infrastructure of the city and the social relations that the city shapes, which in turn shapes the city in specific ways can be understood in terms of what Lefebvre in 'The Specificity of the City' identifies as the relationship between the 'city', which he defines as 'a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact', and the 'urban', which he sees as 'a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought' in that 'Urban life, urban society, in a word, the urban, cannot go without a practico-material base...' (Lefebvre 1996: 103). Moreover, Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* concerns himself with '…the social character of space — those social relations that it implies, contains and dissimulates…' (Lefebvre 1991: 83), and makes the following observation:

> spaces are produced… They are products of an activity which involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well beyond them, for these are also political products… it (space) is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures… (it) cannot be separated either from the productive forces…or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society. (Lefebvre 1991: 84, 85)

The most important and central spaces in Manto's stories include the chawls, the 'red-light' areas, the crowded lanes of impoverished localities, the neighbourhoods of the working class, and so on. The Bombay chawl serves as a setting in many stories including 'Peerun' and 'Mammad Bhai' where Manto describes his own experiences of living in dilapidated rooms in crowded chawls. The chawl, as a physical structure designed to provide cheap accommodation to the urban working class and the lower middle class, is a very specific Bombay phenomenon so much so that the chawl in many ways has come to represent this city, particularly life at the margins in Bombay.

The characters of Manto's tales and the spaces they inhabit can be seen as deeply connected to each other in that while people can be seen as shaping the spaces they dwell in, they in turn are shaped by these places and spaces. This inextricable connection between people and places, characters and spaces is evident in Manto's description of the pimp Dhundhu in relation to the electricity pole, which he routinely stands by to solicit clients for his sex workers in 'Siraj'. This pole and Dhundhu are inseparably linked to each other in Manto's imagination so much so that for the writer one represents the other even as the electricity pole becomes a symbol for the whole city in its own way, as is suggested by the following lines:

> Dhundhu was outside the Iranian restaurant across from the small park near Nagpada Police Station, and he was leaning against the electricity pole that he manned from sunset until four in the morning… Since the beginning, he had been working from the same pole outside the Iranian restaurant across from the small park. It had become his symbol, so much so that the two were inseparable in my mind… It seemed that this pole commanded a large area, and that its influence radiated out through other poles to encompass the entire city. (Manto 2014: 194)

Similarly, the titular pimp from the story 'Khushiya' can be seen in relation to his haunt near a paan seller's stall. The condition of the utterly exhausted sex worker in 'The Insult' is also reflected by the space she inhabits, that is, her cramped and messy room. That the spaces inhabited by characters shape their lives and psyche in specific ways is also revealed by the story 'Naked Voices' in which Manto portrays the impact of lack of physical space and proximate and crowded living on the sexual desires and sex lives of his characters. The protagonist of this story can be seen losing his mind as he fails to let go of the shame he feels at the prospect of consummating his marriage in the open space of a communal terrace where people's makeshift beds are partitioned only by temporary and flimsy arrangements. The idea of the people around him listening to the 'naked voices' of his sexual activities, just like he can listen to theirs, is at the core of this story, which humanises the urban poor by focussing on an oft-neglected concern, that is, its sexuality and desires under harsh conditions of survival.

It can be concluded that Manto portrays the lived experiential realities of his characters as mediated by the spaces they inhabit in the city. However, these characters are not passively defined by these spaces as they too alter them in the process of inhabiting them. Moreover, resistance and subversion in his tales manifest themselves in the everyday endeavours of his characters to survive in the city against all odds while Manto's masterstroke, as the chronicler of the people and places at the margins of the metropolis, lies in his ability to humanise his characters by focussing on their inherent humanity and on their psychological and emotional responses to their lived experiences in specific spaces in the city.

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Deterritorialising Marginalisation: Negotiating Difference and Belonging through Literary 'Minorityscapes'

Arti Mathur

Abstract

This paper addresses the exacting questions of identity and assimilation, contextualised in asymmetrical cultural encounters in contemporary India, structured within majority–minority division of society. It focuses on minority discourses that primarily operate within the paradigms of centre–periphery, territorial–non-territorial and extraneous–native dialectics. The aim is to foreground the complex meanings and concerns of 'minority' identities as essential to the objective of exploring dynamic possibilities of sustaining cultural difference, belonging and conviviality. Accordingly, I offer interpretations of selective literary works representing 'minority' communities which blend socio-politico consciousness with creative historiography as significant narrative strategy. These works demonstrate alternative ways of constructing identity that transcend the debilitating categorised division and politics. I locate my argument in the transformations of the metropolis and the urban/rural dichotomies highlighting how proximity to power affects communities in distinct ways, whereby, the cosmopolitan character of the city and provincialisation of spaces serve as ambivalent tools that can either reify or diffuse marginalisation. To this end, I compare the novels *The Assassin's Song*, *Book of Rachel* and *Family Matters* to reinterrogate ideological and cultural assumptions embedded in urban and rural 'minorityscapes' through the themes of sacrality, nostalgia and home. Further, the delineated texts are scrutinised for vital transitions from alienation to belonging, reiterating the latter as the ethical basis of co-existence. Drawing on theoretical insights from Paul Gilroy's concept of conviviality, Craig Calhoun's defence of multiple belonging including the emotive value of nation and nationalism, and Arjun Appadurai's critique of urban spaces under aggressive vernacularisation, allow for intersection of minority objectives with cosmopolitan ideals. These frameworks provide a vantage point to critique the dialectics of majoritarianism versus minoritisation. Despite the tensions emerging

from these complexities, the innovative interplay of memory, history and language 'deterritorialises' marginalisation and difference beyond the stereotypical liminalities of a divided society.

Keywords: minority, identity, urban, rural, cosmopolitanism, conviviality, belonging

Introduction

The terrain of minority literature[1] as a consciously constructed body of work draws attention to the power dynamics creating marginalised collectives as social and ideological praxis, structured within the paradigm of majority–minority division of society. While there are numerous social and political formations that define minorities, two important factors complicate the minority/majority dialectics specifically in the context of India, the first is demography intersecting with religious, ethnic, linguistic identities, and the second, proximity and distance to political or cultural power. The emerging minority discourse is affectively caught in the tensions of centre/periphery, territorial/non-territorial, extraneous/native, and similar binaries. Concomitantly, these binaries often translate into hierarchical structures that foster assertions of identity bound by liminalities of homogeneity, subsummation and alienation in both cultural and literary spheres. This paper foregrounds the exacting issues of identity and assimilation in contemporary literature representing 'minority' writers in India with the objective to underscore dynamic possibilities of co-existence that can encompass diversity, identity and belonging. The selected texts locate cultural confrontations of contemporary Indian society primarily in the urban centres, as evocative sites of nostalgic cosmopolitanism and increasing provincialisation poignantly embodied in the transforming character of the cities, challenging the presumed diversity and openness, in comparison to the rural as ideologically conservative and excluding. These boundaries are often constructed through historical, ideological and spatial lenses, where majority-minority dynamics, cosmopolitanism and vernacularisation shape identity and belonging. My interpretations of the texts allow for the intersection of minority objectives with cosmopolitan ideals to provide a position of vantage to critique the stereotypical conditioning entailing majoritarianism versus minoritisation, the latter referring to groups facing decline in collective cultural or social powers as targets of active processes of hegemony.[2]

The selected literary texts invoke a crucial connection between majority/minority as well as metropolis/rural dichotomies, emphasising how proximity and distance to power centres have different implications for different communities. Consequently, in keeping with the objectives of this paper, relevant works of fiction including Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters,*[3] Esther David's *Book of Rachel*[4] and M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin*'s *Song*[5] have been selected to bring into focus the dilemmas of cultural confrontations, violence

and identarian duress, while resisting internalising of marginalisation[6]. However, the devaluation of the identity, culture or social position of the represented communities in the novels, leading to self-perception that reinforces their marginal status, suggested by internalised marginalisation, is countered by notions of conviviality and belonging as vital to co-existence. The paper draws on theoretical frameworks from Paul Gilroy's theory of conviviality, Craig Calhoun's defence of multiple belongings and the emotive value of nation, and Arjun Appadurai's critique of the changing spaces of the city under aggressive vernacularisation to provide useful insights, though not without qualification, for deeper understanding of the power dynamics invoked in the novels. My reading of the texts foregrounds challenging, transcending or dismantling of the structures underpinning the debilitating binaries through a nuanced examination of the cosmopolitan and convivial models of co-existence, more organic to the Indian context, allowing for 'non-territorial' identities to 'deterritorialise'[7] marginalisation. The novels offer alternative ways of constructing identity through creative 'minorityscapes' a term adapted to convey sites and places inhabited by minority communities, through self-reflexivity, historiography, and the interplay of personal and political. This is facilitated by the writers occupying multiple positions inside and outside of the 'minority' community, viz a viz their relative global location, experience, recognition in writing and publishing in the English language, towards sustaining identity, belonging and agency.

The novels represent distinct minority communities, such as, Zoroastrian (Parsi), Indian Jewish (Bene Israel) and Muslim (Sufi), each navigating unique challenges. Vassanji and Mistry's novels examined here are poignant narratives provoked by their Indian past written from the relative distancing of their present Canadian identity. Both the writers are perceived as ethnic minority in India and Canada. Mistry's *Family Matters* portrays the Parsi community, which renders the 'minority' label ambiguous due to its historical economic and cultural influence.[8] David's *Book of Rachel* depicts the Indian Jewish community, not a homogenous group, whose population has dwindled to approximately 6000.[9] While recognised as a state minority in West Bengal and Maharashtra, their demand for national minority status remains unmet. Indian Jews claim minority status to counter obscurity rather than persecution, unlike Muslims, represented in Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song,* who claim marginalisation as India's primary minority group. These relatively contradictory 'minority' positions defy a homogenised notion of minorities in India and resist easy equations between the community and the categorisation of the representative literature.

Jewish, Parsi and Sufi arrivals at the Indian shores do not express their experience of adapting and adopting a new land in the stereotypical binaries

of majority-minority. The latter is a colonial legacy, the adage of 'communal' substituted for communitarian. Jewish groups settled in different time periods in India, for a long time remained unknown to each other. As Bombay became a mercantile centre in the 18th century, it drew Jewish and Parsi business communities to it from other cities and regions in India who 'discovered' the Bene Israel community. David describes, 'For years, they had lived in these bustling streets with Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, and Christian families. Then the riots had struck like the plague. The screams, the weapons, the blood, and the dead bodies had revived memories of violent persecution which they thought they had buried with their ancestors in Alibaug' (*Shalom* 2007: 42).[10]

The Indian Jews who had remained insulated from the holocaust and persecution, witness communal violence in the city of Ahmedabad in 2002. The 'Walls' of the city of Ahmedabad signify ideological and physical barriers between communities as ghettoisation becomes the norm.[11] The city increasingly induces elements of anxiety in the face of violent incidents. The writers make a vital point in linking identification and violence through incidents of mistaken identities, and the air of intolerance. David, Mistry, Vassanji each recount incidents of enraged mobs belligerently hunting for victims, as for instance, stripping males to check for circumcision. In *Family Matters,* Mistry poignantly describes riots and bomb blasts as the irony of Shiv Sena demanding that Bombay be changed to Mumbai on the signboard outside Mr Kapoor's emporium, a joke often recounted by the cosmopolitan Mr Kapoor, changes into harsh reality. The brief portraits of a Parsi family are episodically woven together in the novel through socio-political consciousness of their changed status and place in the city and by implication within the paradigms of the nation. Mistry exposes parallel strains of alienation that diffuse boundaries between the personal and political. The family and city appear increasingly dystopian, mirrored in the intolerance for the aging and ailing 'burden' of the protagonist Nariman Vakil, the hatred for minorities that the political party Shiv Sena has spread and vernacularisation as a double-edged tool ostensibly employed for preserving language but also exploited for cultural hegemony. Mistry evokes nostalgia for loss of values within the domestic sphere as Nariman is shunted from his own house to that of his daughter's, simultaneously, with the cosmopolitan past signified by the not infrequent incident of a man grabbed by many pairs of strangers' hands, rescued and pulled into the local train: 'That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here' (Mistry 2006: 152). This civic cosmopolitanism of the city blurs marginalisation.

The cosmopolitanism of the mega cities including Mumbai is evoked by the writers as a space that accommodated their Westernised bent, diasporic past and religious identity. Here, it is possible to underplay dialectics of territoriality and extraneousness, indicators of a burdened minority consciousness and conditioning. Paradoxically, the city exudes power, but this proximity to the political power wielders for the minorities becomes highly problematic. Under such circumstances, as cosmopolitanism gets revoked, the longing, aspiration and some romanticisation for its lost ideals is intensified. The cosmopolitan position (Diogenes, Kant, Delanty, Beck, Calhoun) since antiquity has privileged the individual staking his claim on a larger world, rather than be limited to or by strong local allegiances, thus thriving on the creation of dichotomies. Vassanji critiques cosmopolitanism through Karsan Dargawalla in *The Assassin's Song,* who prefers his existence in Harvard, the Western centre of academic power, viewing it as exclusionary space, where his modern identity alone is relevant. This is in sync with the cosmopolitan ideas of unbelonging, giving up of local identity and attachments. It suits Karsan who is trying to escape his Pirbaag legacy in the village of Gujarat as the descendent and guardian of an ancient Sufi shrine. Karsan identifies himself 'simply as an ordinary secular Indian studying in America' (Vassanji 2007: 259–60) He imagined for himself a life 'free of the burden and expectation of tradition…' (Vassanji 2007: 271). Vassanji critiques Karsan's illusion of freedom from the burdens of traditional identity in his cosmopolitan modernity by underpinning it with alienation from self, embedded in urban sites. This alienation is heightened by the tensions created between a known past in denial, intruding upon his present through memory and his father's letters, reminding him of his mission in life as a Sufi *gaadi varas*. In the context of the above, I problematise specific strands of cosmopolitanism in relation to minority identity. The cosmopolitan 'citizen of the world' is critiqued as being privileged without ethical obligations, and cosmopolitanism, is consequently, seen as elitist. But the quest for minority identity can only be against identifiable and unambiguous entity/entities, in which identity, rights, affiliations, and reciprocations are to be manifested. The desire for inclusion and equality gains relevance only within the framework of the place or space, such as the state or nation, from where there is exclusion. Cosmopolitan theories that play with the idea of 'individuals abstract enough to be able to choose all their "identifications"… reflect the attractive illusion of escaping from social determinations into a realm of greater freedom, and from cultural particularity into greater universalism' (Calhoun 2003).[12] Cultural theorists including Calhoun are critical of this abstract illusion that creates a new elitist cosmopolitan culture and leaves the underlying structures of social inequality untouched. Rather, he maintains that belonging to specific social groups could

be an important source of collective strength for many, hence cosmopolitanism and belonging need not be in opposition to each other. Moreover, he advocates the possibilities of multiple belongings, recognising the claims of various affiliations within, beyond and of the nation. According to him, 'nations are not merely objects of familiarity and affection but achievements of struggle. Far from perfect, they still should not be lightly denigrated for the solidarity of elite dominated cosmopolitanism' (Calhoun 2008: 440).[13] This framework resonates with the novels' portrayal of characters maintaining minority identities alongside national or cosmopolitan ones.

At the same time, Appadurai's 'globalisation from below' is a concerted effort to counter the elitism associated with cosmopolitanism. He highlights the cosmopolitan nature of Bombay pre -1960's using the metaphor of different kinds of housing, from the traditional fishing villages to low middle class and colonial structures, as co-existing local particularities.[14] Appadurai refers to the shared dignity in basic civic amenities accessible at a low cost to most people of diverse communities that lived in Bombay, and as citizens of a city of commerce, working towards attracting global capital. The first major change towards the disintegration of shared civic virtue was primarily due to the closing of the mills, rise in migrant populations that occupied barely more than body space, followed by communal riots. These situations gave an opportunity to the rise of Shiv Sena that vernacularised the shared civic and social spaces, including the spaces of pavement dwellers, and exploited the mistrust between religious communities. Appadurai sees Bombay's transformation into Mumbai under the claims of vernacularisation, as a violent and xenophobic attempt at exclusion and ethnic cleansing. He analyses, though cosmopolitanism, or its economic manifestation in the form of globalisation often blurs the lines between 'Us' and 'Them', the possibility of heightened conflict due to increasing uncertainty about the meaning of national belonging is also accentuated. Elsewhere, in his study of the coincidental rising in impact of globalisation and cultural violence across the world, Appadurai interprets that for the majority, the minorities tend to symbolise or embody impediments to a homogeneous notion of the nation. Majority communities in multicultural societies often perceive their significance through prevalence over the minorities and more aggressive claims to national identity. To strengthen these claims, the majority could imbibe 'ideological totalitarianism' in its 'fear of small numbers'[15] or go to the extremes of 'ethnocide' as an alternative to their global insignificance. This mirrors the broader societal shift toward ideological totalitarianism that the incidents of communal violence critiqued in the novels.

The transformation of the city mounts on control by fundamentalist forces validated by linguistic and territorial nativism. In such a climate, in Mistry's

novel, Nariman's stepdaughter Coomi fears for him as he goes out for his routine walks, Jal recounts the beating up and robbing of an old woman in Ferozsha Bagh, as other characters from the Parsi community narrate similar incidents. Yezad states, 'South Indians are anti-Bombay, Valentine's day is anti-Hindustani, Film Stars born before 1947 in the Pakistani part of Punjab are traitors to the country' (Mistry 2006: 32). Yezad's turning towards conservative Parsi religiosity as a result of personal guilt of stealing from his employer Mr. Kapoor, alongside the impact of external violence, creates trauma within his family. Yezad's retreat from being an open-minded and happy believer into a pensive character, collapses the difference between numerical or notified minorities with those who perceive victimisation from the majority community. Parallel to the expulsion of non-Marathi *manus* by the dominant political regime, the ripple effects of characteristic exclusion outside of the novels is most evident during the pandemic, as the 'migrant outsider' is initially frozen without resources and then cruelly expelled. I assert that identity politics, majoritarianism and minorityism are liable to devouring their own in the frenzy to distinguish themselves from the 'other,' regardless of the rationale — be it purification, cleansing or protectionism. Simultaneously, I also problematise the assumptions of easy travel and border crossing inherent in globalisation and cosmopolitanism, which have been shaken and disrupted by the Covid pandemic, exposing the inability to disrupt structures of exclusion and inclusion.

While Mr Kapoor, embodying the open acceptance of all cultures as an urban cosmopolite becomes a victim of parochial violence, the Parsi identity suffers from the inability to accept Nariman's atheism or his choice to marry outside the community. I suggest that Mistry's self-reflexive narrative reflects the duality of the dilemmas within which minorities contend assimilation in the face of aggressive stick-wielding 'vernacular' political party, and the danger of the 0.006 percent Parsi community members dwindling from self-consuming insularity. The Jews, like the Parsis are equally susceptible to the delineated threats along with low birth-rate, emigration by younger generation, interbreeding, and decrees against conversion.

Conversely, in the *Book of Rachel,* the Indian–Jewish protagonist Rachel finds herself to be the last representative of her community in the village off the Konkan coast, the place, where her ancestors long ago were shipwrecked and the handful of survivors adopted it as their new home. Three major markers including food, clothes and language provide insights to her connect with the land and people around her with diverse religions, the mythical past of her community and the sacred 'promised land' of Israel. The preservation of her traditions is leisurely and lovingly described by the writer, primarily emanating from her kosher kitchen, her prayers and her determination to look

after the abandoned synagogue in her village as the last of the families and her own children leave for the newly formed nation of Israel.

Unlike the walls in the city of Ahmedabad that tended to discriminate by not allowing little Esther into her Hindu friend's kitchen as she is a 'meat-eater', the walls in the rural setting of Rachel's village are rather porous, allowing for deeper and richer relatedness. Her kitchen is liberally laced with Indian spices and various local ingredients substituting for the original Hebrew recipes and constituents. David's focus on the culinary creates parallel historiography as she blends culinary and Jewish history. She utilises this strategy to reinforce her community's ethnic identity as Bene Israel, as well as Indian Jewish, while evocating the atavistic Jewish dietary codes, through the differences and similarities in the recipes and ingredients. New identities emerge from the kitchen or the subculture of her food cosmopolitanism. Thus, David uses both form and content to challenge boundaries. Rachel routinely wears a saree and eats food with her fingers. Moreover, she feels no contradiction in singing Marathi versions of her prayers. She often sings a bhajan to child Moses floating in a basket on the river Nile, an adaptation of a popular Krishna bhajan. Her neighbours 'appreciated the fact that, although she was a Bene Israel Teli, she spoke Marathi with the right intonations, just like them, and also knew all the Maharashtrian customs, so much so that often they introduced her to their relatives as a Konkanasth Brahmin' (David 2007: 5). 'Rachel took pride in her new-found identity, which made her a part of their lives, not a stranger who belonged to a minority community' (David 2007: 5). Rachel, representative of the Bene Israel community, takes many liberties with her faith, but her modes of difference or assimilation are chosen, just as her will and agency is apparent in her determination not to leave India and in taking care of the abandoned synagogue in her village singlehandedly. 'Whenever her sons and daughter spoke about immigration to Israel, she shivered and imagined they would imprison her for ever in an unknown land and tie her tongue with the language of their prayers' (David 2007: 39). Thus, the rural calls out assumptions of powerlessness and marginalisation. Significantly, the village conveys a more vibrant convivial existence as it is men and women from her neighbourhood who assist in her efforts to save her legacy.

Conviviality has been envisaged as a way of plugging in 'the shortages of cosmopolitanism' and the issue of 'living-with-difference' mainly in the urban contexts. The purpose of conviviality is promise of freedom from structural inequalities.[16] Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy prefers conviviality over cosmopolitanism, specifically, as he reiterates that minorities remain caught in the hierarchies implied in cosmopolitan networks. Conviviality demonstrates an ethical basis unlike cosmopolitanism, making 'multiculturalism normative

in everyday life' rather than multiculturalism at the level of tolerance. The latter sans harmony and mutual acceptance of difference merely replicates the centre/periphery model. I suggest, *Book of Rachel* and *The Assassin's Song* are closer to Gilroy's interpretation, 'the acceptance and affirmation of diversity without restaging communitarian conceptions of ethnic and racial difference',[17] and in the attempt at reconciling the notion of the individual with inter and intra community affiliations. However, Gilroy conceives of his theory in the western urban context of race, inadequate to the understanding of cultural models in India that primarily emerged from rooted cosmopolitan[18] and local forms.

Similarly, Pirbaag, located in a village in Gujarat, to which the protagonist Karsan Dargawalla is compelled to return however unwillingly, testifies to difference, confluence and co-existence, historically through the life of Sufi Pir Nur Fazal. The diasporic Pir established the community and the traditions, unto the time Karsan's father presided over the shrine many generations later. 'Although Pirbaag harboured the precious memory and the grave of a Muslim Pir and the question of Hindu and Muslim had never arisen before for its followers' (Vassanji 2007: 51), events leading to the Partition and its aftermath laid heavy on Pirbaag. Vassanji points out the roles of the collector and the Russian professor in 1942 who push Dada, the narrator's grandfather, to join the Muslim League, suggesting that the community needed to be steered 'towards the larger Muslim Community, or being small and insignificant, they will disappear altogether' (Vassanji 2007: 51). Henceforth the cleavage of the country and the family coincide as his father's brother takes on the identity of 'Iqbal' from Rajpal and opts for Karachi. Karsan is pressurised to convert to Islam by his uncle, and Christianity by the Anglican priest, coercions not faced by Nur Fazal:

> But now the shrine lies in ruins, a victim of the violence that so gripped our state recently, an orgy of murder and destruction of the kind we euphemistically call 'riots'. Only the rats visit the Sufi now, to root among the ruins. My father is dead and so is my mother. And my brother militantly calls himself a Muslim and is wanted for questioning regarding a horrific crime. (Vassanji 2007: 53)

Thus, Vassanji's novel offers a powerful critique of diverging Muslim and Sufi communities contending with the consciousness of being extraneous by the dichotomy set up by religious identities perceived as Indic/non-Indic, territorial/ non-territorial, secular/communal within the framework of the nation. Paradoxically, as Karsan is attracted to the peace and spirituality exuded by the shrine, his estranged brother Mansoor is disillusioned by the violence around him and pivots towards confrontational fundamentalist attitudes as he takes up a 'Muslim' identity. The text simultaneously exposes the crisis of sectarian violence as well as dogmatism.

Thus, all three writers offer trenchant critiques of fundamentalist forces, territorial nativism and notions of conservative religiosity, thereby applying the introspective lens at both ends of social co-existence as impediments to justifiable conviviality as the space for possibilities of transcending these impediments. Mistry's novel critiques exclusion within the liminalities of the structures of tolerance, reiterating belonging in cosmopolitan freedom in everyday multiculturalism. The denial to Nariman Vakil or Yezad's simultaneous affiliations to multiple communities challenges singular national identities. Conversely, David evokes belonging embodied in Rachel finding her isolation in the village less traumatic and terrifying than the move to Israel. Her fears have to do with her roots once again being taken away from her. Rachel's way of life successfully transcends 'minority consciousness' as she counters notions of extraneousness and exilic existence, expunging alienation. Rachel's hybrid identity exemplifies the potential of multiple belongings. Both *The Assassin*'s *Song* and *Book of Rachel* undercut notions of rural as a romantic ideal or peripheral and powerless, in the process transcending the urban/rural as a redundant binary. Significantly, both Vassanji and David reinvigorate 'reverence' and 'sacredness' to challenge the notion that territoriality alone inspires sustained belonging. Karsan's return to Pirbaag reconnects him with his Sufi heritage, simultaneously defying territorial binaries. While Karsan's immersion in the mystic elements combined with the unlimited sources of knowledge in the Pirbaag library are pointers to his transcendence, Mansoor remains alienated and captured by the more evident form of religion and devastating forms of minorityism. Just as the Sufi mystic, despite being a stranger from outside, belonged to the village of Haripir, so does Karsan experience the wholeness of belonging as the new Sufi spiritual guide. Thus, the novels 'deterritorialise' the sites of conflict by deconstructing and diffusing the stereotypical liminalities of a post-divided society by offering vibrant spaces of cosmopolitanism and conviviality. The novels defy being irreducibly categorised as minority literature and resist boundaries through personal and political interplay that succeeds in devising alternative ways of constructing identity for multiple belongings, empowerment and agency, freeing it from the signified binaries, hence effectively 'deterritorialising' marginalisation.

Notes

1. See Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), JanMohamed and Lloyd, *Cultural Critique. No. 6* (Spring, 1987) *and No. 7* (1987), Bhabha, Homi 'On Minorities: Cultural Rights' (2000), Kymlicka, Will, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (1995), Mahajan and Sheth, *Minority Identities and the Nation-state* (1999), Goswami, Manu, *Producing India* (2004).

2. '[I]ndividuals and populations, including numerical majorities, whose collective cultural, economic, political and social power has been eroded through the targeting of identity in active processes that sustain structures of hegemony.' See Gunaratnam, Y. 2003. *Researching 'Race' and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power*. New Delhi: Sage Publications Ltd.
3. Mistry, Rohinton. 2006. *Family Matters.* London: Faber and Faber.
4. David, Esther. 2007. *Book of Rachel.* Gurugram: Penguin India.
5. Vassanji, M. G. 2007. *The Assassin's Song.* London: Viking.
6. The concept conveys the difficulties arising from internalising stereotypes of identity perpetuated by the dominant culture, traced by many culture theorists including Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993).
7. See Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1986). *Kafka: Toward a minor literature*. University of Minnesota Press. Minor Literature theorists Deleuze and Guattari use the term "deterritorialization" to interpret Kafka's literary works as literature of protest in a specific European context of major and minor literature. The context of minor writing within a major language is not applicable to a multilinguistic nation like India and given the ambivalent elite status of English language within the nation. Despite the constraints, the novels question and destabilise cultural hegemony towards deterritorialising marginalisation.
8. Under the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992, five religious communities, viz., Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians (Parsis) were notified as minority communities by the Union Government. Further vide notification dated 27th January 2014, Jains were also notified as another minority community. See Website 'National Commission of Minorities, Government of India' https://ncm.nic.in/homepage/homepage.php
9. Website 'Crosscurrents in 20th Century Literature and Fiction', The Jewish People Policy Institute, https://jppi.org.il/en/#.ZBiNT-xBxIs (accessed on 28 February 2023).
10. David, Esther. 2007. *Shalom India Housing Society.* New Delhi: Women Unlimited (an associate of Kali for Women).
11. David, Esther. 2002. *The Walled City.* USA: Syracuse University Press.
12. Calhoun, Craig. 2003. 'Belonging in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary', *Ethnicities*, 3(4): 531–53.
13. Calhoun, Craig. 2008. 'Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism:* 14 (3): 427–48.
14. See 'Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai' by Arjun Appadurai in Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, H. K. and Chakrabarty, D. (eds). 2002. *Cosmopolitanism.* Durham: Duke University Press.
15. See Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press.

16. Nowicka, Magdalena. 2020 'Fantasy of Conviviality: Banalities of Multicultural Settings and What We Do (Not) Notice When We Look at Them', in Hemer, Frykman and Ristilammi (eds), *Conviviality at the Crossroads: The Poetics and Politics of Everyday Encounters*, pp. 15–42. Sweden: Palgrave Macmillan. (e-book).
17. Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*. London: Routledge.
18. See Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, H. K. and Chakrabarty, D. (eds). 2002. *Cosmopolitanism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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Now, Bulleh Shah Dances from the 'Periphery' to the 'Centre'

Harsimran Kaur

Abstract

The transposition of Bulleh Shah's Sufi verses into Kathak performances are instances of cross-cultural, intermedial translations, entangled with various discourses and spheres of aesthetics, offering alliances and resistances. It is a journey from 'periphery' to 'centre' and from 'margins' to 'metropolis'. Kathak has its origins in the high culture of the temple and court art, asserting its continuity from the *Gharanedars* and the *Natyashastra*. However, the intercultural translations of Kathak are numerous, including multiple geographical areas and cultures. Practiced and performed by *Kathakars,* the traveling bards, the dance form relies on the trans-mediation of oral stories and mythologies into visual and embodied acts. In this paper, I propose to trace the journey of Bulleh Shah's Sufi poetry into Kathak, with the case study of performances by Manjari Chaturvedi, an exponent of this intermedial art. The main line of enquiry seeks to find answers to the vital questions of how Sufi Kathak, a term coined by Chaturvedi, is revived from the lost tradition to the 'centre', as a dance form, within the popular culture. Do the translations of Sufi lyrics/words/verses remain at the boundary/periphery of the discourse of Kathak, or do these reoccur and mutate in styles, movement and iteration? How have various practitioners — the erstwhile courtesans, contemporary professional performers — or even the connoisseurs, viewers further translated as well as re-interpreted the verses into dance? Another relevant line of enquiry will include the intermedial pirouette, which occurs when the word becomes performative.

Keywords: Sufi kathak, transcendence of self, Sufism, rasa

Introduction

Kathak is one of the classical dances of India; the name is drawn from the saying '*Katha Kahe so Kathak Kahave*', that is, 'the one who tells stories'

(Kathakaar or Kathak), hence the dance is sometimes also known as '*Natwari Nrutya'*. The themes of Kathak traditionally revolve around the stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Lord Krishna, and Raslila of Braj, apart from these Kathak encompasses presentations on manifold subjects. This dance form traces its lineage to four *gharanas,* which belong to different geographical areas, namely Jaipur, Lucknow, Banaras, and Raigarh, and hence are so named. Kathak attained a respectful position because of the efforts of the great Kathak guru Bindadin Maharaj and the legacy was efficiently carried out by his grandson Pt. Birju Maharaj in the present times. The dance form belongs to the oral tradition of the Kathakars and the means of propagating it in the beginning were only gharanas. Thus, the questions arise: What makes Kathak a classical art form? Were the stories exclusively about the classical epics told and retold? Are there any other anecdotal accounts of Kathak?

To tell a story one has to dive deep into the character's consciousness and feel empathetic. This capability can only be achieved through yoga, thus gaining absolute control over the *Chitta*. Classical Indian dances convey the sense of transcending the body and being one with the mind. It is a form of yoga, a union of body and mind. Without considerable emphasis on this unison, dance is not possible. A dancing body is acculturated in meanings and movements, in classical dances no movement is devoid of profound implication. The quintessential experience of dancing brings with it a sense of being in the here and now, a sensation through which one can perceive connectedness in movement, locate the body in three-dimensional space, feel togetherness in time, and know oneness with a larger entity, which humans often identify as a transcendent religious experience. Edward Warburton in his essay 'Of Meanings and Movements: Re-Languaging Embodiment in Dance Phenomenology and Cognition' asserts that 'dance is an ideal medium for investigating embodiment, and considerable attention has been given to "talk about the body" as an cultural object, to "talk of the body" as a subjective experience, and more recently, to "talk on the body" as an "architect of the human mind"' (Warburton 2011: 68).

The primary methods of enquiry in this paper are phenomenology and dance ethnography. Phenomenology as a research method in an anthropological discipline provides an encounter with subjective experience. Edmund Husserl, the main exponent of phenomenology, defines it as a descriptive but non-reductive science of what appears, in the manner of its appearance. By etymology, phenomenology is the study of the phenomenon, in the root meaning of appearances; or better the way things appear to us in our experience, the way we perceive and experience things in the world around us. Max van Manen writes in the essay, 'Phenomenology in its Original Sense' that 'the world itself, without reference to an experiencing person or consciousness,

cannot be described directly, as such approach would overlook that the real things of the world are always meaningfully constituted by conscious human beings' (Manen 1990: 9). The research for this paper was operated through the active engagement of spectator–performers' response to the evolution of the Sufi Kathak dance form, which also uncovered how the form has transformed its flowing process. Within dance studies, phenomenology responds to 'describe concrete lived human life, without forcing it through a methodological framework, or reducing it to a series of inner psychic experiences or conceptual abstractions' (Kozel 1994: 5). Here, the spectator/*rasik* is the researcher; I am accounting for and accommodating my experience as a Kathak dancer. Another method that is applied here is to divulge deeply in dance ethnography, an examination of dance from an ethnographic perspective where it acts as a piece of cultural knowledge drawing on people's portraits. Deidre Sklar in the essay 'On Dance Ethnography' asserts that it 'depends upon the postulate that cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance. This statement implies that the knowledge involved in dancing is not just somatic, but mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values, and feelings' (Sklar: 6). Dance ethnography is embedded in the experience of the body and its movements rather than any text, artefact or abstraction. The dance ethnographer seeks to discover why artists move in a certain way. How their beliefs and values embody themselves in their praxis. The contribution of the ethnographic perspective is that it assists the researcher in having an enlarged view of both the dance event and the dance as a cultural process. A key aspect of dance ethnography is the ethnographer taking part in the dancing, which generates special knowledge (which, like any bodily practice, is accessible only through participation). Dance ethnographers are often former modern or classical dancers, and some keep dancing, even choreographing. Theoretically, dance ethnographers relate to topics such as ethnicity and nationalism; postcolonialism; race politics; gender and sexuality; body, mind and movement; globalisation; and combinations thereof.

The paper focusses on the marginalised sects of Kathak dancers, which were kept hegemonically subdued and hidden by the dominant Kathak dancers of the Vaishnava sect. The paper focusses on the Sufi verses of Baba Bulleh Shah, which originated as an oral text and matured into a visual text in the later years. The youngster who would go on to become Bulleh Shah, the master of Sufi poems in Punjabi, and one of the most illustrious Sufi poets of South Asia, was born Abdullah Shah (1680–1757). Bulleh Shah (vocatively also known as Bulleya), who lived in a period of instability and significant conflict between the Sikhs and the waning Mughal Empire, wrote poetry that questioned the unrest of the time and had a strong humanist and tolerant

ideology at its core. Bulleh Shah's spiritual philosophy and his message of equality found expression in his Kafis, a form of poetry native to the Indian subcontinent that can be viewed as a type of folk ballad. Bulleya was blind to the boundaries of religion and caste in a country that was becoming more and more divided. The translation of folk ballads in Punjabi to a Kathak visual text is a matter of reshaping the consciousness and perception regarding the former.

The Sufi saints of the Bhakti era wrote about their *Murshids* or *Pirs* (spiritual guides) similar to how Meerabai wrote and sang for Krishna. Bulleh Shah kept wandering and dancing, but he danced in a different manner, using vocabulary and gestures like that of the Kathakars. Manjari Chaturvedi, a famous exponent of Sufi Kathak, explores the lost classical dance of Bulleh Shah and other Sufis, which also constitutes the dance of the courtesans in her view, and gives it a designated name as Sufi Kathak in the 21st century. As stated earlier, Kathakars were traveling bards who kept unfolding their oral narrations into visual performances, which in itself were a form of translation and mediation in its ancient sense. How were oral performances translated into visual performances? Was the translated visual performance available to the public at large in the Bhakti era? Performers have always been the authors and translators of classical performances, however, the intra-cultural translation of Kathak was marginalised in history. Gestures were largely misunderstood or never given importance across traditions and cultures. 'Transmission of performance was and is aural-oral and visual; learning came through practice and refinement of whole performance texts rather than mastering components and combining them into artworks later' (Erdman 1983: 67). The question here stood how an audience belonging to a belief other than Sufism could not understand that gesture although the meaning conveyed was quite similar? Is the performance always planned for a particular group of audience? What is the difference between the perception of spectators when it is addressed to them in a culturally related manner or otherwise?

As the vocabulary of the Sufis was different from the Brahminical texts, priests, temples, and other sacrosanct majority therefore it was kept at the periphery of pure Kathak as it was called, when it was revived in the light of nationalism. The mediatisation of classical dance forms helps the spectators, as well as the performers, gain insights into the dynamism and heteronomy of the dance form. Manjari Chaturvedi through her ethnographic study of the anecdotal performances contended that Sufism is also one of the branches of Kathak discourse like Court Kathak or *Mujra*. A performance text whether dance or theatre is an image and movement memory that relies absolutely on image, sound and movement and the spectator's interpretation of it. Thus, Chaturvedi also bases her revival of Sufi tradition on what the fakirs have

seen and heard throughout history. However, even though the vocabulary of the dance form changes, the grammar remains intact. Here, the performers get into the character of a typical *Nayika* who is dancing for the love of God, waiting to unite with Him, and evoking the rasa of Bhakti.

Bulleh Shah, wandered like a *jogi* to persuade his Murshid and sang, 'Your love has made me dance like mad'. An anecdotal account regarding one of Baba Bulleh Shah's famous Kafi, '*Tere Ishq Nachaya Karke Thaiya ve Thaiya'* is that when a family member of Bulleh Shah was getting married he sent an invitation to Shah Inayat, his Murshid. Instead of coming himself, Shah Inayat sent one of his students. This individual was from a low class and showed up for the wedding dressed modestly. Not only did the host fail to attend to him but Bulleh Shah also neglected to attend to his *khwajatash* (individuals who share the same master), and they both declined to extend him any hospitality. When the man went back to Shah Inayat, the latter was furious on hearing about this behaviour and refused to talk to Bulleh Shah anymore. Bulleh Shah is reported to have fallen into a delirium due to the misery of being separated from the one person he loved the most. This separation from his beloved served as the inspiration for many of his Kafis; one of them on which Manjari Chaturvedi performs in her project is:

Tere ishq nachaya Krke thaiya ve thaiya
Tere Ishq ne dera mere andar keeta
Bhar ke zeher payala main taan aape peeta,
Jhabde wahudi tabiba nahin te main mar gaiyaan
Tere Ishq nachaiyaan kar key thaiyaa thaiyaa

Falling in love with you
Was like taking a sip of poison
Come my healer, forsaken, I am sad.
Your love has made me dance like mad

In the refrain, the word 'thaiyya' presents a particularly classical piece: It is more commonly used as a word for the classical music traditions of Pakistan and India. It is used as a metronomic scale for the rhythms in singing and dancing rather than as a noun with semantic connotations. Similar examples include 'Ta', 'Tai', 'Tak', and 'Thai', as well as each of their conjugations, such as 'Takthai', 'Thaitak', 'Tathai', and 'Taitak', and so on. While performing this particular Kafi, Chaturvedi transcends physical love and enters into the realm of embodying divine love. She embodies a fakir desperate to convince and persuade his Pir, and to unite with him again. Her face is constantly facing upwards and the peculiar expression of longing and *virah* further makes it profoundly classical. Body holds a secondary value in Sufism and it is considered as merely the container of the soul. The performative words convey the sense of total submission or surrender to the will of God.

Poetry is different, language and movement are used differently, the music is different, and even the dancer's attire, jewellery and aesthetics are unique to Sufi Kathak. For instance, depending on the poetry of the mystical tradition to be followed in the dance, the Sufi Kathak costume's emblematic colour is pure black with a silver or gold border. Manjari elaborates, 'The costume color is decided upon through references of states of mind, uses of metaphor and other symbolism in the poetry. Although an array of colors such as mustard yellow, green, and red may be used – each particular to its relevance, prime signiûcance is given to white and black because of their purity and completeness'. Manjari Chaturvedi is frequently seen performing Bulleh Shah wearing a black *Anarkali* dress and a pyjama with the addition of a *paranda* to her hair accessories. *Paranda* is a clothing piece that is used to add length to the hair braid and for enhancing the beauty. Chaturvedi has given a regional touch to the performance of Bulleh Shah by shifting the binaries of the centre and periphery.

The Sufi Kathak performers transmit the joy of a liberated soul who imagine themselves as female bodies and dance to persuade God like the *devadasis* of the ancient era. There has always been cross-cultural communication between Sufism and the Bhakti movement in India. Nonetheless, there was selective osmosis of the dance forms of the Vaishnavas into the dominant nature of Kathak. The Sufi tradition remained at the periphery until the 21st century. S. K. Das in the essay 'Mad Lover' confirms that 'the Heers and the Sohnis in Panjabi and Sindhi poetry can be said to be the manifestations of Radha in a Sufi dress. When Heer in a verse of Lai Husain says, '*Sajjan bin rati hoia baddia'* ('nights become longer without you, my friend') or Sohni laments '*dard bichode da hal ni mai kainu akha'* ('how to describe my tale of suffering') one hears distinct echoes of the Radha-Krishna' (Das 2003: 215). Dance or classical dances in particular have universal themes, emotions, moods, and rasa; they only differ in their historicity of existence and the language of the specific culture from which they have evolved. Bulleh Shah belonged to the Sindh region and thus created a new character of Heer whose longing for God, the beloved, merged in the chorus of the devotees of Shiva or Krishna. 'Heer's piteous appeal *'mai tere qurban ve vehre avad mere'* ('this life I dedicate to you, come to my courtyard once') could have been reciprocated by a Chaitanya or Meerabai' (Das 2003: 215).

Chaturvedi through various projects has brought Sufi Kathak into public consciousness. Initiated in 2010, the '22 Khwaja Project' is an ongoing project designed by Manjari Chaturvedi to raise awareness about the 22 Sufi shrines in Delhi and the surrounding area. The project guides city dwellers through the lives and teachings of the many Sufi saints who had made this city their home. These yearly events encourage traditional Sufi music and dancing

through uncommon artist partnerships. Through the revival of Sufism in dance, there has also been the revival of local *qawwals* and Sufi singers who moved from 'margins' to 'metropolis' to showcase and assert their art. Additionally, the project undertakes the revival of the writings of once unknown yet exceptional Sufi poets from Awadh and Uttar Pradesh who wrote extensively while being influenced by secular traditions and the Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb. The Sufi poets are highlighted in this project because their profound poetry is still recited at numerous shrines today, but the public is unaware of the lives of these philosophical writers. The Sufi *khanqahs* (monasteries) were centres of learning where the faithful were inducted into a spiritual discipline. Devotees created rituals from their teachings and poetry. An entire ritualistic and spiritual world grew around these shrines where women and children went in large numbers to pray, to supplicate, to bring offerings, and to seek relief from emotional, familial and financial concerns.

Manjari has performed Sufi Kathak in more than 200 concerts all over the world including Europe and the US, Australia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia at locations as prestigious as Rashtrapati Bhawan in New Delhi and the Sydney Opera House, thus asserting and transfiguring the marginal identity of Sufi Kathak into a metropolis space. 'Baba Bulleh Shah – A Tribute' is a concert that features Manjari Chaturvedi dancing to live *qawwali* music based on Baba Bulleh Shah's lyrics, performed by traditional Punjabi musicians. It also includes a biography of this famous Sufi from Punjab, whose teachings are still applicable today. The event is a component of the Sufi Kathak Foundation's endeavours to safeguard, support and raise awareness of the national traditional arts. This concert showcases Indian traditional arts in a special cooperation that embodies the country's belief in the concept of Unity in Diversity by fusing several regional styles. Manjari reflects, 'In Sufi Kathak, I incorporate the mystique of Sufism… the moving meditation… thereby blending both the Hindu and Muslim divine traditions'. Nurtured by Manjari's knowledge and experience, Sufi Kathak melts the philosophical depth of Sufi poetry with the narrative beauty and grace of classical Indian dance to evolve a unique dance form that uses classical dance to narrate and interpret Sufi poetry. She explains, 'Sufi Kathak covers the delicate nuances of expressiveness… alluring grace in movements… unique *abhinaya* to the accompaniment of spiritual poetry and music such as the rhythm of Qawwali…'.

The peculiar qualities of dancing classically on Baba Bulleh Shah's poetry is that the language belonged to the common man of the Punjab region and the technicalities of music is comprehensible and possess the ability to connect with the rasik and common spectators. One of the indispensable parts of Kathak is *chakra* (pirouette); Sufi Kathak does not keep count of the chakra

as the performer is lost in meditation, the performer becomes unaware of the immediate surroundings and becomes one with God. The musicians have to align with the performer, not vice versa. Chaturvedi has deliberately chosen local *qawwals* and singers to perform with her and to blur the lines between 'periphery' and 'centre'.

She, in her project, dances on one of the famous Kafis of Bulleh Shah:

Ethe amla de hone de nbede
Kise na teri jaat phuchni
namaaz te niyaaz na sikhaya,
tereeyaan kis kamm padahiyaan namaaza,
na ghar ditha na ghar vaala ditha,
tereeyaan kis kamm dittiyaan niyaazaa
ilm padaheya te amal na keeta,
tereeyaan kis kamm kiteeyaan vaajaan
bulhe shaah pata tad lag si,
jadon chidi phasi hth baajaan

Manjari elaborates, 'My dance form spans from earthly romance of Hindi folk to the evolved Sufi imagery of love in Persian poetry, from a beloved in flesh and blood to the abstract presence of the Almighty, from a form to formlessness'. Sufi Kathak brings out the nuances of Sufi music and poetry through the language of the body, which expresses the rapturous heights of spiritual ecstasy. 'While in existing classical Indian dance forms, there is a focus on a beloved in flesh and blood, in physical form, it is the abstract presence of the Almighty that becomes the focal point for the Sufi Kathak dancer. The dance thus becomes a communication of the Self to the Almighty of the union that is desired between creation and Creator, or soul with Spirit,' says Manjari. It is this, which makes Sufi Kathak the dance of the soul! The dance spectacle — especially '*othe amla de hone ne nbede*' — embodies the transcendence of differences in caste, creed, gender, and other social and religious differences and asserts on being one with God. The performer is dressed in a completely black attire with her hair open to represent her unstable and yet trance-like state of mind. In the performance, she is emphasising and telling the audience to shift their focus from this world's affairs to the divine affair with God. '*Amla'* or '*Amli'* is a Punjabi word that means someone who has lost the sense of the world and experiences intoxication. She uses hand gestures, which she claims Baba Bulleh Shah used when he used to dance.

Another popular Kafi of Baba Bulleh Shah, which has been reused and retold in innumerable Bollywood songs, yet has kept a profound space in the Kafis of Bulleh Shah is:

Mera piya ghar aya
Ho laal ni mera piya ghar aya

Ho laal ni mera piya ghar aya
Ho laal ni mera piya ghar aya
Ho piya ghar ahay sanoon Allah milaya
Piya ghar ahay sanoon Allah milaya

This particular piece was written when Bulleh Shah united with his spiritual guru and there was limitless joy and bliss in this union. Here, Chaturvedi embodies the dance of joy, union and pure communion. While performing this piece, she decorates herself with a colourful *anarkali* and a hair braid with a *paranda.* The facial gestures also shift from that of longing to a sense of satisfaction and evoke the *sringara* rasa in the performer as well as the spectators.

Conclusion

Manjari Chaturvedi through her '22 Khwaja Project', in which 'O Bulleyah' stands out, brings public and popular consciousness to the lost and marginalised tradition of Bulleh Shah dancing on his Kafis and *kalam* to persuade his Pir. It can be understood in comparison to the poets of the Bhakti era who were assimilated in the making and remaking of classical dances of India. The Sufis, the Kafis, and their art were termed as folk art and culture and kept at the margins of the 'high culture' of Brahminical patriarchy. Bulleh Shah's words were performative in the classical sense that they carried a profound meaning and gestures, the words were the medium to unite with God. The exclusive difference these words carried was that they worshipped a formless God that could only be imagined and felt. Classical dance or Kathak in particular is a medium where the performer communicates the formless, imagined by the spectators and rasik through gestures embedded with deep meaning.

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Amar Shohor[1] (My City): Exploring the Metropolis and Counterculture in Bangla Band Songs

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Abstract

The songs of Moheener Ghoraguli, the first Bangla band in the mid-70s, had completely shaken the Bangla audience who were used to the mellifluous you-and-I romantic compositions of the Golden Era of Bangla music. But with the arrival and reception of Suman Chattopadhyay and his contemporaries from 1992 onwards, which marked a hairpin bend in the music industry, a platform was prepared for the birth of a number of bands in the mid-90s, initiating a new genre of music in Bangla. Modelled on the rock-band structure of the West, their songs were a reflection of hard-core urban emotions and carried references of the metro-life both in terms of imageries and vocabularies. The soundscapes they designed were accepted by the youth of the city but did not make any mark on the non-urbane 'backward' areas. A new Bangla-band generation was born — rockstar images of band members of bands like Cactus, Crosswindz, Lakkhichhara, and Fossils lashed the interiors of the urban middle class in Bengal. There was a general feeling of existential debility among the youth owing to a hopeless socio-politico-economic scenario, which was being voiced in the songs of the bands. The issues in the songs were sometimes points of concern for spaces beyond the immediate city as well, but the manifestations and presentations of these problems silently omitted the language of relevance for the non-urban areas. There was hence no representation of the rural in the songs, and their acceptance was limited to a section of the neo-modern urban audience.

This paper aims to investigate the dominance of the city and the consequent exclusion of the rural/ non-urban in the Bangla band songs of the 90s and to identify the reception or rejection of the same amongst its audience.

Keywords: Bangla music bands, urbanity, culture, counterculture, hegemony

Introduction

The Gramscian concept of hegemony talks of a 'spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, this consent is historically caused by the prestige and position and function in the world of production' (Gramsci 1971: 12). From this point of the proposition, first I will attempt to analyse the politics between the urban and the rural spaces, and the consequent hegemonic position of the former in terms of culture and the society, especially in the context of Kolkata in Bengal.[2]

The 'becoming' of Calcutta[3] from a conglomeration of three villages to the metropolis Kolkata of today, included a consistent process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the rural society and culture of the then contemporary times — making it a new city with a newfound definition of urbanity. With the Industrial Revolution and the consequent surge of shift of the rural population from the periphery towards the central core in Calcutta, which was gradually taking the shape of a city and defining itself as the financial nodal point, segregations between the rural space and the emerging city were established not only in its exterior structure but intrinsically intellectually as well; it stood at the crossroads of an economic, cultural, sociological re-configuration and gradually faced ideological conflicts between what existed and what the young minds were experiencing with their new education, scientific reasoning and shift in tastes. This clearly stated that the new era was city-centric, and not village-centric unlike the previous times. Rural spaces were moving to the margins.

This evidently testifies the power–hegemony–urban–rural dynamics and its consequent manifestation in the evolution of culture — what is hegemonic and mainstream is challenged by an alternative culture — 'counterculture' — until that counterculture takes over the mainstream and role reversals are witnessed. While dealing with the question regarding how dominant social forces gain and maintain control over societies, Gramsci suggested that one of the ways in which the supremacy of a social group manifests itself is through its 'intellectual moral leadership' (Gramsci 1971: 57). As Binoy Ghosh explains through a simple metaphor in his *Banglar Nabajagriti*, the distance by train between Nabadwip–Murshidabad (the non-urban areas of Bengal) and Calcutta is not much, but the chronemic distance is huge — if Nabadwip is Bengal's Oxford, then 19th century Calcutta is certainly the Florence of Bengal, the pivotal point of Bengal's socio-cultural Renaissance (Ghosh 1995: 36). Hence, by this gradual hegemonic power that the city of Calcutta gained for itself, the hitherto rural music of Bengal too, like all other sectors, was influenced, and over a span of two centuries began being taken over by a shift both in terms of form and content. Formats of *Panchali*, *Mangalkabya*

or *Kirtana* that mostly talked of gods and goddesses started giving way to the *Kobi-gaan* of the *Kobiwalas*[4] of the 18th and the 19th centuries, moving on to the internationalism of Rabindranath, Nazrul in the early 20th century, then gradually towards the more revolutionary songs of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1940s and 50s, and the popularity of Bangla film and non-film songs of the 60s.

Musical experimentation was taking place as a cultural reaction to both urbanisation and the postcolonial experience. Any form of musical experience is sourced from the individual's experience of the world around, which finds a popular expression in the song, reaches the audience who interprets it according to their own private experiences and finally it returns to the originator with a feeling of oneness between the source and the receiver. The then mainstream music of Calcutta was largely unable to reflect the angst of the times and portrayed a dreamy reality of the elite with which a section of the dissident voices of the youth could not relate. In this backdrop of events — hastily summarised due to the limited scope of this paper — the 'rock' culture of the West (the USA and UK in particular) was permeating into the urban scenario of Bangla music in the second half of the 20th century. Moheener Ghoraguli (Moheen's Horses)[5] — the first Bangla band — appeared in 1975, trying to bridge the gap between what Calcutta encompassed in reality in that period and what was starrily drawn in the more 'popular' Bangla songs of films and non-film songs, 'raising a different voice with an aim to take Calcutta to a wider, more open and freer space that uninhibitedly would receive international events and influences in its canvas, thereby bringing alternative social discourses in its cultural space' (Banerjee 2021: 221-2). Soumen Sen in his essay 'Sanskritir Protibhumi O Adhidesh' quotes Stuart Hall thereby complementing our perspective that dissidence counters a hegemonic presence, as is seen in the context of the formation of Moheener Ghoraguli: 'By approaching culture through the use of the idea of hegemony, culture can be conceptualised as a space within which struggles between social forces are conducted' (Sen 2004: 13). It is to be noted at this juncture that Moheener Ghoraguli was at their creative peak during *'the best of times… the worst of times' — the Naxal period in Calcutta (1967–71).* The city had already learnt to articulate resistance through a section of bewildered, distraught youth, whose academics, career and future were all precariously hanging loose due to the absolute employment crisis and political menace that raged in the city in those times. A helpless sense of disillusionment and confusion was widespread, but without a mass platform to vent the restlessness. The youth in particular experienced a severe sense of detachment and alienation from the apparently 'linear' flow of the city post the Naxalbari movement. Hence the blatantly expository title of the first album — *Sonbigno Pakhikul O Kolkata Bishoyok*

(*Ruffled Feathers and Calcutta-themed*) (1977) — displays the cold disruption in Calcutta and the consequent raised voices to break the set parameters of the then mainstream music as well as the blind subservience to the chaos that the city demanded.

It needs to be remembered in this context that any counterculture that emerges at any point of time is not really an event outside the mainstream culture of the place and time. It is rather the 'parallel stream of rebellious outbursts of cultural fissures from within the normative cultural traits' (Mukherjee 2017: 37). In the Bangla rock scenario, the appearance of the tedious and the profane in repeated circles establish the claim that these 'parallel stream of rebellious outbursts' are born around the concept of dissociation from the dogmatic rules of traditional cultural theories. These are intellectual protests from absolutely within the system and yet separate from the existing one. While Moheener Ghoraguli challenged the establishment in the 70s, bands appearing thereafter continued this strain of dissidence in their compositions and presentations in the 80s and more emphatically in the 90s. Bands like Krosswindz (1990), Cactus (1992) and Fossils (1998) furthered the panorama of Bangla rock through their disgruntled lyrics and music arrangements that resonated with the socio-politically chaotic Calcutta of the 90s. The Bangla rock genre that Moheen had started was loud and used layers and accompanying vocals to echo the restlessness and pain of the lyrics. Traditional Bangla music of the times did not embody expressions of anger, and hence Bangla was considered to be a language too soft and sweet for expressing the essence of angst that rock music aimed to create. However, as Kamalini Mukherjee writes:

> That vernacular poetry is a strong political form of expressing dissent, has been evident since the days of India's struggle for Independence. Bengal especially saw some of its brilliance reflected through poets of protest, and also authors who rose to the challenge to invigorate its youth through words. This power of Bangla Rock is a tribute to its altruistic past: although they are intensely personal (which is an affliction of post modernity), they are also militarily populist. And they represent a very cohesive cogent identity — that of the youth today, disengaged from the expectations of its previous generation. (Mukherjee 2017: 42)

Hence, Cactus' 'Buddha Hesechhe'[6] (The Buddha Smiled), for example, refers to Operation Smiling Buddha — India's first successful nuclear bomb test in Pokhran — and hints at the sense of vulnerability, insecurity and protest against the consequent power game across the world. Again, Fossils' entire album *F3*[7] (2008) is a critique of the contemporary socio-political issues as they create an atmosphere of discomfort through loud metallic sounds that incite both nausea and disturbing visuals. This discord and urge to break away from the existing system find reflection not only in issues typically political or socio-cultural, but also in absolutely emotional, private subjects as the youth experience a sense

of alienation and loneliness in the island-like singular existence of the 20th century. Moheen's songs like 'Amar Priya Café'[8] (My Beloved Cafe), 'Telephone'[9] or 'Prithibita naki'[10] (The World, May Be); 'Holud Pakhi'[11] (The Yellow Bird) or 'Sudhu tumi ele na'[12] (Only You Didn't Come) by Cactus; or 'Hasnuhana'[13] (Night Jasmine), 'Ekla Ghor'[14] (The Lonely Room) by Fossils treat the acute pain of nostalgia, rejection and loneliness of the modern individual in a manner that does not conform to the usual soft presentations that Bangla music had seen so far, especially while dealing with personal sentiments such as these.

However, it is interesting to note at this point that though all these emotions are generated from extremely human experiences that thread the collective humanity into one common experience, yet the language of representation and the images used are way removed from the rural audience-scape, thereby limiting the feeling of oneness amongst the urban Kolkata audience only.

Chandrabindoo, another Bangla band formed in 1998, is not modelled on the hard rock pattern, but nonetheless resonates with the spirit of all the bands of that age. Their songs stand out as strong statements that critique the superficial urban society with an element of wit and humour that is unique to their compositions. Their protest is against mundane experiences from all strata of society and uses sharp sarcasm as their tool — something with which the educated urban audience can relate. For example, in their masterpiece titled 'Bathroom',[15] they parody the blind aping of Western culture and strict regulations of English-medium schools in the city, which often subvert the basic human needs and rights in order to sustain their stringent discipline. Interestingly, Chandrabindoo uses the format of 'John Henry',[16] a Bangla protest song in the rock-n-roll genre by Hemango Biswas composed way back in early 20th century — an act that keeps them connected to the rich musical legacy of Bangla songs, at the same time raising their voice of dissent against the urban craze for English-medium modern education system that burdens and tortures the child in the garb of bubble-like culture and discipline. Also, at a deeper level, this song is the language of the marginalised who will one day raise their voice against 'hegemony and power', and a reversal of role will take place.

Since its initiation, one of the primary purposes of band music in the Bangla cultural arena was aimed at finding and imbibing an internationalism in the familiar portrait of the city through not-so-common-Bangla references in multiple songs. The attempt was to create a comfortable courtyard of interaction between indigenous elements and Western components without disagreement, which would create a wider arena of discourse beyond the limited regional and local translations of the city. As Sirajul Islam Choudhury writes in his essay:

> Internationalism… encourages people to grow. It is not about destroying the prevalent character and barging into the indigenous space. It is about steadily sticking to one's original space while calling out to the world. (Choudhury 2004: 61)

Hence, in 'Choitrer Kafon'[17] (The Coffin of Spring), 'Priya Café' or 'Bhalobasi'[18] (I Love) by Moheen, we find a direct message that the city has moved beyond its known elements of Bengali-ness, but at the same time it's holding on to its original culture. They deliver, in fact, an early message of fusion of indigenous songs, instrumentation, dance forms, and even fashion with those of other communities across the globe — reception, internalisation and co-existence — which would only enable pushing the socio-cultural-intellectual boundaries of Calcutta beyond its defined scope. Shantanu Datta, a senior journalist and music-historian opines:

> '*Bhalobashi Picasso, Buñuel, Dante, Beatles, Dylan aar Beethoven shunte/Ravi Shankar aar Ali Akbar shune, bhalo lagey bhore kuashay ghore phirte'* is our story. Ask anyone growing up in Calcutta during the '70s and '80s, and even now, and he/she will identify with this sentiment.... It is a telling commentary on who we were, and what we have become, that this philosophy needs iteration. (Dhar 2020)

He further states that Moheen is the 'embodiment of a kind of chutzpah rarely seen in urban musical soundscapes'. They dared to do original Bangla songs in a rock idiom, which were not 'mere derivatives' back in an agitated '70s' Calcutta (Dhar 2020).

This element of internationalism is also present in the songs by bands in the 90s, as references and associations often move beyond the familiar imageries of the specific Bengali community to more pan-global expressions, which could be related to by an educated elite urban audience only. For example, the melody structure of Fossils' most popular song 'Ekla Ghor' in its bleak introspection of loneliness bears resemblance to Eagles' 'Hotel California'. Again, there is ample usage of English words in songs like 'Bhoot aar Tilottama'[19] (The Ghost and the Metropolis) or in the very concept of 'Nemesis',[20] 'Tritiyo Biswa'[21] (The Third World) or 'Millenium',[22] with which only a certain section of the urban audience could relate.

However, by the time Moheen arrived at the Calcutta scenario, rock music in the West had started taking a different shape, led by Led Zeppelin, Allman Brothers and Doors, visible from the growing success rates of genres like hard rock, progressive rock and heavy metal. But despite this changing global trend, some like Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Pink Floyd, and The Beatles went against the tide to retain their originality and continued to express in their own pattern. Moheener Ghoraguli did the same in Calcutta: they introduced a unique genre that was an amalgamation of folk and rock (urban folk) with the subculture of the 1960s — psychedelia. They were convinced about new eclectic creations out of a diverse coalesce of inspirations that transcended any limited boundaries. Hence, Led Zeppelin, The Grateful Dead, The Beatles, Purna Das Baul, Lalon, Bach, Beethoven, Ali Akbar Khan, and *patchitrakars* (painters on earthen plates) — all found place in their original numbers. This

too was a tool of their resistance against hegemony and fascism: 'For my father, a band from India, or even Bengal, had to sound like it belonged to the country instead of blindly aping the West. Having one's own elements meant a great deal to him', notes Gaurab Chattopadhyay, son of Gautam Chattopadhyay, the founder of Moheener Ghoraguli (Sethu 2021).

Hence arose an element of fusion in the band songs — an attempt on the part of some bands to hold on to some traditional indigenous elements in the songs while moving in the international space — an amalgamation of both traditional localism and internationalism. 'Telephone' by Moheener Ghoraguli, for example, is formatted on a *Bhairavi*---------*Baul*[23] synchronisation. In fact, in a concert in 1979–80, members of the Baul community also came to perform with Moheen at the Kolkata International Jazz Festival. In the later years, Cactus' 'Bodhu re'[24] (O Beloved), for example, shows indigenous elements of the Baul in its format though the musical arrangement uses electric instruments with sharp metallic sounds. Bhoomi, formed in 1999, is probably the most popular Bangla band in the 'urban folk' genre, by far. Their songs extensively bank upon the diction, language patterns and the popular indigenous tune formats of the soil — Baul, *Saari*, *Bihu* or *Jhumur*, to name a few, but represent the metropolitan character in their usage of modern urban accompaniments, harmony, layers, or even lyrics in English language as in 'Rangila re'[25] (O Colourful!), for example. There is an extensive use of the electric guitar, octapad and other metallic percussions in their songs, which render the final compositions as by-products of a fusion urban culture.

However, Chandrabindoo's experiments with these fusion patterns are perhaps the most interesting till date, as their compositions allude to their very roots of the oldest Bangla forms of songs and yet their references in lyrics refer to the cosmopolitan issues of contemporary times. For example, the tune of 'Duniya dotcom'[26] is taken from the traditional *strotra-path* or incantation of prayers in Bangla, but the subject matter actually talks about the technological revolution that has apparently connected every corner of the world and has formed a global village with unlimited access to any nook. Again, we are reminded of Jayadeva's 'Gita Govinda'[27] as their song of the same name borrows couplets from Jayadeva's original musical text and is tuned in the pattern of a *kirtana* — the most celebrated indigenous format of songs in Bengal. However, the references and imageries used in Chandrabindoo's composition in question would be relatable to a modern city: that the Bollywood actors Preity Zinta and Kareena Kapoor could come up as references in a Bangla song, or the Niagara waterfalls and Viagra tablets could be used together in a rhyming couplet — was unprecedented in Bangla music trajectory. These were unexpected references and found familiarity, inclusion and acceptance within the educated, elite or middle class urban

circle only. Even though the songs often talked about people of other sections of society, yet these could never reach them and remained confined within a narrow section of audience. For example, 'Ami je rishkawala'[28] (I am a Rickshaw-puller) is a song from the perspective of a rickshaw-puller — the tune pattern has been borrowed from 'O amar chander kona'[29] (O My Precious!), an indigenous Bangla song meant for people who construct concrete roofs while singing this song to ease their labour (*Chhad-Petano Gaan* — a sub-category of the indigenous *Saari gaan*). However, the band's song in question has not been popular with its subject — the rickshaw pullers, which evidently shows the alienation between the urban bands and their limited audience on one hand, and the larger mass beyond the elite, educated metropolis on the other.

Shaswata Kundu Chaudhuri writes in an article in *Firstpost*:

> For the Bengali *bhodrolok*, the term "Bangla rock" often evokes macabre images of long-haired, substance-abusing men screaming incomprehensible lyrics into microphones and violently shaking their heads to agonisingly loud music. However, some of the children of the same *bhodroloks* grew up listening to these "unsavoury" numbers, adopting them as their personal and collective anthems. (Chaudhuri 2021a)

Back in the initial 1970s, this experiential fusion of ideas was not easily received by the initial audience — the traditionalist, conformist 'mainstream' culture of Bangla songs, which was still matching its beats with the 'boy-meets-girl' romantic numbers. Calcutta was yet not prepared to react and receive the band, even if it talked about contemporary urban issues in the language of its times, and Moheener Ghoraguli was dismembered in 1981. Probably they were too ahead of their times to be fully realised, as Nachiketa Chakraborty says in an interview:

> …at that time people here did not know what jeans meant. Did not know how to play the bass guitar. So a lot of them could not follow what a group of long haired young men were singing in Anglo-Bengali [he is referring to the mixture of English and Bengali in the lyrics]. …so shadowy was the arrangement of words that it did not understand the ordinary people. Songs must always represent the time. If songs cannot grasp time, they cannot get a foothold. Like Moheener Ghoraguli did not get a foothold. (Chakravarty 1999: 173)

Inspired by Moheen, a handful of Bangla bands came up in the late 70s and 80s with their heavily urban-themed songs, which included Debojyoti Mishra's (currently a famed film music director) band Bicycle, Indranil Sen's Nagar Philomel, Avijit Adhikari's Ekka, and Suman Chattopadhyay's Nagarik. On the inlay of the cassettes of Nagar Philomel was embossed the phrase 'Shohor Sangeet' (Urban Songs) — that is, the band had declared right at the onset that they would sing of the city-space, while Nagarik derived its named from

'Nagar' meaning the city. However, none of these bands thought of pursuing music professionally, because it was still impossible to survive by performing original music in the Bangla culture industry. Most of them usually disbanded within a few years when members engaged in traditional jobs for a living. Nonetheless, their creations carried an honesty that can only come from intense passion and sincerity.

In the interim years between the formation of Moheener Ghoraguli in 1975 and the cult rise of Suman Chattopadhyay (now Kabir Suman) in 1992, who marked a paradigm shift in the erstwhile 'mainstream' music of Bangla songs, the socio-cultural-political-economic scenario had changed across the world quite a lot because of master events like the fall of the Soviet Union, and their consequent impact on the global life. Calcutta too had its share in this liberalised global trend and had walked long miles in its reception of pan-global music. Hence, the city welcomed back its first Bangla rock band almost 20 years later in 1995, as Moheener Ghoraguli came out with a compilation of various songs sung by different artists in an album titled *Abar Bochhor KuRi Pore* (*After About Twenty Years*) only to receive its due recognition and appreciation amongst a larger section of urban audience — something it had missed in the 70s. Following Robert Jauss' theory of Horizon of Expectations, (Jauss and Benzinger: 12) it can be derived that the audience of Bangla music in the 90s' Calcutta was prepared to accept the changes that Bangla songs would showcase in this decade. And this time, not just as a mere 'other' voice that could be labelled easily as a counterculture or counter-hegemonic, but rather as the predominant mainstream music that raged amidst the city audience for nearly the next two decades.

However, there was a gradual decline in the position of the bands in the cultural arena after 2010. This was partly due to digitisation, which transformed the music industry globally. This directly impacted the economics of the music industry as the earnings from album sales gradually got jeopardised. The bigger reason was possibly the waning of TV and radio's support, as film music saw a rise in its popularity, especially with the arrival and rise of Anupam Roy in his debut score for *Autograph* (2010). Practically no new song was aired on the FM channels, which were instrumental in the popularity of Bangla songs previously; only old Bangla band hits were played at times:

> "Radio and TV stations began asking obscene amounts of money, amounting to over a lakh per month, to broadcast our songs. That was impossible for us," says Gaurab Chattopadhyay of Lakkhichhara. However, Roopsha Dasgupta, an alumnus of Radio Mirchi, Power FM and Aamar FM, counters that "a conscious decision was taken at the headquarters, based in Mumbai or Delhi, to not air independent Bengali music. So we did not have a choice. As for film music, only the soundtracks of big-budget films got airtime". (Chaudhuri 2021b)

Also, musically a saturation point had been reached as there were plenty of inferior bands that were formed and dissolved every other day. Interestingly enough, they too were majorly centred in and around the city of Kolkata, which clearly shows the lack of relevance that Bangla band still held for the not-so-urbane spaces.

The urban–rural power game has always shown the repressive 'male' gaze of urbanity over indigenous ways, resulting in an evident reduction of the non-urbane to almost non-existence by subservience to the intrusive predominance of the urban space. Villages and their consequent expressions have been looked down upon as 'rustic' — a word that carries much deeper condescension in its utterance than is there in its apparently linear presence. The neoteric neon lights of the city consider themselves bright and choose wider avenues to appear progressive with an infused sense of internationalism and modernity, which in the Indian context popularly has a Western connotation. The effect is evident: marginalisation of country spaces and an ever-indelible difference with their urban counterparts. It is interesting to note that since the time of Calcutta's emergence as the pivotal city that almost decides the socio-political-economic-cultural flow of Bengal as if no other strain of music beyond the ones originating from its space was seen to make an entry in the mainstream music industry of Bangla songs, be it the film or the non-film genres. Hence, the Bangla music industry in the 20th century was composed of the hegemonic presence of songs of urban originations and receptions. In the last couple of decades of the last century, these songs not only drifted towards a completely city-centric approach, but also initiated a pride regarding 'better standards' of life in the city as compared to the 'backward', 'un-sophisticated' lives of villatic spaces. This process of establishing city-ism as the ruling factor behind the identity of an individual has excluded the non-urbane from the mainstream and reversed its identity as a mere 'other' — what was once THE culture, had changed seats with the erstwhile counterculture. The phenomenal rise and fall of Bangla bands mark a significant milestone in the trajectory of Bangla music arena. The rejection-acceptance-re rejection of this genre by different sections of the audience at different points of time, their confinement to urban limits even in an era of globalised media interconnectivities and the apparent differences in perspectives between sections of audience within this new genre of music — all point towards the strong demarcations of boundaries between the metropolis and the margins, the ever-revolving wheel of culture and counterculture and the acceptance of and dissidence from hegemonic power that decide on inclusions and exclusions in a living system.

Notes

1 The title refers to a song by Chandrabindoo – 'Kolkata Kolkata tei, amar shohor' (Kolkata remains Kolkata in essence, my city!). See Amar Sahar - YouTube .

2 Though 'Bangla' would include both West Bengal and Bangladesh, yet keeping in mind the limited scope of this paper I have deliberately stuck to the cultural activities of West Bengal, India, only.

3 Calcutta has been officially renamed as Kolkata on 1 January 2001. Hence all the references to Calcutta in this paper will relate to the period prior to the renaming.

4 Short poems sung in accompaniment of *Dhol* and *Knasor* was prevalent in small groups even before the beginning of the 18th century. Gradually this evolved as a practice of continuous exchange of impromptu dialogues between two groups. Towards the end of the 18th century, this moved from the grip of the uneducated, 'unrefined' laymen to the control of the newly 'educated' people of the society and received much more acceptance among the emerging *Bhodro somaaj* of Calcutta. This came to be known as *Kobi Gaan*, and the singer–composers were called *Kobiwala*.

5 All translations in the text are done by the author, unless mentioned otherwise.

6 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z20Jjm2bGXQ

7 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eTOTef9h_k

8 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhiPSClU7b4

9 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyiAwf5uFbo

10 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XgXzPn0dm0

11 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WUXLeRbCew

12 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IadiReOYUyw

13 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1PMLoiiliA

14 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku4k6DQdoDs

15 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWMRQOvPf78

16 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUqoQ_gksIo

17 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbBtIx6V8FI

18 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZRRPRaoenU

19 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5sUUq5AQ00

20 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2QO0OiUULQ

21 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di4FB7OCrh8

22 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA_YZgdYmcE

23 Bhairavi is one of the basic Indian ragas of a specific tune of dawn, while the Bauls refer to a community of indigenous singing minstrels of the Bengal countryside, who render a typical tune of the soil to their compositions. The composition of Moheener Ghoraguli in question carries characteristics of these two essentially Indian/ Bangla elements in it.

24 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTyKM1F_A3w
25 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvJwt_OKxHc
26 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8n_FvP-i_Y
27 *The Gita Govinda* is a work composed by the 12th-century Hindu poet, Jayadeva. It delineates the relationship between Krishna, Radha and the gopis of Vrindavan. For Chandrabindoo's song in question, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INtJj5qSmQg.
28 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVfWtesDywU
29 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQxg7fcXAng

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Of the 'Juvenile Nationhood' and the 'Shadow Lines': An Analysis of the City in Select Indian English Fiction

Jindagi Kumari

Abstract

According to Lehan, cities have played roles both as the background and the foreground in literature apart from being used in a wide variety of ways, as real, symbol, text, inspiration, motif, prop, and protagonist. In *The City*, Robert E. Park writes that the city is related to civilisation and an intellectual way of life, and its urban structures, flows and networks differ from rural places. It is a large institution that has evolved in response to its citizens' needs, forces itself on them as an unprocessed external reality and then modifies them to match its purposes and interests.

The city is 'a discourse…, we speak our city,… simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it…' (Barthes: 167–68). Barthes argues that the city functions as a form of communication, akin to a language. The city communicates with its residents, and in turn, the residents communicate with the city through their daily experiences, observations and interactions marked evidently in the visual culture of urban environments.

Henri Lefebvre in his essay 'The Specificity of the City' claims that the city is related to the 'constituting elements' and history of the society. By constituting elements of society, he implies countryside and agriculture, offensive and defensive force, political power, states, etc. Underlining the fact that a city 'changes when society as a whole changes', Lefebvre defines a city as an interface between 'near order' and 'far order' — relations of persons in groups of variable size (more or less organised and structured) and among themselves. He defines far order as massive, powerful institutions that rule society by law and culture and impose themselves (Lefebvre 1996; 101).

In the South Asian context, Amitav Ghosh in his seminal fictional work, *The Shadow Lines,* portrays Dhaka, Calcutta and London as 'shadow lines' between colonial and postcolonial, national and international, memory and history, metropolitan cities and

outskirts. In Salman Rushdie' *Midnight's Children*, Bombay is both an 'imaginary homeland' and 'a tarmac of nationhood's mirages'. Despite having lived a considerable part of his life in cities like London and New York, Rushdie desperately returns to his childhood city in many of his major works, treating it as a puzzling myth and a puzzling reality; as text and environment. With a focus on the 'act of looking', the study seeks to investigate, illustrate and compare the meanings and uses of the city in their work. Using the insights of theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Richard Lehan, Robert E. Park, etc.

Keywords: cityscape, coloniality, modernity, urban structure, nationhood, South Asian novels

Introduction

The city, once an Enlightenment ideal, was being questioned in romantic, modern and postmodern thought. A sense of being at home in the city was replaced by its opposite — the 'unhomely', expressed as the uncanny and often embodied by the outsider, the Other, the mysterious stranger or the lonely man in the crowd, all anticipated by the Dionysus figure. The wilderness may have given way to the city, but what was wild in nature was never fully repressed by the city… (Lehan 1998: xv).

According to Lehan, the city has been a central part of Western culture for over three centuries, shaping our personal and national destiny. As a product of the Enlightenment, urbanism has become the source of political order and social chaos. He explores the city's conceptualisation from its origin to the present, focussing on its evolution through three stages: commercial, industrial and 'world stage' cities. The city's rise is inseparable from various literary movements, including comic realism, romantic realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. These narrative modes contain subgenres like the utopian novel, gothic novel, detective story, young man from the provinces novel, imperial adventure, western, science fiction, and dystopian narratives.

Modernism, for example, is a defining issue in this context. The rise of the industrial city is depicted in literary naturalism, with characters seeking their destiny in the city. Romantic realism, on the other hand, uses mythic constructs to explain the city's meaning in symbolic, religious or mystical terms. Modernism is the second stage of romanticism, with the meaning of the city becoming denser as modernists move toward new forms of subjectivity.

The modern city has been a subject of debate among writers and thinkers since its inception. Some view it as a sepulchral city, while others see it as a city of the dead or in decline. This view was shared by Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, Max Nordau, Henry and Brooks Adams, Herman Hesse, and Oswald Spengler. As the city became more materialistic, it engendered a hostility in the literary imagination, which went hand in hand with a distrust of Enlightenment values.

Historians and litterateurs both explore the city through conceptual systems and imaginative systems. *The Waste Land* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* are examples of how writers of literature have interpreted the city through different lenses. Eliot and Spengler focus on the city's disconnection from a source of energy beyond itself, while Dreiser and Park focus on the physical laws that control the self-enclosed system. Simmel and Durkheim explore the psychic effect of these laws when the city is seen from the inside out.

The city and literature share textuality, with ways of reading literary texts being similar to urban historians' reading of the city. As the city becomes more complex, the ways of seeing it become more difficult and the individual becomes more passive in relation to it. The city often presents itself metonymically, embodied by the crowd, which dominates urban fiction in both the 19th and 20th centuries. By looking at the city from its origins, we can reveal a special meaning, with the spectrum of meanings — real and conjectured — being the subject of this study.

The city has consistently had a unique and significant role among literary environments. Since the oldest known literary writings, depictions of cities have consistently portrayed their intricate and paradoxical nature: serving as both sources of productive and destructive forces, as well as symbols of both idealistic potential and moral caution. Cities are typically perceived in terms of centralisation and density in their literary expressions, contrasting implicitly with a hinterland or peripheral that may be suburban, rural or colonial. Urban expansion and the decline of post-industrial cities have demonstrated that a sense of peripheral urbanity is crucial for modern urban centres.

In the South Asian setting, it is undeniable that the city in literature did not receive the same level of importance as its Western equivalent. Prior to the age of colonisation, India did not have any established urban centre in the current interpretation of the term. Nevertheless, colonisation resulted in the process of urbanisation. Although initially limited to small areas in the 19th century, urban development progressed rapidly and eventually resulted in the creation of cities that may rival the best in the world, such as Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, and Delhi.

The use of modern technology and the development of a railway network facilitated the integration of the country both domestically and internationally. The Indian city expanded due to its role as a hub of authority, administration and commerce. British colonisation introduced advanced technology, institutions, knowledge, ideologies, and a value system. Indian towns gradually developed into bustling commercial and industrial metropolises throughout the mid-19th century. For example, in laying the foundation of Bombay, the first city of India, the East India company played a key role. It was determined to develop Bombay into a trading town, invited traders from Surat and called

skilled labourers to build a fort to secure the harbour from the Maratha Army. These traders were offered incentives and guarantees of 'Freedom from religion, freedom from taxation, tax free lands and land ownership rights' (100 Years of Bombay 2019).

With the entry of the practice of modern kind of fiction writing, South Asian fiction seemed to emulate the modernist depiction of cities in 19th century Western fiction, often in the Indian context intermingling the key motifs in Indian socio-political concerns. Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* presents the Indian social conflict between the necessity to be in home and action of freedom movement taking place outside. In many writers, cities carry the concept of evolution of the society from an agrarian to industrial. Cities have been seen critically for representing a life that stands in contrast with the rural life in structure and values. However, cities have often been strong carriers of the colonial and postcolonial experience of South Asian society. Like the city's rise is inseparable from various literary movements in the Western society as observed by Lehan in the book *The City in Literature*: *An Intellectual and Cultural History*, Meenakshi Mukherjee, a noted Indian critic, underlines a similar phenomenon in the Indian context. In the book *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, she traces a deep connection between the rise of '... the early novels in India' , and that of the 'urban areas' and 'English-educated people' . Mukherjee 1986: 6).

Salman Rushdie and the City

Among the prominent contemporary writers of novels having roots in Asia Rushdie's eminence is well established. Equally known is his unique relation with place, particularly some noted cities of the world. Being born and raised in Bombay, India, Rushdie lived for a long time in London where he went to school, attended college and worked as an advertisement editor and a novelist. London and England had been significant places, proving to be a safe haven for Rushdie when he was threatened by a fatwa announced by Ayatollah Khomeini in the wake of publication of his book *The Satanic Verses* (Britannica 2023). In 2000, Rushdie moved to New York (Remnick 2023) and has been staying there for more than two decades now. In several interviews he has expressed his fondness for New York and seeing it as a 'Western rewrite of Bombay' — having similar bustle and noise (Max 2000). It was in this city where he faced an ironic violent attack at Chautauqua in August 2022. He also lived briefly in Pakistan and has set his novel *Shame* in its cities. However, one city that he returns again and again to, fondly and helplessly so, seems to be Bombay, Salman Rushdie's city of birth and childhood. Despite his lasting associations with London and New York, what makes Rushdie return to Bombay, especially in his novels, deserves a deep literary and textual introspection.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie explains that writers like him who are exiles or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, but looking back is not easy. It gives rise to profound uncertainties — that their physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that they will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones, imaginary homelands (Rushdie 1992: 10).

Makaranda Paranjape in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* echoes the sentiment. He notes that Rushdie could not be simply mentioned as 'Indian or South Asian' as his self-definition and citizenships have undergone several mutations over the time. He lives outside India permanently. Paranjape suggests that many writers in Rushdie's position reflect an 'uneasy relationship' with the country often portraying it as 'unhappy gloomy, doomed place' (Paranjape 2000: 70). However, Rushdie's Bombay offers a more complicated case if examined on this line of argument.

Bombay as Reclamation

Bombay in Rushdie outsources a reassuring image of the past childhood experiences. In *Midnight's Children* it becomes a hinge between memory and space, full of colour and vibrancy and a source of pride. Rushdie admits that the reminiscences of, and visit to, Bombay have been like statements to his own self that his past has not been monochromatic or black and white like in the old photo in his writing room in London. In *Imaginary Homelands* he notes the details of his old house in Bombay: '[…] vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of the cactus-leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillaea creeper' (Rushdie 1992: 9).

Bombay triggers his desire to reclaim his past, which seems pivotal in his self- identification. In the trailer of his Masterclass, Rushdie underlines that to write, one of the basic prerequisites is to know oneself. Knowing Bombay is a part of his attempt to know himself. In the introduction of *Midnight's Children* he states: 'I had wanted for some time to write a novel of childhood, arising from my memories of my own childhood in Bombay'; his 'lost home' and 'lost city'. He confesses his urge to reclaim it as the primary motivation behind writing *Midnight's Children*: 'It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born…'.

His return to Bombay in his work, besides, symbolises that his link with the country is not severed completely (Paranjape 2000: 69). In *Midnight's Children* Bombay emerges through a 'shard of memories' (Rushdie 1992) thinly guised as the city of the narrator's growing up years. Bombay is introduced in the chapter 'Love in Bombay' (Rushdie 2013: 249) where he recalls the excitement of going to the movies with mother and sister and

shares his enthusiasm as a budding movie critic. The details build on Bombay's identity as the city of cinema; a place that is known for filmmaking. The narrator's group of friends give us a peek into the citizenry and demography of Bombay. Sonny Ibrahim, Eye Slice and Hairoil Sabarmati, Cyrus Dubas, etc. form a set that is suggestive of the composite culture of the city incorporating Christians, Gujaratis, Anglo-Indians, Parsis and Muslims. Apart from the variety of communities, Bombay consists of people of different classes. Saleem belongs to a well-off family and when he falls among a group of protesters, they critically call him as 'a little laad sahib from a big rich hill' (Rushdie 2013: 264).

Rushdie's representation of Bombay incorporates a sense of history and origin and imminent change too; 'a sense of the older world lost to a newer one' (Lehan 1998: 183). While in Karachi, the narrator remembers Bombay, he notes the stark difference between the two cities despite their similar origin — both 'Started life as fishing village" (Rushdie 2013: 428). The narrator underlines that industrialisation and expansion of Bombay transformed it from '… a dumb-bell shaped island, tapering at the centre, to a narrow shining strand beyond which could be seen the finest and largest natural harbour in Asia' (Rushdie 2013: 429). He mulls the evolution of Bombay from being a collection of individual islands such as Mazagaon and Worli, Matunga and Mahim, Salsette and Colaba to becoming 'a long peninsula like an outstretched, grasping hand, reaching westward into the Arabian Sea'. The evolution nonetheless is not an exhilarating experience for the narrator. He seems disappointed about the change brought about by 'reclamation', 'tetrapods' and 'sunken piles' (Rushdie 2013: 121).

In his encounter with the 'impassioned throng' of 'language march' consisting of 'shopkeepers on hartal' (Rushdie 2013: 262) and textile workers from Mazagaon and Matunga, the narrator brings in the broader question of national integrity. The language protesters on the streets of Bombay represent the socio-political turmoil that India underwent post-independence. Saleem's accidental fall in the middle of the language protesters introduces the event of division of Bombay, which led to violence over linguistic identity.

A Juvenile Nationhood

Timothy Brennan underlines Rushdie as an established 'Third-World' intellectual and his use of 'nation' as 'discursive practice' and 'imaginative projection'. *Midnight's Children* is a political allegory and within its grand plan the writer marries the personal with the political, 'city country relationship becomes symbiotic' (Lehan 1998: 182–183). Bombay too acquires multiple discursive and imaginative sides and helps sustain the allegory of self and nation. On the cusp of adolescence, Saleem's plan to propose his love to Evie

corresponds to a lot of proposals being pleaded elsewhere in the country: 'Election campaign had begun: the Jan Sangh was campaigning for rest homes for aged sacred cows, in Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad was promising that communism would give everyone food and jobs; in Madras the Anna D.M.K. Party of C.N. Annadurai fanned the flame of regionalism' (Rushdie 2013: 256). The city here turns out to be an artistic and narrative tool where personal associations with the city are magnified to become vehicles of the stories of the infancy and adolescence of India's nationhood. Rushdie's Bombay shows his 'reconciliation of the subjective and the objective worlds within his consciousness' (Cullen and Knox 1982).

Rushdie's Bombay inhibits characters such as Evie Burn, who is relentless and symbolises the continued ideological dominance of the imperial powers over independent India. Evie Burns introduces Saleem to both 'midnight's Children' and the 'partition of the state of Bombay'. Her domineering personality, disregard of Saleem, an assumed superiority and interferences parody the interferences of the British administrators in Indian matters. Her skills such as 'sharp shooting', 'dismounting' and 'announcing' seem metonymic of the colonial powers: 'from now on. There's a new big chief around here. Okay, Indians? Any Arguments?' (Rushdie 2013: 253).

Bombay emerges bit by bit from personal childhood memories and becomes symbolic of the childhood of the country. Saleem's unsureness and submission and credulity in the face of Evie Burns imply the indecisiveness of the country regarding the administrative confusion amid socio-political unrest in the wake of newly gained freedom and the reconstruction of states.

Rushdie seems as much interested in his personal association with Bombay as the journey of the city as a part of the larger society. A writer of global stature, Rushdie has always been keen to know and capture the world outside and beyond — the politics and the administration and social changes. In the introduction of *Midnight's Children* he offers the political update of the time: 'It was the year that India became a nuclear power and Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party and Sheikh Mujib, the founder of Bangladesh was murdered… and Bill Clinton married Hillary Rodham …' (Rushdie 2013).

In *Midnight's Children* he sees his 'lost city' with an eye of an 'outsider-insider' (Paranjape 2000: 69), as an abode of reminiscences of childhood world but also as a South Asian city with a rich history and society undergoing the socio-political churning in the newly independent India.

Metropolises as Shadow Lines

Probably, one of the most celebrated Indian writers of the day, Amitav Ghosh has increasingly and passionately indulged in taking forward the concerns of the non-human: environment and climate through the uses of

history as 'travel, migration and lived experience of cosmopolitanism' (Desai 125). His efficacious uses of the motifs of travel, migration and experiences of places render Ghosh's portrayal of cities highly fetching. In his novel *The Shadow Lines,* for example, Ghosh's narrative of migration and cross-cultural exchanges carve out reverberating images of Calcutta, London and Dhaka as postcolonial metropolises. Notably, cities in *The Shadow Lines* emerge, not out of a conventional 'full circle' narrative (Jones: 432) but rather from a disrupted chronological view of history and challenge the Eurocentric view of 'the real'. The three cities: Calcutta, London and Dhaka are built up alternatively by personal memories, reading, historical research, and travels. The writer offers perspectives and sites that are both historical and contemporary by weaving them in the narrative in a manner that the stories of past are often juxtaposed with the experiences of the present.

While the picture of the London of past is formed with Tridib's narration of the memories of wartime London, the city also forms through the narrator's reading of its description in history books and his travel to London for higher studies. The picture of Dhaka is, likewise, formed with the memories of the narrator's grandmother's childhood in Dhaka and her visit to the city in old age to see her uncle. Calcutta is the narrator's native city, which he paints as its denizen; however, one gets a visitor's outlook of Calcutta too through the narrator's cousin's experience of it.

Tridib is one of the central persons in the story whose intriguing tales of the cities he has travelled to in the past become a major inspiration for the protagonist narrator's love for travelling to old and new places. As a child, the narrator meets Tridib regularly to hear his evocative tales of faraway places and cities. One of the narrator's 'rich relative(s) (uncle)', Tridib has travelled widely. He lives with his aging grandmother in an old house in Ballygunge Place in Calcutta while other members in his family live abroad. Tridib's simple and carefree routine involves frequenting the haunts at street corners of Calcutta where he often fascinates people with his ability to invent interesting tales of the places he has been to.

The narrator imbibes Tridib's penchant for imagining and describing places. He pictures the evolution of Calcutta of his childhood as follows:

> […] there were so few cars around there that we thought nothing of playing football on the street around the roundabout — making way occasionally for the number 9 or any other bus that happened to come snorting along. There were only a few scattered sacks on Gariahat Road then, put up by the earliest refugees from the east. Gole Park was considered to be more or less outside Calcutta (Ghosh 2008: 8).

By the 1990s the demographics of the narrator's native city seem completely changed. Not only do old acquaintances leave but the space gets filled with crowd: 'when I walk past the paan-shop now and look at the crowd thronging

through those neon lit streets, the air-conditioned shops filled with rickety stalls and the tarpaulin counters of pavement vendors, ...' (Ghosh 2008: 8). In the Calcutta of his childhood the denizens of the city combined 'a talkative populace of students, and would be footballers and bank clerks and small time politicos and all the rest…'. These people loved conversations and gravitated for their chit-chat towards the 'road between Gariahat and Gole Park' (Ghosh 2008: 9).

With time, both the concentration of the population of the city and mobility increases. In the narrator's own life, the shift is marked by the young becoming old and changes in the roles and responsibility of family members. As a child, the narrator's household is dominated by his grandmother; her values of importance of time and hard work are rigorously followed by all the family members (Ghosh 2008: 4). But when the narrator's father gets a promotion and they shift to a bigger house the grandmother withdraws her 'enveloping placental presence' (Ghosh 2008: 133), allowing more space to her daughter-in-law. The change within the home also hints at changes outside. Calcutta is changing with the emergence of urban agglomeration that does not hold any charm for the narrator's grandmother. And she craves increasingly for her childhood house in Dhaka.

> It was a very odd house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships (Ghosh 2008: 133).

The grandmother is at home with her past and seems disinterested in anything 'current'. She is unable to accept the new urban social set up not only in its physicality but also because it inhabits the changing demographics and ways of living. Her dubiousness about the narrator's friend Ila reveals her insecurity and suspicion on the modern way of life.

The grandmother might dislike the changing Calcutta however, she had had significant connections to several places. Born and brought up in Dhaka, Bangladesh, she was married to a railway officer, posted in Mandalay, Burma, where their son (narrator's father) was born in 1925. Soon after, her husband dies of pneumonia, and she settles in Calcutta. During independence owing to partition, Dhaka becomes the capital of East Pakistan. They, consequently, witness and survive the riot in East Pakistan (Khulna) that spreads to Calcutta. Though there is no reliable information about how many people died in the riot, the number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand. After the violence of the riot there is no question of going back (Ghosh 2008: 138).

Years later, the grandmother discovers that her cousins are living in Calcutta and her elderly uncle continues to live in their ancestral house in Dhaka. The grandmother's past and present seem to converge into an ambivalence of frontiers. Her identity markers such as place of birth (Dhaka) and nationality (Indian) are at odds with each other, underlining fluidity of identity and of place. When she visits Dhaka, on 3 January 1964, she wonders if she will be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane but is told that the 'border isn't on the frontier; it is right inside the airport' in the forms of disembarkation cards and things.

To the grandmother, Dhaka too appears to be a changed city when: 'the driver pointed out the sights …: the Plaza Picture Palace with a fifteen-foot hoarding of Ben Hur hanging outside, The Gulshan Palace Hotel, Ramna Race Course, and so on. It's all wonderful, she said. But Where is Dhaka?' (Ghosh 2008: 227). However, soon she encounters the familiar places: 'look, Shadorbaajar, there's the Royal Stationery, do you remember?' The cities in *The Shadow Lines*, thus, appear to be 'Uncanny' metropolises; at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, 'mine' and 'not mine' (Nayar 2010: 88–119). Through the example of the narrator's grandmother's old house in Dhaka one experiences changes caused by dispossessions in the wake of partition. Their house now consists of a workshop of Saifuddin mechanic. A cycle rickshaw puller Khalil also lives in their house; Khalil's wife cooks for their uncle. All this is extremely shocking for the grandmother. She remembers that there was a time when her uncle was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within 10 feet of his food. The cities in the novel reek with experiences of migration, homelessness, acclimatisation, which are common among many characters in the novel, for instance, Saifuddin who lives with the grandmother's old uncle is a migrant from Motihari, Bihar.

The story of another prominent character in the novel, Mr Treswasen, Mrs Price's father, gives pictures of the London of the past and its gradual evolution. Born in Mabe, in southern Cornwall, Mr Treswasen went on to become overseer of the tin mine in Malaysia. He had worked in Bolivia, the Guinea Coast and Ceylon, finally surfacing in Calcutta to own a small factory at Barrackpore. He used to meet Tridib's grandfather Mr Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri at séances, leading to their family friendship. Mr Treswasen's wife decided to return to London because she wanted her children to have 'all the advantages of a proper & education, university and all' (Ghosh 2008: 56).

The Third-world Dreamer of the First World Cities

It is ironic that after decades the narrator too moves to London for 'university' and 'education' and encounters a London that both corroborates and contradicts the London of his readings and daydreams. His mind has

pictures of London formed by his reading of history and fascinating descriptions by Tridib. His familiarity with London seems more intense than many inhabitants of the city. The narrator surprises Ila and Nick by his ability to recognise places and spots by the sheer help of imagination and facts learned by reading. He takes Nick to the exact place where Alan, Mr Treswasen's son, lived. But now the place looks different. The crumbling masonry now bears a signboard of Taj Travel Agency on the ground floor. They enter it on the pretext of having to plan a trip so that they can inspect it closely. Now the narrator imagines it as it looked during the war time: 'I wanted to know England not as *I* saw her, but in her finest hour — every place chooses its own and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in war (Ghosh 2008: 63).

The narrator revives the war time scenes and photographs to decode the experiences of contemporary London. In one of the photographs, he is able to see 'a large shallow pit' which actually is the 'foundation of an Anderson air raid shelter', 'a line of defence against the expected German bombs' (Ghosh 2008: 70). Ila, Tridib's niece and the narrator's childhood friend has spent more time in London, and she seems either detached or contemptuous to the city and its various landmarks. She does not share the narrator's excitement about the city. While the narrator looks forward to travelling in the 'underground', she terms it as a 'bloody concord'. Ila has travelled to other places such as 'Addis Ababa, Algiers, Brisbane' however, these places are merely fixed points for her in the shifting landscape of her childhood. For the narrator, however, these places were 'daydream names' : '… it would irritate her to see how excited I got when we stepped on to the escalator; … gulped in the netherworld smell of electricity …, she would snap at me impatiently; for god's sake stop carrying on like a third-world tapioca farmer' (Ghosh 2008: 72).

The city again occurs as uncanny; at once familiar and strange. While on the one hand, London seems like a dream come true to him, on the other hand, it offers him quotidian experiences, such as the experience of drinking tea and eating dumaloo and puris while listening to a bearded student from Allahabad at an Indian students' hostel. The narrator and Ila present two opposing views on the place or the city. Ila approached places perfunctorily with scepticism whereas the narrator seems driven by the spirit of curiosity and exploration. Ila, however, believes in the superiority of the West that has created world history that everyone else reads; she does not like India. The narrator thinks that Ila's perception is invented and there is a difference between 'living' at a place and travelling to a place: '[…] her practical bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, …she had lived in

many places, she has never travelled at all' (Ghosh 2008: 23). Further, the narrator points to the difference between Ila and him in relation to the lived and imagined experience of a city: '[…] she, who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta' (Ghosh 2008: 22).

Ila considers her life more eventful as an English citizen, she finds herself a part of history formation. In this context she considers the narrator's position as subordinate because he had spent his 'whole life living safely in middle class suburbs in Delhi and Calcutta'. She thinks that countries like 'Nigeria, India, Malaysia get their inspiration from the West'. Concerns in India like 'Famine', 'riots' and 'disasters' seem but 'local' events to Ila. The narrator then realises that his knowledge of England is based on 'invention'. An as Indian travelling to London, the narrator challenges Ila's invention with his own history and argues that the way partition changed Calcutta and Dhaka, World Wars changed London. Life and society in London did not remain the same after the War.

City of History Books

Through the life of Mrs Price's family, the narrator offers us some insight into the contemporary life of London. Nick comes back from Kuwait jobless and is looking for a career prospect, which he does not expect to find in England as 'England's gone down the drain… it can't afford to pay anyone properly except old age pensioners' (Ghosh 2008: 58). Ghosh underlines that the socioeconomic condition of post-war England is not as robust as it was during pre-war or war time. Besides, he chooses the specific instances of intimate dialogues between people of different cultures, gender, class, and other social categories to highlight examples against 'exotopy' or 'outsideness'. The relationship between the Prices and Ila's grandfather is shown as very deep and continues across generations. Ghosh applies multiple lenses to view the city, creating dialogues about the place between the insider and the outsider, between the traveller and the residents and between the past and present.

Conclusion

There is a marked difference between Rushdie and Ghosh in their portrayal of the city. For Rushdie, the city is related to the 'imagination' of nationhood as a postcolonial identity against the colonial experiences of the immediate past. Ghosh, on the other hand, looks at the city in terms of its evolution from the past to the present, reinforcing ideas such as fluidity of frontiers and ubiquity of the practices of travelling and interpenetration of cultures since historical times. However, cities for both the writers seem to undermine the

idea of identity based on frontiers. Both highlight that the frontiers themselves are uncertain, but when they become an issue of contention thousands of people suffer the tragedy and trauma caused by '… terrorists and separatists and the army and the police…' (Rushdie 2013: 271). Both Rushdie and Ghosh see cities with the lenses of travellers and historians. They record cities crumbling and reshaping under the colonial experience, historical and political violence and terror, and rising back to resilience and hope of its inhabitants. For both Rushdie and Ghosh, recollection occurs as massive narrative tool to construct and reconstruct their cities. Cities for both writers carry hints of nostalgia for the old and scepticism for the new. Ghosh emphasises upon combining a traveller's curiosity with memory and conversations to relish inimitable unfolding of 'cities' and 'maps'. Rushdie's city is a nostalgic reimagining of homeland that allegories, the melancholic loss of childhood as price for growth and maturity, and sacrifice of common people for the goal of nationhood.

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Evolving Nature of 'Centre–Margin' Relationship in New English Short Fiction from Assam

Jyotishman Kalita and Suman Sigroha

Abstract

Published since 1939 with an estimated current daily circulation of about 7,00,000 copies, *The Assam Tribune*, now published from Guwahati and Dibrugarh in Assam, is the most circulated daily newspaper in northeast India. One of the prominent features of the newspaper is the weekly Sunday supplement *Sunday Reading*, which publishes miscellaneous readings of general interest, with regular features on literary criticism and contemporary book reviews. The supplement also dedicatedly publishes original fiction in English, written by both amateur and professional writers. Arguably, by estimates of readership, regularity and originality, this supplement is the most direct and fresh source for assessing English short fiction written in Assam. By retrieving the archives of this newspaper and the supplement published only in the year 2022, this paper offers a meta-analysis of short fiction published over the year and presents three arguments. First, the paper argues that while this may be literature published from the periphery or the margins, currently it largely manages to circumvent conventional definitions of the centre–margin paradigm. With constant references to global themes and issues, apart from the frequent movement of characters over diverse local and global geographies, there is a hint that the compulsion to situate this body of fiction in the mainland–periphery paradigm may be slowly eroding. Second, this paper argues that the centre–margin paradigm that is really advocated by these stories is the rural–urban divide, where the rural stands for the pangs and predicaments of the heartland of Assam, and the urban, following the first argument, stands for the rest of the fast-paced world, and not just the cities of Assam. This paper concludes by acknowledging the importance of the concomitant function of a newspaper, apart from established publishing methods, for its unique ability to accurately represent the literary pulse of the so-called margins. This paper proposes that if the analysis of fiction published over only a year in a

'regional' newspaper can yield such assessments, perhaps it is a good idea to look closely at other newspapers that publish similar literature, anywhere, in any language.

Keywords: newspaper, paradigm, shift, media, rural, urban

Introduction

Published since 1939 with an estimated current daily circulation of about 7,00,000 copies, *The Assam Tribune*, now published from Guwahati and Dibrugarh in Assam, is the most circulated daily newspaper in northeast India (https://assamtribune.com/about/). One of the prominent features of the newspaper is the weekly Sunday supplement *Sunday Reading,* which publishes miscellaneous readings of general interest, with regular features on literary criticism and contemporary book reviews. The supplement also dedicatedly publishes original fiction in English, written by both amateur and professional writers. The supplement invites short stories within 1,800 words, though they occasionally publish longer short stories by carrying them over to the next Sunday. Arguably, by estimates of readership, regularity and originality, this supplement is the most direct and fresh source of assessing English short fiction written in Assam. By retrieving the archives of this newspaper and the supplement published only in the year 2022, this paper offers a meta-analysis of short fiction published over the year and presents three arguments. It was necessary to limit ourselves to stories published in the year 2022 since including stories published before 2022 would have been beyond the scope of this paper. Even with this limitation, we had to analyse more than 30 stories to present our arguments.

The first argument of this paper is that while this may be literature published from the geographical periphery of this country, currently it largely manages to circumvent conventional definitions of the centre–margin paradigm. With constant references to global themes and issues, apart from the frequent movement of characters over diverse local and global geographies, there is clear evidence that the compulsion to situate this body of literature in the mainland–periphery paradigm may be slowly eroding. More than half of the short stories published in 2022 are concerned with contemporary globally relevant issues like mental health, physical health, the pandemic, economic inequality, natural or human-made disasters, strained personal relationships, domestic violence, patriarchy, etc. Other stories take more nuanced routes and address issues like writer's block, loneliness, predicaments of a diasporic population, connections with home, food preferences, internet assisted commerce, virtual relationships, upward mobility through education, relevance of folklore and legends in contemporary narratives, etc. A thorough reading of these stories suggests that the concern of the authors is to highlight relevant issues creatively, instead of deliberately trying to address political issues like the centre–margin dichotomy just because these stories would be published

in a regional newspaper, or because the authors belong to this region or because most of these stories are staged in this region. In the stories that consciously refer to home and away migration, the focus is more on maintaining a connection with home through nostalgia or material elements, rather than to depict a movement away from the margins to more established 'centres.'

Abhijit Rajkhowa's 'Memories of Loss' (Rajkhowa 2022), published on 22 May 2022, and Shibani Sarmah's 'Frozen in Time' (Sarmah 2022), published on 19 June 2022, both centre around serious diseases like Alzheimer's and schizophrenia. In 'Memories of Loss', there is a vivid description of a hospital scene with an elderly Alzheimer patient whose primary caregiver, a nurse, becomes a character in the hazy memories of the patient. However, the ominous section of the story concerns the son of the elderly patient, who is clearly a visitor in the hospital ward, and readers later find out that he suffers from schizophrenia. The story concludes by asserting that 'An Alzheimer patient's family members are the worst sufferers. They can only look and silently suffer while the patients get consumed and wither away in a world of their own' (Rajkhowa 2022). 'Frozen in Time', in a similar vein, centres around an elderly female patient with a memory wall and who is apparently drifting away, and the story takes a turn by mentioning that 'The lockdowns made it worse' (Sarmah 2022). Jayanta Madhav's story 'The Repentance' (Madhav 2022), depicts the troubles faced by a son who has to take his father for specialised medical treatment to Bombay. Though this refers to a contemporary aspect of the centre– margin divide, as even now there is a considerable outflow of patients from Assam who have to seek specialised treatment outside the state for the lack of the same here, it should be mentioned that Madhav's story is set in the year 1992, and 33 years ago, the health infrastructure of the state was considerably below par as compared to present times. The state of the health infrastructure of the state can be seen in another story by the same author published on 1 and 8 May 2023. The story titled 'The Inner Voice' depicts a 'sense of duty' of a couple of young doctors and centres around contemporary incidents of violence directed against doctors, but this story has more relevance in the second argument of this paper (Madhav 2022). As has been the concern of global literary circles during and after the pandemic, authors in this part of the country have also responded with creative works. Nisha Mahanta's 'Love in the Times of Covid' depicts the predicament of a female character who loses her vision due to Covid, and her loving husband who will stop at nothing to make his wife feel secure in her new situation (Mahanta 2022). Among other things, this story also makes several shifts in its geographical setting, including Mumbai, Guwahati, Udaipur, and the Aravallis in its creative ambit.

Shyamolima Saikia's 'A Voice Set Free' (Saikia 2022), Sadhna Kashyap's 'The Caged Bird' (Kashyap 2022) and Madhurjya Goswami's 'A Pair of Pink

Shoes' (Goswami 2022) are three stories centred around women empowerment with hints of domestic violence, female companionship and patriarchal restrictions as sub themes. Each of these stories can also be read independently of the centre–margin paradigm and have been narrated with a larger appeal in mind. Sabreen Ahmed's 'A Pair of Doves', speaks of the loneliness of an unnamed female character who has seen life move on, leaving her behind (Ahmed 2022). The story is set in a small town of Assam yet speaks of a 'cosmopolitan neighbourhood'. This theme of loneliness is combined with a hope of companionship in Gauri Priya Bora's 'Bougainvillea Bond', where a female university student with a speech impairment promises companionship to a little female child who has a similar impairment and is dealing with a traumatic incident (Bora 2022). Manoj Kumar Hazarika's 'The Drifters' is a refreshing take on modern relationships, where a couple, long expected to settle down together, actually live very separate and different lives in different parts of the world and eventually end up together in the Judima Festival, which is held annually in the district of Dima Hasao in Assam (Hazarika 2022). Debahuti Barooah Saikia's 'Ghosted in Paris' is the story of a young Assamese woman who meets a person online and goes to meet him in Paris while on her way to New York, where she lives and works, and when he does not show up, she decides to create her own happiness, alone and independent (Barooah 2022). In a more light-hearted approach, Meghali Barua's 'Life of an Online Shopaholic' paints a picture of contemporary dependence on the internet and internet commerce, which intensified after the lockdown, in a setting that does not distinguish between the metropolis and the margins (Barua 2022). It does, however, highlight recent popular work cultures and their effect on relationships, especially marriages. Similarly, Shibani Sarmah's 'Free Movie Tickets' highlights brand promotions and offers that common people everywhere are too eager to follow and pay a hidden price (Sarmah 2022). If at all a story comes close to addressing the conventional notion of a geographical margin–centre paradigm, it is Durabikhya Gogoi's 'Of Zinnias and Tangerines', which tells of a young expat who expects a package from home that contains fruits and vegetables wrapped in grandmother's love. And yet, this story is careful not to treat the margin as a margin — it treats the homeland as a sweet memory filled with love and positive connections and not as a margin one is lucky to escape (Gogoi 2022).

With these examples, we can come to a conclusion that, at least when it comes to geographical marginality, fresh and original fiction that has been written in the recent past does not conform to the conventional understanding of the centre–margin, or the metropolis–margin paradigm. In the same context, it can also be said that the fiction referred to in the argument above do not refer to or mention the various ethnic frictions and fissures that have shaped

the political landscape of Assam. As critics, we do not have much say in what authors chose to write about and what readers like to read, especially in the case of a publication that has a wide and current readership. But the overall tendency to circumvent conventional definitions suggests that we may need to acknowledge a fresh and distinct way of looking at geographical marginality. In a sense, it may be because of the development of a cosmopolitan outlook, but that cannot be a generalised statement since there is a set of stories that tells of a different kind of centre–margin paradigm. This representation also depends on the axis of geography, but the 'divide' these stories represents suggests that marginality and its associated disadvantages may be a shared phenomenon. It is even possible that this shared marginality is able to rise above politically motivated divisions like ethnic, linguistic or religious identities. We stress on this point because metropolitan places in Assam cannot claim to represent 'marginal' places and communities and similarly, the fiction produced from a metropolitan publication in English may not be the correct representation of the true lived experiences of people from ethnic, linguistic and religious margins. However, the fiction analysed in the next argument does suggest a shared nature of disadvantages of being in the margins that may be the prime motive of representing them within 1,800 or 3,500 words that may not give space for the authors to highlight other kinds of tensions.

The second argument of this paper is that the centre–margin paradigm that is really advocated by these stories is the rural–urban divide, where the rural stands for the pangs and predicaments of the heartland of Assam, and the urban, following the first argument, stands for the rest of the fast-paced world, and not just the cities of Assam. Firstly, some of the stories published in 2022 manage to represent the struggles and disadvantages faced by people living in the geographical margins of Assam, meaning rural places, as compared to people living in urban spaces. Secondly, one set of stories represents marginality based on income or financial status that does not distinguish between rural and urban population. Thirdly, another set of stories, already mentioned in the first argument and not elaborated here, is centred around marginality based on gender.

Sadhna Kashyap's 'The Tempest' (Kashyap 2022) and Shyamolima Saikia's 'The Dream of a Football Match' (Saikia 2022) are two stories that vividly describe the annually recurring flood disaster in Assam in similar ways. In Kashyap's story, the growth of a young girl through seasons of floods along with her male best friend is juxtaposed against images of the rising river, submerged houses, dead and floating cattle, relief camps, food shortages, and finally that of death. Saikia's story is told through the vision of a young boy eager to go out and play with his friends, but who now must contend with the rising river that brings with it flooded fields, lost uniforms, eroded

soil, impending homelessness, schools converted into relief camps, camera happy politicians, and of course, tragedy. Both stories have a lot in common — the rural setting, agrarian families, shared sense of a public tragedy that is different from urban tragedies, personal loss in context of social loss, and a natural disaster that does not know how to distinguish between human-made political differences. At the lowest point of the shared tragedy, no other difference based on any other kind of marginality is of importance. Survival trumps all. But what is also distinguishable is that both stories also have no space to deal with the problem of floods from a cosmopolitan setting in Assam. The emotional appeal of both stories is intensified by drawing attention to the plight of the rural poor.

In the context of the metropolitan elite–rural poor divide, Jayanta Madhav's story 'The Inner Voice' needs special mention (Madhav 2022). The story is set around a contemporary issue of great relevance in Assam. Over the past several years, there have been frequent incidents of violence against doctors in the line of duty. Most of these incidents have happened in government-managed institutions and in both rural and urban spaces. Madhav's story is centred on three principal characters, all of them doctors: a father–daughter duo from an affluent metropolitan family and a young boy from a poor family who puts himself through medical school and now wishes to repay his community by choosing to serve in a rural place. He is eventually assaulted in the line of duty. The girl and her father come from a cosmopolitan background and the father does not want his daughter to serve in a rural place with all its disadvantages. Neither does he want his daughter to be in a relationship with the poor doctor. Eventually, the girl choses to serve with the boy in a remote hospital to the dismay of the father. Madhav's story, told in simple and straightforward terms, exposes a contested area of modern Assamese culture. Notwithstanding the theme of violence against doctors, the unwillingness of a section of metropolitan people to engage with the rural margin manages to come at par with the initial theme of the story.

That economic and social marginalisation is an undercurrent in the urban metropolis is seen through Pallav Tamuli's 'The Bicycle' (Tamuli 2022) and Sabreen Ahmed's 'The Staircase' (Ahmed 2022). While Tamuli's story highlights financial constraints in an urban setting that forces a young boy to pawn his coveted bicycle to help out his father who has not been paid his salary in time, Ahmed's story is a short and dark journey in the lives of a family of a former sex worker who now resides in Guwahati. As distinct as the two stories are, we cannot help but notice that both authors have highlighted the plight of the metropolitan poor with only a marginal reference to the metropolitan elite. A major difference in the two stories is the way they end. While Tamuli's story keeps hope alive through the kindness of a person known

to the family, Ahmed's story follows a downward spiral, symbolic through the title of the story, that ensures that there can be no peaceful or 'normal' life for a former sex worker. This difference can also highlight a second level of marginalisation for a section of the urban disadvantaged, since there is a section of people who are not accepted as a part of 'respectable' society because the nature of their work will eventually pass on their disadvantage to their succeeding generations.

From the two arguments mentioned above by citing a large body of fresh fiction in English published only in one year, we can draw two conclusions. First, there is a shift in the way we tend to see the geographical centre–margin divide, and we need to acknowledge newer paradigms of understanding this divide. Second, even within this so-called periphery, there are other substructures of centre–margin divide based on specific forms of disadvantages. The stories published in *The Assam Tribune* in 2022 are a testament to both these conclusions.

This paper concludes by acknowledging the importance of the concomitant function of a newspaper, apart from established publishing methods, for its unique ability to accurately represent the literary pulse of the so-called margins. When we are dealing with a sensitive topic like divisions between the metropolis and the periphery or between the centre and the margin, it would do us good if we also look at associated publishing mediums. For that the attention has to shift from canonical works of literature and move on to more nuanced and current publication. This also means that we have to abandon, for the time being, the distinctions between established authors and newer authors. By extension, this would also suggest that for some time at least, the parameters of 'literary merit' have to be altered to accommodate fiction of this kind. Afterall, various literary histories have enough examples of authors starting small and getting published in small journals and newspapers before they went on to make a name for themselves. Similarly, authors and fiction of the kind cited in this paper must be acknowledged, analysed and respected for their ability to reflect the current literary pulse of a society. This paper proposes that if the analysis of fiction published over only a year in a 'regional' newspaper can yield such assessments, perhaps it is a good idea to look closely at other newspapers that publish similar literature, anywhere, in any language.

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Coexisting Beyond Binaries: An Analysis of *Nostalgia* and Haraway's Ideas

M. Anjum Khan

Abstract

The binary division of the world creates a dichotomous understanding of the world that is reductionist and does not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals and communities. The construction of binaries reinforces power dynamics and perpetuates oppression, as it prioritises one group over another and naturalises these hierarchies. The example in Vassanji's *Nostalgia* highlights the dangers of such divisions, as it reinforces the notion of a superior human group and an inferior inhuman group. In addition to examining the negative effects of these binaries, the paper will also draw upon Haraway's ideas of coexisting living to explore alternatives to this problematic pattern of division. Haraway suggests that we must acknowledge and embrace the interconnectedness and interdependence of different groups and communities, breaking down the rigid boundaries that separate us. By embracing this mode of coexisting living, we can strive towards a more just and equitable world. This paper will examine the ways in which the constructed binaries in *Nostalgia* serve to reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuate oppression. For example, the division of the world into two halves reinforces wealth disparities, as the developed metropolis is portrayed as a space of prosperity, while the global rough country is portrayed as a space of poverty and degradation. Similarly, the division of the world into two halves reinforces the division between the self and the other, perpetuating notions of superiority and inferiority. Overall, the paper aims to provide a critical examination of the constructed binaries present in *Nostalgia* and explore how these binaries contribute to the perpetuation of oppression and inequality. By analysing these divisions and considering alternatives, such as Haraway's ideas of coexisting living, we can work towards a more just and equitable world.

Keywords: binaries, coexisting living, artificial intelligence, advanced medical technology

Introduction

To achieve social justice and equity, promoting diversity and eliminating division is crucial. Binary division has led to a wide range of social and political issues, including inequality, discrimination and prejudice. The creation of two distinct groups in society often results in a hierarchy, where one group is seen as superior and marginalises the other, leading to denial of equal opportunities, access to resources and recognition of their rights. Recent years have seen an increase in awareness of the harmful effects of binary division, and a movement towards a more inclusive and equitable world. 'We are after all but one species among many inhabiting diverse urban worlds' (Houston et al. 2018: 192). Literature serves as both a reflection and observation tool, and Vassanji's novel *Nostalgia* provides a glimpse into a potentially near future. This paper aims to analyse the detrimental implications of binary divisions and propose alternative solutions to the problematic pattern of division, drawing upon Haraway's concept of coexisting beings. The study focusses on how the artificially created binaries within *Nostalgia* perpetuate existing power structures and oppression. The objective is to critically examine the binaries presented in *Nostalgia* and their role in the perpetuation of oppression and inequality. The book portrays a world segregated along geographical, racial and developmental lines, with the widening of division leading to one side being increasingly reduced to being treated as inferior and insignificant. By examining these divisions and contemplating alternative perspectives like Haraway's concept of coexisting existence, a fairer and more equitable world can be achieved. As Haraway states, 'All of my writing is committed to swerving and tripping over these bipartite, dualist traps rather than trying to reverse them or resolve them into supposedly larger wholes' (Haraway 2003: 23).

The Negative Effects of Binaries

The perpetuation of systemic oppression and marginalisation of disadvantaged groups can occur through the reinforcement of power dynamics by institutional policies, social norms and cultural values, resulting in an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and privileges. The mechanisms that sustain this oppression include social norms, economic policies and political practices, which reinforce existing power dynamics and restrict the opportunities and freedoms of the oppressed. As Robert Young notes, 'Ideologies reflect social locations and serve established or aspiring powers' (Young 1992: 163).

M. G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* is a remarkable literary work that offers a prescient vision of the future. The novel is centred on a binary division of society into civilisation and barbarism, which is a significant aspect of the politics of space. This dichotomy is rooted in power, wealth, cultural dominance, narratives, and their associated elements. Moreover, it highlights the politics of space, power and identity.

In *Nostalgia* the binary division of society into civilisation and barbarism is a clear example of the reinforcement of power dynamics through cultural dominance, narratives and associated elements. This division is deeply rooted in power, wealth and identity, perpetuating systemic patterns of discrimination and marginalisation. The novel highlights the politics of space and power, revealing the ways in which existing power structures are strengthened and perpetuated through various means, ultimately leading to the oppression and marginalisation of those who are deemed inferior.

Nostalgia is a science fiction that delves into the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced medical technology while simultaneously serving as a dystopian cautionary tale. The plot centres around a government experiment that involves observing a specific group of citizens, who are subject to the control of an AI system that significantly shapes their lives. The novel also explores the use of cutting-edge medical treatments, including rejuvenation therapy, which enables individuals to live healthy lives for more than a century. The use of advanced neuroscience techniques allows individuals to have multiple lifetimes by erasing and recreating personalities, and medical doctors possess the power to reset and reprogram human lives.

Moreover, *Nostalgia* introduces a novel condition known as Memory Leak Syndrome, in which individuals gradually lose their hold on the fabricated reality and begin to recall their past, leading to conflicts of identity. In most cultures, memories are highly valued and preserved through means such as photographs, diaries and heirlooms. However, in this dystopian world, memories of the past are treated as an ailment, and individuals who experience memory flashes seek treatment from medical professionals. The manipulation of memories also highlights the manipulation of individual histories and their relationship to collective history. Dr Frank is one such medical practitioner who assists his patients in blocking their past memories, thereby enabling them to firmly believe in their present identity. This cutting-edge medical technology, which allows individuals to live multiple lives, further exacerbates the division of society into NGS (new generation) and OGS (old generation). While the NGS rebel and oppose this new way of life, the OGS continue to live, utilise resources and capitalise on the opportunities presented to them.

The novel depicts two distinct and separate nations, possibly even worlds, separated by an enormous wall. This wall serves as a powerful symbol of the deep division that exists within humanity, with one side being inhabited by the privileged while the other side is home to the marginalised. This separation is also evident in the physical landscape, with one side being urbanised while the other remains wilderness and underdeveloped. The population is divided into two groups, citizens and outcastes. The North Atlantic Alliance represents the nation where the privileged reside, while Maskinia is located on the other

side of the wall, encompassing regions in Africa and the Middle East. Maskinia is the result of war, violence and environmental degradation, which is largely caused by the dominant and more powerful North Atlantic Alliance:

The current misery of Maskinia has its genesis in the year 2032. Before then the region was at the height of its so-called Southern Resurgence, a period of economic prosperity and relative peace. In 2032, however, for reasons yet to be clarified, two of the region's nations, Garibu and Tajiri, declared war on each other. In the midst of hostilities, two 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors of Canadian design, operating in tandem, mysteriously exploded. This catastrophe, known as the Great Explosion, brought an end to the war, but the region never recovered. The incident caused considerable damage, which went uncontrolled; faulty Canadian design was blamed, and the angered populace turned on the experts who were sent to assist. Secondary explosions were not prevented. Endangered populations were not removed in time. Since then, unexpected weather patterns with large-scale flooding have extended the contamination areas. The food and water consumed, unless donated by aid agencies or grown in artificial soil, is largely unsafe (Vassanji 2016: 97).

Haraway's Ideas of Coexisting Living

Donna Haraway is a feminist scholar and a philosopher who has made significant contributions to the fields of science and technology studies, feminist theory and cultural studies. One of Haraway's key ideas is that of 'coexisting living', which refers to the interconnection and interdependence of all living beings and the environment. 'She often employs it to describe the multispecies coevolution of the worlding world, but she also proposes it as a metaphor for a multidisciplinary analytical approach in which each node becomes fundamental for a critical practice whose patterns all the players should be able to create and to be responsible for' (Timeto 2021: 316). Haraway argues that the traditional dualisms and dichotomies in Western thought, such as human/nature, mind/body and self/other, are no longer useful or relevant in a world that is increasingly interconnected and complex. Instead, Haraway proposes a more holistic approach to understanding the world that recognises the interconnections between all beings and the environment.

Haraway's concept of coexisting living stresses the significance of acknowledging the influence of non-human entities like animals, plants and machines in shaping our world and experiences. According to Haraway, all entities, including non-human ones, actively participate in shaping the world. Therefore, the conventional view of nature as passive or static is no longer sustainable. Haraway's ideas challenge traditional dualisms and offer a comprehensive and interconnected worldview that recognises the agency of all beings, human and non-human, in shaping our world and experiences. As

Rae explains, Haraway advocates the need to overcome binary oppositions to recognise the interdependence of beings (Rae 2014: 506). Haraway's political agenda behind this critique is to expose how binary oppositions lead to the unjustified privileging of one aspect, which is then used to justify the repression of non-privileged others, including animals, women and non-Westerners.

The Construction of Binaries in *Nostalgia*

In the novel, wealth disparities are starkly reinforced as the wealthy reside in privileged locations and hold both power and narrative control. On the other hand, those living in poverty are relegated to the other side and are often used as subjects for scientific experiments. This further widens the gap between the rich and the poor and highlights the inherent injustices in the society. The stark contrast between the lifestyles of the wealthy and the impoverished is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and the author uses this to underscore the brutal realities of class inequality. The exploitation of the poor for scientific experimentation is a particularly poignant example of how the privileged use their power to maintain their status and wealth, while the less fortunate continue to suffer. Overall, the novel serves as a scathing commentary on the detrimental effects of wealth disparities on society and the need for systemic change to address this issue.

The intersection of politics and psychology plays a role in shaping one's identity. When politics prioritise division and power, it can lead to the degradation of those who are different. The citizens of the North Atlantic Alliance may feel a sense of satisfaction and pride in their superior status, but this is often at the expense of their neighbouring communities. They may even start to believe that they have an exclusive right to resources and life itself, as evidenced by the quote: 'At some point we have to cut off life support of the hopeless and save on resources. The good that's in the human race must be preserved — or we all sink' (Vassanji 2016: 9). The state produces knowledge that reinforces this belief in superiority, which is then consumed and repeated by the citizens. This creates a discourse that reinforces their sense of entitlement and worthiness.

The epistemological framework is constructed around the dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism. The North Atlantic Alliance views themselves as the epitome of civilisation, while labelling the Maskinians as barbarians and cannibals. The latter group is completely objectified as being uncivilised, as evidenced by the statement, 'Over There, in Barbaria, if I may so call that foul region, they eat people'. The North Atlantic Alliance values their own lives over those of 'others,' yet paradoxically compares themselves in terms of self-preservation and violence. They distance themselves from others under the guise of hygiene and decorum, but this leads to a loss of their humanity

and human values. As stated, 'Here we fear proximity — no, wait a minute, don't we go about shielded by clouds of protective vapor, and creams and sheaths and gloves ... We don't actually even touch each other. Is this the price or gain of civilisation? We shoot from far, clinically, they hack at each other until the blood spurts out and hits them in the eye ... ugh' (Vassanji 2016: 38). While they dehumanise those outside their walls, they also devalue themselves by reducing themselves to mere machines and programs.

Another paradox in the construction of cultural identity is the interchange between civil society and barbarism. While the North Atlantic Alliance calls the Maskinians as barbaric and cannibal, it is they who are inhumane. The country literally and metaphorically uses the less privileged of Maskinia. They conduct experiments, and use their human organs for medical research and development, '— it is the source of our raw materials, … And we let a few of the Barbarians leak in through the Border every year, because we have to replenish our populations and gene balances and immune systems. And we need their organs' (Vassanji 2016: 39).

Reflecting Points

Intersectionality: Donna Haraway's theory of coexisting living focusses on the idea that multiple systems of oppression exist simultaneously and interact with each other. In *Nostalgia*, the binary division of civilisation and barbarism is used to reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuate oppression. This division takes into account factors such as wealth, culture and power, and highlights the intersections of these systems.

Decentralisation of Power: Haraway's ideas of coexisting living challenge the notion of centralised power and instead advocate for a decentralised, non-hierarchical model. In *Nostalgia*, the AI represents the state and holds centralised power over the citizens who are subject to the government's experiment. This reinforces the existing power dynamics and perpetuates oppression.

Collaborative Relationships: Haraway's ideas focus on the importance of creating collaborative relationships between different beings, including humans and non-humans. In *Nostalgia*, the relationship between AI and human beings highlights the lack of collaboration and reinforces the existing power dynamics, as the AI holds power over the human subjects.

Rejection of Dualism: Haraway's ideas reject the dualistic thinking that categorises things into binary oppositions, such as civilisation and barbarism. Instead, Haraway advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the world that takes into account the complex relationships and interactions between different beings and systems. In *Nostalgia*, the binary division of civilisation and barbarism serves to reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuates oppression.

Embrace of Complexity: Haraway's ideas of coexisting living embrace the complexity of the world and reject the oversimplification of binary divisions. In *Nostalgia*, the constructed binary of civilisation and barbarism serves to oversimplify the complexities of the world and reinforces existing power dynamics, perpetuating oppression. This can be seen as a rejection of Haraway's ideas and a reinforcement of dominant power structures.

Conclusion

Terry Eagleton proposes that the boundary between reality and fiction is not fixed and can shift over time (Eagleton 1983). What is considered fictional today may eventually become reality, and vice versa. Similarly, the values that we currently espouse may one day be relegated to the realm of fiction. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on our beliefs and actions.

In the novel, the North Atlantic Alliance is depicted as a society in which values such as compassion, sharing, kindness, and humanity are on the decline. The citizens of this society view the suffering of their neighbours as a form of entertainment, using it to showcase their education and sophistication. They demonise and categorise others to assert their own superiority. This division not only degrades humanity but also causes numerous societal problems. Instead of creating divisions, we must embrace the diversity of our world, acknowledge the fluidity of our values and work towards a future that is inclusive and equitable for all.

In conclusion, Donna Haraway's theory of coexisting living is a powerful framework that challenges traditional dualisms and highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. Her ideas have significant implications for various fields, including science and technology studies, feminist theory and cultural studies. Haraway's critique of binary oppositions is particularly relevant in the context of the novel *Nostalgia*, where the construction of binaries such as civilisation/barbarism and wealth/poverty perpetuate existing power dynamics and lead to systemic oppression. By acknowledging and embracing our interconnectedness and breaking down rigid boundaries, we can strive towards a more just and equitable world where all individuals have equal opportunities and access to resources. It is only through collective action and a multidisciplinary approach that we can create a future that is inclusive and sustainable for all beings, human and non-human.

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Challenging the Norm: Evaluating *Kamla* and *Mrigayaa* against the Centre-Margin Conflict

Maziah Shaaz

Abstract

The centre and margin clash operates at social, cultural, political, and economic levels. It emerges due to conflicts and tensions between those who hold power or occupy central spaces and those at the periphery. It often manifests as discrimination, exclusion, identification by association, and ideological monopoly. The concept of the metropolis and margins need not always be physical. Psychological and emotional barriers are vital in highlighting the cracks in the power equation, operational at the fundamental level in society. Sometimes, the conflict is seen as the dominance of one form of power over another. For example, it can be seen where dominant cultural norms and values are imposed on marginalised groups, erasing their cultural identities and traditions. Similarly, patriarchal hegemony objectifies and marginalises women to the periphery of the mainstream narrative. This creates a rift that exposes power imbalance and inequality within societies and organisations.

In the light of these observations, this paper evaluates two films, *Kamla* (1985) and *Mrigayaa* (1976), and attempts to highlight the distortions in the societal system where, on the one hand, yellow journalism gnaws away at the life of a tribal sex worker sold from a small village and on the other hand, the pre-independence caste-ridden royalty dehumanises the people of an indigenous tribe. It also addresses the clash by recognising the needs and concerns of marginalised tribes in India and questions the sense of social justice.

Keywords: centre–margin conflict, power-play, exploitation, injustice

Introduction

The centre–margin conflict can be understood as the asymmetric distribution of control within a domain. It is a fundamental ideological conflict that can be

seen almost everywhere. Usually, these terms are associated with discussions centred around the geographical, political and economic relations between nations and groups within these nations. Power dynamics in the world is an imbalanced equation. Ideological tropes function at the fundamental level, ensuring the undisrupted function of hierarchies. The consolidation of power and the creation of factions based on the flow of control from a resourceful centre towards a peripheral margin result in asymmetric growth and pose challenges to the equal participation of community members, leading to resentment, angst, alienation, and betrayal. People living in a society are equal stakeholders in the shares provided by society. Therefore, meaningful negotiations are necessary to bridge the gap.

In political terms, the clash between centre and margin can arise when the central government or ruling elite tries to impose its policies or authority on marginalised communities, leading to protests, unrest and even rebellion. One can see this conflict when the government fails to address the needs and concerns of marginalised groups or prioritises the interests of the powerful over those of the marginalised. In social terms, the clash between centre and margin can manifest in various forms of discrimination or exclusion, such as racism, sexism and homophobia. Marginalised groups may be denied access to resources, opportunities and social protections, while the centre or dominant group enjoys greater privileges and advantages. In economic terms, the clash between centre and margin can arise when the economic policies of the centre or ruling elite favour the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalised. This leads to growing inequality, poverty and social unrest. Finally, in cultural terms, the clash between centre and margin can be seen where dominant cultural norms and values are imposed on marginalised groups, erasing their cultural identities and traditions and leading to cultural conflicts and tensions between different societal groups.

In postcolonial studies, the centre and margin become essential factors in understanding the functioning of the ideological institutions and shifts in authority. Colonisation left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the colonies they created. Colonialism operated on the basic assumption that the world was divided into binary oppositions that could never exist equally on the same lines. Exploitation in the name of who-owns-whom began. In a country like India, the colonial impact was/is more profound than in other nations because of the country's rich, multicultural and diverse universe. The meaning of centre and margin got redefined in a new light. The empire wanted to establish the civilised status of their existence, for which they needed to highlight 'savages' through a carefully crafted and manipulated hierarchical scheme of things. India was already grappling with a different form of hierarchy enforced by its caste system. Class/caste divide also played a vital

role in establishing the conflicting boundaries of centre and margin. The sudden influence of the West added the element of gender disparity, and marginalisation got another layer to deal with.

The centre–margin opposition can also function through and within abstract concepts like language and literature. For instance, in English Literary Criticism, deconstruction postulates a theory that makes centre and margin an integral part of understanding the literary text. Jacques Derrida's works define 'centre' as the starting point or 'a point of presence, a fixed origin' ('Centre and Margin' 2015), which nothing can substitute. According to him, the centre of any structure is an essential part responsible for holding the whole system together. Derrida's concept of supplementary is synonymous with margin, with which the interpretation or representation that the centre implies is made clear. 'Actually, "margin" is the binary opposition of the deconstructive term "centre", which indicates the boundary or the periphery of the language of a text or even the socio-hierarchical boundaries' ('Centre and Margin' 2015). Evaluating the impact of colonial rule on India's socio-political and cultural dynamics brings to the forefront the reality of centre–margin conflict in a nation dealing with a lot under British rule. Certain groups or sections of society were impacted much more and suffered total marginalisation at the hands of the authoritative dealings of foreign rule. Thus, India's colonial history contributed to the othering of these groups, and the dominant power dynamics continued to play out in contemporary Indian society.

Indian cinema in the era immediately after independence picked up themes and concerns of the displaced and decentralised groups and showcased films rooted in social reality. The 1950s and 1970s were the golden era of popular Hindi cinema. 'The 1970s was a period of rising worker, peasant, and student unrest. Films have become more strident in addressing endemic corruption and the state's inability to stem it in this changing political climate. They upheld the victimised working-class hero as challenging the status quo' (Creekmur and Virdi). During the 1980s, the angry young man trope was in demand, and somehow, the female lead actor lost her place and strength in the film narrative.

Kamla (1984) is a movie directed by Jagmohan Mundhra. The story is based on Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kamala,* which was written in 1981. This play is said to be inspired by actual events that marked the life of journalist Ashwini Sarin of *The Indian Express*. The movie entails the story of an avid journalist, Jaisingh Jadhav, played by Marc Zuber, and his attempts at bringing to the forefront the corruption prevalent in society in the name of human flesh trade. Although his intentions are good, he is a victim of yellow journalism that believes in creating news rather than digging into reality. He lives in a massive mansion with his wife Sarita (Shabana Azmi) and house help Kamalabai

(Sulabha Deshpande). Sarita's uncle Kakasaheb, aka Shivaji Rao Mohite, is also a renowned journalist in Maharashtra. The movie's plot is simple, yet it has layers illuminating and redefining the different faces of the centre–margin conflict. To pull a scoop by presenting a poor tribal Bhil woman who is bought from a rural village in Madhya Pradesh, Jaisingh aims to achieve the headlines, which will give his journalistic career a successful push. The tribal woman Kamla and other young girls are paraded like animals in the flesh market, where their worth is measured by their bodies. Negotiations over their price reflect the commodification of women in general and tribal women in particular because of the exotic status of tribal people. Jaisingh's character is representative of one of the highest rungs of the hierarchical ladder of supremacy and authority. He symbolises the upper-class urban man who, in contrast to the rural low-class and tribal woman Kamla, sits very high up on the power chain. In the opening scene, where Jaisingh buys Kamla for 250 rupees and offers to share the bullock cart with her, the pimp Bihari tells him,

> *hajoor*, *riwaj nahi hai. Aap thehre maalik, aur ye aapki gulaam. Kaayede ki baat to yahi hai ke jooti zameen pe hi rahegi singhasan pe nahi baith sakti* (That's not the custom here. You are the master and she is your slave. As per the rule, shoes always stay on the floor. They cannot be kept on the seat) (*Kamla* 1985: 00:08:23-00:08:36).

He also explains that as per the rule, one should not treat these people equally because they find it humiliating. Kamla is supposed to run barefoot behind the cart the whole way. Further, the displacement of the poor tribal woman contrasts sharply with the elite urbanscape of Jaisingh's house. The woman of the house, Jaisingh's wife, is introduced through various photos of her accomplishments as a horse rider, shooter, badminton player, and degree-holder. Savitri's character stands as a paradoxical entity where she is simultaneously the centre and the marginalised within the confines of her household. Compared to Kamla, she is an educated, well-settled, rich urban woman. However, the treatment she receives from her husband makes her position questionable. In addition to forcing himself on her, Jaisingh is seen casually dismissing Savitri's queries about the new woman he has brought to their house and insulting her in front of her uncle. She assumes the role of a dutiful wife but offers a comforting hand to a bewildered Kamla. The trope of journalism is used to highlight the insensitivity of society towards people who are not considered equal as per societal norms. Kakasahab, the star journalist of Teleporter, symbolises journalism's simple and honest spirit, the fourth pillar of democracy. At the same time, Jaisingh stands for business-like journalism that only caters to the sales of the newspaper, notwithstanding the cost at which any news is procured. Here, the marginalisation of a tribal woman occurs at the hands of these hawk-like media people when Jaisingh

introduces her to the Delhi Press Club, who treat her like an alien and brutally question her identity. Kamla is cornered by an elite urban woman who taunts her by saying, '*Kamla! Tum jaisi aadivasi aurate tamaam badan kholkar mardon ke samne ghoomti rehti ho, tumhe sharam nahi aati*' ('Kamla! You tribal women expose your body and move openly among men. Don't you feel embarrassed about it?') (*Kamla* 1985: 00:59:48-00:59:55). Here the centre is redefined in the form of a political, social and cultural concept where marginalisation occurs at the hands of people of similar groups. In this scene, it can be observed that a woman of high class is body-shaming another woman who is assumed to be a pariah. The film is replete with casual sexism, whether it is Jaisingh, who dismisses his wife or the fellow journalist who makes fun of Kamla owing to her tribal status. Jain, Jaisingh's editor friend, calls out to Kamla, '*meri aadivaasi jaadu ki pitari*' ('Come out, my tribal magical trove') (*Kamla* 1985: 01:01:13-01:01:16) and, along with Jaisingh, narrates in their drunken stupor the questions asked by the media:

> *Photo wale alag angle pakad rahe, flush maar rhe flush. Ek ne to baanh pakad ke pose dene ki koshish kari… hmare kuch bhai nipat ghonchu hain. Khopdi me hi nhi ghusta ke question pooch kisse rahe hain, mantri mahoday se ya ganv waali se… usne poocha, "hmare desh me aadivasiyon ke economic exploitation ke baare me aapki ki kya raye hai", jaise kamla unki conference me Delhi School of Economics se padh ke chali aa rhi ho…suna hai tum logo ki biradri me free sex chalta hai, to batao najayaz aulad ka kya karte ho... Kamla!Tumne is naye malik ke sath thoda bahut free sex to kara hi hoga…aaj talak kitne mardon sang sex ka anubhav kara*
>
> (The photographers clicked from various angles. Click and flash, click and flash. One of them tried to hold her arm and pose... some of the journalists are stupid. They don't realise who they are questioning a minister or a tribal woman... he asked, "What is your opinion about the economic exploitation of tribals?" It was as if Kamla had just walked out of the Delhi School of Economics. I have heard there is free sex in your society. So, what do you do with your illegitimate children... Kamla! You must have had some free sex with your new master... how many men have you slept with?) (*Kamla* 1985: 1:04:39-1:06:17).

The treatment meted out to Kamla at the press conference is symbolic of the treatment meted out to people from small tribes in the villages. Along with the political exploitation of such indigenous tribes, social harassment is very common. Treating the tribal people as being outside of society due to their cultural practices defines the level of discrimination based on myths and ignorance. The photographers maltreat Kamla, encroaching on her personal space. She is subjected to uncomfortable questions, which she does not understand because of the language barrier, but she can sense the disdain, mockery and disgust around her. The city dwellers treat tribals as exotic aliens who can be used as objects of experimentation and exhibition. Kamla becomes proof of that.

In the same household, the journalist–husband Jaisingh becomes the centre for marginalised women while the elderly Kakasaheb represents the values of a bygone era. The mandate and dictates flow from this centre towards other people at the periphery of the narrative. In the latter half of the movie, the bonding between the two women, Sarita and Kamla, reflects the unity amongst the cornered groups in the wake of a dominant power. The conversation between Kamla and Savitri brings out Kamla's tribal innocence and simplicity, as well as the sensitivity and compassion of a modern urban woman who relates to the subjugation of this other woman. When Kamla asks Sarita, '*Tumhe kitte me khareeda?*' ('How much did he pay for you?') (*Kamla* 1985: 1:16:28-1:16:30), Sarita is taken aback but realises her worth as a wife for her husband. She sees a shocked Kamla and asks whether 700 is less, considering her status. Listening to a humungous amount of 700 rupees, Kamla innocently says, '*bada mehnga bhayo sauda. 700 rupay kharche aur na baal na baccha*' ('You came very expensive. He paid 700 rupees and yet has no children') (*Kamla* 1985: 1:16:58-1:17:11). Naive Kamla believes that even Sarita is like her and Jaisingh has bought her from the city. She extends solidarity with Sarita by trading work with her. Due to their status difference, Kamla voluntarily takes up all the household chores as well as bearing children for her master while leaving the accounting and social responsibilities to the educated, sophisticated Sarita. The two margins merge to appease one centre. Kamla believes she has been bought to care for Jaisingh's needs. On being asked by Sarita how many kids she has, Kamla says with a hint of pride in her smile, '*hain to nahi, par chaahe jitte chaahi utte de hum. Mehnat majoori soye kara leyo*' ('I don't have any, but I will give him as many as he wants. I'll even do all the chores') (*Kamla* 1985: 1:17:26-1:17:31). She appears to be toughened by her circumstances. She is aware of the role the dominant societal norms have relegated to her. The irony that she can break free from the manacles of the burdened role is lost on her.

Another instance of power politics that can be seen between the dynamics of husband and wife is the patriarchal notion that a man owns his wife. Jaisingh, the man of the house, subjugates Sarita, who is equally talented and educated. Gender disparity is another angle of centre–margin conflict. Jaisingh, in his drunken state, tries to take his wife forcefully, making her feel guilty the next day for not fulfilling her duties towards her husband. She lives in the shadow of her husband. She has been conditioned to believe that wives should cater to their husbands' demands. Jaisingh orders her to accompany him to the party without asking about her choice. There is only an illusion of free will. Sarita resonates with Kamla and equates her position in the house with her when she says to Jaisingh, '*Nahi main tumhari patni nahi hu. Main to Kamla hu, tumhari ghulam hu, tum mujhe khareed kar laaye ho*' ('I am not

your wife. I am Kamla. I am your slave! You have bought me') (*Kamla* 1985: 1:39:09- 1:39:22). Even Kakasahab, who initially disapproves of Jaisingh's perception and ways of working, readily sides with the power group he belongs to when Sarita decides to leave her husband in the wake of all the ill-treatment she has suffered. He says:

> *Tum Jaisingh ke bare me aisa sochti ho? Aisa kya hi guzra hai tum dono ke beech? …jisse pyaar ho uski khaatir istemal hone me kya burayi hai? Kya kharabi hai pyar ki ghulami karne me…purush ka ahankar bahut shaktishali hota hai. Ek oche aur kamzor purush ka bhi. Prakriti ka niyam hai ye*
>
> You think like that about Jaisingh? What has happened between the two of you? …There is nothing wrong with being used by someone you love. What is the harm in being a slave for the one you love? That's because a man's pride is very powerful. A weak and vile man's pride too! This is the law of nature. (*Kamla* 1985: 1:54:52- 1:57:41)

Sarita speaks for all the women caught up in the tangle of patriarchal dominion. Whether she is wedded to a man and made to feel like a slave or is like Kamla, who has been paid for obeying the master, the quality of life is the same, and self-respect is nil. The one assuming the central role in all the decision-making and power-wielding is the man who constantly marginalises other genders at his convenience. In the movie, 'Kamla becomes a metaphor and symbol of the chain of slavery in which every link is a slave of the preceding link and master of the coming link' (*Kamla* 1985: 2:01:11- 2:01:20).

Mrigayaa (The Royal Hunt) is a 1976 historical movie directed by Mrinal Sen starring Mithun Chakraborty, Mamata Shankar and Utpal Dutt. It is based on an Odia short story, 'Shikaar', by Bhagbati Charan Panigrahi. The original story is set in the pre-independence time of the 1930s, whereas the script is set against the backdrop of the Santhal revolutions in the 1850s (Kohli 2012). It describes the lives of a tribal community that leads a harsh life in a small Odisha village. The thematic tenet rests on the relationship between the British colonial government and the native villagers and their exploitation by Indian landlords in 1920s India. It is also a story that narrates the lives of tribal people against the injustices they suffer at the hands of colonial and non-tribal authorities. Ghinua (Mithun Chakraborty) is the village chief's son and a seasoned archer. Because of his hunting skills, he strikes a friendship with the British colonial commissioner, who also has a flair for game hunting. However, '[Ghinua] was thrown to the gallows after being found guilty of murdering the moneylender who kidnapped his wife' (Ghosh 2022). His unjust trial and death ignite a series of revolts among the tribal people. They stand their ground and confront both the British and their landlords. The story includes another critical angle of the tribal revolution against the government in the form of Shalpu, who is in hiding, but is betrayed by a fellow non-tribal police informer

who reveals his whereabouts, which eventually gets him killed. He is also falsely accused of looting the government treasury. The villagers depend solely on their harvests, which this season, wild animals destroy. Amidst such travesty, the moneylender's yearly visit to collect debts and his harvest share adds to the debt-ridden farmers' woes.

The centre–margin conflict plays out between the coloniser and the colonised. The atrocities inflicted by the colonial government and the unjust imposition of rules on poor village people speak of the corruption of power, a benchmark of the centre–margin conflict. Also highlighted is the plight of poor farmers who live at the mercy of greedy and scrupulous moneylenders who not only exploit them financially but also sexually assault their women. The situation is aptly captured when one of the villagers in a village meeting says, '*janwar fasal ujade ya pawan le ude, ye baat Mahajan nhi sunega. Dadam ki fasal hain, nhi doge to sab chheen le jayega*' ('Even if the animals ruin it, or the wind blows it away, the moneylender will not sympathise with us... We have taken a loan from him. If we don't repay the debt, he will take away everything') (*Mrigayaa* 1976: 00:07:20- 00:07:28). 'Tribal communities have traditionally lived in or near forests, and depend crucially on forest resources for their food, shelter, fuel and medicines' ('From the Margins to the Centre' 2017–18). There are instances in the movie where one can see the margin aspiring to be a part of the centre through sycophancy and the policy of appeasement, such as the moneylender's henchmen and the British police officer's informers. The character of the moneylender Govind Sardar is an example of the newly emerging centre in the last years of pre-independence. While his procession is going through the village, a few women recognise him as the evil shadow who lures and abducts women in the name of employment to satiate his sexual desires. When the villagers complain to him about the misfortune of their crops being destroyed by wild boars and a tiger attacking the only son of a farmer, he scoffs and says, '*jiski jitni badi bhook uska utna bada panja*' ('One's claw is as big as his hunger') (*Mrigayaa* 1976: 32:31-32:34), symbolising his greed and apathy. The solidarity of the margin against a more significant threat from the centre is highlighted when the moneylender comes to collect the debt from a destitute farmer and tries to trade his dues with his daughter, and again, when the British police officials come to take away Shalpu, the revolutionary, the villagers unanimously testify against the informer.

The movie has many symbolic scenes in which the eternal nature–culture conflict is also seen. Both at the beginning and in the climax scene, the greedy, authoritative man is compared to a predatory animal that lures and attacks the vulnerable prey and feasts on its carcass. The description Ghinua gives of his method of hunting becomes synonymous with his fate. Ghinua's friendship

with the British commissioner symbolises a feeble attempt to debunk the boundaries differentiating centre and margin. He puts the official on a high pedestal, explaining to his wife:*angrez sahab, sabse bada raja,wo to devta hai. Devta kabhi pas rahe. Devta to bht bht door viraaje* (The British Officer, the highest officer, he is God. Does God live nearby? God resides far, far away!) (*Mrigayaa* 1976: 44:38-44:45).

There is nothing common between the two men to ever meet and understand each other; it is neither the origin of the British administration of imperial time nor the primitive culture of the tribe from the jungle in central India, but the sharing of a common passion: hunting. For both of them, a big game is a sport, a prey; this is probably why Ghinua, the young hunter and a loving husband, reacts like a terrible 'hunter' when the usurer–landlord kidnaps his wife. He slays him as the wild pigs must be slain when they destroy the harvest or a tiger when he lifts a child. As an avenged man, he brings his trophy, the head of the most mischievous game in his area, to the only man who will understand him, the English sahib, the other hunter. Neither Ghinua nor the villagers can understand why the imperial justice can take Ghinua's life, whereas a significant award is given to the traitor who kills Shalpu, one who was, for them all, a revolutionary hero. In his closing argument at the court, Ghinua emphatically proclaims:

> *kal raat maine ek janwar maara hai. Hmare jungle ka sabse khoonkhar janwar, sabse khtarnak…janwar hmara dushman hai. Lekin wo jaanwar jisko maine maara…haan, haan maine maara* (Last night I killed an animal. The most bloodthirsty animal in our jungle. The most dangerous... Animals are our enemies. But this animal — the one I killed...yes, yes I have killed him) (*Mrigayaa* 1976: 01:30:41-01:32:17).

The scene where the commissioner gets Ghinua arrested shows that even for one instance it is improbable for the centre and margin to leave their differences aside and act on the common grounds of humanity. It reflects the invisible rift, the chasm of the divide when one testimony by a high-ranking official is enough to sentence a tribal man who fought for justice to the gallows. Ghinua dies protecting his wife's honour, self-respect and the villagers' integrity. Nonetheless, there are attempts before this incidence to bridge the gap when the commissioner invites Ghinua and his wife to meet his wife, who paints them both. The scene's beauty lies in the innocent gesture where both stand like statues for the 'gori mem' (white woman) to make their sketch. This metaphorically translates to the recreation of the image of the margin as viewed through the centre's lens. For them, Ghinua and his wife represent the uncultured yet simple poor tribal people who find joy in the simplest of things.

Examining *Kamla* and *Mrigayaa* against the centre–margin conflict brings to light certain vital aspects of this binary. The concept of the metropolis and margin shows how conflicting their co-existence has always been in the

history of human civilisation. The metropolis, or the 'centre', is the hub for all knowledge and critical viewpoints, thus having the upper hand over the less privileged margins. Conversely, the margin functions on the approval and sanction from the centre, thereby giving it absolute authority and dominance. In *Kamla*, the urban space depicted against the tribal setting reflects the stark contrast in people's lives and attitudes. Jaisingh's yellow journalism signifies the politics of representation and misrepresentation that holds the right to subjugate because such opinions are valued as opposed to the opinions of tribal people like Kamla, who sits there like an artefact in a museum, solely depending on its description for establishing her identity. In *Mrigayaa*, the centre–margin conflict caters to colonial power dynamics where the exploitation and marginalisation of poor tribal villagers at the hands of imperial powers and greedy moneylenders are played out. It is also essential to understand that a different centre might reside within a greater centre. In *Kamla*, it is Sarita, whereas in *Mrigayaa*, the moneylender and the police informer, Dora, are the centres within centres. The old definition of centre and margin stands validated, but intersectional meanings and new overlapping microcosms of centres and margins are emerging due to a shift in the power equation. Identity crisis and existential issues remain the defining feature of the marginalised as against the established norms of the centre. Still, an aspirational change in the assimilatory nature of the newly defined margins can be seen. The centre and margin cannot be defined in isolation but by each other. The narrative is nuanced, and there is no absolute black and white; new meanings are found in the shades of grey.

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Returning to 'Roots': Understanding Postcoloniality in Indian Theatre

Mitali Bhattacharya

Abstract:

The rubric of 'postcolonial theatres' identifies specific historical and contextual terms that shape theatre and dramatic practices in different postcolonial places. Within this rubric, this paper aims to understand the postcolonial impulse of Indian drama and theatre that lies in its inclination towards 'return to roots'. This impulse enables Indian playwrights, theatre practitioners and academicians to confront the politics relating to identity, gender, caste, and nationhood specific to Indian society and culture. This paper intends to examine the semiotics of 'return to roots' vis-à-vis Indian theatre post-independence, wherein the focus would lie on tracing an indefinable (yet visible) quality of 'Indianness' in the realm of Indian drama and its theatricality. The paper aims to provide perspectives on the relevance of Drama and Performance Studies within Indian academia in terms of its growth, contemporaneity and scope by referring to some of the leading playwrights who have contributed to this postcolonial endeavour. They are Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Tripurari Sharma, among many more. Along with them, some of the leading Indian theatre critics and thinkers who have played a substantial role in tracing postcoloniality in Indian theatre are Aparna Dharwadker, Nandi Bhatia, Rustom Bharucha, and Bishnupriya Dutta. In addition to analysing their arguments, this paper is also an attempt to understand performance as a medium of debunking the centre–margin binary and as a source of exercising resistance to dominant hegemonies prevalent in society.

Keywords: decentring, Indianness, margins, modern Indian theatre, performance, postcoloniality

Introduction

Theatre is neither a text nor a commodity. It is an activity that needs to be in ceaseless contact with the realities of the world and the inner necessities of

our lives. If theatre changes the world, nothing could be better, but let us also admit that this has not happened so far. It would be wiser (and less euphoric) if we accepted that it is possible to change our own lives through theatre.

Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*

These lines hint at the liminality of Drama and Performance Studies as a field of studies and how there is a need to realise its concrete efficacy in its truest sense. The field of drama and performance studies has been evolving, expanding and developing its niche. The quality of this area of studies as an ever-evolving gyre gives rise to the need to step back, or beside, or ahead, in order to build new critical and analytical standpoints. With respect to India, the concept of drama has a great historical lineage. From being borne out of Bharath's *Natyashatra* to being a subject of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) followed by the changed scenario of performance post India's independence, Theatre Studies framework in India takes representation as a category to approach drama, both text and action/performance. However, one phenomenon that changed the face of Indian theatre is that of postcolonialism. Rustom Bharucha, in his work titled *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture,* says:

> In the case of India, the exposure to "other" cultures has not always been a matter of choice. Colonialism, one might say, does not operate through principles of "exchange". Rather, it appropriates, decontextualizes, and represents the "other" culture, often with the complicity of its colonized subjects. It legitimates its authority only by asserting its cultural superiority. (Bharucha 1993: 2)

In recent years, postcolonialism has emerged as a major theory to deal with marginalised theatre and performance traditions. It designates a set of theoretical approaches that focus on colonial experiences, both in terms of the past and present. With respect to have encountered postcolonial reverberations, the Indian idea of performance has always been central to questions of social being. After India attained freedom in 1947, the genre of drama and performance was known for contributing to anticolonial resistance and questioning the newly emerging postcolonial realities. At this juncture, theatre became the site of struggle for social visibility. In India, performance was considered to be transgressive in nature. Due to this, many theatre practitioners have been put to death. Safdar Hashmi, the activist and playwright, was brutally injured in 1989. He was performing a street play titled *Janam* in Delhi with Jana Natya Manch. As theatre stands for the masses, seen as a medium of protest, it refuses to die either as text or as practice.

If an attempt is made to assess the politics of postcoloniality in Indian Theatre and Performance, returning to the immediate roots becomes essential. However, before delving into the various socio-political forces that led to

growth in Indian drama and theatre, it is imperative to understand as to what postcolonial theatre entails. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tomkins, in their work titled *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice and Politics,* examine how performance practices gave rise to an understanding of postcolonial instances. Gilbert and Tompkins argue that the marginalisation of drama 'suggests a considerable gap in post-colonial studies' because 'dramatic and performance theories, particularly those developed in conjunction with Brechtian, feminist, and cultural studies criticism, have much to add to debates about how imperial power is articulated and/or contested.' (Gilbert and Tomkins 1996: 8–9). As per Gilbert and Tomkins, postcolonial performance includes the following features: acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly; acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-contact) communities; acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms; and acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation (Gilbert and Tomkins 1996: 11).

Indian theatre, even being at the margins, created its own emergent identity. It is sensitive towards the full complexity of a prolonged encounter between India and the West. Aparna Dharwadker, in her work titled *Theatres of Independence: Studies in Theatre History and Culture* says:

> Since independence, theatre practitioners in India have both embraced and rejected the colonial inheritance in terms of form, language, ideology, and conventions of representation. Despite the emphasis on anticolonial critique, their work remains deeply connected to modern and postmodern Western practices, especially to specific forms of social-realist, existentialist, absurdist, and Brechtian political theatre. Through translation, adaptation, and intercultural appropriation, contemporary Indian theatre also maintains an extensive intertextuality with classical and modern European and Anglo-American drama. This multifaceted engagement with the West coexists with a complicated relation to the classical, postclassical, and colonial Indian past, both as a cultural possession and an object of knowledge. Indian playwrights deal with this multivalent cultural legacy by adjudicating between the conflicting claims of tradition and modernity, Indianness and Westernization, but their use of two major forms of retrospective narrative — myth and history — also questions received views of the past and the ways of knowing it. (Dharwadker 2005: 34)

Coming back to the concept of 'returning to roots', it derives its meaning from the theatre of roots movement that was the maiden effort to produce a hybrid body of work that subsumed Western theatre and traditional performance, thereby creating a new, hybrid theatrical form. Theatre of roots is an umbrella term given by Suresh Awasthi in his essay, 'Theatre of Roots: Encounter with Tradition', wherein he defines it as an unconventional theatre resulting from the encounter between two traditions for some two decades. In the post-independence period, the discovery of Indian tradition was inspired

by a search for roots and a quest for identity that were lost somewhere due to the colonisation of Indian culture, values, literature, and history.

In that light, the idea of returning to roots hinted at the need to focus on the issues that were being encountered by the common people after the British left. Some of the pressing issues of that time were the absence of India's classical history, the Partition pain, crisis of the working-class people, and the need to understand the subaltern class. Playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Tripurari Sharma are the main focus of this paper. All these playwrights return to their roots through their works. Starting from Mohan Rakesh's *Asadh ka Ek Din* (A Day in Early Autumn, 1958), this play is about an unknown poet named Kalidas who nurtures an unconventional romance with his muse, Mallika. The play is set in a remote village in the foothills of the Himalayas. Through this play, Mohan Rakesh attempts to revisit the glorious past of the Indian Classical Drama (Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*) with a modern sensibility wherein Kalidasa, as a hero, encounters an identity crisis, which was one of the most serious psychological issues in the 20th century. Moving on, Girish Karnad's oeuvre entailed revisiting India's mythical richness. His plays like *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* represent the issues of retelling the story of a 14th-century Indian ruler and man's search for meaning in a meaningless world, again themes that were both rooted in the past and the present. His concept of hybrid theatre was not only about the use of modern as well as folk theatre techniques but signified the period of transition that prevailed at that time when India gained independence and was still struggling to adapt to the new identity of being a free nation. After Karnad, Badal Sircar is another seminal playwright/thinker who focussed only on the plight of the common man and the ones on the margins. His approach of going back to the roots was rooted in representing the wrongs, struggles and the voicelessness of the ones who couldn't speak for themselves. His play *Baaki Itihas* focussed on the Santhal rebellion that was about the tribe's struggle for survival and a revolt against the British. His play *Evam Indrajit* is an absurdist play that deals with the anxieties of the middle-class section of the society. It is a play about the mediocre class. His concept of 'Third Theatre' is the fusion of two kinds of theatres, that is, the rural and the urban theatre, very much like Karnad's hybrid theatre. However, Sircar's 'Third Theatre' was more concerned with direct communication with the audience.

In recent years, playwrights such as Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan and Tripurari Sharma have returned to their roots by not borrowing themes from Western drama/theatre, but have created a new idiom of their own, especially focussing on gender. After India's Partition, women were only

limited to being markers of honour. Nandi Bhatia, in her work titled *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* states:

> From Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* to Harishchandra's *Durlabh Bandhu* and the plays presented by the IPTA, the exploitation of women under colonialism and their participation in nationalist struggles were compelling themes. Nonetheless, such themes remained centered primarily around the question of nationalism. Playwrights either projected the violence committed against women as a violation of the community or national honor, or constructed the image of the female activist as one willing to sacrifice her life in defense of the nation. (Bhatia 2009: 111)

However, being the symbol of national honour was entrusted to them by the nationalists. Women in India also faced issues of discrimination. Mahesh Dattani's plays, like *Dance like a Man* and *Tara,* highlight the issues of fixed gender roles and gender discrimination. While the former play considers *Bharatnatyam* an integral part of the play wherein a young man loves to dance, the latter play based itself on the separation of two conjoined twins and how their mother and grandfather discriminate between them based on their gender, Chandan (male) over Tara (girl). Gendered violence, again, is a sensitive issue dealt with by Padmanabhan in her play *Lights Out,* wherein she represents a society that abhors women. This play raises the issue of 'gang rape', thereby giving rise to various questions related to female exploitation both in the private and the public sphere. Tripurari Sharma's *Daughter-in-law* also highlights the voicing out of a daughter-in-law who feels alienated at her husband's place and has no identity of her own. The play focusses on her journey from being a nameless being to someone who claims her identity of being a woman. Bishnupriya Dutt, in her work titled *Maya Rao and Indian Feminist Theatre: Elements in Women Theatre Makers* gives us a detailed understanding of how Maya Rao's performance in *Om Swaha* paved the way to think, understand and discuss dowry in the context of larger feminist issues and status of women in the public and the private space. In relation to the need and relevance of raising such issues through the medium of theatre and performance, Dutt refers to Uma Chakravarti's essay titled 'Cultures of Resistance: The Women's Movement in Performance' in defence of *Om Swaha*:

> The play's conception and staging acknowledged the cultural production of violence. Further, it is also important to note how *Om Swaha* resonated with agitprop plays from other organizations such as Jana Natya Manch's *Aurat* (Woman) (1979), Sachetana's plays in Bengal with *Meye Dile Sajiye* (Giving the Women Away in Marriage) (1983), *Mulqi Zhali Hai* (A Girl Is Born) (1983) and *Roshni* by Manushi (1980). Together these could be regarded as a diverse field of feminist activism in different parts of the country. (Dutt 2022: 9–10)

In conclusion, this paper has been an attempt to touch upon the issues that have been central to modern Indian theatre and how the act of returning to

roots entails the realisation of voicing out the concerns that are closer to Indian history, society, culture, and politics, the primary ones being identity, gender and the subalterns. Along with this, an attempt has also been made to give space to the idea of a performative text being as sacrosanct and as authentic as the other fields of inquiry. Drama/theatre/performance engages the readers/audience in an exploration of the world from multiple vantage points through artistic skills, critical thinking and effective representation of issues. It challenges the central forces of hegemony only to give space to the underprivileged, voiceless and underrepresented. However, till now, Drama and Performance Studies lies in-between in terms of its positionality. Richard Schechner, in a 1998 essay, 'What is Performance Studies Anyway?' has talked about its liminal space existence. He says:

> Performance studies is 'inter' — in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural — and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, PS cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries, it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently 'in between' and therefore cannot be pinned down or located exactly. (Schechner 1998 10)

However, despite having a liminal identity, Drama and Performance Studies, in itself, is beyond confinement. It is ontological, epistemological, and axiological, which is to say that it is historical, existential, cultural, ecological, spiritual, political, and moral. The way the wind blows, the way rain falls, the way the river moves, the way snow falls, the way trees grow, everything encapsulates performance. Performance is what unites us with everything else in the world.

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Mufidun Nisa's 'Wait, Flower, Don't Bloom': The Problematic of the Literary Circles in Manipur

Natasa Thoudam

Abstract

Mufidun Nisa belongs to the Pangal (Muslim) community of Manipur. She has written several books of poetry in Meiteilon in the Bengali script, namely *Aroiba Khonjel* (*The Last Voice* 2001), *Mingselda Leichil* (*Mist on the Mirror* 2006) and *Thihousi Chengjel* (*Let's Search the Journey of Life*). The poem discussed in this paper is titled 'Wait, Flower, Don't Bloom' ('Shakhinu Leirang', translated by Sheelaramani Chungkham, 2009). The poem, first written in Meiteilon then translated into English, was especially written for an anthology published in 2009 *Dazzling Dewdrop: An Anthology of Verse Written by Women Poets in Translation*—an initiative by LEIKOL. The politics of inclusion of a text by a Pangal in an anthology dominated by Meitei writers and translators can be understood in two ways. On one hand, there is Chungkham who observes in the 'A Note from the Editor' section of the anthology that Nisa belongs to 'the younger generation of women poets [from Manipur]' who form 'a voice of protest rather than mourning at their subordinated forced destiny' (xiv). Here Chungkham seems to see Manipur as a geographical category and tries not to contain its problems of nationalism within Meitei nationalism.

On the other hand is Kulladhwaja Konsam's problematic inclusionary politics that tries to solve Manipur's problem within Meitei nationalism. In a review of Nisa's collection of poetry titled *Aroiba Khonjel* (*The Last Voice* 2001), Konsam refers to her as 'the first Manipuri Muslim woman [to bring] out [a] Manipuri book' and distinguishes her from 'other Manipuri Muslim poets' who 'use Arabic or Urdu words' with the exception of her collection titled *Thihousi Chengjel* (*Let's Search the Journey of Life*). The term 'Manipuri Muslim' is now problematic in the light of the scholar Feroja Syed's arguments. Further, in his review, Konsam tries to subsume the Pangals into the Meitei community by highlighting Nisa's contribution to Meiteilon literature and the political struggles of the Meiteis. According to him, she is 'the poetess' who writes 'elegy lamenting for late Arambam and the passing away of the poet Dr Kamal'. Both of them were prominent Meitei men writers.

This paper, through the above text and its literary context, attempts to re-visit and re-interrogate the dynamic configuration and negotiation of the unstable binaries of margins/metropolis, centre/peripheries, subaltern/standard, mainstream/regional, vernacular/dominant language or culture, outsider/insider, and indigenous/settler.

Keywords: Meitei nationalism, inclusive politics, mainstream/regional, indigenous/settler

Introduction

The Sahitya Akademi award included 'Manipuri' (for literature written in Meiteilon) as a category in 1973, a year after Manipur attained statehood. This national institution similar to many critics and theories seems to have confused Meiteis with Manipur here. Consequently, the language and the literature of the dominant Meitei community of Manipur have come to represent the state. Moreover, the award winners' list is not only dominated by writers from the Meitei community but a majority of them are men. Exception in gender terms is Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi, Ningombam Sunita, Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Moirangthem Borkanya, and more recently, Koijam Shantibala (as of 2022; Sahitya Akademi and Northeast Now [Irom, 2022] websites). To date, no award has been given to any writer who is not a Meitei. It seems that this 'national' organisation sees Manipur and Meitei synonymously and has contributed to creating a gendered Meitei hegemony with its jury being gender biased in selecting winners of its awards for almost five decades.

The Meitei hegemony of the literary space in Manipur does not end here. Apart from the Sahitya Akademi, another cultural organisation that demonstrates this hegemony is the Meitei-dominated Manipur Sahitya Parishad, founded before independence in 1935 to promote the 'Manipuri' language and its literature with the Meitei leader Hijam Irabot (Irawat) as its secretary. The 'Manipur' of Manipur Sahitya Parishad and the 'Manipuri' language and literature it promotes refer to the Meiteis and their language, Meiteilon.

In contrast to these two Meitei-dominated organisations is Manipur State Kala Akademi, which was instituted in 1972 with two aims: 'to promote research in the field of Music, Dance, Drama, Literature, Archives and Fine Arts' and 'to co-operate with similar institutions for the furtherance of its objects and the enrichment of Manipuri Culture' (Art and Culture website, "Objectives"). Unlike the other two organisations, this organisation at least encourages non-Meitei contribution by conferring awards to 'artistes, artists, writers and scholars' representing 'Tribal Culture' (Art and Culture website, "Objectives"). Still, this organisation is participatory in maintaining the Meitei hegemony here by mostly allowing tokenism. Even the women's literary circle in Manipur is dominated by Meitei women, who formed their own literary associations such as Leimarol Khorjeikol (LEIKOL) by 2001, which organise seminars and talks and is involved in the publication of women's writing in Manipur. Yet, this should not discount the fact that Meitei literature is still marginal to other canonical literature of India.

Mufidun Nisa belongs to the Pangal (Muslim) community of Manipur. She has written several books of poetry in Meiteilon in the Bengali script, namely, *Aroiba Khonjel* (*The Last Voice* 2001), *Mingselda Leichil* (*Mist on the Mirror* 2006) and *Thihousi Chengjel* (*Let's Search the Journey of Life*). The poem discussed in this paper is titled "Wait, Flower, Don't Bloom" ('Shakhinu Leirang') (Chungkham 2009: 100). The poem, first written in Meiteilon and then translated into English, was specially written for an anthology published in 2009 *Dazzling Dewdrop: An Anthology of Verse Written by Women Poets in Translation*—an initiative by LEIKOL.

This politics of the inclusion of a text by a Pangal in an anthology dominated by Meitei writers and translators can be understood in two ways. On one hand, there is Sheelaramani Chungkham who observes in the 'A Note from the Editor' section of the anthology that Nisa belongs to 'the younger generation of women poets [from Manipur]' who form 'a voice of protest rather than mourning at their subordinated forced destiny' (Chungkham 2009: xiv). Here Chungkham then seems to see Manipur as a geographical category and tries not to contain its problems of nationalism within Meitei nationalism. On the other hand is Kulladhwaja Konsam's problematic inclusionary politics that tries to solve Manipur's problem within Meitei nationalism. In a review of Nisa's collection of poetry titled *Aroiba Khonjel* (*The Last Voice* 2001), Konsam refers to her as 'the first Manipuri Muslim woman [to bring] out [a] Manipuri book' and distinguishes her from 'other Manipuri Muslim poets' who 'use Arabic or Urdu words' except in her collection titled, *Thihousi Chengjel* (*Let's Search the Journey of Life*) (Konsam 2001).

Here, the questions of internal divides, unequal status and minorities within Manipur must be discussed. This paper focusses on just one relevant to the present discussion: What is the place of the Muslim—the Pangals—in Manipur? S. R. Mangang claims that 'the Muslims joined the Meitei society before the people (Meetei or Meitei) professing Hindu religion (Vedic religion) migrated to Manipur and became part of Meitei community' (qtd. in Ahmed 2011 13: 100). In fact, Farooque Ahmed in *Manipuri Muslims: Historical Perspectives 615–2000 CE* (2011) traces the arrival of Muslims in Manipur to as early as the seventh century even though the 'main settlement' began in 1606 (Ahmed 2011 96: 31). Moreover, the Hindu Meiteis share a common language with the Pangals.

While a Hindu hegemony that refuses to accept the Pangal community as an equal claimant to Manipur is itself a problem, many of the scholarships that aim to assert that Pangals are indeed a part of Manipur, tend to subsume or assimilate the Pangals into the Meitei community, which is also a problem. Such a tendency is critiqued by scholars such as Feroja Syed. In her study of Pangals in Manipur focussing on the Meitei–Pangal conflict of 1993, Syed considers the term 'Meitei Pangal' as problematic. According to her, the term was a previously 'dormant form' that has been 'revived by the Meiteis to argue that Muslims are part of the Meitei community' (Syed 2007: 5). Thus, by using the term 'Pangal' instead of

'Meitei Pangal', she argues for 'the emergence of Manipuri Muslims as a distinct political community' post the1993 conflict (Syed 2007: 6).[1] Syed further states that Pangals have 'a history of some 400 years of living in the state [Manipur]' and 'they had settled in Manipur even earlier than many other communities' (Syed 2007: 10).

Syed's dissertation is also critical of the existing scholarships on India's Northeast that focus mainly on the 'hill tribes', when not on a 'dominant' community such as the Meiteis, and totally ignore the Muslims who, according to her, have been a part of the history of India's Northeast for some 800 years (Syed 2007: 1). She further adds that this invisible Muslim figure gains visibility only in 'a recent history in the region' as 'immigrants from Bangladesh', thus, limiting their studies to Assam and Tripura. The motivation to correct this distorted view posited by previous studies on Muslims in India's Northeast informed Syed's project on Pangals in Manipur. Fearing the assimilation of the minority Pangals into the dominant Meitei community and critical of the imposed term 'Meitei Pangal', Syed argues for 'the emergence of Manipuri Muslims as a distinct political community', more so strongly after 1993 (Syed 2007: 6).

Notably, the year 1993 saw conflicts amongst various communities within Manipur be it the Meiteis, the Nagas, the Kukis, or the Pangals (Muslims). This was happening simultaneous to the spread of communal violence in different parts of India. Further, in the aforementioned review, Konsam tries to subsume the Pangals into the Meitei community by highlighting Nisa's contribution to Meiteilon literature and the political struggles of the Meiteis. According to him, she is 'the poetess' who writes 'elegy lamenting for late Arambam and the passing away of the poet Dr Kamal'. Both of them were prominent Meitei men writers.

Through Nisa's poem and the problematic literary context it invokes, highlighting the status of a Pangal woman writer in the dominant Meitei literary circle while simultaneously marking the absence of a Pangal literary circle, this paper attempts to re-visit and re-interrogate the dynamic configuration and negotiation of the unstable, relational and problematic binaries of margins/metropolis, centre/peripheries, subaltern/standard, mainstream/regional, vernacular/dominant language or culture, outsider/insider, and indigenous/settler.

In the introduction titled 'Canon Formation and Literatures from India's Northeast: Some Reflections', M. Asaduddin writes:

> Writers and literary historians from the Northeast have often defined literatures produced in this space in opposition to what they perceive as mainland Indian literature and separate from Indian literature. A binary was and is established in which mainland Indian literature, which itself is an amorphous and uncertain category, is seen as the centre and literatures produced in the Northeast as the periphery. Granted the capital of the country and other great metros house the national and transnational publication houses that often determine what will be published and disseminated, prescribed in university courses and canonised, but I am not sure if such an oppositional binary is helpful. (Islam 2022: 1)

Here, Asaduddin questions the oppositional binary set up by writers and historians from the Northeast that define mainland Indian literature, which itself is an amorphous and uncertain category as 'the centre' and literature produced in the Northeast as the 'periphery'. This binary of 'the centre' and 'the periphery' is not a static category and takes on a new configuration, combination and permutation in a new context. In the Preface to *Literatures from Northeast India: Beyond the Centre–Periphery Debate*, K. M. Baharul Islam has this to say while describing this binary within the larger Indian context:

> The voices from the periphery in the Indian literary environment are those coming from social, economic, and even geographical margins that include, among other things, the writings from translingual, minority, Dalit writers and writers from remote areas like the Northeast. These writers form a periphery that has been termed the 'subaltern' by Antonio Gramsci and highlight an ongoing endeavor to portray a different "context" or worldview that can be understood and adequately interpreted from the author's own social, cultural context, and political milieu. Though limited in number and scarce in our critical literary landscape, such writings nevertheless underline an alternative mode of consciousness that emerges from caste, community, spatial existence, and economic marginalisation. It also depicts a subtle ongoing struggle of the writings from the "margin" to move towards the "centre". Therefore, the writings from the periphery are a case of assertion of identity, culture, and social reality that is "different" from the mainstream and a protest against any literary hegemony of the mainstream. (Islam 2022: xii)

Thus, Asaduddin's centre/periphery is now variously centre/margin and mainstream/periphery of Islam. Other further inverted inflections of this binary are margin/metropolis, subaltern/standard, regional/mainstream, vernacular/dominant language, outsider/insider, and indigenous/settler.

Insider Outsider: Belonging and Unbelonging in North-East India, edited by Preeti Gill and Samrat Choudhary, rehearses this binary as that of an insider and an outsider. In 'Bongols, Ch*nkies, and Role Reversals: An Introduction', Gill highlights the objective of the anthology thus:

> This anthology has been an attempt to look at the "outsider", and the circumstances under which they also become an "insider", and vice versa. What we often shortsightedly overlook is the fact that we, too, are outsiders and strangers elsewhere, in other spaces and neighborhoods. Or that just the arbitrary drawing of a line can create a new border and we may be left outside of it, having to migrate, to relocate. To face xenophobic hatred and possibly get killed. (Gill and Choudhary 2019: 2)

However, in the 'Preface' to this anthology, Choudhary also alerts us to the danger of another binary:

> The danger in any tale of victimhood is the obverse: victims on the one hand and villains on the other. This is a dangerous and, with rare exceptions, untrue binary. To avoid such a false binary, we have looked at these powerful human stories in a wider context of insider/outsider. This experience of being both insiders and outsiders in post-independence India is, remarkably enough, shared across divides in India's North-East. […] The dividing lines between the

> insider and the outsider are often confusing and unclear, even for those who have grown up experiencing being othered. (Gill and Choudhary 2019: iv)

One common problem observed in all these discussions is regarding the question of gender. What is the gender of Asaduddin's 'writers and historians from the Northeast', Islam's 'Dalit writers and writers from remote areas like the Northeast' and Gill and Choudhary's insider outsiders? Through Nisa's experience and poem, the remaining section of this paper interrogates this problem.

Returning to the literary context of this paper, to this list of binaries could be added another configuration of the binary between the marginal and the dominant. From the discussion so far, it is an obvious inference that the Meitei literary circle is considered dominant vis-à-vis the Pangal literary circle, but it is also marginal to the larger Indian circle. Yet, the focus of this paper is not the Meitei but the Pangal circle. The category of a woman writer invoked for analysis is not the 'dominant' Meitei woman writer, rather, it is a Pangal woman writer Mufidun Nisa, and this category is invoked through a reading of her poem 'Wait, Flower, Don't Bloom'. It is a nine-line poem divided into three stanzas with its first and last stanzas acting as refrains. The persona of the poem commands the flower not to bloom before the 'dirty garden' is cleaned as its 'beautiful hue' will be lost in the dust/dirt. The last stanza then reiterates the same command but with another description of the same garden. The garden is also 'neglected' and 'not looked after by the owner'. Allegorically, the garden could also be read as Manipur. Though an open-ended poem that could be read in multiple ways and contexts, including as a 'universal' poem with broad philosophical underpinnings, it is impossible not to read it politically as a commentary on contemporary Manipur, especially considering the anthology it was first published in. In such readings, for me, the Pangal identity of the poet, given that so few Pangal voices are heard in the literary scene in Manipur, also assumes inescapable significance. Evident from the editor's note in the anthology and reviewers commenting on the poem, which have been discussed previously, Nisa's poetry has generally been read in that way.

In this paper, the category of a Pangal woman writer is invoked through two prisms or literary tropes that appear in the poem: the garden and the flower. Looking back to literary cultures of the past, both the Garden of Eden from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the English traditions and the 'pleasure garden' of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* in the Sanskrit tradition show the garden as an idyllic and desirable site. In contrast to this 'dominant' literary trope is Nisa's 'dirty' and 'neglected' garden. Indeed, its description makes it an undesirable site. Please note that 'dirty' and 'neglected' pertain to the activities of humans. Hence, a question could be raised thus: are the inhospitable conditions of this garden for this flower the outcome of human activities? What could be these activities? If the garden is allegorised as the land of Manipur, then what does the flower stand for? Does the flower that grows in this garden come to represent a community that inhabits this land? Is it a reference to the

Pangal community whose growth and existence in the garden called Manipur is shown as inhospitable? What happens to the question of gender when the Pangal community is invoked? Is this life-threatening experience invoked that of a Pangal man or a Pangal woman? Are they the same? Should they be the same?

As the paper ponders upon these questions, another poem written by a 'dominant' Meitei woman writer from the same anthology is 'Ode to the Lotus' ('O, Thambal!') by H. Jandho Devi. What interests this paper are the striking contrasts that emerge between the two poems, which were probably written around the same time. It might be a matter of coincidence but this also raises questions of the difference between a Meitei imagination and a Pangal imagination. In Jandho's imagination, Nisa's garden is replaced by a lake or a pond where the lotus grows. Also, the persona in Jandho's poem feminises 'the flowers on land' by referring to them as 'sisters' to this lotus. If Nisa commands that her flower should not bloom in the 'dirty' and 'neglected' garden, then Jandho enquires ('Won't you bloom, O Lotus!'), worries ('How worried I am, O Lotus!') and ponders ('To ponder if you won't be able to bloom again'). The conditions that are unfavourable for the flowering of the lotus is not because of human but natural causes such as 'if the monsoon rain doesn't come' or 'the severely cold months of winter'. The nature of the inhospitable conditions is also distinct. The human-made inhospitable conditions in Nisa's imagination of the 'dirty' and 'neglected' garden are absent in Jandho's nature-caused inhospitableness of 'the over brimmed lake' and 'the dry pond'. What could be inferred from this difference in imagination? Moreover, the stereotypical imagery invoked by 'the lotus' being surrounded by 'black bees' seems to feminise the lotus. Even the earth is feminised as 'the mother earth'. This feminisation may have other implications as the lotus's experience could come to represent or stand for a woman's experience.

Another text that this paper brings in is the Bangla Muslim women writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's short story 'Sultana's Dream' (1905). This feminist text imagines a utopian world where 'men are confined to the *murdana* [or men's quarters; the counterpart of women's *zenana*] and women have taken over the affairs of the country' (Hossain 2012: 340). This paper draws attention to how this story makes use of the literary trope of a garden as this also interests this paper. The garden mentioned at the beginning of the story is a destination. The protagonist is invited by her friend, Sister Sara, to 'come out and have a look at our [their] garden' (Hossain 2012: 342). The use of the term 'our' sets the tone for the initiation of female solidarity. Indeed, this garden is desirable and hospitable. This garden is not artificial like 'the Botanical Gardens' (Hossain 2012: 343). The protagonist while enjoying the scenery on her way to the garden 'mistook a patch of grass for a velvet cushion', and while walking on 'the path covered with moss and flowers', she feels like she is 'walking on a soft carpet' (Hossain 2012: 343). The play, confusion and contrast between natural and unnatural objects continue. Finally,

'the path covered with moss and flowers' for the protagonist 'looks like a garden' (Hossain 2012: 343). Sister Sara then responds to this comparison with the remark: 'Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so' (Hossain 2012: 344). The next garden they encounter is at Sister Sara's house. The house 'was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden' (Hossain 2012: 345). Another space enclosed by a garden is Sister Sara's kitchen, which is also 'situated in a beautiful vegetable garden', where 'every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament' and 'it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower garlands' (Hossain 2012: 346). The next invocation is significant. Sister Sara describes an important preoccupation of 'the far-off Ladyland' thus: 'We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can. … Our noble Queen is exceedingly fond of Botany; it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden' (Hossain 2012: 350). The protagonist and Sister Sara finally visit the last garden of the story: 'The Garden of the Queen' (Hossain 2012: 351). The last few sentences attributed to the Queen are instructive. She says:

> We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature's gifts as much as we can. (Hossain 2012: 352).

These three women writers who inhabit both 'dominant' and 'marginal' positions vis-à-vis each other and in relation to men enrich this paper with three disparate and desperate images of a garden (a lake or a pond in Jandho's case). Their differences have been discussed so far. The garden and the pond/lake imagined are inhospitable for flowers to grow: the garden is made inhospitable by humans, while the pond/lake by nature. Both are rendered undesirable. The third imagination invokes a desirable and hospitable garden (or gardens). However, such a garden (gardens) remains only in the realm of dreams. The paper ends with pondering on what happens to the binaries when the situation is simultaneously liberating as well as limiting. Does the fact that they are faced with a common foe called intersectionality make them transgress these binaries or do they remain comfortable within the lines drawn by them?

Note

[1] Quoting Shakil Ahmed, Syed sees the term 'Meitei Pangal' as a term 'imposed' by the British, which was the result of confusing 'an ethnic group' with 'a linguistic categor' and later this term is appropriated by the totalising Meiteis to subsume the Pangals into the Meitei community, more strongly today since 1993 (Ahmed 2 qtd. in Syed 2007: 23). Further, 1993 is the year when an ethnic conflict took place between the Meiteis and the Pangals.

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Lost Narratives: Voices from the Forgotten Chinese Assamese Community in India

Neeharika Haloi

Abstract

The late 19th century saw the emergence of a Chinese community in the northeast of India. This community is descended from immigrants and refugees from China who arrived at the ports of Calcutta and Madras to work as indentured labourers in the flourishing tea and sugar cane plantations in these regions. After years of settlement and fraternising with the locals, intermarriages grew to a point where it became hard to physically differentiate the Chinese immigrants from the natives. Their physical features changed; the descendants forgot the Chinese language, ensuing a multi-cultural harmony. Years of peaceful intermingling followed. But when in 1962 India went into war with China regarding border disputes, the locals grew suspicious of the Chinese–Indians and soon started terrorising them. As a result, about 3,000 Chinese–Indians from all over the country were sent to a disused World War II prisoners of war (POW) camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, marking the beginning of an internment without any resolution. This paper aims to understand the predicament of the narrative voices from the survivors' viewpoint of the Deoli internment. Rita Chowdhury's translated text *Chinatown Day*s weaves a tale of immigration and identity, exploring the inevitability of loss, and a mother–daughter duo struggling to find a way out of silence, anguish and nostalgia for the past. This paper aims to understand the largely forgotten chapter of the country's history that tells a harrowing tale of racial prejudice on the part of the Indians. Examining the text with *The Deoliwallahs* written by Joy Ma and Philip D' Souza would uncover an untold truth provided with a historical and political context. The paper also seeks to map the parallels between the Japanese–American internment during World War II and the Chinese–Indian detention in the 1960s. Lost within the grand narratives of India's history of war, listening to these voices from the margins gives us an inkling about the tragedy that unfolds when people are forever torn from their roots.

Keywords: Chinese community, plantations, descendants, prejudice, roots, margins

Introduction

The Chinese have had a long history in India. The Chinese immigration to India began in the 1770s. They came over in search of better opportunities as traders, tea-plantation workers, dentists and other professionals, settling mostly in small towns across different regions in India's northeast. These Chinese immigrants belonged to different communities; the Hakka, who arrived by boat in Calcutta, were the large in number. They found work in the leather industry and many went into leather tanning and the shoe making business. However, the large prominent of these immigrants were the Cantonese and Taishanese, who settled mainly in or near tea plantations or tea factories in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was in Makum, a town in Assam, that the Chinese chose a different industry: carpentry. After years of dwindling and blending into the Indian society, several of these families became Indian enough that they spoke only local languages. The Chinese married local women and established a new society in Assam. They made skids, furniture and boxes for tea exports. Makum even had a neighbourhood called Chinapatty, bounded by the Chinapatty Road and the Makum railway station. The town was so prosperous that it had a Chinese club with a swimming pool, Chinese language school, Chinese restaurants like the Hong Kong Restaurant in Tinsukia, Chinese grocery stores and even Chinese shoe shops.

When the British moved into the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century, they tried to solidify the boundaries in the north with China but failed to arrive at a conclusion. The British passed the problem to the newly independent nations of India and Pakistan. In 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC), under Maso Tse-tung, took over China. India recognised Mao as the sovereign head of the country, which the British government never did, and gave up her rights in Tibet in the India–China Agreement of 1954 to win China's friendship. But not long after the Chinese started to violate the much-publicised *Panchsheel* principles (Five Principles) enunciated in the preamble to the agreement. They constructed a highway through the Indian territory in Ladakh (Aksai Chin) showing a large tract of Indian territory as Chinese. On 20 October 1962, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) moved into the disputed territory on the eastern front, at the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and on the western front at Aksai Chin. They resorted to massive attacks and occupied about 15,500 miles of Indian territory. As a result of this clash, China captured 3,942 Indian military personnel. A month later, on 21 November, China declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew behind its disputed line of control on the eastern and western fronts. Both governments regarded the month-long boundary war as the 'the 1962 Sino–Indian Incident'. But what happened along the borders also reached the lives of common people. In India, people of Chinese ancestry-Chinese–Indians-began to be immediately viewed with

suspicion. India enacted anti-Chinese laws to ban ethnic Chinese living in India from government jobs, held towns and cities where they lived and imposed document verification for permits to travel. This official policy resulted in the closure of Chinese language schools, newspapers and organisations that supported the PRC and the deportation of people whom the Indian government thought were PRC supporters. India's then President S. Radhakrishnan signed the Defence of India Act, 1962, allowing authorities to detain anyone under suspicion. Starting in November 1962, the Indian government incarcerated nearly 3,000 Chinese–Indians in a prison camp in Deoli, Rajasthan. These were the people who were mostly from towns in the foothills of the Himalayas, whose families had lived in India for generations, who spoke only Indian languages, who had no connection to China. The last detainees were released in 1967, five years after the 1962 Sino–Indian war. Their incarceration left them disillusioned with India.

Despite the years of familiarity across northeast India, plenty of Indians began to suspect their neighbours from Chinapatty who 'looked Chinese' and turned on them. The police knocked on Chinese–Indian doors in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Tinsukia and Makum, allowing families to only pack a few essentials and report to the police station. All these prisoners were put onto a train that started from the Makum railway station and travelled west across the country for a week. They were bundled into an old British camp that had been used for German, Japanese and Italian POWs during World War II and were assigned barracks. The camp had been a military cantonment where Indians were trained for the British Indian Army. In 1931, the British government arrested 500 Bengali rebels and converted the camp into a detention centre and incarcerated the rebels. After World War II, the British closed the Deoli Detention Camp in 1947. The Indian government reopened Deoli camp on 1 January 1948, to inter 10,000 Indians from Pakistan displaced by the Partition of India and Pakistan. The government returned the camp to military use.

Life in the Detention Camp

For the survivors of the interment in Deoli, the effects and stigma have been made deeper by the lack of information about the incident. The day, 18 November 1962, remains a fateful day for every survivor because that was the day when internments began. The hard-earned fortunes of over four generations were taken away in a single day. The seven days' nonstop journey to Rajasthan seemed endless as the train would stop outside the railway stations so that the cooks could prepare meals for the passengers on clay stoves set up on the side of the tracks. The detainees were served half-cooked *khichddi* as the only food. The ordeal was too much to bear for the older people. There were instances of villagers holding chappals in their hands, shouting slurs at

them to go back to China. The attacking villagers were responding to the words 'Enemy Train' written outside the compartments they were travelling in. Ying Sheng Wong who hailed from Shillong recalls his family's experience after reaching Deoli, 'The government had arranged a table outside the camp to register every person and everything they had — their belongings, valuables, gold, cash. The internees were given tea and bread, but the bread was so hard, it could only be eaten after it was soaked in the tea' (Ma and D'Souza 2020: 11). The military tents that were set up were made of jute, and they did not provide any comfort to the freezing internees, '… like others from the east, had no warm clothes. He mused that even if they had them, they would not have been allowed to bring them as they had been instructed to take just one set of clothes to the Camp. They tried their best to sleep in the cold, falling eventually into an uncomfortable, restless slumber because they were so tired' (Ma and D'Souza 2020: 12). After returning to Makum after Deoli, they found that the situation had changed utterly. Their houses had either been confiscated by the government or had been auctioned as enemy property. The locals now started to treat them as enemies.

Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days*

Chowdhury, a celebrated Assamese writer who was a young girl in 1962, remembers visiting the town of Makum while growing up and hearing tales of the near-disappearance of the local Chinese–Indians. Her novel *Makam* which means 'golden horse' in South-Chinese language– an alternative spelling of Makum — was one of the first real attempts in 50 years to tell the story of what happened to Assam's Chinese-origin people. Her narrative interweaves different experiences of a people who were suddenly caught in the fractured history of suffering, displacement and disillusionment. Published first in Assamese in 2011, it was later translated into English as *Chinatown Days* in 2018. Though a fictional war-novel and love story, it explains how over the years Chinese immigrants became an integral part of Assamese society and how their experiences in Deoli tore apart those ties. The novel begins with the unravelling of the story of a Chinese labourer named Ho Han who is brought to India to work in the tea plantations of Assam. He builds an unlikely love with Phulmati, a fellow Adivasi bonded labourer, who finds herself in Assam as a part of the migrant 'coolie' workforce for the flourishing tea industry and the tea plantation enterprise. The story is based in Cheenapatti where the majority of the Chinese–Assamese community lived in the town of Makum. The unsettled status of citizenship in India is highlighted where Mei Lin and Pulok Baruah are separated when Mei Lin is taken to Deoli despite being married to an Assamese. But the background to the story starts more than a century ago. In the year 1823, the British government started setting up base

on the banks of the river Brahmaputra with the help of a local chieftain. What caught the attention of the British was a beverage drunk by the indigenous people of the region called '*phalap'*. They identified this drink as the Assamese, or rather the Indian variety of tea. Soon the British officials decided to set up tea gardens in Assam to compete with China's monopoly over tea in the world market.

During this particular time, another story takes place in China during the First Opium War (1839–1842). China is hit by a severe drought that forces people to sell their belongings and even their children into slavery so that they can afford food and water in return. One such child, as fate would have it, travels from Lintin Island in the south-eastern China via Penang to Calcutta in the year 1841. After being imported to work in the tea gardens of Assam, this slave becomes a part of the vibrant community consisting of Chinese and Indian Adivasis from regions like Chhattisgarh. The number of intermarriages grows and the resultant progeny carry on this harmonious tradition of prosperity for generations. The novel then fast forwards to Makum in the year 1962 when the Sino–Indian War is about to begin. By this time, the Chinatown of Makum is a place throbbing with life with peaceful co-existence with not only Adivasis, but also the Assamese. The children of inter-ethnic marriages are comfortable in all their identities, giving rise to a multicultural identity. These children are endowed with both the Chinese and the local languages and cultures. However, the harmonious environment had slowly begun to change since 1959, when the Dalai Lama escaped Tibet and came to India. This exodus exposed to the world the Chinese agitation in Tibet and the persecution of Tibetans, resulting in the spread of anti-Communist sentiments. The skirmishes along the contentious India–China border further aggravated suspicion of the PRC in India. At the time, many thousands of Chinese–Indians who were born in India did not have valid Indian documents. As the tension grew, the Indian government started to acquire proof that they were Indian citizens, but before that process could produce valid papers, the war broke out in 1962. The government expanded their surveillance of members of the community, shutting down Chinese establishments; and an air of anti-China feeling grew among their Indian neighbours. The authorities started to arrest all the Chinese and Tibetan people living in Assam, Darjeeling and nearby areas in Calcutta to deport them to China – not for reasons of national security, but under an agreement in which the Chinese government would return Indian POWs to India in exchange for Indians of Chinese origin. These selective arrests saw inter-ethnic families breaking up.

In the novel, Ho Han, Lailin's ancestor, fled the Qing dynasty to work as an indentured labourer in Assam. The discovery of native tea trees, known to the indigenous Singpho people as *phalap,* by an Englishman named Robert

Bruce broke up China's monopoly over the tea market. Rita Chowdhury gives an insight into the workings of the East India Company under Robert Bruce's brother Charles Alexander Bruce who was the 'Superintendent of Tea Culture for the Assam Company' during the time. By 1838, the Company had taken over the tea gardens in Keheng, Tingrai and Naoholia in Upper Assam. It was here that Ho Han and his friend Ho Yen and others like them were brought from Calcutta and introduced to the life of indentured labour in carpentry and leather-making shops. The passing years saw the Chinese contributing to the economy by working as dentists, carpenters, canister-makers, lead-sheet makers, etc. Jayeeta Sharma in her book *Empire's Garden* details how the skilled Chinese workers became important in the Britishers' experimental venture of tea (Sharma 2011). They smuggled profitable and marketable variety of seeds and plants out of China. Easterine Kire writes how Choudhury brings the flavour of this life home by inserting phrases and nouns used by this mixed population. The Marwari shops were called "keya golas", while the "burra golas" were the big shops located at each tea garden for selling rations. In Chowdhury's novel, a wife threatens a former opium addict husband: "I'll play the Nagaa drum on your back". It is a mix of tea garden jargon and a throwback to the languages that the labourers brought from their homes' (Kire 2018). A congenial scene in the novel describes the Assamese population celebrating the Chinese New Year. Now the Chinatowns wear a ghostly appearance with desecrated tombs, skeletal remains of a 100-year-old club and dismantled homes that stand as witness to the history of the small community.

The subject matter of Chowdhury's novel is the search for lost roots and tracking the present existence of the characters. The characters in *Chinatown Days* exhibit a tendency to create an idealised notion of Salman Rushdie's imaginary homeland. They try to re-create a home after migrating to Canada — with shared experiences of a homeland left behind. Mei Lin suffers from the nostalgia of a lost home. The novel treats the assimilation of a new culture as a natural follow-up of displacement and relocation. A report in *The Telegraph*, 18 April 2010, quotes Wang Shing Tung, former schoolmaster from Makum, Wang Shu Shin's son, who was only seven years old at the time of the war:

> They picked up all the Indian Chinese early one morning in November 1962 and packed us in a cowshed. Police said they would jail us for 'safety.' No one was allowed to carry any money, food, clothes or ornaments. (Choudhury 2018: 3)

Choudhury has relied highly on the individual memory of the trauma survivors for the recreation of a dark history. *Chinatown Days* is an outcome of numerous personal interviews that the writer has conducted through travel and as

secondary research. Thus, the book becomes an account about bearing witness to the most forgotten period in the grand history of India. The advent of this process of witnessing begins with the character Arunav Bora's confrontation with Lailin Tham at a writer's meet in Toronto: 'I am but an incompetent artist of a tragic epic that remains hidden in hearts of thousands of people' (Choudhury 2018: 11). Bora overcomes the shock and tries to pen the tragedy, but not before fully empathising with the survivors and witnesses. Mailin's antagonistic attitude towards the Indian people is what emotionally charges him to search for the hidden past.

Plight of the Japanese–Americans during WWII

The parallel to this episode is the American incarceration of 100,00 Japanese–Americans in prison camps, two decades earlier. In a seminal text called *The Deoliwallahs* reporting the true events of the 1962 Chinese–Indian internment, Joy Ma and Dilip D'Souza point out this parallel that spurred the world's two largest democracies to suspect the loyalties of thousands of their own citizens, solely because they 'looked' the way they did. What India did to Chinese–Indians, the US had done to Japanese–Americans two decades earlier, though on a much larger scale. The actor George Takei, himself interned as a child, suggests that 'the administration needed some way to show that it was being tough on Japan, as it had little military success at the early stages of the war' (Ma and D'Souza 2020).

Though a definite parallel, the difference between the two internments is significant. The Japanese–American internment is no forgotten history. It is remembered in literary works and popular. Besides, the Japanese–Americans have not hesitated to use the moral force of the injustice visited on them in the 1940s to draw attention to present-day injustices. Civil disobedience in Oklahoma, a plaque on a street corner in California, a confession of error recalling and commemorating the dreadful moment in American history. The shame was so great that in 1988, President Ronald Reagan explicitly acknowledged it and apologised on behalf of his country to his Japanese–American fellow-citizens. Nearly eight decades on, the lasting experience of 1942 still remains raw for some, and the previous President Trump's segregationist policies a distressing reminder.

Conclusion

After more than half a century, some Chinese–Indians growing weary of the ignorance travelled from North America to India in 2015 to hold a series of public meetings to tell their stories. On the morning of 24 August 2017, a group of 50 Chinese–Indians gathered in Toronto to visit the Indian High Commission in Ottawa, where they intended to hold a peaceful demonstration

and hand over a letter addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, asking for an apology for what had once happened to them 55 years ago. As the characters in Choudhury's *Chinatown Days* found a sort of relocation as the displaced families found a closure after a reunion. The type of close ending gestures towards optimism in that it holds out the promise of reclaiming what was lost within the grand narratives of history. The ending of the novel is also ambiguous simply because it reflects the inherent contradiction when one is torn apart from one's roots; it is connected to the tension between remembering and forgetting, and the risk to lose what Cathy Caruth calls 'the force of its affront to understanding' (Caruth 1995: 154). That is why building the support for an apology is important, first of all, for spreading wide the knowledge that the Deoli episode even happened. Also, to point out that the great wrong India committed against thousands of its own people. In every hateful prejudice expressed about one or the other community today, every attack on members of a different religion, every call to go to Pakistan, one can trace the roots which stretch back half a century to that Deoli prison camp.

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Detecting the City and Mediating Conflict: The Flaneur–*Bhadralok* in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi*

Neepa Sarkar

Abstract

Set amidst a saga of urban deterioration, collective moral–ethical degeneration and the vast incomprehensible city amid Partition and mob violence, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi* remains reminiscent of the old-world order of virtue and faith. The 20th century apart from being defined by the World Wars in the West also saw concomitantly the development of the city and its impact on the socio-cultural fabric of nations as a whole. And here, the private eye or the modern detective appears transformed in this version of the crime fiction genre and is almost a substitute for the flaneur figure, as extolled in the essay, 'Myth of the Flaneur' by Walter Benjamin. Much like the flaneur figure, the detective of Bengali crime fiction becomes a response to the world that had become chaotic, duplicitous and corrupt.

Crime stories woven around such modern conurbation found explicit portrayal in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi* series, where the city became a text characterised by insatiability, intertextuality, materiality, and desire. This paper seeks to explore the social and narrative turning point ushered in by analysing select stories from Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi* series and look at the changes prevalent in the city and in the ways of living.

Keywords: urban crime, detective, flaneur, Bengali crime fiction

Introduction

The 20th century apart from being defined by the World Wars in the West also saw concomitantly the development of the city and its impact on the socio-cultural fabric of nations as a whole. The city came to be viewed as a dark, contemplative place of lurking characters, crime scenes of violence, pollution, and decay — a sort of urban wasteland where alienation becomes a tour de force. And here, the private eye or the modern detective appears transformed in this version of the crime fiction genre and is almost a substitute for the flaneur figure, as extolled in the essay, 'Myth of the Flaneur' by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1982).

Flânerie and the flaneur have been important concepts in the modern existentialist oeuvre to decode the secrets of being in the modern urban, metropolitan public world. Since Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin's musings on 19th century Paris, much of socio-literary analyses have been fixed on the figure of the flaneur as a representative of modernity and contemporary urbanity. Decoding the flaneur has served to focus critical theory on the many kinds of relationships that exist within the city. The flaneur, then, becomes a historical tool in the hands of literary cartographers to measure the changing social and cultural landscape of the city. Much like the flaneur figure, the detective of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's crime fiction, Byomkesh Bakshi, becomes a response to the world that had become chaotic, duplicitous and corrupt, and the plots of his stories highlight the anxieties of the contemporary social and political order.

The security of familiar and conventional settings becomes replaced by the urban mean streets, decayed and alone with its transient populations in which the criminal could not only go undetected but also dwell in the inherent duality present and inevitable in the existence and essence of the city. A duality where boundaries could easily be transgressed and blurred. Crime stories woven around such modern conurbation finds explicit portrayal in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi* series (written between 1932 and 1970), where the city becomes a text characterised by insatiability, intertextuality, materiality, and desire.

This paper explores the social and narrative turning point ushered in by analysing select stories from the *Byomkesh Bakshi* series, namely, 'The Hidden Heirloom', 'The Man in a Red Coat' and 'Room Number Two', and looks at the changes prevalent in the city and in the ways of living that developed due to the socio-political circumstances of the 20th century. Further, the paper particularly explores the delineation of the city as a part of the collective memory and identity reflected in detective fiction and as Bakshi's constant adversary; a city of despair, violence and garish neon lights where love and humanity have not yet entirely disappeared. The researcher has selectively

focussed on the plots of the chosen stories in a manner to explore the delineation of the transforming city and its effects on the inhabitants.

The Flaneur and His City

Seen as a wandering observer, the flaneur, as revelled in the works of Baudelaire and Balzac, not only observed and confronted but also deciphered the signifiers of the labyrinthine metropolitan alleys. Much like the flaneur figure, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *Byomkesh Bakshi* becomes a response to the world that is rapidly changing. Created in the pre-independence era of India, Byomkesh Bakshi becomes an endeavour to express and propagate a specific cultural identity, albeit local, manifested in the characterisation of a subaltern detective. Many of Bakshi's adventures are mired in social difficulties, and apart from crimes, he finds himself providing solutions to these problems that inhabit colonial Calcutta.

We, the readers, often find Bakshi along with his loyal companion Ajit strolling the streets of Calcutta, looking for possible solutions. This act of strolling and looking is consolidated by the flaneur, who, since the 20th century has been an important part of analysing the urban existence. Initially the figure of the flaneur was attached to a specific time and locale, that is, Paris, and was a masculine observer who derived his existence and meaning from the spectacle of the visible crowd. This uncanny hero of modern life lives in the public spaces of the city and like the flaneur, Bakshi gains insights and solves crimes by roaming and observing the streets of Calcutta.

The flaneur of the 20th century through his activity points towards a freedom (economic and social), and a superior social status that is circumscribed in the bourgeois and consumer world. However, Byomkesh Bakshi is different in this respect. Inspired by flânerie, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay constructed Bakshi as a subaltern response to the Eurocentric genre of crime detection. In many of the stories not only a city centeredness is depicted but also a historical context is referred to, thus providing the readers with a sort of certainty — that crime never goes unpunished, which the contemporary reality drenched in war, Partition and chaos is not able to render. Byomkesh Bakshi first appeared in the Calcutta-based *Basumati* monthly in 1932 where he and Ajit become friends and partners in solving crimes. Bandyopadhyay wrote 32 complete stories, and all of them refute the popular Eurocentric British detective Sherlock Holmes's claims of insularity and uniqueness. In fact, Bakshi is presented as an ordinary man with a shrewd intellect and observational skills, an educated Bengali youth who through his truth-seeking method hopes to bring changes in his society. Written amidst the freedom struggle movement, the stories do not overtly condemn the British administrators but instead look at an alternate urban space where Bakshi

decodes the myriad crimes and solves them. Bakshi's Calcutta symbolically becomes a postcolonial response to and reaction against Holmes's imperial centre of London.

Flânerie and Byomkesh Bakshi

Flânerie is seen as a distinctive intellectual activity and as Byomkesh Bakshi shows us that he is no ordinary flaneur who merely consumes the urban text passively but is quite well versed in the urban epistemology. He is able to not only contextualise the cause of the crime by mapping the shifting patterns and people's relationship with the city but also towards the end of each story neatly domesticates and presents the solution and the denouement of the crime that had potentially disrupted the urban environment. Cities, for Byomkesh Bakshi, are not simply the cradles of civilisation but hold something sinister and barbaric, indicative of the primal nature of man, as he goes about unmasking the delusions and pretentions often associated with urban culture.

Walter Benjamin had looked at the urban centre as the quintessential site of modernity. In a post-war society, the flaneur and his methods gained political significance as he became defined by the notion of desire in an increasingly transformed urban landscape. Desire, even while getting appropriated becomes a tool for comprehending and controlling the travesties of the urban society of the early 20th century. And Bakshi seems to have mastered this skill quite like the masculine detective figure of the hard-boiled crime fiction genre. Bakshi understands the modern social and economic structures of the urban space as well as its nature of spectacle (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 2) and is adept in its ambiguous interpretation. Through his stories Saradindu Bandyopadhyay gives his readers glimpses of the cityscape with its accelerated rhythm and modern temporal sensibility.

Interestingly, the metropolis, which is often seen as a monument to the conquest and subjugation of nature by humans as well as the principal site of human progress and technological innovation, becomes for Bakshi a place where the myths of the modern but serve to camouflage the primeval nature, desire and greed of mankind. Bakshi is a vigilant stroller in these urban spaces, always the *bhadralok* (gentleman) detective and the unabashedly bourgeois Bengali intellectual whose primary role is that of a truth-seeker (as he likes to call himself). Bakshi's intellectual prowess, keen observational skills and agility seem to be designed to counter the colonial categorisation of the colonised as 'effeminate'. Through Bakshi the writer presents rich portrayals of mid-20th century Calcutta and detailed depictions of the Bengali culture and way of life.

Calcutta underwent major transformations in the mid-20th century both pre- and post-independence with changes in the structure along with rapid and unplanned growth. The refugee colonies became a testimony to the politics

of displacement and the brutal truth of Partition, and gradually became an imminent part of the Calcutta landscape. Calcutta had been the headquarters of the British colonisers till 1911, which was perhaps the reason that the detective figure conceived by earlier writers like Priyanath Mukhopadhyay and Panchkori Dey had a distinct European influence before Saradindu Bandyopadhyay invoked the *dhoti* and *kurta*-clad *bhadralok* Byomkesh Bakshi.

For Byomkesh Bakshi, urban spaces present a riddle that only the flaneur-detective can solve by means of observation and versatility. He is always mannered and compassionate in all the stories and is always on a quest for the truth. Bakshi is portrayed as a family man and hence does not follow the rules of isolation that often apply to fictional detective figures. Ajit, Bakshi's friend and companion, is a litterateur and documents the mysteries that they solve. They first meet, as mentioned in 'The Inquisitor', in a mess or boarding house in central Calcutta in 1925. It is the peak of freedom struggle and Byomkesh and Ajit become the author's intellectual response to the imperial conquistadors. Bakshi maintains his authority over challenging situations and acts as well as presents his readers with a consciousness that is aware and critical of the situations in the world. The first 10 stories of the *Byomkesh Bakshi* series do not have much critical interaction with the colonisers even though they were written in the pre-independence time. However, as readers follow the mysteries that Bakshi solves in the entire oeuvre, we find that the writer has posited him as an orderly detective who thrives on his ordinariness instead of the eccentricities that are often associated with iconic and fictional detective figures. Thus, Bakshi presents a contrast to the Eurocentric view of colonies as disorderly and irrational and, instead, posits an ordered postcolonial response to the coloniser's hegemonic portrayal of indigenous people and places.

Bakshi brings in a psychoanalytical approach to his crime-solving techniques, and the Calcutta that we see where he mostly operates becomes a microcosm of the colonised India. The stories of Byomkesh Bakshi set in Calcutta sometimes depict the binary that runs through the city that of the urban poor on one hand and the elite class and imperial collaborators on the other. In the story, 'The Hidden Heirloom' (1933) we meet Sir Digindra Narayan Roy, knighted by the British government and who has achieved fame as an artist and scientist. 'He is a strange man. If he was born abroad, he would have been recognised as a genius… he was knighted by the British government' (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 27). Having a complex mind, Digindra Narayan steals the priceless diamond in his nephew's possession and hides it in a unique manner — in the plaster at the base of a Nataraj statue, which Byomkesh because of his quick thinking is able to find and rectify. 'When I found that my initials were not there under the statue, last evening, I realised

that it has been exchanged. Everything became clear. Later you saw the trick I played to exchange the statue in the presence of Sir Digindra' (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 50).

Apart from the plot details, as a reader, we are able to identify the colonial connotations inherent in the story and characterisation as Calcutta is shown as a colonial centre with its ambiguities and ambivalences. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay sets up a distinct close-knit community for Byomkesh in his Harrison Road apartment, which is distinctly and significantly Bengali — Ajit, Satyabati and Puntiram — and makes Byomkesh intellectual and serene and not much different from the educated Bengali youths of that time.

In 'The Deadly Diamond' (1936), the author employs topicality by not just referring to the dreary afternoons of Calcutta heat but also the gold trade between the prominent jewellers of Calcutta. 'During that year, there was a sudden spate of jewellery theft in this city of Calcutta — today Jawaharlal Hiralal was robbed, the next day Dutta jewellers was burgled — in fifteen days at least five large shops suffered great losses' (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 3).

In 'The Man in Red Coat' the readers are introduced to Bakshi's new address in Calcutta. The story in its plot points towards the migrant population who had settled in other states after historical upheavals in Bengal during the British Raj. The story in its delineation of the crime also looks at the alienation and complete detachment that city life often brings. So, for Ashok, a simpleton from Meerut, it is not difficult to believe a stranger's words without realising the consequences of it. 'I live in Calcutta. My house is in South Calcutta. I am going out of the city for a month. The house will be vacant. If you stay in my house, it will be convenient for both you and me' (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 79).

Byomkesh and the City

Bakshi strives to maintain an equilibrium between contending affiliations of traditional culture and colonial modernity that often gets echoed in the cityscape and its inhabitants. He is a professional and ethical man and has traces of the old-world order of virtue and faith, however it is his observational and deductive skills that grant him a protective awareness regarding the world that he resides in, which has increasingly become chaotic, driven by self-interest and consumption. As evinced by Raymond Chandler in *The Art of Murder*, the detective is always a good man — an idealist who is surrounded by corruption and crime but essentially incorruptible himself (Chandler 1988).

Bakshi, unlike the city which is undergoing rapid transformation with the end of the imperial rule, prevails over the urban landscape and does not lose his hold on the social and moral order. Bakshi can be seen as the 'wisecrack' persona, which often gets associated with the investigator; as one who sees through everything and holds an exceptional awareness and presents a stylised

demonstration of that knowledge, which not only showcases a sort of indifference towards authority but also implies that institutionalised power has not been able to capture his psyche and will. Though a product of the modern consciousness, Bakshi tends to turn to old chivalric conventions to negotiate with the world as he brings together disparate elements of a centreless urban space.

With the development of the city, there were, apart from the restructuring of old economic and social relationships, new bonds that brought in a different code of conduct and ethics. Bakshi understands such a world very well and from his established sense of personal autonomy he knows how to demand what he deems as right in his dealings with his client in terms of freedom and compensation for his services. Unlike the hard-boiled crime fiction of Chandler and Hammett, Bandyopadhyay does not make Bakshi a lonely and isolated figure given to cynicism and bitterness. Instead, he is presented as a family man who very much enjoys the domestic life along with his tea and cigarettes. Even though Bakshi is exposed to and has continuous dealings with the criminal world, he always inspires hope. Even if it is a world without any benevolent presence and includes episodic interventions where justice and lawlessness intermingle and disillusionment freely flows. As an inhabitant of the modern complex world, Bakshi is prone to inner thoughts and deliberations within his psyche where his survival strategy is through the usage of wit and his interactions with Ajit. 'After a few stations, I got down at the platform to stretch my legs, when I spotted the gentleman in the compartment next to ours — he was staring at me but as soon as our eyes met, he ducked. Excitedly, I told Byomkesh, "Listen…". He said, "I know, the gentleman is in the next compartment. Things are not so simple as they seem. That's good."' (Bandyopadhyay 2003: 23).

In the story, 'Room Number Two' the city is shown as a modern space, and the story starts with a murder in a hotel that caters to travellers coming from different states. By locating the plot in a hotel, Bandyopadhyay is referring to the changing relationship of the city in a post-independent time where trade, exchange and travel have become common. 'Nirupama Hotel was situated on Rashbehari Avenue, a little further away from the Gariahat Square. The hotel was a little westernised. The servants wore smart uniforms' (Bandyopadhyay 2003:178).

Bakshi understands that a mystery might get temporarily solved but the question remains on how to address and resolve the deeper malaise that ails society and the human conditions particularly in a world that is under colonial regime. Bakshi much like the flaneur is a modern hero as he lives and operates in the public spaces of the city. And as Baudelaire once stated about the flaneur, Bakshi too is an 'independent, intense and (somewhat) impartial spirit' (Tester 1994: 28) and who cannot be easily defined.

The expanding metropolis of the 20th century was a space of mobility and migration and where the effects of modernity on the individual could be visibly seen. The experiences and the tribulations faced by the individual in the city (which has remained a space for dreams and fantasies to come alive) brought forth new fictional figures in the literary oeuvre woven onto the mosaic of the expanding city and its culture. The hybrid characterisation of Bakshi (essentially a Bengali but well-versed in English mannerisms and culture) by Bandyopadhyay creates a space to articulate resistance and novelty in conceptualising a Western genre in an indigenous way in early post-independent India.

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A Road Less Travelled by the Metropolis: Vindicating the Dichotomy of Centre and Margin in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

Phaguni Bist

Abstract

The reality of India's provincial past and cultural heritage is sustained through its peculiar rural and small-town expanse. Indian fiction in English based on Indian locale, people and language presents a window into the chasm between this provincial past and the spasmodic modern erections of metropolis. This Indian reality, translated into a binary of power-relationship between the metropolis as a site of prominence and small towns as peripheral and disenfranchised, is adroitly explored by Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody*. The text builds upon the marginalisation of small-townships represented by Mirpore and its resident, Deven — standing for stiltedness associated with small-townships in the belly of India — in parallel with the estranged status of Urdu — representing a communalised bracketing of cultural language in post-partition Hindustan. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks provided by Aijaz Ahmad and Tabish Khair in their critical writings on Indian literature, the paper traces the incidents of dialogue and alliance of these marginalised subjectivities through Deven, who mediates between the small-township and the metropolis and also becomes a custodian of an Urdu poet Nur and the Urdu language by rescuing its decaying heritage from the ravines of Delhi. Through these interactions, the peripheral status of locale and language is given an opportunity to establish its presence and acquire agency, thus, puncturing the prominence monopolised by the metropolis and in this process of subversion, changing the paradigm of urban centrality.

Keywords: provincial, metropolis, marginalised subjectivities, dialogue, space dichotomy

Introduction

The urban–rural paradigm in the Indian–Anglophone novel was morphed, reimagined and chalked afresh as the literary tradition traversed through changing terrains of initial nationalist fervour towards the shores of globalisation. The works of early novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan (the famous trio) who wrote in the 1950s and 1960s spoke from the rural and provincial spaces of newly independent India. These writers painted the early Indian literary scene with the nationalistic discourse of Gandhi that vociferously hailed the rural expanse as a symbol of nation's identity. This early literature was soaked in the ideologue wherein villages were representatives of 'real' India, the places of resistance and sovereignty that 'remained uncontaminated and unsullied by the Western influences that systematically devoured Indian culture' (Bhattacharjee 2023: 197). In a similar attempt at reclaiming the Indianness associated with the provincial geography, Tagore zealously extolled Indian villages and made the beauty of these spaces visible through his works, which he claimed were heckled by the colonial master's oriental prejudice.

When we refer to a landscape, we are talking of a 'creative act of perception' by which Khair means that landscape is a 'selected reality, or rather a reality selectively perceived or depicted towards a certain conscious or unconscious end'. He further posits, 'Every landscape has a certain reason to be or not to be in a literary text' (Khair 2001: 167). Raymond Williams attaches the idea of landscape with an implied act of 'separation and observation' (Williams 1973:121). This explains why certain depictions of a given geography in a fictional work are pressed upon while others are elided into an unexplained oblivion. For instance, the astute depiction of Malgudi as an intersectional town between old and new structures in R. K. Narayan's works showcased the approaching wave of modernisation brushed with an overpowering stroke of traditional pre-eminence. The railways appeared but were only sustained in the narrative through the railway station, kiosks, the vendors, and the hustle bustle of small economic activities that mattered to the small-town lives of Malgudi. The fervour accompanying the great Indian rail as a bugle of the future world was subtly dissipated into the local humdrum of the mundane. The budding towns and urban spaces, which were heralding the dawn of modernisation in this era, were seen as distant and alien by the rustic populace of independent India and simultaneously dismissed for continuing the Western legacy in the newly freed country. The novels by early Indian writers writing in English chose to align with the nationalist ideologue of rural India and suggested modernisation to be an imperial sceptre, and that India's decolonisation could only be realised through its traditional society and conventional lives. This meticulous outlining that zooms into a

certain space as prominent and elides the rest provides a window into understanding the dynamics of spaces. It, especially makes the case for the othering of urban spaces in the initial novels from the Indian subcontinent, which is later toppled when rural spaces in Indian fiction are blatantly occluded. Here, we move on to the new emerging Indian–Anglo fiction wherein the writings emerge from the urban centres, hence, shifting the perspectives on the Indian landscape.

Undercutting Gandhi's focus on villages, Nehru's vision of a progressive India was incompatible with the rural space as its launch pad. He thought of this space as 'backward intellectually and culturally' and that 'no progress [could] be made from a backward environment' (Nehru 1997: 152). The literature emerging from this chasm between the two leading ideologies — Gandhian and Nehruvian — was equally mangled and reflected the identitarian struggles of the Indian social scene that was crushed by the binary of urban–rural as representative of modern–backward. As the focus shifted from rural and provincial spaces as original Indian identity to the urban as the future of India's global stance, the simmering stake of rural India in the nation's economy, politics and cultural framework was hurriedly snuffed. Concomitantly, the literature reflected the changing trends wherein a reference to urban spots connoted a space of progress, opportunities, technology, and above all, relevance. Alternatively, the mention of villages and small towns harked back the reader to the distant *mofussil* settlements that had staggered behind in the narrative of globalising India. This binary of meanings that became incorporated into the equation of urban–rural was cogently established through fiction and non-fiction with convincing descriptions of small towns as spaces plagued with infrastructural backwardness besides their parochial and impassive lifestyles.

There seems to be a neo-colonial relationship between the rural and urban spaces in India, which means that the power of representation lies with the urban and the rural is devoid of any agency. Consequently, the rural, the small-town and the provincial parts of India are the lesser known, or worse, the misunderstood spaces. The subalternity of these peripheral spaces in Indian fiction has been a frame of reference for the Oriental gaze and has served well to the skewed discourse of the colonial master who 'wanted to show Indian villages [as] deeply conservative and genetically predisposed to irrational superstitions and mystic belief systems' in contrast to the 'urban life as scientific, advanced, civilized, and superior…' (Chatterjee 2023: 191). As a result, India's rural expanse provided stock images of spaces stuck in the past with its rustic inhabitants failing to catch up with the smart urban populace. However, even though the seat of agency has rarely been with the villages/small towns, which often remain an appropriated space, there are instances

when voices from these subaltern spaces have breached the nexus of power and have negotiated with the urban centres in more than one way. This paper is an exploration of such an interaction through Anita Desai's novel *In Custody,* which brings the inertness of the *mofussil* town of Mirpore into the scintillating alleys of Delhi's urbanity and negotiates the binary of urban–rural archetype in literature.

Paradigm of Urban–Rural

In postcolonial India, the baton of literary tradition was gradually passed from the older generation of writers to new ones. As already mentioned, this led to a shift in the Indian fiction in English, which changed its backdrop from the rural expanse to the burgeoning cities, and this time not with scepticism but with an open heart. The new age writers redefined modernity, especially 'literary modernity' as an 'ideology of aesthetics in order to distinguish themselves from their "traditional" predecessors' (Majeed 2012: 277).

The image of India was revamped, especially through the major cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Krishna Sobti's *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, extols the nostalgic beauty of Delhi and Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* is a saga on Bengal's metropolis. The wave of metropolitan fiction that swept the global literary world with Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* paved the path for new Indian fiction. The stage was set for the metropolis and the staggering provincial spaces keenly picked by a few writers in the past further dawdled on the literary map. The city took the lead, and it was no more a runner up to the idea of an original India depicted through Gandhi's discourse of India as a nation of villages. Rather, it became the model for new India that shone with the promise of neo-liberalisation, which was sealed by the globalisation of the 1990s. The literary scene was dominated by the metropolis, and the cities were in many ways 'the primary vistas of modernity' (Bhattacharjee 2023: 4). These literary cityscapes heralded the new Indian fiction wherein the city was the seat of power, technology and opportunities to a better life, with Bombay as the 'city of dreams' and Delhi as a political and bureaucratic hub that promised claims to global ascendancy.

A postcolonial enquiry into the dichotomy of rural–urban divide in India unveils a major factor that facilitates this binary. This factor is a linguistic claim over English as a lived reality of the people in metropolis who commonly use English as a language of expression and communication. This accords a legitimacy to English as a medium of story-telling to Indian fiction with an urban background. Khair explores this aspect in a literary piece: 'English is not only an urban language, but largely a big-city language in India. English is far more likely to be employed with a degree of fluency by metropolitan and diasporic Indians than by Indian in villages or provincial towns like Gaya' (Khair 2014: 20).

The possession of the language through which the Indian landscape is presented or represented is a determining factor in the rural–urban paradigm in literature. There is no doubt that the writings on India and its landscape come from the centre and that the coterie of Indian writers that write in English are either city-based or are situated in the Western diaspora. The literature that emerged from such positions was mostly steered by the demand of market forces, which played upon the 'desire of Indian English writers to appear representative', which could happen if the manuscripts showcased India through a 'colonial bridge' (Khair 2014: 29), that is, represented the country within Western expectations. The fact that most of the writers writing Indian novels come from a sort of privileged place, makes the case for a diminishing or rather obfuscated depiction of rural Indian spaces in novels. Furthermore, in a quest to find the reason for this specific elision, Khair observes 'a (diminishing) pastoral/romantic tendency to view the village' owing to a lack of personal experiences of these spaces by these writers, which translates into 'the non-industrial suburban set-up as somehow more authentic, more India' (Khair 2001: 168). Combining the spatial source of Indian writings along with the language of narrative, the disenfranchised position held by the rural along with the language of agency is raised by Khair. He quotes C. D. Narasimhaiah with reference to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*: 'I don't know how village life gets expressed in our regional languages but I know I can't cite another authentic account of village among novels written in the English language' (Khair 2001: 159). This accrues to that fact that even though some of the postcolonial literature from India has villages or provincial towns as its background, the picture that is painted accrues to the oriental gaze of the West. E. M. Forster's understanding of the Indian imagery in *The Passage to India* continued to be echoed through Ruth Prawer Jabhwala's *Heat and Dust* and many more novels written in this line of thought. As a result, the postcolonial writings about India and its people have remained indeterminately stuck in the derelict, dusty spaces that have been narrativized through a language that the people living there have not learnt to use.

This brings us to the core of the paper that juxtaposes the issue of language of agency with the infrastructural and structural distress experienced by the rural and provincial spaces that occupy a peripheral position in relation to the urban centres and examines how these peripheral spaces undercut the urban discourse by making their realities palpable. The paper outlines the trajectory of this binary wherein the town of Mirpore in Desai's novel is exposed with its impoverished geography along with its depraved protagonist Deven's hollow existence only to be subverted by allowing the readers to witness a necessary intervention of this *mofussil* town's inhabitant with his passion for Urdu in the alleys of Delhi where a famous poet Nur is rescued.

Subverting Dichotomy in *In Custody*

Gyan Prakash notes in his article on the urban turn in academia: 'The urban turn …offers an opportunity to revise the history of Indian modernity, to bring into view spaces of power and difference suppressed by the historicist discourse of the nation' (Prakash 2002: 6). By this Prakash wishes to open the critique of spaces in India, to be approached not through the dominant ideologies that have situated the rural or the urban in periphery or centre or vice versa over different epochs, rather to look at the intersection of the two in a non-linear fashion. This provides scholars with a necessary tool to observe and understand the dynamics between different spaces that do not exist in isolated pockets but are intersected incessantly. In our world, 'space' has become more relevant than 'time' as Michel Foucault and Jay Miskoweic point out and they characterise this epoch with spaces embroiled in sinuous relationships with each other, as that of 'simultaneity…of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (Foucault and Miskoweic 1986: 22). There is a constant interaction between the two oppositional points on the spatial grid and brings into sight what Soja determines as the 'Thirdspace' with respect to the city, and which can be perceived as that space where 'there is another way of thinking about the social production of human spatiality that incorporates both Firstspace and Secondspace perspectives while at the same time opening up the scope and complexity of the geographical or spatial imagination' (Soja 2000: 77).

Anita Desai, in her novel *In Custody*, achieves the formidable task of providing this window to the reader to understand space in juxtaposition with different sites by situating two points side-by-side, in this case, Mirpore and Delhi, and thereby toppling the dichotomy of centre and periphery. She writes, '…for Mirpore was isolated but not cut off from the world, as Deven had come to believe. It had its railway station, after all, at one end of the bazaar, and the bus depot at the other, and the constant comings and goings of trains and buses gave it an air of being a halting place in a long journey, a caravanserai of a kind' (Desai 2019: 16).

Desai's introduction of the small town of Mirpore and its people begins with its biosphere mercilessly spread-eagled, displaying its dusty lanes, acrid landscape and shrivelled water bodies. There is no misgiving about the infernal existence of this town, which is described variedly as 'cruel trap', 'indestructible prison', 'dustbin', and 'had probably existed for centuries in its most basic, most elemental form' (Desai 2019: 12). Despite its historical tethering, Mirpore comes across as alien and stark with its impoverished streets and roads. The glorious tones of Tagore that eulogised the provincial towns and their simplicity is lost upon the banality of this town where the people are 'petty tradesmen rather than agriculturalists' and who 'could not

be blamed for failing to understand those patriotic songs and slogans about the soil, the earth. To them it was so palpably dust' (Desai 2019: 12). Here 'dust' is imbedded with a characteristic sterility unlike the fecund patriotic symbolism delivered through 'soil', which emanates a life force. The lives of people in Mirpore are infected with this sterility presented through 'dust', rendering a sense of bleakness to their existence, which once again is an extension of the town's futile efforts at being relevant through its commerce or laboured development:

> There was really more bustle than doldrums and it was often deafening. Yet the bustle was strangely unproductive — the yellow sweets were amongst the very few things that were actually manufactured here; there was no construction to speak of, except the daily one of repairing; no growth except in numbers, no making permanent what had remained through centuries so stubbornly temporary — and it was other cities, other places that saw the fruits of all the bustle, leaving the debris and the litter behind for Mirpore (Desai 2019: 16–7).

Desai's brutal exacting of Mirpore that unmistakably engraves its name on the plaque of India's scruffy spaces, makes the town's predicament almost pathological. However, soon enough the unforgiving realistic narrative of small-town is shifted to the other side of the Indian landscape — the urban space — with the arrival of Murad, Deven's friend from school. Their meeting is metaphorical, their skirmish representing the material realities of small-town, which are summoned for humiliation by the real/imaginary urban pre-eminence. Coming from Delhi, the overpowering demeanour of Murad is clearly an extension of the spatial dynamic that Foucault and Miskoweic succinctly encapsulate as a fundamental quality of our epoch, which they describe as 'one in which space takes for us the form of relations among site' (Foucault and Miskoweic 1986: 23). Consequently, when the site of belonging replaces the human elements, Murad's position as coming from the centre, commands Deven's subordinate stance. The power dynamics are played out in Murad's smug remarks on Deven: 'Still a two-cigarette man, are you?' wherein 'still' is an indolent modifier stressing on Deven's stagnation, and further patronising his position by saying, 'A full-fledged lecturer in a college, an important citizen of Mirpore, and still can't afford a whole packet of cigarettes?' (Desai 2019: 2). The failed enterprise of Murad's Urdu magazine is conveniently obliterated in his injunction to extract Deven's services to obtain Nur's interview for a special edition. This meeting transpires into Deven's passage of flight from a small town like Mirpore, a town that he refers to as 'cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape' (Desai 2019: 12), to the centre, the urban, which will eventually deflate the spectre of urban supremacy.

The task of obtaining Nur's interview is enmeshed with a web of revelations, toppling of circumstances, besides a breakdown of material and

conceptual walls. The decrepit sublet office of Murad, the gutted alleys of Chandni Chowk and the sullen and morose existence of Nur, becomes an antithesis to the colossal imagery of an exuberant urban dwelling. There is too much discrepancy between the idea of a great luminary inhabiting the capital city in Deven's mind and the dystopic labyrinth that he is meandering through in search of Nur's home. The town of Mirpore described by Deven previously as 'prison' is suddenly vindicated in the 'peeling, stained walls of office buildings' (Desai 2019: 32), 'shady-looking and evil-smelling shops', 'a bazaar encountered in a nightmare' which was 'so like a maze from which he could find no exit' and 'wondering if the urchin sent to lead him through it was not actually a malevolent imp leading him to his irrevocable disappearance in the reeking heart of the bazaar' (Desai 2019: 32). Deven halts the hunt as 'he knew he could not be near the poet's residence in this pullulating honeycomb of commerce' (Desai 2019: 33). But betraying Deven's imagination, this is the very abode of Nur who not only changes the perception of urban supremacy but also reveals the rotting lives of its dwellers.

The putrid lanes leading to Nur's house are simultaneously symbolic of the defeated and browbeaten stance of Urdu language that has lost its hold in the literary and cultural scenario of globalising India. The mention of Urdu poetry urges Nur to question the relevance of this interview for Urdu, asking: 'How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language?' (Desai 2019: 39). The perpetual decay and the cultural appropriation of Urdu is embodied in the 'laboured sound of the of poet's breath' which 'snarled in his throat with elderly phlegm' (Desai 2019: 39). The otherness of provincial spaces in the developing nation of India is concomitant with the deteriorating eminence that Urdu once had. The cultural syncretism of India's past that flourished through convivial multiculturalism was thwarted, especially the reception and perception of Urdu after the partition of India. Aijaz Ahmad traces this untimely and unfortunate decline of once a language of courts and cultural gatherings, attributing its marginalised stance to its communalised bearing with Muslims. The Hindu–Muslim divide is transferred to Hindi–Urdu binary where Hindi occupies the centre stage and toggles the literary as well as the official medium of expression. With the heydays of Hindustani coming to an end that 'served as a living link between Urdu and Hindi…' (Ahmad 1996: 201), Urdu's tenure ended, which Nur poignantly points to as '…its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried' (Desai 2019: 39).

The intervention of Deven in this bleak, decadent world of Delhi, of Nur, and of Urdu, brings a voice from the nooks of Mirpore. This becomes an encounter of the parochial attitudes of small-town man with the supposedly grand and mammoth purposed lives of city people. Deven acts as a custodian of the dying legacies of Delhi's past, and his confession to Nur for becoming

a lecturer of Hindi 'for living' does not botch down his zeal to serve as the singular frontline force in this rescue. His pendulum movements between the macabre of urban reality and the tormenting small-town inertness becomes a quest for saving the dying poet and along with that the language of poets, hence saving the utopic essence of Urdu poetry. The mirage of this treasure that would not only afloat the sinking gem 'Nur' and bring Murad's flailing magazine back to life, but most importantly, it would fructify Deven's 'literary yearnings'. There is not only an intervention from the *mofussil* space but rather a merger between the two opposites wherein a symbiotic existence comes to the fore.

The fate of Urdu and Nur becomes tied to Deven's unique chance to break free from his circumstantial bondage of penury and mundane, to meander out of Mirpore's dust and into the debris of Chandni Chowk, and for once escape the prison of anonymity to make a mark in the heterotopic gardens of Urdu poetry. Beginning with the predicament of Mirpore, Deven's life there and his journey into the urbane, the narrative is fraught with endless clash between Deven's life as a Hindi lecturer and his love for Urdu, his unsound economic condition and the demanding nature of the project that he undertakes. The quest of Deven to rescue the poet and Urdu poetry from its imminent death is supplanted with a further dissonance of modernity represented through gadgets like tape recorders and cassettes, which refuse to offer a reservoir for holding the glory of past. As a custodian of the elements that are at odds with Deven, he undertakes the challenge of navigating through the baffling domestic scenarios in Nur's home, then acceding to tape recording Nur's interview and in this process of reconciling the past with present, Deven becomes a bridge between the staggered reality of an Indian province and the charade of modernity in the urban lanes. Furthermore, Deven becomes a disruptor who keeps the binaries of space, language, religion, and culture in a perpetual flux, which is evident in the fact that despite being a Hindu, Deven is given the task to infuse a fresh breath in the decaying body of Urdu. The relentlessness of Deven in the face of unrewarding conditions becomes a potent solvent in the binary of solids that removes any kind of ossification.

To conclude the arguments on urban and rural divide in Indian fiction and to foreground the relevance of a negotiation between the two in terms of spatial interaction, it would be apt to state Edward Soja's assertion. Underlining the power of spatiality in current times, Soja asserts that 'it is now space more than time that hides things from us, that the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, and theoretical sense of the contemporary era' (Soja 1989: 79).

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A Sense of Departure in Dalit Literature: A Study of the Centrifugal Force in Bama's Writings

Prathama Sarkar

Abstract

Literature from every nation contains specific socio-codes, which play a taxonomical factor in marking specific texts under certain categories such as canons, residual and emergent. The canonisation process of texts constructs an apparatus of power position within a given literary system and culture. From there specific centripetal and centrifugal forces start functioning within that literary system. The centripetal force attempts to maintain the norms of dominant cultural parameters, whereas the centrifugal force tries to constitute its own markers. In the Indian context, Dalit literature is an example of a centrifugal force that essentially counters the dominant society and its knowledge system. This point of departure gets reflected in the generic and thematic markers used in Dalit writings. This paper would like to highlight these concerns of Dalit literature through Bama's *Karukku* (2000) and *Sangati* (2005). These two texts depict one's self-recognition as an untouchable in the mainstream socio-political-economical context. This paper will also focus on the English translations of these texts by Lakshmi Holmstrom. It will investigate how this act of translation compels an engagement of readers irrespective of their chronotopes. Are these texts able to break the barrier between the metropolis and the margin by constituting this kind of readership? Or are they initiating any synthesising process? Do these texts genologically written in testimonial and novel genres successfully bring out the dichotomy between the centre and its peripheries? This paper will engage with these texts through its historiographical, thematic and genological analysis to enquire these questions and to highlight these texts' point of departure from the contemporary mainstream knowledge and literary system.

Keywords: Bama, *Karukku*, *Sangati*, Dalit literature, Dalit feminist writer, autobiography, Indian Bhasha Literature

Introduction

Literature from every nation contains specific socio-codes, which play a taxonomical factor in marking specific texts under certain categories such as canons, residual, emergent, etc. The canonisation process of texts constructs an apparatus of power position within a given literary system and culture. Specific centripetal and centrifugal forces start functioning within a literary system. The centripetal force attempts to maintain the norms of dominant cultural parameters, whereas the centrifugal force tries to constitute its own markers. In the Indian context, Dalit literature is an example of a centrifugal force that essentially counters the dominant society and its knowledge system. This point of departure is reflected in the generic and thematic markers used in Dalit writings. This paper will deal with the debate about the centre and its periphery with relation to Dalit literature by addressing questions such as—What elements make Dalit literature different? What traits make Dalit literature use a centrifugal force against the conventional literary system? How Bama Faustina Susairaj, whose pen name is Bama as a Dalit feminist writer, works in that framework or does she construct a different kind of framework? When Bama's works are being translated into English, what kind of ethics does a translator have to take cognisance of, and how is the translator negotiating the politics of emitter and receptor language in the context of India? To address all these questions, one needs to focus on the politics of literature in a linguistic society first. Literary culture does not provide equal importance and significance to every text. This unequal distribution of concentration and significance initiates the selective representation of texts. This entire process leads to the canonisation process in a particular literary culture. This canon-formation process keeps drawing and redrawing the fields of literary production in terms of what is socially acceptable and unacceptable. From there, it can be derived that values and implicit judgments with a power structure constitute the history of any language literature. By this canon formation, literary conventions come into being and an otherisation process is initiated for the texts that do not abide by these conventions: 'The canon of literature, on the other hand, is the product of a wavering and unofficial consensus; it is tacit rather than explicit, loose in its boundaries, and always subject to changes in its inclusions' (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 29).

Ideally, the boundaries of canon formation remain indefinite, but because of the power structure within a literary system, specific authors remain central, and others are made to stay marginal. These canon formation dynamics give hints to binaries such as major–minor literature, dominant and para literature. Literature from the politically dominant category becomes the major and dominant one, and in contrast to this category, others are portrayed as minor and para literature. Through this formation, an act of transformation also

takes place. The 'low' valued literary aesthetics start attempting to internalise the 'high' valued literary aesthetics, and by this, they tend to lose their innate tenets. In this context, G. N. Devy terms this treatment and idealisation of canons as the 'kanuns' for the dominated society (Devy 1998: 141). In the Indian context, the 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' literature have been interdependent and have an elaborate history of mutual transactions. The question of an assortment of traditions, trends and varieties holds great significance in a multicultural nation-state like India. The para literature of that context contains the trends, traditions, and practices of social lives that are systematically considered marginal, trivial and inferior by the dominant section of the society, which leads them to be characterised as parasitical (Devy 1998: 134). This para literature remains in the middle space between literature and non-literature. It does not get to be recognised as 'literature' because it is unacceptable by the literary canons, which form the formal attributes of literature through time. It is a sheer fallacy to consider para literature as non-literature.

A sensitised training of readership, however, can make its readers cognisant of the vital signs of any kind of literature and its politics by providing particular importance to its chronotope. The signs include how they are coming into being, converging into and diverging from a literary tradition and how a text becomes a path-breaking element for a movement and creates a rupture in a particular literary society. In this context, it is crucial to highlight the centrifugal force prevailing in Dalit writings. To constitute the definition of Dalit writing, Raj Gauthaman has stressed the literary traits of this literary culture. He states that Dalit writing is meant to disrupt the received modern upper caste language properties and to expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements, and its falsifying order as a symbol of dominance (Gauthaman 2021: xii). Dalit writers make a conscious choice of language for their writings, and they tend towards the colloquial version of their mother tongue. It politicises both theirs' and the reader's expectation. If the reader wants to come in proximity to the Dalit reality, it has to be done through a Dalit writer's language. Many critics claim that Dalit literature does not render a pleasing experience. To counter this claim, Gauthaman states, 'Dalit literature is not for the pleasure of reading. It should disturb the reader. It should embarrass him or her. It should expose the hidden caste-religion ideology in those who declare that caste and religion are no longer functional in contemporary life' (Gauthaman 2021: 23).

This discomfort of the reading experience is generated through the language, the themes and the narrative strategy of the concerned texts. In narrative strategy, Dalit writers use two instrumental elements in their writing strategy — inversion and reversion. Inversion is functional, where the writer

uses language to protest against the hegemony, and reversion works in a manner where the hegemonic powers permit the oppressed to violate the norms for the time being and bring them back into submission through different mediums. Dalit writings purposefully use no stereotypical models for their writings. They reconstruct the sequence, chronology, perception of time, form, and language, and all these literary tropes evolve through time through their writing. In the case of Bama, the tension throughout *Karukku* (2000) is between the self and the community, where the narrator leaves one community to join another. Even though she cannot escape from the caste-based facade. *Sangati* (2005) shifts from the story of the individual struggle to the perception of a community of Paraiya women, a neighbourhood consisting of friends and relations and their collective struggle. In this sense, *Sangati* can be considered as a recorder of the collective experience of a community. *Karukku* and *Sangati* draw the reader's attention towards a new generic style where testimonies of struggle, hardships and conscious choice are present. The texts are testimonies of women who are conditioned by their sociological, patriarchal context, but they constantly strive not to give up their agency.

Bama's autobiographical work *Karukku* can be considered as a documentation of self-observation from a third-person perspective. According to the conventional norm of autobiographies, the events of one's life should be projected in a linear, chronological and sequential manner. In *Karukku*, Bama does not abide by the generic conventional rules of an autobiography. The text strategically plays with the sequence of her life events, making the narrative more realistic and conversational and adding some confessional value. The themes of this narrative can be categorised into work, games, education, belief, food, man–woman's conjugal life, and so on. A journey of one's life exploration can be traced out from this narrative. The narrator gradually becomes aware of every bit and part of her identity, and at the same time, it can be seen how she is compelled to face the unwanted pieces of baggage of those identities. *Karukku* depicts the author's different life events, from her childhood to her womanhood. At home, she is made a victim of gender discrimination by being denied good and nutritious food (Bama 2000: 28). Outside her home, she witnesses caste discrimination when her upper caste teacher never hesitates to slap her across the face for trivial reasons (Bama 2000: 34). Then when she becomes a nun, she is strategically identified as a 'Dalit–Christian'. Throughout her journey, all such hyphenated identity markers are tagged to her from the day she becomes cognisant of her senses. By the sequential arrangement of the events, it is understood that the narrator's spiritual development and her realisation of her societal position go hand in hand. Her spiritual exploration of herself as a catholic and the realisation of being a Paraiya happens simultaneously (Bama 2000: 65); but this exploration of self

in the Christian religious structure is not devoid of caste. Her identity as a Paraiya is not overlooked here even for a moment. Despite being a well-equipped and capable teacher, she does not get to teach in schools of her choice or in a school where a teacher like her is much needed. These events are marked with religious rituals, significant years memorised with religious processions and the years counted by the cycle of crops and seasons. Parallel to this cyclic notion of time, the narrator puts an equal importance on her personal socio-political life events, such as the revelatory moment of coming to know herself as an untouchable in society or the day when a father has to arrive at his dead son's funeral disguised as a woman (Bama 2000: 76).

Sangati is more a community-specific documentation, where the role of a woman in a Dalit society is highlighted. Women from Dalit communities face labour discrimination in a two-fold way. In professional labour, female and male labourers dedicate equal time, but in terms of payment, women get less than their male counterparts. In household chores, women are compelled to take the entire responsibility. Women are denied their agency in the case of their labour and their bodies. An ardently dedicated wife's duty is fulfilled when she can provide bodily pleasure to her man even after a day-long laborious day. Their motherhood also falls under scrutiny when any woman's child does not follow societal presupposed norms. A Paraiya woman is made to breastfeed an upper caste child as she consumes beef which is nutritious. However, she is not served water in a container because of her caste. Dalit women are prohibited from going to cinema halls because of the possibility of getting sexually harassed by upper-caste men. In Dalit communities, males are allowed to have multiple marriages, but females are brutally criticised if they choose to do the same. Bama minutely observes and records all these instances in a critically politicised manner in *Sangati*. The reader gets to understand that a Dalit woman's life is discriminated against across multiple layers: 'A woman's body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and entire life are under his control and domination. And we too have accepted what they want us to believe that this is the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men' (Bama 2005: 68).

Gopal Guru has famously claimed that 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (Guru 1995: 2549). This claim becomes transparent and logical when autobiographical works of upper-caste and Dalit women are read in contrast. It is not only caste and class identities but also one's gender positioning that gets into the discourse. Dalit men play the same role against their women that higher caste people do against their women. The narratives of Dalit women showcase their experiences that are more local and come directly from them without filtration and appropriation. For these reasons, Dalit women define the concept of Dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting 'womanhood' as an

umbrella term. At the same time, their social location with a perception of their reality makes their narratives more realistic.

Reading Indian writers with reference to their concerns and achievements is crucial for understanding the different layers of Indian realities from several points of view. The English translations of Indian Bhasha texts bring these realities to readers in more proximity, irrespective of their chronotopes. But in the context of Indian cultural politics English as a language is not devoid of the fear of homogenisation. (Prasad 2011: 31). This is where the skills and mindset of the concerned translator play a crucial role. Through *Sangati* and *Karukku*, Bama attempts to make a rupture in content and in writing as a craft. They negate Tamil literary traditions, Tamil standardised grammar and the binary between written and spoken Tamil. Her writing style has an excessive use of proverbs and songs. In the English translations, Lakshmi Holmstrom makes a dedicated and passionate attempt to capture the real essence of every bit of them. She does not let her English sanitise or appropriate the motif of the texts. English as a language in the South Asian context has a history of power, hegemony and appropriation. By which it is easier to homogenise the disparate experiences. But Lakshmi Holmstrom attempts to translate for the Indian people; she prioritises Indian readers, by which she posits resistance through her translation as she is constructing a specific local experience in English. She is particularising the English language through her ideology. She is well aware that all cultures and languages are not similar or function in the same way; by doing this, she can depict Tamil aesthetics in Bama's style in the translations. The translations assert the differences and departures from the conventional writings by creating a different space for the readership and constructing a synthesisation to the non-Tamil reader by starkly highlighting these literary tropes.

Notes

1. Chronotope: In Greek *Chronos* stands for time in sequential manner and *Topos* stands for place. Therefore, the intersection of time and place is termed as 'chronotope' which is used as a methodological tool to understand the text's multifarious contextual elements. By this the readers can acquire profound understanding regarding the multilayered politics of a certain text.
2. Genology: The study of genre in literature is termed as 'genology.' For further information refer to *Literary Studies in India: Genology,* edited by Shubha Chakraborty Dasgupta. Published in July, 2004 by Jadavpur University Press, Kolkata, India.
3. Bhasha Literature: The methodology of Comparative Literature in the Indian context deals with several mother tongues and literary texts produced in those languages. The 8th Schedule of Indian Constitution recognises only 22

languages as 'standard languages.' The past census reports of India have segregated standard languages as *Bhasha* and others as *Boli*. In linguistic terms that stands for the binary division of 'Language' and 'Dialect.' The disciplinary praxis of Comparative Literature in India condemns this hierarchical structure and stands for providing equal respect and weightage to every mother tongue present in this nation and their literary corpus. Henceforth this paper emphasises the usage of the term 'Bhasha Literature.'

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The Ecocultural Keystones and Place Centrism in Selected Lepcha Folk Tales

Pratiksha Pradhan and Vijayalekshmi Ramachandran

Abstract

The paper examines the Lepcha folk tales collected and published by Yishey Doma under the title, *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* (2010). Through a textual analysis of the tales narrated, the paper demonstrates the significance of the Lepcha narratives that persistently debunk the human/nature divide and frequently project the mutual dependency between humans and animals by subverting the superiority myth of the former. A story such as 'The Sun and the Moon' is a case in point. Lepcha folk tales are primarily oral, and this study argues that they are 'place centric' and offer us scope to imbue the place with meaning (Taussig 1987). In Doma's collection of Lepcha folk tales, the tale titled 'The Race between Teesta and Rangeet' places geographical locations such as the Triveni in Teesta River at the centre of the narrative and imbues it with religious and cultural significance. The concept of a sacred grove and the evocation of it to stop humans from exploiting the land further helps in the conservation of 'places'. Teesta River figures in the folk tales as an ecocultural keystone (Alex 2016b), gathering ecological, cultural and mythical resonances. While tales such as 'The Cave of the Occult Fairies' foreground the 'damning' of rivers, suggesting that dams are created by demons to create havoc, 'The Lake That Shifted' shows how natural water bodies are polluted. The stories thus traverse time and place, constructing ecocultural keystones that the community can perhaps foreground in the context of current ecological discourses. The paper studies Lepcha folk tales using a contemporary perspective as a tool for raising ecological consciousness among the general public. The stories can be moved from the margins to the mainstream in that respect.

Keywords: Lepcha folk tales, place centrism, ecological consciousness, ecocultural keystones

Living in a world characterised by a worsening ecological crisis, it has become imperative to seek out various mediums and modes, past and present, that

can assist in re-envisioning human relationships with the habitat. Such a re-envisioning can involve foregrounding discourses that have been relegated to the margins and re-imbuing them with a significance that would help us rethink our relationship with space, place and land.[1] Concepts such as 'life-place'[2] (Thayer 2003), 'topophilia'[3] (Tuan 1974, 1990) and 'biophilia'[4] (Wilson 1984) have all been developed to re-read, re-imagine and re-inhabit 'places' and rekindle our affection[5] towards them. While 'biophilia' is the feeling of oneness with all life forms, 'topophilia' is 'the affective bond between people and place or setting' (Rangarajan and Slovic 2018: 4). The personality of 'places' is attempted to be restored through the practices that result from this rewiring of the human mind by listening in on to what places have to say, and not through the usual dominant discourses that hold sway at any given moment.

Stories related to places[6] get relegated to the realm of folklore, necessitating the viewing of them as part of a past that no longer holds any relevance for the present. In addition to this, technology mediated lives and globalisation have made place itself peripheral to human lives and identities. Place has become a distance and a hurdle that humans are too eager to cross and leave behind. It stands in our way, impeding our flight. We get bogged down, we get stuck, and we get mired – all in places! We feel the tyranny of space and place as much as we feel the tyranny of time. In short, we are a people alienated from spatial-temporal coordinates. And this alienation from land has had a tremendous impact on ecological health, turning us into ecological aliens on planet Earth.

Returning us to our places would require a leap of faith and faith in the potential of places and place-narratives to help build on the values of the affective domain in terms of the human relationship with the ecosystems in nature, on earth and the planet. It is nothing short of a leap of faith that is required because oftentimes place-based stories are critically apprehended as being too romantic, idealistic and even naïve in their belief in a Thoreauvian idyllic landscape as a corrective to all human-engendered corruption. However, this was the scepticism that prevailed only till the years of the COVID pandemic, which taught new lessons and new stories that were more often than not old lessons and old stories that just signalled new directions. For instance, the year 2020 witnessed two issues of the journal, *Time and Mind*,[7] being dedicated to exploring the connection between ecology, landscape and folklore. The two issues focussed on understanding 'the complex relationships between landscape, folklore and people'. The articles in the volumes explored in their own way how 'folklore can influence behaviour in certain landscapes, and how land use decisions can be made by land-owners to protect and preserve these places for the benefit of the human and non-human communities that constitute these spaces'. Folklore, thus, was perceived as necessary to be

revisited to use its potential 'to change attitudes and behaviour towards the natural environment, and act as a tool for the transfer, dissemination and improved understanding of ecological knowledge' (Hunter 2020: 223).

Popular culture brings us instances and real-life incidents of how the people of particular locales develop beliefs in and around certain features of the land that they must have inhabited for generations. Any developmental project that comes in the way of tampering with and wiping away the traces of a myth or a story related to a tree, bush, forest, grove, river, rock, hillock, or mountain is resisted. Myths, stories and folklore have moved from the fringes where popular beliefs and rituals are usually assigned a place to the centre stage of discourses surrounding the environment. Some examples can be drawn from places as far away as Iceland and Ireland where construction projects took into account the landscape's association with fairies. In more recent times, the invocation of the legal personhood of landscape is an attempt at restoring to the land and its features the right to not be plundered in the name of resources for human beings. Associating land and its specific features with guardian deities and their own life force that animates within them must be an ancient mythological and folkloristic belief and habit. Instead of relegating all these as superstitions to the hazy and dark margins of a curated culture,[8] the potential of place-centric folklore to raise ecological consciousness must be explored.

The TiNai ecocritical concept,[9] formulated by Nirmal Selvamony (2010), for instance is, in a sense, a place-based theory that integrates 'the inner landscape and outer geophysical space, yoking the environment, the human, the non-human and the sacred in a seamless continuity' (Rangarajan and Slovic 2018: 74). In the integrated *oikos* of Sangam poetry, as Selvamony highlights, plants have been sisters and sharks have been ancestors. The role of such an integrated kinship where plants, animals and humans are part of the same plane of existence not just physically, but intellectually, morally and mentally points towards the indispensability of the affective domain in re-envisioning the relationship between humans with other-than-human, or better still, more-than-human entities.

In the ecocultural critical theory developed by Adrian J. Ivakhiv, cultural theorist and eco philosopher, culture acts as the 'battleground' or terrain within which different ideas about nature and the environment, human-environment relations, and environmental politics and action are articulated and contested (Ivakhiv 1997). According to him, the primary goal of ecocultural critical theory is to examine how human and non-human species are handled in scientific discourse, technical practice and popular culture. The second goal is to critically analyse the cultural representation and dimension of human–nonhuman world relations, taking into account social disparities

such as race, class, gender, and so on. Ecocultural critical theory also attempts to investigate the dependability variables between the two. It further tries to decipher hegemonic and anthropocentric attitudes through the development of alternative forms of interaction, eventually, to address the world's current environmental crisis.

It is in this context of a shift in perception and approach that the recentring of place-based myths and folklore in this paper is to be viewed. The paper examines the Lepcha folk tales collected, translated and retold by Yishey Doma in a book titled *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* (Doma 2010). Lepchas, considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim, India's first organic state, are known as *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup* or the 'Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God', in short, *Rongs*. The name underwent changes owing to the intervention of other communities such as the Nepali immigrants and the British colonisers. The Nepali immigrants, unable to understand the language spoken by the indigenous community, misinterpreted the meaning and addressed the people of the community as *Lapcha* or *Lapche*, which was further twisted by the British as *Lepchas* (Tamsang 2000: i). The Lepchas are rich in culture and heritage, and they are proud of their language. Owing to British colonisation, the translation of Lepcha words into English started in the year 1840 by Archibald Campbell. Other works based on the Lepcha community were written by Mainwaring, Grünwedel, Waddell, Schott, Drouin, Feer, and many others (Plaisier 2005: 10). Their work focusses on Lepcha culture, heritage, language, grammar, folklore, and identity. Recent studies such as 'Locating Lepcha Identity: Folktales, Myths, and Legends of the Lepchas' (Aden 2016) foreground the making of the community's identity and its attempt to reclaim its history through myths, legends and folk tales. This paper takes its point of departure from similar studies by looking at Lepcha folk tales from an ecological perspective as it would serve as a tool for raising ecological consciousness. Lepcha folk tales are primarily oral, and this study argues that they are place-centric and offer scope for us to 'raise their meaning'. Taussig explains:

> To imbue a landscape with moral and even redemptive significance is for most of us nothing more than romantic fantasy. But there are occasions when to travel through a landscape is to become empowered by raising its meaning. Carried along a line in space, the traveler travels a story, the line gathering the momentum of the power of fiction as the arrow of time moves across a motionless mosaic of space out of time, here primeval and divine. So it is today that Indian medicine men of the Putumayo, those who stay at home no less than those who wander, arouse the slumbering meaning of space long colonized by the white man and carry him through it to uncover the hidden presence not only of God but of the sorcerer (Taussig 1987: 335).

Lepcha folk tales, apart from foregrounding the community's culture, beliefs, rituals, and identity, place the utmost importance on 'place'. 'Place is integral

to community, identity, purpose and a sense of connection with nature' (Rangarajan and Slovic 2018: 64). The discourse related to living in 'place' includes 'key terms such as bioregion, sustainability, community, dwelling and reinhabitation' (Rangarajan and Slovic 2018: 64). In addition, the concept of a life-place is imbued with 'a deep and respectful attachment to "place" and its other-than-human inhabitants' (Rangarajan and Slovic 2018: 64). In his article, 'A Critical Theory of Place-Conscious Education', David A. Greenwood says that 'place-conscious education can provide environmental education research with a fluid conceptual framework that bridges cultural and ecological analysis, and that is responsive to diverse and changing cultural and ecological contexts' (Greenwood 2013: 93).

Through a textual analysis of the tales narrated, the paper demonstrates the significance of the Lepcha narratives that persistently debunk the human versus nature divide to frequently project the mutual dependency between humans and animals by subverting the superiority claim of the former seen in dominant discourses. Doma writes that according to the Lepcha creation story, Itbu-moo, Mother Creator, created Kongchen Kongchlo, his wives Samo Gayzong and Paki Chyu, his brothers, Pawo Hungree and Bagok Chyu, and many other mountains. And to complement her creation, Itbu-moo created *daa*, the lakes, and *roong*, the rivers. Itbu-moo created Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu, the first man and woman respectively, taking snow from her first creation, which is the mountain Kongchen Kongchlo. By creating humans from snow, Lepcha folk tales exemplify Brian Massumi's concept of the nature–culture continuum, which opposes the nature–culture divide, the ideological legacy and burden of the Enlightenment age (Massumi 2002). The nature–human divide is almost easily bridged by creating people out of snow, which is an element of nature. By blurring the line between nature and culture, Lepcha folklore also subverts, though perhaps unintentionally, the superiority of human beings among all other living and nonliving things. The story also de-centres the anthropocentric attitude.

The Lepcha folk tales titled 'The Death of Lasso Mung Paso', 'The Stairway to Heaven' and 'The Cave of the Occult Fairies' are important as through these tales we get to know about the reason behind the names of places in Sikkim. For instance, 'The Death of Lasso Mung Paso' is about Lasso Mung Puno, the abandoned child of Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu. He is deprived of love and care from his parents, which turns him into a demonic creature who returns to take revenge upon the entire Lepcha clan residing in Mayel Lyang:

> At Sakyong, the demon king took shelter in another tree, the *sangli kung*, which was crushed by the demon's weight. Then it flew towards Pentong, Laven, Tingbong, Lungdeum Adong, Lingthem, and Liklyang, killing and eating humans who came in his

> way, with the three Gods and the Lepcha warriors in hot pursuit. All these villages got their names after Lasso Mung Puno flew over them (Doma 2010: 17).

Thus, Lepcha folk tales are also seen to become a medium through which places are named. 'The Death of Lasso Mung Paso' is significant in one more respect: in terms of the human superiority being subverted. To help the Lepchas hiding from the demon, Itbu-moo sends beetles, grasshoppers and crickets, but they prove to be of no avail. So Itbu-moo creates *bongthing*, a powerful shaman, and assigns him the task of killing Lasso Mung Puno. The *bongthing*, blessed with supernatural powers, tries his best and wounds Lasso Mung Puno, but cannot kill him as he flies away, transforming himself into an eagle. Even after sustaining severe wounds, the demon king does not stop troubling the Lepchas. So, they, with *bongthing*, decide to kill the demon, who is at the top of the palm tree, and it is with the help of a caterpillar that they are able to finally drive Lasso Mung Puno away.

In many folk tales, humans are dependent on non-human creatures. It is with the help of a bird called *kugreafo* that they were able to kill the demon king in Losso Chungrong, which Doma mentions as present-day Phamrong waterfalls in west Sikkim (Doma 2010: 17). Similarly, in the folk tale 'The Marriage of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom', Tarbong Nom is helped by a bird, a grasshopper and a cockroach to collect fire and buth[10] for chee[11] required to please Narip Nom's parents in order to marry her.

In the folk tale 'The Stairway to Heaven', a group of Lepcha men decide to build a staircase to heaven to meet the gods. They decide to stack earthen pots one on top of the other so that once the column reaches the height equivalent to heaven, they can climb it and meet their gods. To build the staircase, they start searching for a suitable site. They ultimately land on a 'flat piece of land situated to the south of the river Roman in Daramdin in west Sikkim' (Doma 2010: 48). According to the folk tale, the Lepcha men name the place *Thallom Purtam,* which means a flat land leading upwards. All the people start with their respective works, potters make pots and others build the structure. They are successful enough to reach the clouds and are about to reach the sky but unfortunately, tragedy descends on them due to miscommunication between the man at the top and the one at the bottom of the staircase:

> The man right on the top wanted to know how much further heaven was. So he asked for a hook. He looked down and shouted, "Kok vim yang at (send up a hooked stick)". The message got passed along down the column. One worker, who could not hear properly, asked, 'What? "Kok vim yang at", repeated the man above him, but the other worker heard, "Cheyk ta (Smash it down)". (Doma 2010: 48–9)

The men below start smashing the pots with their axes and ultimately the staircase falls down on the ground making a thunderous sound. Lepchas

named the place Ka Daa Raom Dyen, which means 'We ourselves smashed it down'. This folk tale is often read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of miscommunication, but place plays a vital role here as it is because of the lay of the landscape that Daramdin was selected to build the staircase. It is believed that pieces of the smashed pots are still found in Daramdin. And in memory of this tale, the staircase to heaven is still being reconstructed in Daramdin, which attracts tourists.

The folk tale 'The Cave of the Occult Fairies' forebodes in a way the disaster that dams can cause. The story, set in the mid-18th century, is about Guru Padmasambhava, who with his close disciples is travelling to Sikkim from Tibet to form a new kingdom. To hinder and stop Padmasambhava's work, a demonic couple is said to be following him. When Padmasambhava starts to perform rituals at Tashiding, the male demon takes the form of a poisonous snake and starts to trouble him by emitting poisonous gas from his mouth. A battle takes place between Padmasambhava and the male demon and in the end Padmasambhava kills him: 'With his powers, Padmasambhava immediately converted the body of the dead snake into a rock, which can be seen as a cut rock at the back of the sacred stupa known as Choedten Thongwa Rangdrol, which means "deliverance by mere sight"' (Doma 2010: 75). Further, the female demon tries to kill Padmasambhava who is inside a cave by building a rock dam across the river so that the river floods the cave, perhaps anticipating the modern technology of building dams on rivers, only to cause floods and disaster. However, in the end, Padmasambhava kills the female demon with a bow. According to the folk tale, the bow is planted on the top of Tsuan Byak, which is today a bamboo grove.

The folk tale 'The Race between Teesta and Rangeet' attributes significance to places like Triveni in Teesta. According to the folk tale, Rangeet and Rongnyu, a male and a female river spirit respectively, fall in love with each other and meet secretly in the lap of the Himalayas. But when the word spreads about their affair, they offer their salutations to Kongchen Kongchlo and move away. They decide to take different paths to meet at Pozok. Rangeet is guided by *tufo*, a mountain bird, and Rongnyu by a snake. But the bird gets distracted by the beauty of nature whereas the snake follows the path without any distraction and reaches the destination. Rongnyu waits for her lover but when Rangeet get to know that Rongnyu has reached first, he boils with anger as his male pride is hurt. He becomes so enraged that he decides to go back to the Himalayas. He returns, destroying whatever comes his way. Rongnyu, in order to soothe him, follows him, resulting in an increase in the volume of river water, thereby flooding the land. Everything gets destroyed but it is believed that Tundong Lho, a mountain in Damthang, in south Sikkim is saved. The Lepchas, who take shelter in the mountain, are saved and they

offer prayers to Itbu-moo who takes care of them by restoring their land. Meanwhile, Rongnyu is able to meet her lover Rangeet and calms him by telling him that it was not because of him but due to the bird that he got delayed. After being convinced by Rongnyu's words, they decide to flow back to the plains and decide never to be parted again. Later Rongnyu is called *Thi-see-tha* or Teesta. Doma states:

> When the Lepchas heard the story of the two river spirits, they flocked to the confluence of the two rivers as pilgrims to make offerings to the river Gods. The Lepcha bride and bridegroom are always taken to the rivers Teesta and Rangeet and people wish the newlywed couple a happy and prosperous life like the two rivers (Doma 2010: 53).

As evident from the discussion above, Lepcha folk tales can be read as ecofables. This is important as the place-centrism in these ecofables offer scope for the formation of ecocultural keystones, a concept developed by Rayson K. Alex. In his article, 'TiNai-Documentation as Ecocultural Ethnography: My Experience with the Mudugar', Alex narrates how he found betel leaves functioning as an ecocultural keystone in the lives of Mudugars, a tribal community living in Attappady, in the Palakkad District of Kerala. Alex's theory of 'ecological keystone' was developed from the concept of keystone species, recognised as an important species capable of regulating an entire ecosystem. Alex considers ecocultural keystones as living and nonliving entities, which have both ecological and cultural implications for a community (Alex 2016a: 189). In his article, 'Indigenous Interiority as Nature-Culture Sacred Continuum: An Ecological Analysis of *Have You Seen the Arana*?' Alex considers the gooseberry tree and the fish in the river as examples of ecocultural keystones while narrating their ancestor's journey to Earth. P. K. Kariyan, who is a community elder and the president of Thirunelli panchayat, in addition to being a *pulapaattu* singer, mentions that Ithi and Acham, the first woman and man respectively ate fruits from gooseberry trees and drank water from the lake while they were wandering in the forest. He also mentions the deteriorating condition of both the forest and lake as the food source has vanished with time and there is no fish either in the lake.

The Teesta River figures in Lepcha folk tales as an ecocultural keystone, representing and defining what it means to be a Lepcha of Sikkim and the nearby places. The river is not only an ecological keystone or landmark, but a cultural landmark as well owing to its centrality in the folklore of the Lepchas. Thus, the Teesta River, perhaps little known elsewhere in comparison with the 'major rivers' of India, gather and shore up ecological, cultural, and mythical resonances for the place and its inhabitants.

Doma's Lepcha folk tales thus traverse time and place, constructing ecocultural keystones such as rivers, rocks, plants, and bamboo grass that the community can perhaps foreground in the context of current ecological discourses. Further, the Lepcha folktales play an essential role in 'increasing the meaning' of places in Sikkim. The places associated with the folklore help in developing an affective connection, which in turn helps raise ecological consciousness, required in an age of ecological crisis. As Heather Houser, who demonstrated the uses of emotional connection through her work on ecosickness, says, 'It is emotion that can carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions, nations, and the planet' (Houser 2014).

Notes

1 For poets associated with Deep Ecology such as Gary Snyder, 'life-place' is a spiritual concept involving knowledge about ancestors who inhabited the place and their ways of life. Snyder's poems suggest renaming America according to the creation mythology of the Native Americans.

2 'Life-place,' a kind of bioregionalism, is more than that, as it recasts human relationship to the earth and the places and regions that humans inhabit. 'Life-place' is not a static theoretical construct, as 'life-place' has also been advanced and followed as a practice.

3 Though conceived in the early stages of the environmental movement, the concept still has its uses as we, human beings, are long conditioned to maraud earth, nature, and ecosphere unless and until we are repeatedly told the other possibility that we are capable of in terms of the desire to develop a relationship with nature and earth that is less taxing on the latter.

4 An undervalued concept in philosophy and even religion, 'biophilia' is the love and affiliation for all life. The feeling is different from the biologist's taxonomic and exploratory impulses.

5 'Soft, to your places, animals', sang the Irish poet, Thomas Kinsella (*Poems*, 1956).

6 Sthala Purana is a different genre altogether as it refers to stories surrounding a sacred site such as a temple. Besides, it is a genre that mostly flourished in South India.

7 *Time and Mind* is an interdisciplinary journal published by Routlege, presenting perspectives on landscape, ecopsychology, people, culture, and monuments.

8 Etymologically, the term 'culture' has been derived from the Latin word *colere* meaning 'to tend to the earth and grow' or 'cultivate and nurture.' However, at some point in history, culture began to be separately viewed from the earth matter and environment related meanings it always was supposed to have. The concept of culture, owing to it being a matter of selection or

curation, came to include only man-made efforts, thereby making the binary of nature and culture.

9 The TiNai, however, does not originate from modern day ecocritical principles. Rather, it is a concept gleaned from the practice and theory of the people of ancient Tamil Nadu. It is a worldview expressed in their Sangam poetry dating from 300 B.C. to 300 A.D. TiNai is now 're-cognised' as a place based theory that does not differentiate among the plants, animals and humans but integrate and treat them all as part of the same conceptual and emotional universe, not just the physical universe, owing to the work of Nirmal Selvamony, who, according to *The World Humanities Report*, https://worldhumanities report.org/people/nirmal-selvamony/#:~:text= In%20addition%20to%20d eveloping%20the, the%20Indian%20 Journal%20of%20Ecocriticism, "In addition to developing the first course on ecocriticism in the Indian university system, in 1980 [also] founded the forum known as tinòai, which transformed the idea of tinòai into a movement by representing it as an alternative way of life, and the *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*. He developed a new area of study known as tinòai studies and revived the philosophical tradition of tinòai called katòci (philosophy)".

10 Doma mentions it as a powder which ferments boiled mongbree seeds into chee.

11 Doma explains chee as a fermented, cereal-based mild alcoholic beverage and mentions that in the folk tale she is referring to fermented millet brew.

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‘Spaces’ and ‘Identities’ in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road*

Priya Bhattacharya

Abstract

This paper looks into spaces where the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ often overlap in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s novel *Pather Panchali*: *Song of the Road,* which reflects the power dynamics that characterise the social order of community life in the village of Nishchindipur, a part of rural Bengal. Characters like Horihor Ray and his ancestors, Indir Thakrun, a Hindu Brahmin widow, who people the village, not only conform to the social hierarchy dominated by Brahmins — the ‘centre’ that defines the ‘periphery’ constituted by the lower castes — but also themselves become a part of the periphery through their actions and due to the turn of events in their lives. The story is narrated through the eyes of two children, Opu and Durga, for whom the centre often becomes the nature.

The novel was translated into English by T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji in 1968 as a part of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, which was a UNESCO translation project that endeavoured to translate masterpieces of world literature from lesser-known languages into a more international language such as English and French. Hence the original novel in Bengali, its selection as a masterpiece of world literature together with its English translation may be thought of as an embodiment of the efforts of the ‘periphery writing back to the centre’.

Keywords: centre, periphery, power dynamics

Introduction

The ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ manifest themselves in various forms in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s novel *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road*. The caste hierarchy presents the ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ orientation as the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. However, even within the Brahmins, the

supreme caste, there are the rich and the poor Brahmins. Also, the novel portrays the 'centre' and the 'margin' dichotomy through the deeds of virtuous Brahmins and cruel ones. Throughout the novel the 'centre' and the 'margin' contrast also plays out through the portrayal of the virtues practised by some of the characters such as the wife of the wealthy Brahmin and who looks like Goddess Jagaddhatri, the cruel insensitive gestures of Shorbojoya towards Indir Thakrun and the inhuman criminal activities of Biru Ray. The perpetrators of crime and inhuman cruelty are punished — the narration of the story being from the perspective of two children makes it imperative for the author to subject the cruel unkind people to retribution. In a novel that is about the growing up of two children, the virtuous people may be thought of as not only upholding ethical values but also as characters of importance. On the other hand, the cruel, unkind people may be thought of as being relegated to a position of inferior status, which is reinforced by the retribution.

The novel, through the portrayal of the character of Biru Ray delineates the socio-economic, cultural and administrative ambience before the British power was firmly established in the country. An infirm, nascent administrative–legal machinery could not curb the criminal activities of bandits, river pirates and robber gangs. In *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* the robber gangs are described as consisting

> ... mostly of low-caste people, Goyalas, Bagdis and Bauries. They were tough, strong men, and well practised in the use of staves and spears…. They worshipped a goddess who was known as Kali of the Dacoits, and built temples in her honour…. By day the bandits lived the lives of ordinary people, but at night they worshipped Kali and issued forth to plunder the home of some householder in a distant village. Many a wealthy family of those days built up its fortune by dacoity. Bishnuram Ray's son, Biru Ray, had this sort of ill reputation. He was the leader of a gang of mercenary thugs whose den was on the bank of a stretch of water known as the Thakurjhi lake. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Biru Ray's gang hides under a huge banyan tree near the lake and awaits the arrival of unwary wayfarers. The gang members accost their victims, stun and kill them and steal whatever the victims are carrying with them. Having killed and looted their victims they sometimes throw the bodies into the lake, especially if the victims are not carrying any valuables with them. Having completed the gory murderous act they go back to the tree to wait for their next victim to come along.

Although the robber gangs consist of men from lower castes their leader Biru Ray is a Brahmin, the son of Bishnuram Ray, Horihor's ancestor. Being the leader, Biru Ray, in spite of being a Brahmin, partakes in the heinous act of murdering innocent people. The identity and character of a Brahmin is exhibited to have the gruesome aspects of a murderer and a robber. Here an extremely

incisive insight into the identity of a member of the Brahmin community is presented. In the character of Biru Ray, the identities of the uppermost caste and those of the lower castes overlap. Through the heinous murder of an old infirm Brahmin and his minor son, Biru Ray invokes divine retribution, which claims the life of his son within the span of a year and continues to claim the lives of the firstborn male children of his family for two generations.

Biru Ray, belonging to the community of Brahmins that is supposed to be involved and engrossed in worshipping God, and in the intellectual and spiritual cultivation of religious scriptures, enhances his wealth through gruesome murderous acts. He deviates from the realm of virtue — 'the centre' — and becomes a part of the 'periphery', which is peopled with men of lower castes who indulge in heinous criminal activities. Biru Ray's inclusion in this 'periphery' is reinforced by divine retribution. In the story, exactly a year later Biru Ray's infant son is killed:

> [. . .] One of those crocodiles had pulled Biru Ray's son down the bank into the water. They did what they could. They probed around with their punting poles. They cast off the boat and searched the main channel until far into the night. There was weeping and deep lamentation. A year ago at this same evening hour an incident had occurred in the open country near the Thakurjhi Lake. Biru Ray had been a fool; but he knew now by bitter experience that the unseen arbiter of right and wrong is not cheated of his retribution because the deed lies buried under the dark grass of a lake. His way is light even in darkness. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Divine retribution seems to befall the entire family, claiming not only the lives of Biru Ray and his son but also the lives of the eldest sons of his brothers. However, divine retribution seems to wane and lose its potency after two generations, which results in Horihor's survival. Since the story is narrated through the eyes of two children, it must have become imperative for the author to bring in the retributive aspect of the outcomes of wrongdoing. And this retribution would befall even the members of the supreme caste. At the very fundamental level this may be looked upon as the acknowledgement and reinforcement of the fact that all human beings are equal before God in spite of the prevalent social norm of segregating people into different castes. Even at the turn of the century and in the first few decades of the 20th century, there was a distinct trend in intellectual and social thinking that called for the equality of all castes.

Within the world depicted in the novel, the members of the supreme caste, the Brahmins, are portrayed as any other human beings with vices and virtues. It is within this community of the 'Super Caste' that the characters who people the novel are shown to be motivated by mercenary, mercantile interests — the same attitude that inspires the people of the so-called lower castes. In the novel, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor within the Brahmin

community is reflected through the abject poverty of Horihor's family and the affluence of the Mukherjees. So, within this community the 'centre' and the 'periphery' are often the economically powerful Brahmins and the poor ones like Horihor. Horihor's financial difficulties are accentuated by the low rent he is paid by Bhubon Mukherjee for his orchards. Horihor gives vent to his seething rage by calling Bhubon Mukherjee 'a swindler'. Thus, time and again Brahmins are shown to be engrossed in mercenary concerns.

Onnoda Ray is a professional moneylender. His mercenary attitude is reflected in the cruelty with which he takes away the little money a young peasant woman (Tomrej's wife) brings, hoping that in the aftermath of her husband's death, Onnoda Ray will unlock her rice store which he has held as collateral against the 40 rupees that Tomrej owes him. She brings with her the five rupees she gets by selling the gold locket gifted to her son by his late father. Onnoda Ray not only takes away the five rupees but also refuses to open the rice store while simultaneously insulting her for belonging to a lower caste. By not giving the keys to the store, he takes away the only way she can procure food for her infant son.

Poverty and concern for the future impel Horihor to consider employment as a priest in the household of a wealthy person belonging to the caste of Sadgop, a caste much lower than Brahmins. This gives a new dimension to the 'centre' and 'periphery' orientation. Wealthy lower caste people can employ Brahmins as priests for their families. Horihor being poor is inclined to accept this employment, more so since his employer's identity and caste will remain unknown to his neighbours in Nishchindipur. This is because to become a priest for the Sadgop family he would have to relocate to their village along with his family. Horihor's employment as a priest will also improve his family's financial condition.

Ironically, Horihor a Brahmin does not perform puja on the occasion of Saraswati Puja when Opu is about four or five years old. The undeniable influence of nature on Horihor and some other villagers such as Nobin Palit impels them to look for a blue throated jay on the puja day. However, as they walk along the edge of the forest, concerns about financial wellbeing intrude into their consciousness as depicted in *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road*.

> One of them said, "Hori, have you leased your banana orchard to Bhushno Goyala again?"
>
> The man addressed was Horihor Ray, but he looked very different from the Horihor of ten or so years ago…. He was now middle-aged, the father of two children and very much weighed down by his family responsibilities. He collected his rent and went round from village to village to make sure he received all the fees which were due to him as a Brahmin. He haggled in the country markets over the price of vegetables just like any peasant. He bore no resemblance to the uninhibited, care-free young man of

> earlier days who wandered wherever he would. The years he once spent in the west had slowly become a thing of the past. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Horihor's conversation with Nobin Palit about financial gains is punctuated with warnings to his son Opu, who keeps wandering off into the forest, deeply attracted by the flora and fauna on either side of the road. The indigo factory is almost a place of enchantment for little Opu. He has always wanted to visit the old factory. So, since it is on their way, his father points it out to Opu.

The ironic dichotomy of the 'centre' and the 'periphery' manifests in the description of the firehouse of the old indigo factory. The indigo trade, one of the symbols of the extremely repressive British colonial rule, had become a thing of the past. It had lost its importance. When indigo trade was at its peak, Nishchindipur was the headquarters of the Bengal Indigo Concern. The 14 factories in the area were supervised by John Lermor, the manager of the Nishchindipur factory. The fact that indigo trade had become a closed chapter during the British imperial rule in India becomes evident in the novel.

> [...] but now his factory and its buildings, the vats, the firehouse, the manager's bungalow and the office, were not more than heaps of rubble overgrown with jungle. There was a time when the name of the mighty John Lermor had such power that at the mere mention of it tigers and cows went down to the same watering place to drink. Yet today, except for a few extremely old people, nobody remembered him. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

The description bears testimony to the fact that the transitoriness of life had reduced a centrally important aspect of the British rule into nothingness. A more detailed description of the factory reinstates this inevitable truth:

> The old factory sprawled over a large tract of land by the river like the skeleton of some ferocious prehistoric monster, and the still winter afternoon, like the hand of passing time, was gradually spreading its dusky mantle over it.
>
> Not far from the factory compound Opu saw the grave of a little boy, Manager Lermor's only son. It was quite deserted and overgrown with weeds, yet of all that remained to mark the vast headquarters of the Bengal Indigo Concern the grave alone remained whole. If you went near enough you could still make out the inscription on its old black slab.
>
> There lies Edwin Lermor.
>
> The only son of John and Mrs Lermor
>
> Born May 13, 1853, Died April 27, 1860.
>
> There were many trees round the grave but nearest to it, with leafy branches spread wide to give it shade, was a wild Shondal tree; and in the hot weather by day or by night, whenever the wind blew up hard from the delta, it let its clusters of yellow

> flowers fall on the time-stained tomb of that forgotten foreign child. Everyone else might have forgotten him, but the trees of the forest still remembered. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Thus, nature creates a 'space' where a young, innocent life, long forgotten by the temporal world, is remembered, revered and celebrated.

The story being narrated through the eyes of two children, Opu and his sister Durga, accommodates and sustains Opu's world of imagination as occupying a central position of importance, in relation to which the mundane human activities of procuring livelihood, food, shelter, and petty financial concerns are relegated to the periphery. The very large banyan tree near Opu's home ushers in a sense of wonder in his heart. He wonders about the lands lying at great distances from his house. This sense of amazement transports him to another world. The expanse of the sky also adds to his imagination not just because of its limitlessness but also as a backdrop for a paper kite and a hawk floating along to an unknown destination, far off. His mind wanders off to the field near the indigo factory. His fascination for distance is interrupted by his sadness for his mother who will be left behind.

Opu's world of wonder and imagination is nourished by and cradled in nature. The forest seems to beckon him with its myriad forms of trees, flowers and fruits. It provides Opu and Durga, and also the other children, with fruits and berries, which for Opu and Durga are delicacies since they belong to a poverty-stricken family. The forest also gifts them with playthings and toys. Opu's sense of wonder receives an impetus with the arrival of vendors from the outside world. The sweetmeat seller called 'Chinibus' arrives with mouth-watering sweets. An old man comes with a strange box, the contents of which are only made visible to the children after they pay for it.

An integral part of Opu's world of imagination is made up by the tales of travel and adventure shared by the visitors who come to chat with the school master. The visitors, Dinu Palit and Raju Ray often chat not only about the places they have visited but also about the different jobs they have taken up. Raju Ray, for example, has set up a tobacco shop to augment his earnings. Opu listens to these accounts with rapt attention. The description of Raju Ray's life as a tobacco seller mesmerises Opu. Sometimes Rajkrishna Shanyal joins them. The accounts of his travels prove to be even more enchanting for Opu. The indigo factory intrudes into the 'space' outlined by the vivid descriptions of Rajkrishna Shanyal's travels. The factory is always on the periphery — a symbol of urbanity but it is presented as a relic of an important aspect of the British colonial rule. The world of Opu's village sustains itself on nature's gifts, hence a relic of the oppressive British rule appears on the periphery of this world.

For Opu the anecdotes narrated by Shanyal are fascinating and charge his imagination. The anecdotes regarding a fakir who gifts people fruits of their choice in return of a pipe of opium. Opu's imagination is kindled time and again with such anecdotes that Raju Ray tries to rationalise as 'magic'. Dinu Palit's stories centre around the dangers of everyday life. He recalls how Budho, the old cart-driver at Beledanga, powerfully dealt with dacoits and struck terror in the hearts of the robbers. For Dinu Palit, Budho indeed created 'magic', which he had witnessed himself. According to Palit's story, Budho staves off the robbers' attack singlehandedly without any intervention from the village policemen. The village police station symbolising administrative machinery is relegated to a position of insignificance, and moral and ethical righteousness takes centre stage when the robbers bow to touch Budho's feet.

The world of the unknown and of wonder receives reinforcement when the smells of rush mats, old, tattered books and the earth of the floor mingle with the pungent aroma of tobacco, which, in turn, blends with the smell that the wind brings in from the tree and bushes outside. Hence this world of anecdotes not only inspires Opu to visualise incidents of yore, distant lands but also appeals to his olfactory senses. With his imagination ignited and this capacity to visualise imaginary, far off lands and countries reinforced, Opu returns home with an overwhelming sense of awe and happiness. For Opu the road near the indigo factory leads all the way to the land of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, the same land which he can visualise when he looks at the top of the banyan tree. This stirs within him an irrepressible urge to visit this land when he grows up. Mountains like Mount Prasravan spring up in this world of imagination to be etched permanently in his mind, unhindered by the fact that no atlas validates its existence.

Deeply concerned with his financial hardships Horihor takes Opu to the house of Laksman Mahajan, a very prosperous farmer who is one of his clients. The name indicates that the person belongs to a low caste. However, in the character of Lakshman Mahajan his low caste identity is contrasted with his affluence. Opu, who cannot have nutritious food and delicacies at home due to his father's very limited financial resources is brought to Mahajan's house for a brief sojourn so that he will get good food for a few days. His stay at Mahajan's house and the delicious food he has there sensitises him to the financial impoverishment of his family. He realises that although his mother makes delicacies like 'mohonbhog' she cannot afford the ingredients that make it a delicacy. Exposure to delicious food makes Opu empathetic towards his mother. During his stay at Mahajan's house, he sees the railway, which evokes a sense of awe in him. Later he tries to imitate the telegraph system by putting up a string across their yard which is supposed to be an imitation of

the telegraph wire; the string is accidentally hit by Shorbojoya and as a result it snaps. Much like the indigo factory, the telegraph, an emblem of the British imperial rule, is presented as an inert, passive symbol of the British rule. In fact, the telegraph is reduced to a child's play. The novel may be thought of as hinting at the decline of the British Raj through its representation of the markers of the British rule as inactive, passive, ineffectual, inert entities, reduced to a child's play, and turning into the centre of a child's world of imagination.

As a student Opu shows promise and his reading skills are praised by the elderly men of the village who regularly meet on the Ganguli's veranda, where Opu is taken by his father to read *The Ramayan* or old narrative poems. He can not only read but also comprehend the meaning of what he is reading. Elderly men like Dinu Chatterjee compare him with their grandsons who are of the same age but do not know all the alphabets. Dinu Chatterjee is certain that after his death, his family will be reduced to farm labourers as they have no inclination towards education. Even within the Brahmin community there are various occupations. Dinu Chatterjee, in spite of being well off, has been a moneylender while Horihor's forefathers may have been poor but were scholars. Thus, economically the well-off Brahmins like Dinu Chatterjee have been at the centre of their community, while poor Brahmin families like those of Horihor have been relegated to the periphery of the community. However, with respect to education and academics this centre–periphery orientation is reversed. Central to Opu's world of play and imitation of the life outside his home is the forest as described in *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road*:

> This forest, with its freshness and deep green shadows, had laid its fingers on Opu and his sister alike and had brought peace and consolation into their hearts. They had known it all their lives. Day by day, hour by hour, its silence and its delights poured rich and varied nectars into their thirsting souls. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Being imaginative Opu's world of dreams often conjures up the characters whom he had heard of in his village's folklore. The appearance of Goddess Bisalaksi before Shorup Chakraborty was a celebrated folklore often heard in the village. In his sleep, his imagination conjures up the image of the goddess. Opu also visualises imaginative characters from *Mahabharat*, which is described in the novel:

> [. . .] He had caught the youthful Karna in a generous mood, and holding out his hands he begged of him his impenetrable armour, thus luring him to his death. He could see that poor wretched little boy, Asvatthama, Dron's son, drink his rice gruel and dance with glee before his playmates, exclaiming, 'It's milk, milk! I've been drinking milk. And under the bel tree in the deserted compound, he saw Arjun pierce the earth with his sharp arrow and bring forth the sacred river Bhagavati so that he could moisten the

> lips of the mighty Bhishma, who lay mortally wounded on a bed of arrows [. . .]. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

Through all the stages of his childhood and pre-adolescence nature remains an inspiration for Opu and plays a pivotal role in preparing Opu's cognitive faculties that are receptive towards the outside world, especially before life takes him away from the familiar surroundings of Nishchindipur and leads him to the wider world.

Opu in his pre-adolescence resolves to go to Ganganandapur to fulfil his mother's vow to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Siddhesvari. On his way to Ganganandapur nature which is in full bloom seems to welcome Opu, a scene that is described in *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* as:

> The road to Ganganandapur ran for part of the way along an earth track, which being built up a little higher than the land on either side, cut across Shonadanga plain like a low ridge. It ran through a copse of akondophul trees, the long, white branches of which sagged low over the dub grass under the weight of their flowers. There was nobody about. It was very hot and as the hour approached noon the shadows of the trees grew shorter and shorter. The sandy earth under Opu's bare feet was hot and he liked it. Trees and bushes were in full flower. The newly opened buds of the acacias were tipped up towards the sun, and on one small tree the fruit was already out, full and ripe and as red as the wild dumur. While the sun drew forth from the hot earth a rich aromatic odour, which hung heavy in the air. (Bandopadhyay 1999)

As he walks towards Ganganandapur almost all his senses — visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory are satiated by the world of nature.

Opu's personal space is expansive, and it accommodates friends like Gulki and Potu. During a childhood fight with the fishermen's sons Potu is saved from their powerful blows by Opu who in turn receives a few blows while trying to extricate Potu from the mob of boys. Gulki finds a playmate in Opu for a few days. Playing with him gives her a sense of happiness, which she felt in very few things. She is not only an orphan but also does not have any friends to play with, which would temporarily make her forget her woes.

Opu on the threshold of his adolescence, quite unknowingly is ushering in myriad changes in his physical, emotional, intellectual, and social realms. His first exposure to the world outside and to structured, formal education takes place through his interactions with Shuresh, the eldest son of Nilmony Roy, Horihor's deceased cousin. Shuresh is almost of the same age as Opu and goes to a formal school where he studies in the fifth standard. Opu cannot answer his questions about 'geography' and decimal and fractions. However, Opu, an avid and imaginative reader from his childhood days, now discovers a new 'space' when he delves into the old copies of the Bengali daily *Bangabashi*. This 'space' is occupied by stories that he later recounts to Potu. There are stories about Liuca and Raphael, about the volcanic eruption

on the island of Martinique and an exciting tale of a magician who can turn anything into gold. He does not know history, grammar or geometry and in English he has progressed to the 'Horse' in Book I. This 'space' is also inhabited by characters like the Rajput princess Sarojini and her husband Saroj. The characters people cheap melodramas which Opu finds in books like *The Lotus and the Princess*, *The Bandit's Daughter*, *Poisoned Nectar*, *The Mystery of Gopeshvar*. Although the plot structure, characterisation of these literary pieces are not great works of literature but they further enhance Opu's capacity to imagine and visualise the abstract. These books are borrowed from Shotu and in return Opu promises to find the person who steals fish from Shotu's pond every day.

Opu in a short period of time graduates from reading mere melodramas to history plays and fictionalised accounts of historical characters and incidents. Opu's world of imagination is now dominated by historical figures like the Mughal–aligned Shivaji in the early part of his career, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Shivaji in his later career, Rajput royalty like Rana Pratap Singh and his son Amar Singh. Opu's ability to visualise transports him to the world of luxurious royal courts in Delhi and Agra, attended by fashionable Muslim ladies, the battlefields of Haldighat, Chittorgarh, the Bhil country of Rajputana and Mewar and the enchanting beauty of Nahara and Magro. He can witness before his mind's eyes the great might of Tejsingh charging forward to his enemies down the mountain side. The historic battles take Opu to the desert of Rajbara; with the historic figures he ascends the lofty peaks of the Aravallis. He visits Chittor and reverentially remembers and pays homage to the memories of Rana Pratap Singh when he reads about his son Rana Amar Singh paying tribute to the emperor. Opu is evidently very excited to receive new copies of *Bangabashi*, which his father buys for him after subscribing for the daily for two rupees.

Opu's world of imagination has a 'space' which accommodates his friends. In the plays he writes there are characters with names like Shotu and Ranu, who are named after his real friends. Because in real life Shotu is malicious and Ranu is always kind, the characters named after the two also have similar traits, and the former is given harsh punishment. When Ranu gives him a new exercise book and requests that he write her a story he obliges even though he has to write in the light of his mother's earthen oven. Being a sensitive teenager Opu is extremely conscious of the fact that the story he writes for Ranu is his original work. When Otoshi questions the originality of the work his pride is hurt. Opu derives his education from life itself. His first lesson in city-bred sophistication is imparted when on returning from a requiem ceremony with a bundle of food as was the practice among Brahmin invitees, he sees his city-bred cousin Shuresh being severely reprimanded by his mother

for not only eating there but also bringing the food home. However, sensitive as he is, Opu initially tries to fathom the reason why Shuresh's mother asks him to throw the food Shuresh has brought from the ceremony. He inwardly compares his mother's reaction to the food with the reaction of his aunt and deduces that the practice of bringing back food as an invitee is not wrong since his mother and he have not had sweets and other delicacies for a long time. Being sensitive this incident points out to him the economic difference between city-bred people who can afford sophistication at the expense of procuring food.

Opu reads in Shuresh's lower-school English book about the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus; about a brave girl called Praskovia Lapulova who journeyed alone across the vast Siberian wastes to save her exiled father. He does not understand English, so he reads the stories from the Bengali notes that accompany the English Reader and looks at the book for the pictures. He is particularly moved by the story of Sir Philip Sidney and when he asks Shuresh for the details Shuresh can only utter the name of the Battle of Zutphen. As the tales of ancient battles so also distant countries of the world hold great attraction for Opu. He knows about countries like France since he has located it on Shuresh's English atlas. Opu's basic insights into French history, into the life of Joan of Arc inspires awe in him. He can feel the predicament of the young innocent girl. Opu's exposure to the contemporary world is achieved through listening to the tales of adventure of the sailors at Saheb's Ghat. The novel describes the experience as:

> Opu loved to sit there and listened to the sailors' talk about their adventures, the countries they had been to, the different places they had just come from, the many rivers and canals they had sailed, the storms they had encountered, how they coped with the strong tides that ebbed and flowed in the great estuaries and what they did when they were caught in a cyclone (Bandopadhyay 1999).

So, the adolescent Opu's world of thoughts accommodates and sustains an eagerness to know and learn. Without a structured academic curriculum in the village school and having never been to a formal school Opu shows every inclination and a penchant for a 'space' whereby he can learn from life itself. Nature still is an inexhaustible source of awe — his world of thoughts and imagination is also where he interacts with nature. Inspired by nature and the sailors' tales of adventures, he promises himself that he will visit countries like England and Japan. He visualises blue seas, unknown coasts, lines of coconut palms, a volcano, and a land covered with snow. He almost lives and relives this enchanting world of the unknown, the unseen and the unexplored as a sailor in a boat on the China Sea, living on shellfish torn from a submerged mountain. The imaginary figures who people this enchanted world are Jelekha, Sarayu, Grace Darling, and Zutphen Sidney. Opu's world of thoughts thrives

on the informal education he derives from all his readings, nature and the newspaper, and is juxtaposed against formal education based on the accretion of facts. Structured education proves to be superficial while informal education triggers imagination that leads to creative endeavours.

The novel accommodates aspects of the colonial rule in Bengal, like the indigo trade, the telegraph system and the trains. The aspects like the indigo factory and the telegraph appear as inert, passive; the indigo trade precedes Opu's birth hence, the novel only mentions it as a dilapidated remnant. The use of the telegraph system is in vogue, Opu can see it on his way to his father's rich client's house. He later imitates and builds telegraph poles and wires. So, the telegraph is reduced to a child's play. Opu, in his preteens, a little more grown up and more mature, for the first time experiences the speed of a train, which seems to propel him towards a new future and at the same time reinstates the colonial rule in contemporary Bengal.

Other aspects of urbanity like the town in Krishnanagar presents harsh circumstances. When Horihor is looking for a job in Krishnanagar he has to take refuge in a temple. This place is frequented by opium smokers and women of pleasure. Horihor protests when his space is taken up by addicts and as a result he is thrown out of the temple. He has to go around the alien, hostile town offering his services as a priest and also as a reader of ancient religious scriptures. Not only does he not get any opportunity to work but he is also offered money in a way that hurts his self-respect, and he refuses it. So Horihor receives cruel non-acceptance from this 'space'. Urbanity in the form of a land survey team enters the realm of nature cradled in the world of Nishchindipur. This coincides with the arrival of Niren, the city-bred law student and son of Onnoda Ray's cousin in Nishchindipur as well as the deceased Nilmony Ray's widow and her city-bred children. Both Niren and Nilmony Ray's house has been overrun by weeds, trees and bushes. During his stay, Niren forms a respectful relationship with Onnoda's daughter-in-law and gives her some money to help her destitute brother. This ultimately leads to Niren's departure from the village. While Niren tries to override the customs of the conservative rural society, rejecting its deep-rooted norms of social practices and manners, Niren is also rejected by this 'space'. Nilmony Ray's widow also rejects the social norm of the Brahmins' bringing back food from requiem ceremonies.

Within the world depicted in the village the oppressed women and girls are often beaten up, abused verbally, deprived of food, shelter and proper clothes. This space is inhabited by women like Indir Thakrun, Aturi the witch, Gokul's wife and children like Gulki and Durga. However, among them Durga is not an orphan or homeless and is not socially ostracised. Her woes result mainly from the fact that her parents are poor. They cannot afford to buy mouth-

watering snacks and food from vendors who often visit Nishchindipur. And Durga, along with her brother Opu stand watching children from other families in the village buy and enjoy the food and sweets too. In spite of Shorbojoya's efforts to groom her daughter from her early days, a lack of etiquette and sophistication has crept into her mannerism. But more than just staring at others' food Durga's mistake is stealing a string of beads that belong to Ranu's doll. This gives Shejbou the courage to storm into Horihor's house with her children and her nephews and nieces and get Durga's doll's box checked by one of her children. When the string of beads is discovered in the doll's box Shejbou calls her a thief. Although this incident takes place in Shorbojoya's presence, and Shorbojoya does defend her daughter by asserting that children do pick up fruits strewn on the ground and that she does not know about the doll's string, Shejbou continues to abuse Durga. After she leaves Horihor's house she continues to criticise Horihor's entire family by calling them thieves, loudly enough for Shorbojoya to hear. She curses Durga and Opu for picking up fruits that fall on the ground from their trees. Having established her as a thief, Shejbou once again suspects that it is Durga who has stolen Tuni's mother's golden jar of vermilion. Shejbou and Tuni's mother search the room but the jar is not found. Shejbou asks others if anyone has been in the room, but nobody has. Some children had gone into the room, but they know nothing about the jar.

Shejbou's daughter Tempi points a finger of suspicion towards Durga only because she has seen Durga 'sneaking out of the back door' when they are going to have their food. As she speaks Durga comes back. Shejbou's suspicion is thus aroused, and she directly accuses Durga of stealing the golden vermilion jar and asks her to return it immediately. Even though Durga says that she has not taken it and she does not know anything about it, Shejbou disregards her pleas of innocence. Shejbou also bangs Durga's head against the wall so hard that she started to bleed from her nose. Ranu's mother and Tuni's mother empathise with Durga. Ranu's mother admonishes Shejbou and asks her to control herself.

Gulki is a little orphan girl who lives in the village of Ganganandapur at her distant relative Nibaron Mukherji's place. She is about six or seven years old. Being an orphan, she is illtreated by Nibaron Mukherji's wife who does not give her enough to eat. So, Gulki has to ask for food from other families in the village. Among them are Opu's aunt from whom Gulki regularly asks for food. She is beaten mercilessly by her distant aunt and often she bleeds from her back. Her dirty sari and her unkempt look make it very evident that she is deprived of parental care. During his sojourn at her aunt's place at Ganganandapur, Opu meets Gulki and befriends her. He empathises with her and wants to play with her. Gulki, initially smiles or laughs on seeing him and

then runs away. But later she become friendlier with Opu. On his last day at Ganganandapur, Opu meets Gulki while on his way to board Kartik Goyala's tobacco cart, which his uncle had arranged for a lift. As suggested by Opu, Gulki walks with him a part of his way that leads to the cart. Gulki walks with him for a very long distance past the Brahmins' houses and also past the milkmen's sector and walks as far as the edge of the open country.

On the day of leaving Nishchindipur Opu finds the golden jar that has been stolen from Shejbou's house the previous year, hidden in an earthenware vessel at the back of a shelf. Out of deep concern, reverence and love for his dead sister Opu does not mention this to anyone. Opu in his preteens has understood that Aturi who died on Chorok Puja day is not really a witch but an old woman who is isolated because she does not have any children. She used to sell slices of dried mangoes for a living. When Indir Thakrun dies at Palit's house non-Brahmin people do not give her the last drops of water, which are finally given by Phoni, the eldest son of Dinu Chokroborti since Indir was a widow of a Brahmin family. Aturi probably belongs to a much lower caste since after her death Panchu, the son of the fisherman, goes into her house and drags out her precious jar of sliced, dried mangoes. She does not have anyone to perform the last rites.

Both women reinstate the social hierarchy of castes with their deaths. Indir Thakrun is a marginalised character like Aturi the witch. Shorbojoya is brazenly cruel to Indir; she exhibits complete apathy towards Indir, she also completely overlooks the basic needs of Indir, like that of warm clothes during winter. In the end Indir does receive a new red cotton cloth to protect herself from the cold. However, her strained relationship with Shorbojoya takes away her refuge at Horihor's home. She ends up dying on the premises of a person belonging to a lower caste. As she lies dying, the onlookers who mostly belong to lower castes feel inhibited to offer her last drops of water. A Brahmin who is passing by gives her water. In her life Indir has been displaced and uprooted, does not have her own home, however, in her death she reinstates the 'space' designated by the hierarchies of the Brahmanical social structure.

Aturi is a marginalised character around whom myriad rumours do the rounds. She asks Opu to come into her house but his refusal re-establishes her isolation and marginalised existence. The 'centre' here is the entire community of Nishchindipur and the 'margin' is defined through the isolation of Aturi. These women do not have very near kin, often do not have the basic necessities of life; Indir often goes without food, does not have a permanent shelter and has to ask for warm clothes for winter; Aturi has to collect windfalls and has to sell sliced, dried mangoes to eke out a living. After her death there is no one to perform her last rites.

The lives of people depicted in the novel are intimately entwined with the ways of nature. The contrast between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' can be reconfigured and reoriented based on not only differences in caste but also on the basis of vices and virtues inherent in the character of the people, their economic status and also on the basis of the perspective of Opu and his sister Durga, the central characters of the novel. These shifting perspectives create 'spaces' that illuminate the different aspects of the character of the people and reveal their 'identities'.

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Voices from the Margins: A Postcolonial Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

Sadhna Kashyap

Abstract

The margin and the centre are crucial concepts when discussing postcolonial theory; this paper would try to dismantle these concepts in terms of literature from the North Eastern Region of India. This paper would investigate re-thinking postcolonialism in the Indian context, where the northeast is at the margins. Relocating the northeast in mainstream India offers a new insight to look at the region's unique interpretation of the postcolonial narrative. Its geographical location is the main reason for the alienation of this region by the people of mainstream India. Even in recent times, people look at the northeast as an uncivilised land covered with forests and full of tribes. Patricia Mukhim in her essay, 'Where is this North-East?' describes how people of the northeast face discrimination in central India because of their facial features (Mukhim 2005). The colonial experience is quite different in northeast India as compared to the other parts of the country. The colonial presence and the struggle to preserve the tribal culture is evident in the writings of Mamang Dai and Janice Pariat. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is an intricate web of stories that depicts the lives of the Adis before the touch of modernity, which divided the villages into towns and cities. Dai connects with her roots, which shape and define her originality as a writer from the margins. *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat offers a historical canvas to look at the early days of the British Raj and how the impact of colonialism changed people's lives. Both writers draw interesting images of the tribal communities of the northeast and voice the unique problems of these people. The stories from these collections are autobiographical, and are woven with fact and fiction that celebrate the different tribes of northeast India.

Keywords: postcolonial, tribal, community, margins, centre

Introduction

The North East Region of India is a name collectively used for the eight states of India, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. 'Topographically, the region lies in an extension of the sub-Himalayan zone consisting of mountainous terrains and hilly tracts, of plateaus and valleys fed by rivers and streams. The presence of a baffling mix of ethnic communities add to the diverse cultural patterns which are reflected most strongly in the folklore and specifically, in the life breathing oral traditions of the communities of North-East India' (Sen and Kharmawphlang 2007: 1)

Unlike mainland India, the northeast is an isolated region because of its geographical location in the Indian subcontinent. While mainstream India imagines northeast to be a single region covered by hills and forests, the natives of the northeastern states consider their identities to be separate in terms of tribe and ethnicity. The history of this region is mostly misrepresented in the literature and media of mainstream India. The postcolonial narrative of the self and the other constitutes the politics of geography in India. The mainland of India is the self while the northeast is the other.

Subir Bhaumik writes 'Since post-colonial India has been ever willing to create new states or autonomous units to fulfill the aspirations of the battling ethnicities, the quest for an "ethnic homeland" and insurgent radicalism as a means to achieve it has become the familiar political grammar of the region. So, insurgencies never peter out in the Northeast, even though insurgents do' (Bhaumik 2009: 14). The history of colonial presence, insurgency and natural disasters of northeastern region are undocumented in the literature of India. The majority of writers from the northeast have failed to earn popularity in the literature of mainland India because of the language gap between readers. The northeast is portrayed as an exotic region full of different tribes or communities that live in-between hills and forests. The region's favourable image has been further damaged by the unresolved insurgency issues, which have created an image of the area as a difficult terrain full of people with a primitive culture. The exclusion of the northeast from the politics of mainstream India and its lack of representation by national media houses has contributed to the isolation of the region from central India. Writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Janice Pariat, among others have tried to share narratives that are otherwise excluded from the literary imagination of India. The prejudice held against the natives of the northeast is deep rooted in India due to the lack of representation of the region in visual arts and literature. Rewriting narratives from the margins offers an opportunity to reconstruct history and relocate the marginalised sections within the centre. The nationalist movements like the Dandi March and the non-cooperation

movement that shook the British Raj in India are well-documented in history books to glorify India's freedom struggle. But historians have failed to represent the freedom struggle in northeast India. Freedom fighters like Maniram Dewan, Piyoli Phukan, Kanaklata Barua, including many others lack representation in the national history of India while movements like the Phulaguri Peasant Uprising (1861) have all but faded from the colonial discourse.

The indigenous people of the northeast feel a unique closeness with nature and hold on to traditions passed down to every generation. The collective beliefs and practices of an ethnic community tie them together as members of a single unit. This paper aims to study postcolonial narratives in the two novels, namely *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) by Mamang Dai and *Boats on Land* (2012) by Janice Pariat. Both writers belong to two separate tribes of northeast India but they create a oneness by re-imagining history through the unique experiences of colonialism via their writings. The short story anthologies of both these writers are simple stories of ordinary people and their contact with the colonial presence. The natives' experiences of fear and horror at the arrival of the colonial dominance is well-documented in the short stories where the tribes feel the world changing beneath their feet with new masters and technology.

The Legends of Pensam

Mamang Dai is a writer from Arunachal Pradesh who was conferred the Padma Shri in 2011 for literature. She creates a unique space for her writing by locating her community within the larger context of Indian society. Her book, *The Legends of Pensam* is a collection of short stories that narrate the lives of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Traditional beliefs, superstitions and unity of the community mark her unique way of storytelling. The way of life of the Adis reflects their close relationship with nature, which is disturbed by the coming of the colonisers in the 19th and 20th century. The arrival of a white man at the heart of the tribal village marks their lives with change by kindling aspirations for modernity. People start to dream about city life full of modernity in the plains and lament about their lives in the difficult terrain. The novel is divided into four sections: 'A Diary of the World', 'Song of the Rhapsodist', 'Daughters of the Village' and 'A Matter of Time'. All the stories in these sections are interconnected, and describe the life of the Adis before and after the arrival of the colonial rule. As a community, the Adis find themselves negotiating between the forces of change and the weight of traditions. The novel opens with a prologue where the narrator travels back to the land that nourished her childhood with stories and myths common to her community. By flying to the heart of the mountains and leaving behind the chaos of the

plains, she attempts to travel back in time and reconnect with her roots. Like Marlow of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the narrator makes her journey to the centre of the village life to document the villagers' history and unravel the true picture of her community, which is otherwise left on the margins by the people of central India.

The first section opens with the story of 'The Boy Who Fell from the Sky', who is later adopted by Lutor, a famous chief of the Adi clan. The boy is named Hoxo and is an important yet common character of the novel who experiences life both before and after domination by the colonial masters. The first section of the novel deals with the faith and superstitions of the Adi people, which fills their lives with awe and wonder. Untouched by modernity, the people lead simple lives, depend on the forest and rejoice by telling stories about their clans and bonds within the community. Pinyar the widow, an innocent village woman, becomes an outcaste but wages a battle when her only child, born out of wedlock, is arrested for the murder of his children. The courage of the simple woman develops her identity as a strong maternal character who is ever ready to protect her children from harm.

The second section, 'The Songs of the Rhapsodists' features stories of the village ancestors in the form of ritualistic song and dance performances of *ponung* dancers. The rhapsodist is the narrator who experiments with a unique way of storytelling using myth and memory. The Adis address the white men as *migluns* who interrupted their ordinary way of living. The rhapsodist narrates the tale of the killing of Noel Williamson in 1911. An angry Adi struck the British police officer down in Komsing. Other men of the Adi tribe also joined the attack, which also killed a tea garden doctor named Dr Gregorson, along with 47 sepoys and coolies. Fear of the white men provoked the ordinary village men to carry out the massacre. The massacre results in the forming of the Abor Expedition Field Force of 1912, which is instructed to search the forests and capture the culprits to send them away to Andaman Islands. A memorial stone for Williamson is erected by the British, which is looked after by the natives. But perhaps the massacre rescues the village from the grasps of modernity and the British officers leave without constructing a road to that village. This small incident in the larger canvas of Indian history is an example of victory of the natives over the white men.

The third section is about the river woman, Nenem and her daughter, Losi. Nenem falls in love with a young British officer named David who asks her to join him when he is transferred to another place. But like a child of nature, Nenem refuses to leave her village surrounded by a river and mountains and embrace the city life. She is unable to let go of her roots, her land and her people. Later, she marries Kao and has a daughter with him. She celebrates a life of contentment in the land of mountains until an earthquake submerges her village

and misshapes the land. When she is forced to settle down in another village after the destruction of her home, she falls ill and passes away heartbroken. Nenem's death highlights the dilemma and fear of the tribal community when their lives undergo a transition from an old way of life to a modern existence.

The last section of the work titled 'A Matter of Time' explores the changes in the life of the individual and the community under colonial rule. The building of roads by clearing forests is a symbol of modernity and development that can be achieved only at the cost of destroying nature and causing injury to the land. The tribal community finds it hard to accept the change that comes in the name of progress and development.

> The old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered their lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields. (Dai 2006: 157)

With the building of the roads and the arrival of outsiders in their native land, the Adis experience a robbery, which has never happened before. Their granary doors are broken and precious materials stolen at night. Duan, the only elected member of the state assembly of the Adi tribe was obeying orders of the government by influencing his people to welcome the *migluns* in exchange for electric wires and schools. The tribal people imagine that a brightness from the new world would fill their homes with opportunities. But with time the villagers realise that the road is an unwelcome development. They begin to think that '… there houses were not safe anymore' as robbery becomes common in the darkness of the night. They hear stories about migrant workers who loot houses in the plains and fear for the safety of their village. Larik, the son of Tongla, expresses his frustration when he says, 'This one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Diseases' (Dai 2006: 156). The road, which is a means of trade and commerce also becomes a means for exchange of diseases. The Adis imagine a progressive future for their next generations but the reality turns their lives upside down. Like Okonkwo of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Larik also grows restless and revolts against the change bought by the sound of bulldozers and the erecting of electric poles. He revolts against authority and burns the shacks of the labourers in the silence of the night after stealing the electric poles. The wildness of the jungle engulfs the electric poles as it takes years to find them after they are hidden.

> Land was stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked the old territory and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villages. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy, was lost. (Dai 2006: 163)

Modernity and concrete roads become hazards for the people because of earthquakes, which are common in the northeast because of its location in a

high seismic zone. This danger is highlighted by people like Sirsiri, the singer, who fears that the concrete roads will collapse and take a toll on lives at the time of earthquakes. The fifth chapter of the last section titled 'On Stage' depicts a play organised by the village artists, which has a deeper metaphorical significance.

> It is the beginning of the world. He is the first born of the earth and sky, and they are still so close to each other that the child of their union is restless, determined to find his own space. (Dai 2006: 186)

The play symbolises the alienation of the native child after the union of the earth (tradition) and sky (modernity). Modernity in the disguise of the colonial masters was an enslavement for the whole community where people would run after concrete blocks leaving behind the communal harmony of the village. Menga X is like the restless child of the play who is unable to perform as the microphone and its cable look like an alien object to him. He regrets the change bought about by the British, 'this is what happens when you let go, when you are out of touch. I must change with the times or shut up and be quiet forever' (Dai 2006: 187).

The tribal people were happy with their own customs and rituals that involved a sense of unity and brotherhood. Modern ways of life created a void between the bonds of the members of the community and alienated them from their land and people. The cement walls, narrow apartments and concrete roads were symbols of the colonial presence that disturbed the simple lives of the tribal people by bringing in hopes for a modern existence.

Boats on Land

Janice Pariat is a writer from Shillong, who is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar Award (2013) for her novel *Boats on Land*. The work is a collection of 15 short stories that are set in and around Shillong, Cherrapunji and Assam. The tales begin from the 1800s and span over a century into the modern era. The transition of life after the colonial rule is well-documented in her narrative of multiple voices. By using the technique of multiple voices as narrators, Pariat attempts to make her stories rustic and ordinary. Her collection of stories is a unique way of looking at India's northeast against a larger historical canvas — the early days of the British Raj, the World Wars, the coming of the Christian missionaries. The ordinary lives of the Khasis are infused with myths and folklore. As an oral culture, the storytelling tradition of the Khasis is a way of preserving their history. Their deep belief in the supernatural pervades their lives with mystery and secrets. Every event in the daily lives of the Khasis seems to have a supernatural explanation that connects them to their ancestors.

The first story of the collection titled 'A Waterfall of Horses' features a young narrator who observes the incidents of his village. The narrator works as a household help in the bungalow of the British sahib, which makes him an eyewitness to the tragedy of the horses. The colonial presence in the Pomreng village changes the lives of the people forever. The cruelty and torture of the natives by the British officers is well-recorded in this story. The narrator describes how the white officers take goods from the local market for free and harass innocent shopkeepers. The working conditions of the plantation workers is never part of the larger historical study. But Pariat highlights these conditions through the eyes of the young narrator: '[S]ometimes I saw them whip the plantation workers or knock them down with their horses' (Pariat 2012: 6). There are also instances of the British officers raping young village women after carrying them off on their horses. But as the narrator describes, love blooms in the most unexpected of places. A white man whom the narrator calls as Sahib Sam falls in love with Haphida, a daughter of the village. While the locals nurture feelings of hatred and revolt against the colonial masters, the young couple fall in love unaware of the prevailing circumstances. Haphida's father objects to their relationship because he is well aware of how young white bastards are left on the streets abandoned by their parents. The tension between the locals and the Britishers increases when Trotter, a cruel officer kills a local man by dragging him behind his horse. The locals want revenge but feel powerless without guns. However, their community believes in the power of words — how words can change the destiny of an entire village. The narrator explains how the horses become untamed in the middle of the night and jump to their death in the waterfall. The incident kills few locals including Haphida, as well as injures the white men. After this tragedy the village is abandoned by the British officers as they fear the power of words.

> Some men fled the barracks, convinced the place was cursed, and that they'd be next to go insane and fling themselves over the waterfall. A few others drank themselves to death on local kiad. (Pariat 2012: 16)

The tragedy haunts the village and the locals also leave for good to settle in another village.

The second story titled 'Kut Madan' is about a doctor Wallang who also acts as a shaman when it is necessary to ward off spirits. The doctor visits a young white maiden, Lucy, who dreams of becoming a firebird. The subordinate position of the doctor in relation to the white master is reflected when he is restricted from going into the bungalow until admitted by the lord of the house.

In 'Dream of the Golden Mahseer', a young boy describes the disappearance of a man, Mama Kyn, who had survived the Second World

War. Mama Kyn suffers from the trauma of the war and has lost his sanity when he disappears from his house. He tells the narrator how he witnessed the bombings in Africa and nearly escaped death. The war and its grief seclude Mama Kyn from the outside world. Perhaps he suffers from 'shell shock', which consumes him slowly and devours him in death. But belief in supernatural powers make his family assume that he is possessed by the water fairy. Mama Kyn is consumed by his solitude after the trauma of the war.

After Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972, the Khasi community regarded other non-Khasi as outsiders even though they had ancestors living in Shillong since before independence. The story of Suleiman in '19/87' reflects on the insurgency and how the locals chase the outsiders, the non-Khasi, out of Shillong. They call them *dkhars* and burn their shops and homes. But a Muslim tailor struggles to survive in the times of crisis and forms a close bond with a local Khasi youth.

> [L]ooking at Pariat's evocation of present-day Shillong, what comes through is a wistfulness, an anxiety borne out a troubled history, a frustration that is evident from "the singular weariness that settles over everyone's features in a town locked by more than towering mountains". (Laloo 2013)

Pariat in an interview says, 'Our landscape was marked by folktales — why's the mountain shaped in a certain way, why the cock crows in the morning… With *Boats on Land*, I've taken these folk stories and interwoven them with the Shillong, Assam and Cherrapunji of today' (Narayan 2012).

In all her stories Pariat focusses on the traditional beliefs of her tribe where anything is possible in their world such as shape-shifters and water nymphs. She uses myth and history to construct the narrative of the colonial past that ruptured the ordinary life of the hill people.

Conclusion

The northeast was the last region to be conquered by British. The difference in ethnicity and racial features of the people from the northeast from those from central India alienated the region as a peripheral area covered by mountains. The border disputes in the region along with the tension of insurgency made northeast appear dangerous and primitive to the rest of the country.

> Before the British conquered the North East, the region was sparsely populated. So when the British started tea plantations and began to exploit Assam's oilfields, they felt a labour shortage — of toilers and white-collars alike. To overcome this, they started importing labourers from Bihar and Orissa, and clerks and teachers from Bengal… As migration from the Indian heartland to Assam increased, the state's demography began to undergo an unprecedented change. This, in turn, affected the

> pattern of land ownership, the linguistic balance and the nature of social and political leadership in the area. (Bhaumik 2009: 61)

The marginalisation of the people from northeast occurs because of the gap created by national media and literature. Several misconceptions about the northeast are prevalent in the rest of the country, which include assuming the tribal people to be backward and uncivilised. Several videos of people from the northeast being bullied after the COVID-19 pandemic went viral on social media, which makes us question: Is northeast not a part of India? Are we outsiders in our own country? The government is equally to blame for the underdeveloped condition of the northeast. The region, considered a difficult terrain, is given little attention in the politics of the country as leaders from the northeast enjoy little or no popularity. As a result, the eight states of the northeast lack the infrastructure for better education and employment. The emerging literary voices from northeast India are a hope for better representation of the region in the literature of mainstream India.

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Re-Locating the Peripheral Space, Self and Consciousness

Shefali Kohli

Abstract

The space of home with which one tends to connect their sense of being and that acts as a conglomeration of memory, nostalgia and belongingness can be juxtaposed with another category of space — a 'community'. Just as home is a space where an individual self resides, dominated by personal memory and nostalgia, a community is a collective space where distinct selves reside together in interdependence and belongingness. However, questioning the interdependencies between selves and the space they belong to problematises the harmonious coexistence of community and self. In such scheme of things, this paper analyses the ambiguity and magic (or mystery) of the number 'two'. It focusses firstly on the 'two-ness of spaces', namely 'home' and 'community' as well as 'rural' and 'urban'. Secondly, it marks the categorisation of the 'two-ness of selves', namely 'communal' and 'individual'. Thirdly, the paper focusses on the third classification, the 'two-ness of consciousness' — 'national' and 'fractured' consciousness. The emphasis would be on these categorisations of the two-ness of spaces, selves and consciousness, taking references from Srilal Shukla's Sahitya Akademi-winning political satire, *Raag Darbari* (1968/ 2012).

Keywords: space, margins, self, consciousness, home, community

Introduction

Whenever life seeks to shelter, protect or hide itself, spaces and margins, as ambiguous concepts, define variously for distinct beings. Spaces and marginalities, for some, are physical constructs having substance of their own, while for others, they are idealised psychological constructs with which one connects their idea of selfhood, and within which one tries to confine oneself. Alternatively, spaces and marginalities also allude to being metaphysical

constructs necessary for bodies to co-exist. In its 'countless alveoli' of such associated meanings, space is frequently connected to memory and nostalgia, as also seen in Bachelard's concept of the 'house' in his *Poetics of Space* as a 'privileged entity for a phenomenological study of intimate values of inside space' (Bachelard 1969: 3). This inside space provides a protected-space that is '*our* corner, *our* first universe' in the vastness of the world one inhabits, protecting the 'I' among the other pre-existing 'non-I'. Thus, within this protected universe, the constructed marginalised selfhood tends to find a 'home', not as a physical being but as an essence connecting memory with the imagination of an ideal-space, inducing a feeling of belongingness and a sense of stability, thus creating a 'oneiric' self. This concept of 'home' as a conglomeration of memory, nostalgia and belongingness, juxtaposes with another classification of space, a 'community', divided and discreetly identified through the imaginarily constructed margins. Just as a home is a protected-space where one's 'I-ness' is dominated by personal memory and nostalgia; a community is a collective protected-space encompassing interdependence and belongingness. In a community, multiple 'I' interact and co-exist, creating a sense of 'we-ness', further metamorphosing an individual self into a communal self with collective memory. The inter-dependence of the two categories of selves — the individual and communal — as residing in two further divided categories of spaces — home and community, is highlighted in Dismas A. Masolo's essay, 'Community, Identity, and the Cultural Spaces'. Masolo points out that 'individual and community were related in a constant mutual dependency: the specific behaviour of individuals in various contexts gave the community its cultural boundaries just as much as the normative standards of community regulated the practices of individuals and groups within it' (Masolo 2002: 3). However, questioning these mutual dependencies is what problematises and perhaps threatens the interdependence between community and self, within or outside its demarcated margins. Is this mutual dependency between space and self, impassive to factors such as class, caste, gender, or political kinship? Or is this idea of community, which has undeniably become the foreground for forming one's marginalised identity and self, ultimately fractured, further questioning the concreteness of space to 'belong'? Through an ever-spreading morass of manipulations and incessant dominations by those in power, the 'we-ness' within the fragmented power-driven community is thereby threatened. These enquiries not only pose to interrogate the two-ness of spaces (community and home) and selves (individual and communal) but also their attachment to constructing two further markers of identity, specifically in the context of post-Nehruvian Indian idealisms — fractured and national consciousness. Within this theoretical paradigm, this paper analyses the ambiguity and magic (or mystery) of the number 'two'. It

focusses initially on the 'two-ness of spaces', namely 'home' and 'community', as well as 'rural' and 'urban'. Subsequently, it marks the categorisation of the 'two-ness of selves', namely 'communal' and 'individual' that further results in the formation of the 'two-ness of consciousness' — 'national' and 'fractured' consciousness, taking references from Srilal Shukla's Sahitya Akademi-winning political satire, *Raag Darbari.*

Two-ness of Spaces

Ontologically, to understand the mutual dependency between space and the self, one must first question the being of space itself that enables space and spatiality to come into existence with an attached meaning or purpose. The installation of meaning and purpose to the idea of space initiates, as Ritwick Bhattacharjee points out in *The Humanity's Strings*, only after 'human absorbs that space, is conscious of it and then, in turn, invests a part of its own self… into that space' (Bhattacharjee 2020: 142). Thus, space is a component of human consciousness and comes into being only through the dependency between humans and space. This interdependence between the self and the space of 'home' with which one attaches their individual being creates an illusion of protection, comfort and belongingness, which is further demarcated with the illusionary margins dividing them from the worldly other. The most proximate equivalent of finding a 'home' in the outside unknown world, where human beings otherwise find themselves alone in a state of limbo, is a 'community'. This other category of space encompasses similar qualities that a 'home' possesses — belongingness, protection and comfort. However, the difference originates when one's individual self multiplies itself, transforming an individual 'I' into a 'we'. Although this 'we-ness' acquires the idea of collective selfhood, it still accommodates the troubled relationships with various factions within these spaces, especially in the context of postcolonial or Third-world nations. Within these nations, the ideal of nationhood is more of a concept than a true reality, attempting to re-enforce and re-construct a sense of national consciousness concerning their oneiric space and sense of belongingness.

In the context of the postcolonial Indian sentimentalities, one of the most deeply engraved obstacles in achieving this idealised unitary identity and communal consciousness is the overarching grand vision of 'development planning, democracy and secularisation', propounded by Jawaharlal Nehru. In order to understand the problems attached to such idealised archetypes of nation as a communal space, one must first understand the troubles originating at the grassroots level. To comprehend the foundation of these troubles, Shrilal Shukla's 1968 political satire, *Raag Darbari*, serves as an appropriate gateway. Situated in a small peripheral village somewhere in Uttar Pradesh called

Shivpalganj, Shukla's *Raag Darbari* acts as a catalyst to reveal the dynamics and nexus existing between the state and politics. Through the microcosm of the ordinary marginalised village, Shivpalganj, Shukla presents a macrocosm of the entire nation affected by the 'utter failings of the ideals of nationalist state in their post-colonial implementation and more drastically, in their post-Nehruvian disintegration' (Anjaria 2006: 2). This juxtaposition of Shivapalganj being a microcosm for the macrocosm of the entire Indian cultural unity is highlighted through these lines:

> [Ranganath] realised that all Indians are one and that everywhere, our minds are alike… the Indian genius for manipulation and manoeuvring existed in an unrefined form in Shivpalganj, in abundance. This was the same genius which was proclaimed by celebrated newspapers… as Rangnath realised this, his faith in Indian cultural unity was reaffirmed. (Shukla 2012: 48–9)

Thus, by satirically alluding to the idealised 'Indian cultural unity', Shukla perhaps illustrates the differentiation between the ideal unified space of a nation as opposed to the reality of the 'infractions of injustice in the name of democracy and village development' (Anjaria 2006: 5), reflecting the socio-political and cultural factionalism existing within a community.

In the guise of development, one can also categorise this marginalised postcolonial village space of Shivpalganj as a magnet for ideal beneficiaries of government. These targeted spaces comprise institutionally male-dominated spaces such as Vaidyaji's veranda (treated as the modern *darbar* or court), the police station, colleges, the civil court, and panchayat, which further highlights how power dynamics operate in the public communal space of Shivpalganj, where power holders such as Vaidyaji, Ramadhin and the principal delude the villagers by acting as their well-wishers. In the semblance of these hollow promises, they gain absolute control over public institutions as their personal property, becoming the 'entitled-enabled' over the 'disadvantaged and subjugated-dis-abled'. By using the trope of humour and satire, Shukla juxtaposes these entitled power hierarchies and government's morality with trivial uncomplicated entities such as 'seat' or 'gearbox', thus revealing the mundane falseness of the hyperbolic promises and 'plot of conspiracies, strange alliances and corruptions' (Anjaria 2006: 4) existing within Shivpalganj, and through Shivpalganj, the entire Indian post-independence ethos. Shukla, thus, problematises the existing governmental power dynamics, specifically in the rural context dominated by the local village administration with their self-proclaimed authoritative power.

The corruption, thus, within the rural space of Shivpalganj, challenges and subverts the formerly romanticised innocent village space that was earlier presented as a counterspace to the repertoire of corruption and immorality dominating the urban space and Western sensibility, the metropolis. Meenakshi

Mukherjee accentuates this idea of deconstruction of the all-too-innocent rural space in her essay, 'Narrating the Nation': '*Raag Darbari* begins with the journey of Ranganath, a *kurta*-clad, *jhola*-carrying Delhi intellectual, to the absurd and complex world of Shivpalganj which though rural is neither pastoral nor innocent' (Mukherjee 1992: 144). Contrary to the idealised conception of peripheral rural space, Ranganath discovers the topsy-turvy world of Shivpalganj to be a space where one can accomplish things not by simpleton methods and protocols but rather with the aid of connections, manipulations and muscle power. Ranganath's experience in Shivpalganj further emphasises the hollowness attached to the satirically inverted idealised rural space. Thus, the space of community that is otherwise a counterpart of 'home' — filled with belongingness, comfort and security — is de-idealised here. The de-idealisation of the marginalised village space juxtaposes the destabilisation of the Nehruvian state's idealism that ironically unveils the 'corrupt breed of cronies and sycophants', propounding factionalism within and outside the existing spatial-cultural divisions. Therefore, amidst the paradoxes encircling Shivpalganj as a marginalised rural space, the novel's first two sentences, 'This is the edge of the city. Beyond this surges the ocean of rural India' (Shukla 2012: 1), question the idea of the constrictive space that identifies as an oneiric community. The unknowability of the illusionary concretised margins determining the re-location of the national unitary space is thus improbable, as Ruppan emphasises in *Raag Darbari*, 'it seems to me that Shivpalganj has spread through the whole country' (Shukla 2012: 330), thus blurring the concrete boundaries between the unitary communal spaces (whether peripheral or central) and their association with one's self.

Two-ness of Selves

Owing to the blurring of boundaries between spaces depicting unknowability attached to the idea of concrete space, the question shifts to the concreteness of an individual self or the 'I' existing within these ambiguous spaces, demarcated by margins. Does the existence of these marginalities and peripheries re-locate the idea of concretised selfhood? Or do these imaginarily constructed margins indicate a divide in the oneness of selfhood, splitting it into two different yet similar selves? The 'I'-ness or individuality earlier attached to the belief (or induced belief) in the promises of those in power regarding the ideals of 'development, democracy, and secularisation' suddenly falters, leading to the shattering of a concrete idea of selfhood that fragments into nothingness. However, this nothingness or void substitutes when, despite the individual's insistence of 'I', humans try to connect their selfhood with another space, a community, transmuting individual 'I' into a

communal being, the 'we'. The idea of 'we-ness' is, however, a complicated terrain. In the microcosm of Shivpalganj, manipulations induced by political kinship and nepotism contribute to defining this 'we-ness' of the communal self, widening the already-internalised marginal spaces. Although the idea of homogenised communal space and selfhood is propounded by the 'power-holders' by introducing elections, where every decision is taken collectively in a democratised manner, and displaying advertisement posters for 'saving for the nation', however, soon enough, one realises that all these revelations are just illusions. The predominantly existing division between the oppressors and the oppressed within the communal space leads to the vast divide within the idealised communal self. This line by Khanna Master's lawyer conspicuously depicts this divide:

> This is a case of the "haves" versus the "have-nots". On one side is the college manager, who is known as Vaidya Maharaj… Backing him are hundreds of his henchmen and thugs, including the Principal… and a dozen or so masters who are either his relatives or relatives of his relatives. On the other side are Khanna and his dozen or so masters, who are poor and who are continually oppressed by the plots of their opponents. (Shukla 2012: 234)

Thus, these lines unclad the falseness and meaninglessness of the otherwise idealised concepts of the community by revealing the internal power divisions within the collective 'we'. The hollowness of the idealised communal self is also noticed in the psyche of the villagers who, when asked for votes, say, 'if you like, we'll vote for him. We'll vote for whomever you say. Your word is our command… after all, it's not as if I can make pickle out of it' (Shukla 2012: 204). Thus, this ineffectual reaction of the *ikka-wallah*s of Shivpalganj concerning the election of their *pradhan* (chief) shows the blurring of the boundary between the 'communal self' and the 'influenced self', constructing the 'we-ness' as an ambiguous selfhood. This blurring of concrete definitions of selfhood juxtaposes with the unitary selfhood attached to idealised national consciousness. Due to the discrepancies between the illusionary idealised Nehruvian state and the real cynical post-Nehruvian state dominated by principles such as 'nepotism, casteism, socialism', the 'oneiric' self disintegrates into various fragmented marginalised selves. Thus, the 'we-ness' that was supposed to be the epitome of belonging to the community fractures and deconstructs into various factions within the spatial-cultural framework, further making one question the idea of oneiric consciousness as attached to defining communal and national unitary identity.

Two-ness of Consciousness

The idea of oneiric space attached to the concept of 'home' creates an illusion of stability, harmonious with memories and imagination of an idealised

space that encompasses one's self. Thus, space needs to exist, 'especially as the consciousness of space, to hold the past and the future, and through them, the temporality of existence itself so that the human does not slip back into the void' (Bhattacharjee 2020: 147). Communal space, hence, acts as a substitute (though illusionary) where humans can find a sense of stability and belongingness in order to define their sense of self and reality. However, what happens when this stable communal space with its ideals of unity and socio-economic equality abruptly breaks down into multiple factions? Perhaps because of this disintegration, the void of nothingness encompassing an individual's self resurfaces and deconstructs one's quintessential consciousness of unitary self, creating a fractured consciousness. Within this fractured consciousness, the promised ideals of national unity and development appear as a component of one's imagination, a fantasised ideal too far from reality. This fantasy, disguised as a false reality, contrasts with the reality of the 'mud of humanity' (Shukla 2012: 346), from which escapism is near impossible. Thus, the reality, irrespective of the spaces one identifies their self to or the marginalities they are restricted within, is filled with 'mud and mud alone', and the attempt to escape this inundating mud is meaningless.

Surrounded by this reality of the 'mud of humanity' from all sides, one has to 'create a separate make-belief world' for oneself, where one can be consciously unconscious of the gruesome reality that encompasses 'infractions of justice', inescapable corruption and power dynamics. Thus, the communal consciousness that was supposed to contain the idealism of 'we-ness' becomes a fantastical–marginalised entity comprising incomprehensibility and consequently culminates into forming an unstable identity with a fractured consciousness encapsulated in the 'hollowness' of enthusiasm.

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Writing from the Periphery: A Study of *Zorami: A Redemption Song*

Shilpy Jain

Abstract

The precarious situation of the northeast, as being situated at the geographical and political margins of the Indian nation-state, keeps it marginalised and stigmatised in the mainstream discourse. While the voice of the people residing at the periphery often remains unheard/silenced, the contemporary writings emerging from the region attempt to address these silences by narrativising the collective memories of these marginalised communities. The paper examines the representation of the conflict between the metropolis and margins in the novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) by the Mizo author Malsawmi Jacob. The novel while tracing the trajectory of insurgency in the present-day Mizoram, highlights the prevailing conflict between the state and central governments and the marginal groups in the region.

The paper examines how the author in remembering and reimagining the history of the insurgency from an insider's perspective articulates the 'collective memory' (Halbwachs 1992) of a marginalised/silenced community in the novel *Zorami*. The study draws from the works of Astrid Erll and Jan Assman to analyse how the novel acts a mnemonic device for the memories of trauma and violence of the peripheral people in conflict with the metropolis.

Keywords: northeast India, Mizos, violence, insurgency, mnemonic device, metropolis, margins

Introduction

In the Indian literary context, the voices from the periphery are those coming from social, economic and geographical margins.[1] These peripheral voices present an alternative context or worldview available only to social, cultural context and political milieu of the author or his/her particular community. Such writings underline an alternative mode of consciousness that emerges from caste, community spatial existence and economic marginalisation (Baharul Islam 2022).

Northeast India is situated at both the geographical and political periphery of the Indian nation-state. The entire northeast region is cut off from mainland India except for the narrow Siliguri corridor. The level of geographical isolation of the northeast can be noted by the fact that only about one percent of the northeast is connected to the rest of India, with the remaining 99 percent bordering other countries (Cline 2006). The precarious location of the northeast in the Indian cartography keeps it cut off from the rest of the nation. Furthermore, the northeast has a history of political marginalisation within the mainstream Indian politics dating back to the colonial period when several hill districts of Assam were designated as Excluded Areas under the Government of India Act, 1935. For the Excluded Areas, the governor of Assam was the sole administrative and legislative authority, which resulted in the further alienation and exclusion of various tribes from the mainstream national life and politics. In addition, because the excluded areas were funded from the provincial budget, there were limited resources for these areas, leading to economic backwardness and lack of development. (Lalzarmawii 2015; Malsawmkima 2015). Thus, the northeast region sits at the margins of the Indian nation-state both geographically and politically. The centre-periphery relationship that exists between India and its northeast is reflected in the terminology used for the region. The term 'northeast' or 'northeast region' is a directional and relational term with mainland India at its centre. The directional place-name highlights a relationship of power and hierarchy that exists between the region and the state (Baruah 2020).[2]

The Counter Narrative in *Zorami*: *A Redemption Song*

The paper aims to look at how literature from the margins positions itself against the mainstream narrative vis-à-vis Malsawmi Jacob's novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015). It is the first novel ever penned by a Mizo writer in English.[3] The text narrates the story of a woman named Zorampari, who is sexually assaulted as a teenager by Indian army men. According to the author, Zorampari is a representative figure of Mizoram.[4] The narrative is non-linear as it invokes the history of the Mizos through varied points of time. Nonetheless, the story majorly focusses on tracing the history of armed conflict in the Lushai Hills/Mizo Hills district in undivided Assam. The armed conflict in the Lushai Hills is often referred to as the Mizo insurgency, the MNF movement or *rambuai* (troubled land). While MNF refers to the Mizo National Front that led the movement, the term *rambuai*, used by the Mizos, literally means troubled land as the two decades of Mizo agitation are associated with the ensuing trauma and sufferings in the minds of its victims; and the term insurgency, used in Indian official discourse, suggests an armed rebellion with mass support. The language of insurgency and counterinsurgency as used by the

Indian nation-state has a political and military undertone. The terms insurgency and *rambuai* signify the contrasting standpoints/viewpoints as well as a relation of power.

Language, Famine and the Armed Struggle

The narrative, though largely focusses on the Mizo experience of the agitation, highlights the conflict between the centre and margins. In the larger political framework of India, the central government or mainland India is at the centre, and the other regions with less political autonomy are its margins. In the novel, the metropolis is represented by both the central Indian government and the state government of undivided Assam, while the margins are chiefly represented by the Mizos in the novel. The Mizo rebellions were not only against the Indian state but also against the policies of the state government of undivided Assam, which was often implicated in the decisions to employ repressive tactics in the rebel areas (Baruah 2020). For instance, the novel depicts the forceful imposition of Assamese language as the official language of state in undivided Assam from the perspective of Mizos. The narrator recounts that a few months ago, the Assam government had mandated that Assamese be taught in all the schools. And the Mizo nationalists had been protesting against this decision (Jacob 2015: 34). The young Zorami witnesses a group of people in a procession, holding placards and shouting, 'We do not want Assamese language! We do not want goblin-scripts! Down with *vai* rule' (Jacob 2015: 14)! In the novel, this incident occurs on the same day as Indian Republic Day, thus highlighting the conflict between the state government and the tribal populace. This scene in the novel is a reference to the procession that was held at Aizawl to observe a 'Protest Day' against the passing of the official Language Bill of the Assam Legislative Assembly on 14 October 1960. The Mizo Union Party and Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) also participated in the procession to express their unwillingness to accept Assamese as the official language and demand a separate hill state. The imposition of Assamese language on the varied ethnic tribal communities is a form of suppression and forceful assimilation as the imposition of Assamese as the state language has the possibility of further alienating and marginalising a particular community. This idea is echoed in the explanation provided by Zorami's mother about the opposition of Assamese language by the Mizos. She claims that 'Because the state rulers are trying to force us to use it for all important matters. But we don't know the language and most of us will not be able to learn it even if we try. That means we Mizo people would become like fools in our own homeland' (Jacob 2015: 35). Similarly, the people contended that 'Assamese language has no connection with Mizo language at all. And it is impossible for us to learn the script. Why should they impose

such a difficult language on us?' (Jacob 2015: 35). Here, the language becomes a means of power assertion. The author, despite writing the novel in English, asserts her linguistic identity through the incorporation of regional language words in the novel.

The centre is the locus of power situated at the urban heartland and the margins are dependent on the centre for its sustenance and development. The Mizo Hills as a territory of undivided Assam depended on the state government and centre. However, when on 29 October 1958, the Mizo District Council passed a resolution cautioning the Assam government to sanction relief funds for the upcoming famine, the Assam government rejected the request on the grounds that such prediction of famine was only 'tribal superstition' (Vanlalhuruaia 2015). Therefore, when the *mautam* famine struck the Mizo Hills in 1959, the local populace suffered from starvation, which ultimately widened the gap between the centre and margins.[5] In the novel, the young Zorami is bewildered at people's sudden obsession with rats. On questioning, she is informed by her mother that certain bamboos flower once in 50 years, produce fruit and die. These fruits and seeds are eaten by rats who then multiply in large numbers and end up eating rice once the seeds are finished, thus resulting in food scarcity. The novel portrays how the people held the Assam government accountable in their failure to take cognisance of the matter and provide relief to the famine struck region. The people complained 'The government is not helping us either. The leaders of Assam know all about the *mautam* and famine but they don't care. We are only a district of Assam and what do they care about tribal people like us? They say people have already died in some far-off villages' (Jacob 2015: 33). This highlights the feelings of alienation and marginalisation as experienced by the Mizos, which were further aggravated during the famine. There was a general feeling that India treated them like stepsons because they are a different race from mainland India (Jacob 2015: 33). This negligence on the part of Assam government is contrasted with the imposition of Assamese language as the state language at the same time. The Assam government's alleged indifference to their sufferings is attributed to the ethnic differences between the people residing at the centre versus the margins. The issue of centre's negligence of its margins is further reflected in the discourse around under-development in the area. Pu Laldenga, as the leader of MNF, said at a political gathering that the region has no proper roads or factories, and the living standard is very low as the Mizos are under the rule of 'other' people who do not want them to develop and progress. The idea of progress and development was at the centre of the MNF movement in their struggle for self-autonomy. The Mizos wanted autonomy and favourable financial aid to develop their economy from the state, which the Government of Assam neglected. This negligence along

with the state government's decision to make Assamese the official state language raised significant concerns about the future of the Mizo culture and identity in India (Roy 2015).

The centre-periphery conflict quickly materialised into an armed struggle between the two sides as soon as MNF rebels attacked government sites, including the treasury. The author writes that soon after the MNF soldiers captured the treasury 'the government's response arrived. Air raids. Burning, destruction, deaths' (Jacob 2015: 79). The government's quick response to insurgency is contrasted with the delayed and inadequate response to the appeals for famine relief. Nikhuma who was a member of the underground parliament thinks to himself that if only the government had given a quick response like this when the people asked for help during the famine, all this could have been avoided.

The Tactics Used for Suppression

The centre/metropolis with its military power uses several tactics to suppress the margins, which has lesser power. As a former officer of the Indian Army once said mockingly: 'The moment they fired a few shots and were organised into a violent movement . . . the power government, but powerful functionaries came running from the Centre. The funds increased, the allocation increased'(George 2004).[6] The novel captures the power imbalance between the centre and margins. The Indian Army conducted aerial attacks or air raids in response to the attack by MNF rebels. Fighter planes sent to Aizawl dropped incendiary bombs, setting the entire towns and villages ablaze and killing many people. This attack, till date, remains the only incident when the Indian government resorted to air strike its own territory. Similarly, the centre possessed greater power in terms of soldiers. The narrator states that executing an Indian Army officer now and then and shooting down some soldiers did not advance the Mizo's cause as the killed soldiers were readily replaced by new arrivals from the centre. In contrast, the number of MNF soldiers declined as many were arrested, jailed and killed (Jacob 2015: 108). However, these were not the only tactics used by the centre to supress the agitation. Among the instruments, the army conducted Operation Security, otherwise known as the village grouping exercise in which people from all over the district were relocated to camps set up along the main communication routes of the army (Hassan). The forced relocation of the people to camps had two impacts — it kept the villagers under close surveillance of the army and it prevented the underground army from seeking help from the locals.

The Fear of Assimilation

The novel also portrays how the margins are threatened by the intrusion of any form of foreign influence that might result in the loss of their culture

and ethnic identities. Laldenga repeats the fears of the common people of Mizoram 'We are in great danger of being assimilated, consumed and annihilated. Our Mizo identity is in danger. If we continue to live as we do now, we may become lost tribes like the lost tribes of Israel' (Jacob 2015: 61). The fear of the common man is represented through the character of Lalwmpuia who feels concerned about the influence of outside culture such as Hindi movies and songs along with the fact that Mizo men are joining the Indian Army and going outside to study an invasion on Mizoram. The influx of non-Mizos into the district is a potential threat as it brings the 'the *vai* ways' or outside influence to the hills. He fears that the outsiders would take over, and the locals would be outnumbered in their own homeland.

Conclusion

The author Malsawmi Jacob in the novel *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) depicts the tussle between India and its northeast for greater autonomy. The novelists writing from the periphery raise the issue of the real and imaginary margins enforced by the centre.

Notes

1 'Centre-periphery model is a spatial metaphor which describes and attempts to explain the structural relationship between the advanced or metropolitan "centre" and a less developed "periphery", either within a particular country, or (more commonly) as applied to the relationship between capitalist and developing societies' (Source: A Dictionary of Sociology, 1998. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

2 Baruah writes that the terms North India or South India are informal and vernacular in nature while Northeast India is an officially organised and named region (as signified in the MoDoNER or the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region). See *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast* (2020).

3 The term Mizo literally means people (mi) of the hills (zo). The Mizo people are an ethnic group native to northeastern India, western Burma (Myanmar) and eastern Bangladesh.

4 For further information, refer to Malsawmi Jacob's interview given to Dr C. Lalawmpuia Vanchiau published in the Journal of MIELS, Vol. 5. December 2018, pp 623–33.

5 In Mizo language, *Mautam* means death of bamboo (*mau* referring to bamboo and *tam* to death). It is an ecological phenomenon that occurs in a cycle of 50 years in which the shedding of bamboo flowers leads to the multiplication of rodents, causing famine.

6 Unnamed senior Indian army official quoted in A. N. George, 'North East, Not Best,' *Mid-Day* (India), 10 Oct. 2004 at www.mid-day.com/news/nation.

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A Disquiet Home: Reading Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Shivam Kundu

Abstract

Literature is a potent apparatus for providing a glimpse into the lived experiences of people beyond geographical, social, and cultural boundaries. With the advent of reformatory theory and praxis in the sphere of literary studies, this aspect of literary writing has come to the fore. The decolonising endeavour has led to the redefinition of canons all across the globe. The narratives of people living in the margins have come to be increasingly recognised and appraised for their literary merit as well social relevance. Temsula Ao's fiction is one such attempt to bring the narratives of the margin to the centre — a powerful and dynamic effort to efface the dichotomy of the centre and the margin. Her short stories paint a picture of disquiet on a seemingly tranquil canvas of the Naga Hills. She writes about an existence amid physical and psychological violence as a result of armed uprising and various modes of resistance. Her stories provide a glimpse of lives in unrest. They highlight the role of myths and oral traditions in the preservation of a one's culture in the face of coercive repression. This paper analyses select stories from Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* as expressions of aforementioned characteristics of her writing. It further elaborates how the stories give space to individual lives while discussing the larger issues at hand.

Keywords: decolonising, margins, dichotomy, psychological violence, resistance,

The genre of fiction provides a unique opportunity for lived realities and imagination to come together. It functions as an apparatus for retelling histories and narratives against the grain. This characteristic of the genre makes it a strong vehicle for resistance and rewriting in the face of coercion and

repression. It also allows for movement of the narratives of the periphery to the centre in the literary sphere, which in turn allows for this change to occur in society at large.

Writing of land under the stringent web of several oppressive laws, like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act 1958 (TADA), National Security Act 1980 (NSA), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967 (UAPA), and of course the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958, writers from the northeastern part of India walk a tightrope (Gill 2013: 12). Their attempt to voice the stories of their home includes a certain activism for the cause of self-assertion. In their writings the 'cultural memory is reprocessed' and it comes through as a narrative woven with craft and emotion (Baral 2013: 3).

Temsula Ao's literary oeuvre consists of seven volumes of poetry, several essays, a memoir, and three short-story collections. A Padma Shri, Ao received the Sahitya Akademi Award for one of her short-story collections, *Laburnum for My Head*. One of the leading literary voices from the region, she has taught at the North Eastern Hill University and served as the director of Northeast Zone Cultural Centre, while being a leading light of guidance and inspiration to several writers from the nearby states writing in various languages. Apart from that she has been a vocal advocate of various modes of literary scholarship and has been involved with various social endeavours that include various women's movements.

These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone was her first short-story collection that was published in 2006 by Zubaan. In this collection of 10 stories of a people living in a home torn with violence, Ao endeavours to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged (Ao 2006: ix).

The collection primarily deals with the long-drawn war between the Indian Armed Forces and various factions of the Naga underground army. The narratives of war and violence take the stage in seven of the 10 stories in the collection. In one of the stories, 'An Old Man Remembers', Ao narrates the experience of the war and the violence borne of it in painstaking detail. The story is in the form of an old man, Shashi, reliving his past and all the pain and trauma it contains to share the history of a whole generation of men who lost their childhood and their youth to the war and the ensuing violence. Following the death of his best friend, Imlikokba, Shashi's grandson asks whether it is true that Shashi had killed many people when he and his friend were in the jungle.

For Shashi who has always avoided answering questions about his past, even those from his wife, this question from his grandson is not a plea; it is a challenge (Ao 2006: 94). What follows is a harrowing tale of rapid changes in the lives of two children, which represents the lives of numerous others who

had a similar fate. '[I]nstead of schoolbooks we were carrying guns and other weapons of destruction and living in the jungle like wild creatures' (Ao 2006: 98). Shashi begins the tale by describing one of the incursions he witnessed early in his childhood.

> Even as the last peal of the school bell was dying away, we heard a great roar, of women and children shrieking and crying and trying to run away from the balls of fire which seemed to be chasing them… these helpless ones that the gun toting soldiers were picking out easily and shooting like animals running away from a forest fire. (Ao 2006: 98)

Shashi and Imli flee towards the jungle and begin on a journey as members of various militant resistance movements, reaching safety only after a gruelling existence for a seemingly endless time in the jungles.

Kailash C. Baral, a northeast studies critic elaborates on the writing processes of texts from the experiences of life in violence-ridden landscapes. Elaborating on the influence of the contexts around such narratives, he maintains that 'the reality around them doesn't disappear but only gets transformed… trying to hold together and give meaning to fragmentation and disintegration, transforming the real into an imaginary realm' (Baral 2013: 6). Imli's life is one such transformation, a signifier of several such lives that usually go unspoken about.

The stories in Ao's collection under study elaborate in great detail the experiences of women living under the grip of militancy. 'Women find themselves at the receiving end of violence on three fronts, from the state, the militants and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes' (Gill 2013: 16). In the book *Our Bodies Their Wars,* Christina Lamb writes 'Rape is as much of a weapon of war as the machete, club or Kalashnikov… The intimate nature of rape means it is under-reported generally and even more so in conflict zones where reprisals are likely, stigmatization common, and evidence hard to gather' (Lamb 2020: 20). Brutalisation of women is one of the most underreported aspects of violence in wars all around the world. An absence of proper records and documents notwithstanding, rape is accepted as the 'most neglected war crime' (Lamb 2020: 22).

The story titled 'The Last Song' brings us face to face with the extent of cruelty and barbaric violence perpetrated by the armed forces under the guise of security operations. It is a chilling account of state-sanctioned violence in which 'women's bodies become the site of the battle with innumerable instances of atrocities and brutality' (Gill 2013: 17). A 'Sunday dawned bright and cool' as the villagers assembled for the dedication of a new church building, Apenyo, the lead singer nicknamed 'singing beauty' was standing in the middle of the front row of the choir (Ao 2006: 27). 'As the song of the crowd was waiting to hear began, there was the sound of gunfire in the distance… their

dedication Sunday was going to be desecrated by the arrogant Indian Army' (Ao 2006: 27).

Unsure of how to react, Apenyo started to sing and was joined by the entire choir. Perceiving this as 'an act of open defiance', the soldiers started beating the *gaonburas* with rifle butts (Ao 2006: 27). The people began to disperse in every direction, but Apenyo stood her ground 'singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven' (Ao 2006: 28). As a result of her perceived resistance, she got dragged away by the leader of the army unit. Her mother, Libeni, after a frantic search witnessed a heinous act of violence as she saw the young captain raping her daughter while a few soldiers waited nearby for their turn. As she leapt to her daughter's rescue she was dragged to the ground and raped even after she was dead. To make sure that were no witnesses to the act, the captain ordered the troops to fire indiscriminately on the people who came forward to lift the two bodies. Hungry for further violence, on the order of their leader 'they emptied their guns into the building… even the house of God could not provide them security and save them from the bullets' (Ao 2006: 29).

Violence against women is one of the key aspects under study in the collection. The women in the collection aren't mere hapless victims but assert their agency for the cause of the rebellion as well as self-assertion. Ao begins the collection with a tale of resistance by a woman in 'The Jungle Major'. Khatila helps her husband Punaba, a soldier in the underground army, escape despite being threatened by an officer with being 'punished in a very special way' (Ao 2006: 4). During a 'meticulously planned operation of the mighty Indian army', rather than being a 'cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself', Khatila betrays no signs of agitation while helping her husband, disguised as a water-bearer, escape right in front of the captain (Ao 2006: 5).

Another aspect of women's lives in the face of war is mentioned in the story 'Soaba'. Away from the actual battles with guns and ammunition, there was another conflict going on in the Naga society: there was a 'conflict of interest that was eating into the moral fabric of a society where friendship and loyalty were the casualties' (Ao 2006: 12). The story elaborates on the activities of one band of self-seeking entrepreneurs, known as 'the flying squad', a part of the Home Guards created to discharge the civil defence duties in the town of Mokokchung (Ao 2006: 12). The story is about the relationship between an innocent and innocuous boy Soaba and Imtila, wife of the head of the flying squad. Imtila is a victim of the war that is reaching inside her household due to the greed of her husband, who is among the many elements employed in profiteering from the war that is ravaging the tranquillity of the Naga Hills. She is 'a prisoner of her husband's notoriety'

and her 'transference of affection' to the boy makes her rethink and realise the true nature of her husband's tasks (Ao 2006: 20). The boy repays her motherly affection by saving her life from a shot fired by her husband in a fit of rage, while losing his own life in the effort. As her husband sinks further into the darkness, she regains her composure and lifts the man back to a semblance of sanity. Thus, representing the journey of several such families left in the wake of scorching violence. Imtila comes across as 'the one trying to cling on to humanity amidst the chaos that had engulfed her world' (Ao 2006: 22).

Apart from instances of physical violence, these short stories present a picture of other modes of violence including forced containment, surveillance and espionage. One such mode finds mention in three stories in the collection, 'The Jungle Major','Soaba' and 'The Old Man Remembers'. The key motive for insurgency in Nagaland and the nearby region was the value accorded to autonomy and freedom by the inhabitants. In stark contrast, one of the routine methods of punishment for the villagers who appeared to be supporting the underground armies was 'grouping', a system of 'group incarceration' of entire villages inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades… which the 'Nagas hated and dreaded more than bullets' (Ao 2006: 3).

Grouping of villages was done with the sole purpose of surveillance, as a result of which villages were uprooted from their ancestral sites and moved to separate enclosures as it was 'convenient for the security forces to guard them day and night' (Ao 2006: 11). This was carried out as an insult inflicted on the Naga psyche to send the message that 'the freedom they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gunpoint by the invading army' (Ao 2006: 11).

In the story, 'The Curfew Man', Ao explores another aspect of the life of people living in the grey areas in times of war. As the war progressed, the armed forces started employing people who could provide them with information about the sympathisers of the resistance movement. Satemba, a constable forced into retirement due to an injury, gets entangled in the crossfire between the insurgents and the army as he accepts employment as a government informer. The story makes us ask difficult questions. As Tilottama Misra writes regarding the collection, 'the questions "Who is a true patriot?" and "What are the limits of human sympathy for a cause?" have been portrayed sensitively' (Misra 2013: 259). The story illustrates the blurriness of boundaries for civilians trying to make the best of the situation through Satemba's 'life in the unpredictable area between trust and betrayal' (Ao 2006: 38).

While the 'disquiet' of the hills leads the charge in the stories in *These Hills Called Home,* it is followed closely by narratives of a home that is inhabited by a people who lead a sustainable life with close relationships within communities that live in harmony with nature. The collection makes an effort

to give us a glimpse of the simple lives of villagers, with all their trials and tribulations. Away from the noise of guns and cries of torture, some stories in the collection share narratives of civilians living their everyday lives. Such stories go a long way in familiarising the larger audience with the people of the region. This is a specific attribute of the writings from the northeast. Writing about such an effort, Ao states that the writers' 'otherness' has helped them to overcome their isolation and made sure that their feelings and thoughts are textualised, inscribed in written form in, forging similarities of worldviews with other cultures; yet the uniqueness of their cultural differences has not disappeared (Ao 2007: 106).

Such unique experiences find space in some of the stories in the collection. They bring to the fore a life of hardship and joy, of compassion and empathy within a community, of progress and adherence to age-old traditions and clan values. However, while doing so, these stories do not attempt to plaster over the fault lines within the tribes and the complications that come with such an existence. The structure of life in the communities is still dominated by patriarchal ideas and most of the power lies in the hands of men. Women in these stories make conscious efforts to navigate through the challenges of domestic lives just as strongly as their counterparts in the narratives of violence and resistance.

The story titled 'The Night' takes us through the experience of Imnala, a single mother of two children who struggles to give an identity to her children as they are conceived out of wedlock. As her suitor joins the Naga underground army and refuses to acknowledge the new-born child as his own, Imnala faces aspersions on her character and an uncertain future for the child. Yet she lives with her head held high. When a similar turn of events haunts her second child, in the morning when the village elders are scheduled to meet and she awaits her lover's decision, she determines that she will devote her life to bringing up the two children as best as she can. She decides to pursue education and employment so that they get a better life than her.

'The Pot Maker' presents to us another set of strong-willed women. The story explores the life of a young girl's efforts to learn the art of pot making, a traditional craft. The girl is determined despite her mother's continuous efforts to stop her from learning such an arduous skill as it doesn't have as many benefits as other more valued skills. The story elaborates on the traditional methods of pot-making employed by her clan, which are handed down through generations from mothers. The story also brings up the question of individual will versus the collective good. The story discusses the importance of living in a community and doing one's part to facilitate the sustainable existence of people in remote areas where one's actions determine the fate of many. Living in a closely interdependent community, one could not ignore the

logic of the village council, which always puts collective good over individual interests (Ao 2006: 62). Despite Arenla's reservations and refusal to teach, her daughter Sentila learns the craft by observing other women and gets help from an unlikely teacher who guides her in her efforts.

Access to quality education is one of the most reliable means for individual development of women worldwide, and the communities in Nagaland are no exception to this. Ao strongly believed in the need for quality education for girls to help them be self-sufficient in the modern world. She has been an educator herself and one of the stories in the collection documents the struggles of a young girl trying to access quality education in an unforgiving terrain as the villages in Naga Hills are.

'The Journey' elaborates on the journey undertaken by Tinula and her brother, Tejemba, from her village in the Naga Hills to her boarding school in the plains of Assam. The story reads like a nature documentary revealing the beauty of the hill landscape, but we are never allowed to drift away from the thoughts of the little girl whose story we are living. Life in a community and the ethos of shared existence come to the fore as the travel party helps the little girl and her brother along the way. The story also highlights the symbiotic relationship of the inhabitants of the hills with the nature around them. As the group passes one of the routes used by elephants, the siblings are assured about their safety by one of their fellow travellers. While to Tinula, 'the forest looked the same everywhere', experienced travellers could trace their paths in the thick jungles without any navigational tools (Ao 2006: 117).

Another equally strong-willed woman features in the story 'A New Chapter'. Merenla, a widow with two young children, has a vegetable farm as the only means of survival of her family. Encouraged by a new business prospect that is suggested by a cousin who is a supplies contactor to the army, she starts rearing pigs to complement her income. Faced with a sudden change in fortunes, she overcomes the loss of face and finances and comes out strong.

In the mid-sixties an 'uneasy surface calm' prevailed in Nagaland. As the armed forces 'ensconced themselves in prime locations', there emerged a new class of contactors who procured supplies for army establishments in the hills (Ao 2006: 124). One such contactor is Nungsang, who starts the business with honest principles but had to reorient his practices to maximise the returns. The story 'A New Chapter' elaborates on the system of corruption in the business of supplies and clearly illustrates the effects of the same. The story gives us an alternative narrative of liaisons between people working for two warring sides as well as the people in the middle who prosper from the spoils of the war. Nungsang gets an opportunity to further increase his stature by contesting the election to the legislative assembly by employing the same

tactics as his business. The story traces the graph of a man's elevation through deceit and corruption as a new chapter in the story of Nagaland.

Tilottama Misra in *Women Writing in Times of Violence* mentions 'it is like trauma to blur the boundaries between the knowable and the unknowable… literary discourses rather than historical narratives are better modes of representing violent events' (Misra 2013: 250). The stories in *These Hills Called Home* provide a glimpse of lives in unrest, of existence amid physical and psychological violence as a result of armed uprising and various modes of resistance. The collection reads as an attempt to memorialise the pain and trauma of the people of Nagaland who lived their lives under the shroud of violence. Musing about the source of the stories in the collection in the foreword titled 'Lest We Forget', Ao talks about memories. She writes, 'Memories are often sifted through an invisible sieve and selections are made, of both the good and the bad, either to be preserved or discarded' (Ao 2006: ix). That is precisely what the stories in the collection aim at — the preservation of memories, both good as well as horrible ones. They elaborate, 'Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination, which started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism but it somehow got rewritten into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome' (Ao 2006: x).

Talking about the efforts of writers from the northeast, Ao observes:

> The North East Indian writers are not only writing orality but also creating a new literature of their own in a language which though not their own, nevertheless lends a kind of universality to the literature. By blending the elements of oral tradition with their creative imagination and synthesizing the past with the present, these writers are exploring exciting and derivative literature which is both oral and written at the same time. (Ao 2007: 107)

The stories in the collection under study are a significant step in the same direction. They employ a similar amalgamation of the traditional modes of expression and the modern methods of literary writing. 'The Last Song' concludes in the form of an oral lore of resistance in the face of oppression as an old storyteller says, 'You have not heard about that song? You do not know about Apenyo? Then come and listen carefully' (Ao 2006: 33). Similarly, the story 'An Old Man Remembers' is a conscious effort of an aging man to pass on his lived realities to make sure that the generations to come have a clear understanding of the past that shapes so much of their lives. That is what narration does well, it shares the trauma in the form of words to be processed for posterity, and oral narratives have had an important role to play in this endeavour.

The stories in *These Hills Called Home* read like an honest effort to rewrite the experiences of the people and bring a reality that lies in the periphery of

the Indian landscape and mindscape through a craft that blends the local values of expression and the universal attributes of a genre as widespread as fiction. The stories that bear the greatest share of violence and oppression also come across as a means of non-violent resistance against the violence of arms as well as inflammatory rhetoric employed in discussing the issues surrounding the Naga insurgency and all other militant movements in the nearby region. As these narratives gain prominence and move to the centre of the literary landscape, they open avenues for such experiences to move to the socio-political landscape as well. They provide an alternate narrative to 'the undifferentiated picture of nameless 'insurgencies' and Indian soldiers engaged in the defence of 'the nation'' that feature as the mainstream understanding of the hills which around two million people call their home (Baruah 2007: xv).

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Aamchi Mumbai?[1] To Whom Does the Metropolis Belong?: A Spatial Analysis of Bombay/Mumbai in Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy*

Simran Bedi

Abstract

The common phrase of *Aamchi Mumbai*, meaning 'Our Bombay/Mumbai' is a ubiquitous expression in this bhelpuri of a city. The phrase is a Marathi expression, and its linguistic orientation and the politics that surround it usually tend to get mixed with the sentiment it evocates. For many, especially the Marathi *manoos* (man) resonates with it. The phrase gives a sense of possession and claim to the city and its spaces. On the other hand, the rest of the communities and groups share a mixed emotion with this phrase and city. As Jerry Pinto and Fernandes describe: 'Roots don't hold easily in (this) metropolis built on ever-shifting flood plains and tremulous marsh. Bombay's always a struggle, but (one is) hooked on the thrill of daily combat' (Pinto and Fernandes 2003: xi). It is then this romanticisation of daily combat that takes an ugly turn for many of the 'unbelongers' (Phadke et al. 2011) in the city. What they feel is neither desolation nor a claim to the city. Rather, there is a liminal feeling that pervades their lived experiences. The binaries of 'real-and-imagined' (Soja 1996) ensure that spaces are labelled. The paper attempts to unravel the space of a *gully* as a site of subversion in relation to the subculture of rap in India. By tracing back to the roots of hip-hop in the Afro–American ghettos of New York, this chapter will try to understand how the culture of hip-hop alters when it reaches the *gullies* of Mumbai.

Keywords: romanticisation, liminal, binaries, subversion, subculture

Introduction

Henri Lefebvre's groundbreaking work The *Production of Space* (1991) delineated how space is a social product.[2] Harvey Moltoch in his review of this book recognises the importance of the suggestive title given by Lefebvre,

where production and space are the keywords of his theory. Therefore Moltoch describes them as follows:

> At the "production" end, Lefebvre means that humans create the space in which they make their lives; it is a project shaped by interests of classes, experts, the grassroots, and other contending forces. Space is not simply inherited nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by "laws"... Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constraints and influences those producing it. (Molotch 1993: 887)

From the above quote, it can then be understood that Lefebvre's philosophy on space looks beyond the mere setting of a place. Restricting a place to its physical environs is a reductive approach as per Lefebvre's postulations. For him, space is a plethora of elements all together at once. It comprises of physical elements, embedded symbols, social and cultural practices of everyday life that intertwine into one another. As per Soja, it is Lefebvre's Marxist viewpoint of space that made possible a theoretical development of postmodern geographical imagination (Allen 1997: 7). Lefebvre was more concerned with the question of what produces space than the 'things' that are present in a particular space. To substantiate his theory, Lefebvre proposed the spatial triad that comprised three components: spatial practice or the perceived space, representation of space or the conceived space and spaces of representation or the lived space (Lefebvre 1991: 33). This triad didn't stem from oblivion; rather, Lefebvre recognised how the 'subjectivist-idealist/objectivist-materialist binary' had overpowered spatial thought in modernity. He called this binary the 'double illusion' as each side referred back to the other and reinforced the other, thereby hiding behind the other (Allen 1997: 7).

Rick Allen further provides the analysis of these two sides of the double illusion proposed by Lefebvre. He says: 'illusion of transparency' and 'realistic illusion' are the two sides of this double illusion. The former is a space of imagination, 'free of traps and a site of free play for human agency' (Allen 1997: 7) and the latter represents the 'objectivist-materialist view', which is dominated by the 'real' (Allen 1997: 8). Therefore, 'illusion of transparency' or the conceived space is hegemonically built upon by those in power and is capable of crafting its own version of imaginary spatialities. Soja recognises that it is through the means of language, its codes and metaphors and the Foucauldian trialectic of space, knowledge and power that conceived space is plotted (Allen 1997: 10). Therefore, the mobilisation of consent provides gravitas to this space to dominate the perceived and lived space (Allen 1997: 9). On the contrary, the second side of the binary – 'realistic illusion' or 'illusion of opacity' (Allen 1997: 8), is what helps in the formation of the perceived space. Lefebvre uses this oxymoron to highlight the nature of this

space. This space is more tangible and is relatable because of its sensory appeal. Unlike the imagined space, which is immeasurable, perceived space's palpability makes it realistic, yet it is illusionary in its form. Henceforth, Lefebvre associates this with opacity as the very nature of this space is to hide the 'truth' behind its materiality (Allen 1997: 8). Lefebvre didn't stop at the juxtaposition of these dual binaries, rather he questioned the synthesis of these two by saying: 'Does the material world produce consciousness or does consciousness produce the material world?' (Allen 1997: 8). This statement seems to be complex at first glance, but it can be understood by the following example: In a hyper-capitalistic world, where material commodities like iPhones are considered to be status symbols, is then that the materiality of the cellphone that constructs an individual's consciousness? Or is it the powerful force of neo-capitalism that forces one to believe that an iPhone is a status symbol? This is the double illusion that Lefebvre has been addressing. As Allen says: 'Lefebvre saw (through) these dualisms … (he understood) they conceal social' (Allen 1997: 8). Hence, it becomes difficult to answer the iPhone conundrum or any binary relationship that exists.

In order to cater to the above problem, Lefebvre responded to this question by looking at the simultaneous relationship of the perceived and conceived space that Soja built upon to call the 'real-and-imagined' space (Allen 1997: 8). This led to the synthesis of an alternative space called the 'Thirdspace', which is not only a mere synthesis of the 'real-and-imagined' spaces, but a site where all three intermingled with each other. This intermingling led to the formulation of an alternate space (Allen 1997: 9). The notion of Thirdspace appears to be simpler in theoretical terms, but its application outside the realm of theory was a problem that even Soja himself accepted. But his attempt at finding an alternative space, even in the fictional world, raises a plethora of hopes for the 'real world' we live in.

In-and-Out of the *Gully*

Amongst the many spaces and places of any city, the *gully* (bylane) is illustrated as a narrow and slender site, which many associate with claustrophobia. Attributing such traits to material spatialities reinforces the idea that spaces are also shaped by 'outcomes of historico-social class struggles' (Allen 1997: 14). The rich don't associate with this space, but even for the middle class and the working class, the gully is a range of ideas. For some, usually the middle class find its compactness to be claustrophobic, and for some, who occupy it utilise each inch of that space. For such people, the gully becomes a home, a site where their subversion begins.

Denizens of this space associate it with the idea of 'home'; a home which is always in turmoil with the external forces that surround it and vice-versa.

Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (2019) is then not just a story of an individual rapper who climbs up the success ladder, but also a narrative where slums become a subject of mainstream cinema in India. Unlike the conventional space of popular cinema, where the story only tends to revolve around the male hero and his heroine, this movie brings forth the struggles of various other characters that share the screen with the protagonist — Murad Ahmad (Ranveer Singh). Characters like Safeena (Alia Bhatt), Razia Ahmad (Amruta Subhash), Moeen Arif (Vijay Varma), Aftab Shakir Ahmad (Vijay Raaz) have their own struggles to share with the audience. These struggles become a crucial aspect of reproducing social spaces. Throughout the movie, then, there is an undulation of 'lived experiences' of characters in-and-out of the gully. These experiences shouldn't be mistaken with the twists and turns in the plot, rather attention should be drawn on how the real-and-imagined space of the gullies intertwines to create lived spaces for its inhabitants. For a character like Safeena, a modern and unconventional woman, her negotiations with her own space are different from that of the gully boy — Murad. There is not only a class difference between the two, which their love tries to rule out, but their struggles and negotiations within the city are unique in their own ways. As a woman in a metropolitan city, Safeena's space is produced more from a gendered perspective that is tinted by her class and caste. Though she may belong to the city of dreams and opportunities, her location as a woman in that society demands a lot of contestation and negotiation. Though, Murad belongs to the margins because of his class and caste hierarchies, still he manages to overlook Safeena's struggles as a woman in the city. Her obsessive and capricious behaviour as a lover can't be ignored. As a woman, she has been fed with concepts and mannerisms of being a 'woman' in the society, which she constantly negotiates with. Though her situation cannot justify her violence, but it can make one to ponder why and what reasons lead to such aggressive and toxic behaviour. Her location as a modern woman in the city lays bare many urban practices that a woman in a city goes through. Like her, Murad's mother is equally a victim of the patriarchal order. Caught in-between an abusive marriage and a non-supportive maternal family, she too negotiates with her circumstances as a lower class woman. Though divided by class, both women have to negotiate in multiple manners because of their gender. It is in their resistance and subversion of patriarchal authority, which is still at a nascent stage, they both are able to (re)create and (re)define their identities. Not that formerly they were ----without one, but in their resistance, they not only define the space around them, but also (re)define the idea of being a 'woman' in the city.

In relation to the male-demarcated spaces of the slum, Murad and his father's worldview are also in a constant scuffle with each other. Murad's

father's (Vijay Raaz) vituperative behaviour is obvious across the film but what allows such behaviour to breed and grow is unequivocally of significance. Many would argue that material realities play a big role in the formation of such behaviour, but if one remembers what Lefebvre said about the characteristic of perceived space, there lies a possibility in the alteration of the same answer. It should be noted that Lefebvre suggested that the perceived space is headed by 'realistic illusion' or 'illusion of opacity' (Allen 1997: 9). This means that the material realities that are still palpable in comparison to concealed imagined spatialities are capable of clouding the conceived space. Murad's father believes in what he sees and doesn't dare to dream like his son. On the contrary, Murad questions his spatial realities that are fed to him by the system. This where his talent and art form aid him to overcome his 'realistic illusion'. He rejects the imaginary spatialities that are carefully crafted by the rich and the middle class for people like him and chooses the path of conceiving an altogether new space for him. This process of creating an 'alternative space' is only possible when the two former spaces: real-and-imagined, synthesise to formulate the Thirdspace. As Allen suggests, the synthesis of the real-and-imagined is not as simple as it seems, but an alternative space is only possible when it is trialectically interlinked to the real-and-imagined (Allen 1997: 9). Keeping this in mind, Murad's struggles and negotiations with these two sites of difference make Thirdspace possible outside its theoretical paradigm. bell hooks' canon, which addresses the issues of Black women in the white racist society of America, is considered to be the manifesto of Thirdspace.[3] Soja himself recognises in his book *Thirdspace* (1996) the contribution of hook's works. Here, he accepts that bell hooks' work on Black Afro–American women in America has played a key role in the application of his theory (Soja 1996: Acknowledgements).

People on the margins are silenced on the basis of class, ethnicities, gender, race, religion, caste, and often these denominators coalesce and intersect to create a 'double or triple' form of marginalisation. Though there are several disparities in the forms of marginalisation, there also lies a scope to learn and share from each experience.[4] Hence, my argument only draws from hooks' postulation in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre,* which brings forth her stance on how identity is contrived in a predominantly white society. Identity formation and its politics have an imperative role to play in Thirdspace experiences. It is through hooks' theory, especially in her essay 'In Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', she extends the premise that she addressed in *From Margin to Centre* (1984). She argues:

> [. . .] marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation… It is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming (in *From Margin to Center*) as a central location for the production of counter-hegemonic

> discourse that is not just found in works but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality which one wants to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving to the center – but rather a site one stays in… It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (hooks 1989: 20)

Though hooks' perspective of perceiving this conceived space as a 'site of radical openness' is restricted to Afro-women and their experiences, whose experiences are unequivocally significant, her premise can also be borrowed to analyse various other suppressed individuals and groups from disparate segments of the margins. She talks about 'politics of location',[5] which address issues of social identity vis-à-vis a particular spatial location. And borrowing from Stuart Halls' notion of 'politics of articulation', hooks prefers to depart from his idea and uses this phrase in context to social and spatial identity, where the radical site becomes a space for articulating the new position of discerning the world (McKittrick 2011: 244).

This radical site is then partially visible in the narrative of Murad's mother. In her narrative of domestic abuse, she gains her identity when she leaves her house and attempts to open a tiffin business. Though her attempts are stifled by her brother, she still tries to achieve her dream. The director hasn't delved on women issues on a big scale but has shown glimpses where there is a possibility of openness. On the contrary, for Murad, rap music becomes his radical site of openness. It truly becomes the site from where he is able to produce knowledge and confront his pain. But what makes this so-called popular art form a mode of resistance is an equally important question that needs to be raised in order to understand the contestations of Murad.

Looking at the historicity of the genre of rap music, a subculture of hip-hop: it kicked off in the Afro–American ghettos of New York along with its other cultural forms like breakdance, graffiti writing and DJing, where it charted its own trajectory of transgression and subversion of social norms (Forman and Neal 2004: 2). These social norms were highly oppressive and suppressed the basic rights of Afro–American and Latino youth. Many scholars have traced the trajectory of these cultural forms individually and as a subculture in its entirety. The subculture of hip-hop has garnered a diverse range of responses, and it has received scathing criticism as having a negative impact on the young audience, but with time, the art form has received its due respect. A similar attitude is being witnessed in India for this art form. This popular music genre not only touches upon the debate of classical Indian music versus popular music, it has also been considered atrocious and scandalous in the most conventional sense. The reigns of desi hip-hop in Bollywood — a mainstream cinematic space — is governed by personalities like Bohemia, Badshah and YoYo Honey Singh, who have truly reduced this

subculture to being flagrant and rotten with their sexist representations. Following them is the Punjabi hip-hop industry in India and abroad, which treads a similar path. But how can one visualise an appropriate space for this art form?

The art has been mushrooming in small spaces like the gullies of Dharavi. This underground project reaches the audience through the means of the internet. In a post-liberalised India, especially in urban spaces, where internet has become a basic necessity, rappers like Murad have been gaining impetus. Their space is recognised and revered on the virtual space of the internet. People resonate with the experiences of such rappers and thus this 'cultural capital'[6] (Bourdieu 1986: 17) helps artists like Murad and McSher in producing their spaces. This new space functions on how many 'likes' one receives, and these likes then become the new currency for burgeoning artists like Murad. This allows in the production of a space that recognises talent, which though a slow and steady process then contributes in the alteration of identity (ies). Even on the audience, who consumes this music, and understands the story behind the lyrics, there is a certain impact of these newfangled identities. This could, then, be a reason why songs like 'Apna Time Aega' become the new anthem of the youth. Somewhere in-between the lyrics, each one associates and (re)constructs a part of their identity.

Conventionally, the film is seen as a musical drama and essentially addresses the significance of rap music, and how it becomes the voice of the streets. However, it is not only rap as a subculture of hip-hop that has been showcased in the film, even graffiti as a component of the same subculture is given some screen time. Though this urban practice is just used as a prop in the song 'Azadi', but as an urban practice and a part of the hip-hop culture graffiti has been practiced by many underground hip-hop artists in India and abroad. Even though the use of graffiti in this film is superficial, even in its superficiality it manages to convey some meaning. Murad's graffiti reinforces how a basic need like internet has managed to alter the fabric of a post-liberalised society. Now, the internet has become a basic necessity for all factions of society. As previously mentioned, the internet has become the new capital of this age, which helps the voice of the street to come out of its cocoon. And through the medium of internet, rap music reaches the gullies and gives them a new shade, not as a site of 'deprivation' but of subversion.

Also, hip-hop has been under the lens of critics for a long period. The whole culture of this form is associated with how the Afro–American and Latino youth in America inhabited their ghettos and the difficulties they faced as individuals and as artists. Murray Forman in *Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music* makes key observations related to the spatial analysis of this art form. In one of his observations in context to rap and space, he lays emphasis

on territoriality where he asserts that territory is not just confined to geography of individuals and their practices, but it also underscores a 'relationship to space or, more accurately, a relationship to particular places' (Forman and Neal 2004: 203). He further says that since the beginning of this form in the 1970's, local ties have been an important component in defining the culture of hip-hop. 'Demarcation of turf and territory among various crews, cliques, and possess' have always generated a heightened sense of spatial awareness (Forman and Neal 2004: 203). This trait of territorialisation has been witnessed in the Indian scenario as well. Before, analysing this phenomenon vis-à-vis the film, the following analysis of Forman holds certain weightage:

> Rap tracks, with their almost obsessive preoccupation with place and locality, are never solely about space and place on the local scale. Rather, they also identify and explore the ways in which these spaces and places are inhabited and made meaningful. Struggles and conflicts as well as the positive attachments to place are all represented in the spatial discourses of rap. This is not a display of parochial narrowness but a much more complex and interesting exploration of local practices and their discursive construction in the popular media. (Forman and Neal 2004: 220)

With reference to the film and the culture of rap in Mumbai, demarcation of space then becomes significant in the formation of spaces. Throughout the film, Bombay 17, the pin code of Dharavi is reiterated as a marker for instilling spatial awareness of that place. As it is a known fact in mainstream cinema, the plot of *Gully Boy* aims to adapt from the lived experiences of underground rappers like Divine and Naezy. But Naezy's short film, *Bombay 70,* again a pin code for Kurla West (a locality in central suburbs of Mumbai) is employed to mark a territory or turf.

Though Akhtar's narrative (re)produces one dimension of Dharavi for the audience, it simultaneously sidelines other stories of the rap community in Mumbai. This tendency of pushing aside other narratives is a common practice in Bollywood. This mainstream cinema has been synonymous with images of South Bombay or Dharavi, henceforth reinforcing the idea of Bombay being a city of two homogenous extremes of wealth and poverty. Other narratives that germinate in such suburban locales are inevitably pushed aside. *Bombay 70,* directed by Disha Rindani, is a short documentary on Navid Sheikh alias Naezy and was recognised as the best short film in Mumbai Film Festival in 2014. This short documentary points out certain important aspects of the hip-hop culture, which have been covertly displayed in the film. Hailing from a middle-class Sunni Muslim family, Naezy confesses in the documentary how his mother and the people in his neighbourhood think of his rap as being 'unworthy'. His mother dissuades him to perform, as such practices are forbidden in the Islamic jurisprudence. This, then, becomes an important statement to reflect upon as one notices how religious institutions and its

various factions construct rigid codes of conduct that are deemed to be the 'correct way of living in a society'. Religious institutions believe in instilling boundaries and producing consent from their subjects. There has been substantial reading and criticism in culture studies, especially in relation to India, that point out how religious institutions encroach boundaries of various art forms and restrict their nature. This constant pressure exerted by the proponents of a religious faith, be it family members or a community, plays a huge role in the production of one's space. Therefore, in Indian context, more than race, class, caste and religion are the key denominators in the production of space. Also, from Naezy's documentary, as well as from the film, it is apparent that women have been given very little place in the Indian hip-hop culture.

Conclusion

Evidently, the space of the gully has been re-looked at as a site of subversion for the rap artist in Akhtar's movie. This big banner film with upper class artists and directors tends to glamourise this contested space, but even while doing so, Akhtar is able to go beyond the conventional way of looking at binaries that plague the city. Her representation of the city tries and withholds the essence of the phrase *Aamchi Mumbai* for a marginalised community of Muslims and even rap artists per se. It is then through the space of the *gully* there lies some possibility where one can look beyond the 'double illusion' of these dualisms of perceived and conceived spaces (Lefebvre 1991: 27) and simultaneously create a Thirdspace. It through the reverberations of the musical anthem 'Apna Time Ayega', one can say that the city may (one day) belong to each and every one who occupies a place in it, therefore bringing alive the sentiment of *Aamchi Mumbai* in every other street.

Notes

1 *Amchi Mumbai* means 'Our Mumbai' in Marathi. The phrase has been employed here to explore the meaning of this shared sentiment.

2 Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*, translated by Nicholson-Smith, Donald (tr), p. 30, Kindle ed., Blackwell.

3 Soja keeps referring to bell hook's work in his work *Thirdspace*, especially her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2015).

4 This idea is borrowed from Shailaja Paik's essay 'Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity'. Her essay recognises the politics of 'location' within South Asia and how it has the potential for new methods of critical inquiry. Her application of 'margin to margin framework' allows a space to construct shared goals and new kinds

of knowledge 'among those who are most exploited, excluded or pushed aside' (Paik, Shailaja. 2014. 'Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42(3/4): 76).

5 hooks, bell. 1989. 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, pp. 15–23. Wayne State University Press, www.jstor.org/stable/44111660.

6 The term cultural capital denotes that not only money has value in the world, but even people's talent can be considered as a form of capital. This kind of capital brings goodwill and respect in its exchange.

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Decolonising the Village: Conceptualising the *Anchalik* in Phanishwar Nath Renu's Fiction

Sneha Sharma

Abstract

The 'provincial' in colonialist as well as nationalist knowledge-making has been an area for impassioned research. The word 'impassioned' is a deliberate insertion, because a moralising attitude in relation to the rural has been a constant through all periods. Reading the *anchal* or the provincial/regional in Hindi literature, this paper examines the modern ways of visualising and theorising the rural in literature produced after independence. The moralised geography of the village republic as popularised by Gandhi forms the bedrock of the imaginative terrain of Renu's oeuvre. Fictional representations offer conditions for polyscopic and heterogeneous narratives to emerge against discursive containments foisted on the 'region' through various disciplinary formations such as anthropology, history and literary criticism. This paper engages with the use of metaphorical figuration in Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Aanchal* to break through the pietistic imagination that had ossified the village in the Hindi literary corpus.

Keywords: provincial, nature, space, Gandhi, Hindi

Introduction

In a diary entry for 31 January 1958, Hindi critic Malyaj writes:

> ...क्या अजीब बात है कि लोग आंचलिकता को – विशेषकर कविता – एक उपलब्धि समझते हैं। क्योंकि इससे उन्हें एक 'ताजगी' महसूस होती है। इस आंचलिकता को कितने गलत मानों में Interpret किया जाता है : नए ताजे शब्द, प्रकृति–बिम्ब, जनपदीय भाषा आदि, गोकि ये केवल माध्यम हैं – आंचलिकता खुद एक माध्यम है। असल चीज तो व्यक्ति के वे ही संघर्ष, अनुभव और

> संवेदनाएँ हैं। मानवीयता। इनसे रिक्त रहकर केवल आंचलिक उपादानों के बल पर पैदा की गई ताजगी घिस सकती है। ताजगी नए मानव–संदर्भो के नए सामंजस्यों के होती है और इसमें आंचलिकता एक बहुत शक्तिशाली माध्यम हो सकता है। एक विकासशील कवि–(कलाकार) की आंतरिक उपलब्धि माध्यम नहीं उस माध्यम से संपृक्त वे मानवीय संभावनाएँ ही हैं जो उसकी विशिष्ट रचना–प्रक्रिया का अभिन्न अंग हैं। (Singh 2015: 369)

For Malyaj, *anchalikta* is a mere trope; it presents itself as a setting that helps relay the 'struggle, experience, and turmoil of human existence' (Singh 2015). Anchalikta is neither a literary method nor a critical accomplishment but a medium that helps bring 'novelty' to the writer's work where the pursued goal is the faithful portrayal of human vicissitudes and possibilities. The word *tazgi* is used rather dismissively to describe the attempts at introducing new aesthetic sensibilities in the growing corpus of Hindi literature by a new breed of writers who were re-establishing the village as a site for human drama. The reference to the idea of freshness is telling here. It indicates a perception of growing distance and a threat of severance of ties with the countryside, which had become a dominant anxiety as soon as language had begun homogenising in urban centres and institutions in the early part of the century. A formerly inhabited mode of being was now being re-packaged as a literary trope and had opened up 'new' grounds for the exploration of human subjectivity propelled by a desire for an authentic experience. These attempts at finding not only new but also primordial ground in the pursuit of authenticity for what came to be known as anchalik fiction, is the subject of this paper. While Malyaj's comment may not fully encapsulate his views on provincial literature, the date of the entry and the normative tone of his criticism provide a suitable context for an exploration of the theory of style that came to categorise provincial fiction in this period. Phanishwarnath Renu's texts are the primary focus for this theoretical exploration as one examines the various conditions for composition that brought together the 'cacophony of intentions' that produced this body of literature (Scott 1998: 142). In this paper, I examine the initial constitution through a close reading of Renu's first novel, *Maila Anchal*.

This paper explores the multiplicity of visual and textual paradigms that shaped Renu's efforts to fictionalise the anchalik in order to reveal what Robert Innis calls a 'complex polymorphy of sense perception' (Innis 1984: 76), which was developed in order to enable a dismantling of specular unity that had existed in the literary and cultural portraiture of the village. Retrospective evaluations as well as realist depictions followed a cultural pattern and logic, which are sullied in his novels. The fixating gaze that reduced a particular village site to a template of all villages, making it asynchronous and

symptomatic is resisted in Renu's literary creations even as a Maryganj or a Paranpur is imagined as representative of other villages. Heidegger says in his essay, 'The Age of the World Picture', that 'the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture', allowing for the possibility of grasping being as 'representing-producing [*vorstellend-herstellenden*] humanity', differentiating it from older modes of apprehension (2002: 67–8). It is this idea of 'representedness', of placing oneself at the scene that is interrogated in this essay through Renu's experimentations with literary realism.

The ability to survey and to imagine visually extended scenes was first applied to the rural countryside in Europe in the early 18th century to fulfil various social as well as aesthetic needs. The older forms of pastoral literature, popular since Hesiod and Virgil, had given way to a reading of social conditions that were at a variance from the former modes of framing the countryside, which emphasised aspects of husbandry and redemptive innocence. Figures of the tourist, the scientist and the intrepid ethnographer offered readings of the village site, which allowed for an exertion of new modes of hegemony and discursive embedding of the rural in larger narratives of national identity and territorial consolidation. A moralising attitude in relation to the rural had been a constant through all periods and is also a foundational factor in the emergence of provincial literature in Hindi, but the modern ways of visualising and theorising the rural coalesced in the fictional representation offer conditions for polyscopic and heterogeneous narratives that struggle against discursive containments. Renu attempts to construct the provincial through literary exertions that were unprecedented in the Hindi literary tradition in order to provide a cognitive paradigm that would enable an unfixing of the provincial as an ethnographic subject and an ideological fixture. The linking of history to geography is a major development in the reading of the rural as power came to be institutionalised spatially in the modern period and therefore, Renu's fiction brings into focus the materiality of space without the concomitant easy identification with a certain kind of moralised geography that legitimised these readings. There is also an attempt to undo the anthropocentric fallacy that had extended a particular visual regime by positioning the rural landscape within it and had placed the urban reader as either a metasubjective observer or a distanced but nostalgically driven contemplative and moralising subject. Through different modes of linguistic construction, Renu attempts to discomfit the urban reader so as to break the pietistic attitude that had ossified the village in Hindi nationalistic imagination and offers a fractured polity that prevents from a viewing of the village as either possible grounds of salvation or as a locus for corrective reasoning. The sections ahead focus on the lexical coinage of the 'anchalik' and examine its metaphoric construction as a part of nationalist iconography responding to colonialist knowledge-making practices.

The immediate political purpose informing provincial writing for Renu was to find ways to circumvent the historical transcendence that bestowed on the village a passive role in the nationalist discourse. Leaders of the nationalist movement had evoked the image of the village to emphasise the importance of the local in the new 'history of expectations' that was being chartered, bestowing on the village an air of quintessentiality. The temporalising ethnology that fed these images harked to an 'achronic humanism', residing in the destitute, but symbolically rich figures who peopled the narrative. Renu's writing bristles against these notions of achronic humanity and also finds itself using the language of sentimentalisation to bulwark the imperiled region against state-led modernising plans. The mode that he chooses for his representation of the anchalik is, therefore, not in absolute contravention of social realism, which was the sanctioned literary paradigm for social transformation but very often projects narrative modes that question this developmental vision. The writing often suffers from a sense of ungainliness because of its desire to chronicle aspects of rural life that constituted its fullness but was now treated as detritus as a static image of the village began to feed the collective imagination with the modern citizen–subject as its protagonist. The imprisoning of rurality in a cultural–ideological paradigm was most trenchantly felt in the years succeeding independence through the predominance of a Gandhian ideology of the village. The absolute hegemonic hold of this form of signification is most visible in the cinematic representations of the village and its characters. The grand success and cult status of the 1957 film, *Mother India*, is a case in point that performed its allegiance to the state's developmental ideologies by exhorting its characters to emulate ideals of suffering, sacrifice and developmental optimism. Other films from the period that promoted similar ideals and operated within the framework of national integration were *Naya Daur*, *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* and *Gaon Hamara Shehar Tumhara,* among others. The interpolation of the rural subject into nationalist rhetoric sits uneasily within the skirmish-ridden terrain of Renu's novels. The drama of village life is in excess of the simple allegorical schemata that frames the very mention of the site in various disciplinary formations mentioned above. The political optimism of Gandhian ideology that believed in the symbolic integration of the village into a larger social order and the Nehruvian vision towards the same is challenged through the teeming canvas of his fiction. It aims to bring into ironic confrontation the positivist prejudices that fuelled state plans for the region and the rhetoric surrounding the land, which had an emotional hold over the general populace and was the founding principle of the idea of a compassionate citizenship that the state had popularised in order to foster a sense of belonging to the nation. The rural

figure does not have either complete autonomy or narrative control. He is emblematic of a certain kind of incapacity that is uniquely highlighted through this mode of narrativisation and aims to represent a distracted gaze; the multiple connections and disconnections evoke and suspend many possibilities within the text, creating a necessary dissonance that refuses to demure to any form of aestheticising formalism or paternal solicitude. The abstract, universal, empty subject-position available to members of modern society is not available to the rural subject. The creatureliness of the rural subject is often highlighted, which acts a foil to the idea of a 'fictiveness specific to the modern order of citizenship' (Prasad 2010: 259). Construction of difference is essential to the presentation of the melodramatic form of Renu's fiction as is a sense of incapacitation, often produced due to friction instigated by the intersection of various aspects of the modern and what had come to be categorised as pre-modern. Madhava Prasad in his essay, 'The Imagined Village: Representations of Rural Life in Indian Cinema', efficiently expresses the conundrum that narratives about the village faced:

> The Indian modern, in the first half-century of independence, was thus a twisted, desperate, and self-loathing kind of modern, committed at once to itself and its negation, and relying upon this negation as the sole means of salvation. There was a desperate attempt to maintain a perpetual stalemate, to freeze the existing state of affairs, to believe, against all evidence, that India was an exception to the universal rule of modernity. The village was one of the fetish objects that helped maintain this belief. (Prasad 2010: 261)

While the baggage of patriotic common-sense weighs as heavy on the anchalik as on other forms of social realist writing of the period, Renu in his fiction constantly oscillates between these two layers of experience — the writerly experience entrenched in modern modes of signification that entail containment, and the embodied experience of village creaturely life enmeshed in socially distanced 'regionalized culture' (Prakash 2019: 78). What emerges therefore, in Renu's mode of writing is what can be described as provincial melodrama. Melodrama is recognisable for its affinity for hyperbole and excess and given its close association with psychoanalysis, it manifests itself best in the decipherment of desire inscribed on a victimised woman's body. Denied the capacity to talk, the hysterical body will convert affect into somatic form. Renu's fictional organisation through the melodramatic mode explores the social crisis of the nation and its moral claims on territory through the modern theatre of rural life. The melodrama inheres not merely in the narrative of the text but in its very genesis. The birth of the anchalik emerges with the dramatic transference of meaning from terrain to body and from a fictional instinct to release the region from the prison of hyperbolic allegorical signification through its very performance. The gendered body-space articulation is the affirming

bedrock for both kinds of fiction — developmental aesthetic as well as Renu's provincial melodrama.

The melodramatic mode of Renu's fiction can be mapped along various vectors. Peter Brooks lists two features as emblematic of the melodramatic form — its possibilities of appearance in a post-sacred era and literature's divorce from a mythic substratum that produces the desacralisation and the consequent urge for resacralisation achievable only in personal terms. This is how drama comes to inhere in the everyday and the quotidian through the use of certain theatrical conventions that emphasise the use of fortuitous elements and carry a strong sense of moral polarisation. Taking inspiration from Thomas Elsaesser's 1972 work on film melodrama, Madhava Prasad traces the classic melodrama of Indian cinema from the 1950s to 1980s to 19th century European melodrama, which featured 'peasants, landlords, damsels in distress, despoiled virgins, and comic interludes', and included 'situations of dispersal and loss, reunion and recovery, with the city featuring as a seductive and disorienting lure' (Prasad 2010: 265). He believes that these films appeal to the peasant consciousness where melodrama is an aesthetic of enthusiasm and realism the aesthetic of a finished revolution. Prasad's reading confirms the widely held view that melodrama is a pervasive genre that lacks cultural prestige and is often categorised as what Christina Gledhill calls an 'anti-value for a critical field' (Gledhill 1987: 5). The common conceptual ground for the reading of melodrama offered by these critics is that it emerges at an intersection of the modern and the pre-modern and that in the process it seeks to reinscribe a moral domain in pursuit of affective engagement as against a rationalised response. Moving ahead of the historical readings of the genre, Ravi Vasudevan employs the form of melodrama as a mode that offers a 'broad structuring logic to emplot the movement of public discourse' (Vasudevan 2011: 402). He views it as a broad analytical category that functions variously as mode, modality and genre across textual habitats. Its braiding of domestic and public spaces through the use of excess in characterisation and narration positions the audience into dealing with personalised experiences articulated through publicly expressive ways. It works through bringing into prominence a space of attachment, here the village, and ideas of victimised subjectivity, inhering in the terrain as well as the people. Melodramatic arrangement positions the community, civil society and structures of the state in ways to create heightened meanings that transgress the pervasive agrarian myth and ideas of bucolic simplicity as well as challenge the metropolitan as the space for civilisational complexity.

With metaphor at the level of designation, and melodrama as the mode, anchalik fiction maps a terrain where the cognitive and the emotive combine, conveying both the realistic intention behind such a mapping as well as a perceptible cultural mood as hinted at by Malyaj in the quote at the beginning

of the paper. The iconicity of the village operates as both the extrinsic factor as well as the site for interrogation for the anchalik novel. The concept of the *anchal* is a metaphoric constitution that contains two kinds of references. It refers to the hem of a garment, specifically used to cover the female upper body and is also used to characterise a region or area close to the border or the coast. While the word is more closely aligned with the concept of a region, making it a geographic designation, it lends itself better to the idea of the provincial, signifying an overlay of human conditions over geophysical terrain indicating histories of governance and administrative knowledge-making. The distance between region and province is mapped in the term *anchal* through a wide range of historical particulars and cultural conventions that framed the way in which village/province/region were made visible in disciplinary systems and social imaginaries. Colonial anthropology made topography legible for administrative purposes through systematisation and border-making, after having consolidated its position over the colony. Imperialist intentions dismembered the region into smaller units for territorial control and fostered classificatory practices mapping populations and cultures on the evolutionary scale while the nationalist movement and scholarship promoted collectivising practices to produce a land-marked citizenry, simultaneously accentuating or demolishing its parochial affiliations during various phases of the movement. In order to ratify their political intentions, colonial and postcolonial, the administration mobilised disciplinary apparatuses that conceptualised territoriality differently, invoking spaces as experiential sites within a colony or a nation.

The word anchalik's evocation of the habiliment of the anthropomorphised, feminised nation as well as the references to the provincial, bring together a range of intellectual traditions and iconographic contestations that reveal a world that sought to do more than present humanistic stories with rustic colouration. The word *aanchal* with its reference to the loose end of the saree was used customarily to evoke ideas of feminine debility as well as magnanimity. The *aanchal* with its ability to provide sanctuary provoked a sensibility that was symbolically charged and demanded affective investment. An early example of such a charged reference is the poem, 'Bharatmata Gramvasini' by Sumitranandan Pant, which provides the title for Phanishwar Nath Renu's first novel (Pant 2006: 253).

खेतों में फैला है श्यामल,
धूल भरा मैला सा आँचल,
गंगा यमुना में आँसू जल,
मिट्टी कि प्रतिमा उदासिनी।

In terms of iconographic sedimentation, the idea of the hem of the saree dissolves into the geospatial periphery of the nation-state, bolstering a

melodramatic imagination, which deepens psychic investment in the region. It seems to converge spatiality with design, and the power of the metaphor acts to combine form and space. The moral and the normative are the primary registers for the exploration of the concept of the provincial, although, as the study will subsequently show, these ideas are considerably complicated in Renu's depictions. They demand a reappraisal of the social imaginary as it is refracted through multiple lenses of civil society, community and caste for the ethnicised citizen–subject. The metaphorising of the spatial allows for a melodramatisation of the marginalisation of the people of the region. The symbolism of the *aanchal* is deployed towards re-familarising and defamiliarising the space and people as it brings to the fore everything that had either been repressed or distanced in the making of the modern and allows it to acquire the power of the double meaning through this mode of metaphorised framing. The metaphor of the anthropomorphised nation lends to anchalik fiction the opportunity to inscribe highly emotional messages on the territory/body. The normative salience of the feminine image compels in the reader a forceful reaction towards the text even before one enters the narrative. It conjures images of a victimised woman's body and uses it to its most expressionistic end in the form of a pathos-laden subtext that helps form implicit intimate bonds between the reader and the fiction.

Through its properties of displacement and extension, the metaphor of the anchal works towards fulfilling various divergent and convergent goals simultaneously. It is primarily a mythopoetic referencing that operates within the paradigm of resemblance and yet, creates tensions because of its function of 'aberrant attribution' (Ricoeur 2004: 23). The attribution is deviant because it partially displaces the landscape with the body, and particularly the body of the woman demanding a constant calibration of the gaze between homage and desire, to serve the needs of a nationalist, patriarchal psyche for control and authority. However, the metaphoric constitution does not permit an ossification of meaning but keeps alive the dialogic dimension that enables the figural comparison to not only be iconic but also commonplace. If the purpose of the metaphor is to make visible through language, the animation of the landscape in the female form introduces the idea of the spectacle and performs an 'ordering function', where the relationship with the land gets embedded in a socio-cultural matrix. It derives its resonance because of the transpositional movement; the moment of *epiphora* where in the deciphering of the *maila aanchal*, for instance, lies a social theatre suggestive of sweeping action and situated victimhood and gendered negotiations of spatialised encounters and emotional attachment. Spatial experience of the *anchal/aanchal* is a paradigmatic cultural act where 'temporal relationships of precedence and power' become inscribed (Tilley 1994: 31).

The historical relevance of the spatialised woman and her *aanchal* is to be found in the visual art that had begun to create a living mythology around the idea of Bharat Mata. Introduced in the early decades of the 19th century, the mythic innovation enters the realm of habitual signification as it begins to appear with great regularity in paintings, lithographs, poetry, and cinema. Sumathi Ramaswamy in her book, *The Goddess and the Nation*: *Mapping Mother India*, has spoken of the fabulation and gradual consolidation of the image of the territorial deity. The embodiment of the nation and its divinisation is the result of what she has theorised as the coming together of two systems of knowledge — the scientific–geographic and the anthropomorphic - sacred — in order to facilitate a patriotic visual labour that helps in cultivating devotion (Ramaswamy 2010). Similar arguments have also been made by other scholars about the need for the visual component in popular discourse in order to fulfil the *darshanic* demands of the Hindu scopic regime. The *devi/mata* representation carries an ennobling aspect but it also enlarges interpretative possibilities as the transaction between contexts of patriarchal and colonial subjugation combines political and devotional energies. Christopher Pinney writes in his *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, '…by the late 1930s a substantial anti-colonial allegorical and metaphorical infrastructure was sufficiently in place for politics to be articulated through "religious" images' (Pinney 2004: 131).

By the time Renu was writing his fiction, the tenor of devotion was no longer being used to cultivate a brood of martyrs for a subjugated land, and the anthropomorphised figure had become quite a standardised trope in literary practice. The interanimation because of the superimposition of words allowed for dual referencing. As a result, the descriptive term anchalik could be put to use in categorising a certain kind of fiction, which opened up the possibilities of new representational techniques — a designatory practice set in motion by Renu himself in the preface to his first novel:

> यह है मैला आँचल, एक आंचलिक उपन्यास । कथानक है पूर्णिया। पूर्णिया बिहार राज्य का एक जिला हैय इसके एक ओर है नेपाल, दूसरी और पाकिस्तान और पश्चिम बंगाल । विभिन्न सीमा–रेखाओं से इसकी बनावट मुकम्मल हो जाती है, जब हम दक्खिन में सन्थाल परगना और पच्छिम में मिथिला की सीमा रेखाएँ खींच देते हैं। मैंने इसके एक हिस्से के एक ही गाँव को पिछड़े गाँवों का प्रतीक मानकर इस उपन्यास–कथा का क्षेत्र बनाया है । (Renu 1954: 5)

By combining the cartographic and the sartorial, with a sublated reference to the corporeal Renu created a new taxonomic category. The designation anchalik was aimed at constituting a meaning that was not only emergent but also suggestive. This village story contained in the novel, the preface seems to suggest, was not the same as earlier romantic descriptions of the countryside.

The prefatory note on the *anchal*, which is considered a manifesto for Renu's regionalism, refers very specifically to the district and village that it chooses as a location for its story, indicating the administrative and sociological fixity of these spaces and yet what inheres in the adjectival reference of the anchalik is a conceptual undoing of the ways in which the expanse had been divided into discrete administrative categories for scientific management. The *anchal* is peripheral and outwardly; poised at once between the referential vagueness of a term like 'region' and the political affinity that the adjectival form demands as the 'regional'. The idea was to offer a panoramic view of social life beyond the solipsism, which authors inspired by *Pravogvad* or experimentation in the *Nayi Kavita* movement seemed to be drifting towards.

A demand for totality in regional fiction is the new thrust of anchalik fiction. The very perimeter that is drawn around the word in Renu's preface with the listing of state and international borders seems to be making a stringent claim for regional specificity, but the demand remains suspended in a transactional moment of history where the 'backwardness' is measurable and relative and therefore must be read in relation to something that lies beyond it. This professed awareness of backwardness, as has been theorised widely, emerges as part of the modern world's insistence on progress setting in motion a 'temporalizing ethos', connoting a relation to time where each culture came to be read in terms of ages and stages (Fabiann 1983: 26). It introduced a sense of fracturing of time across spaces where the metropolis became the centre, enabling the perception of the periphery through the idea of the lag. The 'modern apprehension of time' introduced 'particular modes of experience and expectational possibilities' because new horizons were opened up as historical changes accelerated in the subcontinent in the 20th century, giving rise to semantic structures where 'anchalikta' could be posed as the counter-concept to '*adhunikta*', and '*dehaat*' was spatially and culturally the binary opposite of the '*nagar*' or '*shehar*'.

These notions of modern time as legitimised by anthropology and Victorian evolutionism propelled the focus on areal knowledge. The intermediation of time and space in its discursive strategies led to the search for populations and spaces that could be cast in the space of the Other and informed the gradual ascendance of the village site in the subcontinent as a disciplinary subject. The later decades of the 19th century had already witnessed the doubling of British officials as scholars–collectors who gathered and catalogued information about the 'natives' for the purposes of administrative recall as represented by figures like William Crooke, James Tod and H. H. Risley. These administrators functioned as official anthropologists who developed these archives in a supplementary role to enumerative exercises such as the decennial censuses, which started in 1871–72. Some of these figures were

also the first folklorists including others like Mary Frere, Richard Carnac Temple and Rev. Charles Swynnerton. The colonial library was built through the contributions of three figures — the colonial administrator, the anthropologist and the missionary. In the post-independence period, the 1950s saw a tremendous rise in sociological and anthropological studies of village life with scholars such as Bernard Cohn, McKim Marriot, S.C. Dube, and M. N. Srinivas as the most prominent and prolific contributors. Village anthropology continued to fulfil the larger aim of correlating the past with the present through the objectification of social life, with the new inflection brought in by the state-led push towards development. The generalisable ambitions of nationalist anthropology often went hand in hand with its desire to chronicle progress and change. These forms of directional approach make it clear that the village was a site meant to furnish evidence for pre-given theoretical frameworks.

The metaphorisation of the region as *anchal* and the consequent lexicalisation of anchalik in Hindi literary writing must therefore be read as a response to these forms of rigorous classification and systematisation. Meant for fiscal and cultural management these synchronic and static structural and functional models of theoretical framing were only aimed at creating bookish bounded systems, which did not reflect human actualities. Shahid Amin in his introduction to a revised edition of William Crooke's glossary from 1879 writes of the 'welter of facts, obeying no other logic than the rule of the English alphabet', that appear in it as it attempts to offer a 'pioneering *systematization* of colonial knowledge about the everyday life of the Hindustani peasant' (Amin 2005: 24). Moving ahead from the arbitrariness of such a cataloguing, the nationalist anthropologist attempted to chronicle process and change but found it difficult to rebel against the disciplinary apparatus, which conducted studies of the region through the idea of the boundedness of the village unit. Mapping the world through ideas of progress the colonial administrator–ethnographer had bestowed on the village an epistemological salience, which continued after independence as the postcolonial anthropologist attempted to research the constituted field as an 'ontological existent' that informed the nation's identity and sense of historical purpose. The village was simultaneously an 'institution' and an 'imagining,' a 'predicament' and a 'possibility' (Dube 2010: 45). This retro-projective image of 'the Indian village' was eventually rejected and replaced by a study of trans-regional processes in the discipline.[1]

Renu's metaphoric constitution was grounded on this epistemological rejection at a time when the social field was still being read and interpreted through this disciplinary lens. His representation of the provincial challenges the conventions of meaning that had become reified through various forms of

intellectual sedimentation. However, the rejection was not a direct case of disavowal. He chose the village as the locus of action and adapted the nationalist trope as a referential framework, but the purpose was to compel socio-cultural interrogation. The anchalik is then, a polemical formulation meant to combat the outmoded and straitjacketed modes of knowing encapsulated in mythic and anthropological discourse. The protagonist of Renu's first novel quotes Pant's poem in his early days followed by an evocative description of the landscape that he has newly witnessed in the village:

> मैला आँचल! लेकिन धरती माता अभी स्वर्णांचला है! गेहूँ की सुनहली बालियों से भरे हुए खेतों में पुरवैया हवा लहरें पैदा करती है। सारे गाँव के लोग खेतों में हैं। मानो सोने की नदी में, कमर–भर सुनहले पानी में सारे गाँव के लोग क्रीड़ा कर रहे हैं। सुनहली लहरें ! ताड़ के पेड़ों की पंक्तियाँ झरबेरी का जंगल, कोठी का बाग, कमल के पत्तों से भरे हुए कमला नदी के गड्ढे ! डाक्टर को सभी चीजें नई लगती हैं। कोयल की कूक ने डाक्टर के दिल में कभी हूक पैदा नहीं की। किन्तु खेतों में गेहूँ काटते हुए मजदूरों की श्चौतीश में आधी रात को कूकनेवाली कोयल के गले की मिठास का अनुभव वह करने लगा है। (Renu 1954: 155)

Prashant is a doctor who has come to the village, Maryganj, to pursue his vocation and fantasises about discovering a cure for malaria. His initial exuberance is the result of a certain kind of aesthetic training that the ecological romanticism of canonised Hindi poets has encultured him in. The arcadia he seems to have ventured into abounds in rural virtues and is the very stuff of country literature. This romanticism is a part of a larger linguistic baggage borne by Hindi *bhashi*s that not only trains the mind into perceiving the village in a certain way but also informs certain modes of comportment and self-articulation. His desire for a meaningful career propels him to work in a far-flung district but given his ambitions, the stint in the village appears to be nothing more than fieldwork for his research. However, by the end of the novel his perceptions and aspirations are tempered by the developments in Maryganj and the *shehri* doctor forsakes his profession in order to become one of the inhabitants. Renu is critical of these moralising attitudes because of their social implications. The romantic interest of the tourist and the careful attention of the scientist are both subjects of ridicule. In his second novel, *Parti Parikatha*, he caricatures the cultural anthropologist and criticises his academic work by pitting him against the old cowherd, positing the latter as the real chronicler of tales (Renu 1957). The folklorising attempts of one of the characters, Surpati Rai, are shown as inadequate and sterile as they are distant from the life of the village and only seek to professionally mine them for self-advancement. Disciplinary affiliation prevents Surpati from building real communitarian ties and only cements the 'hegemony of the urban' over

regional life (Gajarwala 2013: 102). His presence in the novel endorses the theme of disciplinary faddishness of 'village studies' in the middle decades of the century foregrounding the lack of reflexivity that its schematised methodology promoted. In the figure of Surpati one finds a comic but prescient critique of the discipline and its unconscious foundations and reminds one of Bernard Cohn's intrepid figures of Philias Filagap and Lucy Lacuna in search of Anthropologyland.

The provocative impulse behind the employment of the anchalik is hinted at in Renu's aesthetic manifesto in the preface to *Maila Aanchal* itself. He warns the readers about the new kind of writing he has attempted, conscious of the ways in which his storytelling dismantles literary constructs and a notional culture around the region.

> इसमें फूल भी हैं शूल भी, धूल भी है, गुलाब भी, कीचड़ भी है, चन्दन भी, सुन्दरता भी है, कुरूपता भी– मैं किसी से दामन बचाकर निकल नहीं पाया।
>
> कथा की सारी अच्छाइयों और बुराइयों के साथ साहित्य की दहलीज पर आ खड़ा हुआ हूँरू पता नहीं अच्छा किया या बुरा। जो भी हो, अपनी निष्ठा में कमी महसूस नहीं करता। (Renu 1954: 5)

The melodramatic recounting of the aesthetic features adds to the figurative embellishment that the title imprints on the mind of the reader. The border region described in the text is echoed and amplified in the idea of the threshold where the author with a slightly exaggerated sense of deference offers his literary submission. The peripheral position of the first-time novelist as well as the novel ways in which he fictionalises the region for Hindi literary circles is underlined through a certain kind of moral posturing that acts as a defence against the obsolescence that the modern world seemed to be forcing it into. The *daman* as a corollary to the *aanchal* operationalises the sartorial metaphor again but this time through the body of the writer himself. The dense semiotics that this constant mirroring produces is part of the heightened effect that Renu wants to create in his writing of the provincial — a re-entangling of the figural and the textual to produce a conscientisation in the reading of the region.

Notes

[1] The most well-known village studies of the 1950s, including those of S. C. Dube (1955), D. N. Majumdar (1958) and studies contained in the well-known trio of 1955 collections, including M. N. Srinivas's *India's Villages*, McKim Marriott's *Village India* and D. N. Majumdar's *Rural Profiles*, constantly strained to explain relations of villages to wider social, economic, political, cultural, and ideational (often called 'civilisational') arenas.

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Problematising Identity and Assertion around Tea Estates through Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me*

Suchitra Singh

Abstract

This paper aims to study the conflicts and struggles of tea tribes in present-day Assam through a detailed study of the novel *Becoming Me*, written by Rejina Marandi. *Becoming Me* paints a vivid and challenging picture of the struggles, negotiations and crises experienced by tea tribes in Assam, which are rooted in various ethnic attacks and riots against them. Literature and representation in English is fraught with its own internal complications of meaning, production and symbolism, which informs the unique position of this novel as it presents a delicate picture of the life of second-generation tribal learners from a community that struggles to find its legitimacy and foothold in a state that has prospered through its labour for two centuries and still refuses to acknowledge and grant it its constitutional position. This study will problematise the intricate meanderings of identity processes, validations and insecurities of contemporary lives in the newly English-educated tribals struggling to bring their lives and existence from the margins of the dominant state and social and cultural position to the centre of critical discussions. The paper also intends to engage with the complexity of identity assertion and articulation propelled by elite Adivasi intelligentsia and its relation or lack of relation with the disenfranchised non-elite Adivasi populace with reference to the diverse experiences across the variegated space of occupations and livelihoods.

Keywords: Adivasi, meaning production, second-generation tribal learners, identity

Introduction

Assam is one of the eight hill states falling under the rubric of the northeastern states of India, witnessing a history of conflicted relationships. These conflicts are informed and shaped by the cartographical and representational distance

from the centres of power and politics in India, the idea of one nationhood and one central sovereignty. Present-day Assam is inhabited by clusters of distinct tribal groups such as Karbi, Dimasa, Khasi, Rabha, Bodo, Mishimi, Miri, Lalung, etc. In the colonial past, Assam experienced an influx of workforce belonging to various Adivasi communities such as Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Kurukh, Gonds, Bhumij, etc., and other marginalised communities belonging to Hindu and Muslim religions as indentured laborers to be employed in tea estates. Between 1858 and 1901, nearly three million Adivasis from different parts of India were displaced and employed in tea gardens, and a significant number of them lost their lives to diseases like malaria, cholera and the oppressive regime of 'sahib-manager' and 'coolie line-chaukidar'. Since then, migrated Adivasi communities have been major contributors and participants in Assam's economic growth and diverse cultural matrix while being discriminated against, treated as immigrant labour and excluded from assimilative or integrative acceptance. Today they constitute almost 20 percent (7 million out of 35 million population of Assam) of Assam's population residing along the tea garden belts of various districts such as Kokrajhar, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Nagaon, Dibrugadh, Tinsukia in upper Assam and Karimganj, Cachar, etc. While they have held Assam's tea productivity consistently, administrative categorisation also does not recognise the migrant Adivasis as members of the constitutional Scheduled Tribes (ST) category, instead identifying them as Most Other Backward Communities (MOBC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Adivasis have been pushed into abysmal living conditions and ghettoization, and the lack of infrastructural facilities such as health, sanitisation and education has led them into a deteriorated and precarious state of existence.

Adivasis in Assam, especially from Jharkhand have historically been exposed to displacement, coerced migration and related complex violence and ostracisation in the wake of the Santhal rebellion of 1855–6 against the British. Yet again, after independence, various attacks and massacres orchestrated by Bodos between 1996 and 1998 against them have sown feelings of deep insecurity and fear and led to displacement, trauma and rightlessness in a place where they had struggled to resituate their homes, make new ties, create and nurture socio-cultural bonds and life. Northeastern states including Assam have been a hotbed of conflict with the Indian sovereign state about diverse tribal communities, their demands and concerns, leading to numerous armed insurgencies, revolts and controversies. Such a history of turbulent socio-political conditions presents the inhabitants of these geographies with complex responses, coping mechanisms and psychological, emotional and behavioural negotiations to go about their everyday lives while shaping and informing their sense of self and community.

Adivasis in Literary Spheres

Literature enlivens the voices and meanderings of the populace traversing such a dynamic range of realities, its effects and impressions in their lives enlarging the purview of the representations and assertions mediated by political, anthropological and economical writings. Literary endeavours from northeast India present nuanced pictures of multifarious conflicts and their impact on the lives of various communities residing there. The precondition of literary representation for any individual or community is being literate, familiarity with writing, not to mention a level of linguistic articulation, and the power to disseminate ideas, beliefs and experiences to the reader. For various ostracised communities, it is not merely a question of appropriate articulation and power, but rather the possibilities to gain spaces to navigate and mark their existence and speak even. Similar challenges become manifold given the tussle between regional, official and global languages, corridors of publication houses, and their nexus of concerns revolving around the ideological and political stakeholders structuring a hierarchical network.

> For Adivasis it mostly means the ability to negotiate the necessity of being lettered, the possibility of securing seats in higher education or finding a job. Writing for Adivasis is foremost about survival. [...] Writing is an acquired skill, often thrust upon us, without Adivasis being ready to receive it, most often in formal, alienating, institutionalised settings, and often having to transition from a known language into an alien one, from familiar approaches to the unknown, with exacting testing standards. Becoming lettered can be a burden too, more than a pleasure, and the ones who endure it do it for the refuge and prospects it affords them in contemporary times. (Hembrom 2022: 1464–88)

Thus writing, marking their presence in academic and literary spheres is also a quest by Adivasis in Assam to be pursued only after overcoming structural challenges of survival in the face of xenophobic experiences, painstaking years of struggles in 'educational institutions' and cultural negotiations. In Assam the literacy rate amongst tea tribes stands at 42 percent , in contrast to 72 percent of overall literacy in the state (Chakraborty 2019), with the model of trickle-down development followed by policies and affirmative actions towards their upliftment also garnering only a fragment of them to unshackle themselves from the informal 'unskilled labour category' and get positioned in the formal workforce in private or government enterprises. Such a state of disadvantaged reality brings up the resistive voices of Adivasis and other marginalised communities across the country to relentlessly struggle against the state and society-enforced exclusion and apathy to keep their traditions, culture and memories alive through orality. It is only a recent development amongst tribes to participate as guardians and original spokespersons of their positionality and dispossession in the literary sphere.

Adivasi writings happen to be a recent phenomenon in the history of writing in comparison to the long tradition of written literature produced by mainstream communities in India and the world. Language is a colossal challenge for Adivasis and other tribes to overcome and the adoption of Hindi and English as languages to communicate their precarious state of existence in middle, eastern and northeastern states is a strategic needful exercise. Even though many Adivasi communities have developed scripts and produced literature in their own community languages, the limited count of readership in their particular language has kept them out of sight from even the peripheral vision of mainstream readership. Hence, it's only recently that Adivasi and tribe narratives in India have begun to create a space on bookshelves and in libraries, especially after the publication of the Sahitya Akademi award-winning text *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) and *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* (2015) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. Since then, Adivasi literature in English, Hindi, and translations have emerged as an engaging field of discourse from states such as Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan, etc. In Assam, given the depressing state of Adivasis and their treatment in the tea gardens, Rejina Marandi and Kamal Kumar Tanti are the only two representatives of the dispossessed community in the literary world. Tanti objects and interrogates the identity discourse channelled by privileged sections of state and society and says, 'I disagree with the current naming of our community as "tea-tribe / ex-tea Garden labor community". Is there any community in this world named after a commodity?' (Shekhar 2019). Rejina Marandi, a Santhal, second-generation learner and philosophy scholar has penned down an auto fictive bildungsroman *Becoming Me* and records the complexity of identity, citizenship, aspiration to secure a dignified life, search and preservation of one's history, culture, tradition and trauma witnessed by Adivasi displacement in the face of several ethnic riots meted towards the various Adivasi communities clubbed under a single rubric of ex-tea garden labourers/ *baghaniya* in Assam.

Auto fictive texts by Adivasi writers is a potent emerging genre of representation rooted in the lived experiences of the dispossessed, supplemented by observations of self and communities while recording the nuances of 'becoming' in a Third World, developing nation-state India, where everyday power structures are shifting, shaping newer peripheries and centres while the simultaneous dismantling of these centres is also under process by micro participants in today's globalising world system. Such works contain the voices of individual protagonists whose life is shaped by their immediate community and their positionality in a dynamic social structure where they stand at the margins concerning the mainstream society at large. Such is the position of Adivasis in Assam, which itself is at the margins concerning its

political and social representation in India, where the mainstream population only gets informed through the limited discussion available if a tussle emerges between the state and nation, and that too coloured by the contemporaneous political ideologies and determinants. Thus, the position of Adivasi communities in Assam finds little to no mention in the mainstream knowledge sphere and it would not be a fallacy to assume that the Adivasi communities of Assam are thrice removed from the centres of knowledge production and welfare promises. It is only the second- and third-generation learners who can muster up the resources and dedicate the time to collate and converge the stories of hardships and struggles, learn about facets and intricacies of culture that is handed down by their elders through oral tales, rituals and narrativisation of their lives and surroundings. Intergenerational knowledge is communicated and dissipated by traversing memory lanes, which is often painful and taxing as the history has been discriminatory towards various sojourns, migration and displacement of the Adivasi communities in the wake of democratisation, development projects, capitalist industrial endeavours, deforestation, various Forest Preservation Acts in pre- and post-independent India.

First-generation participants of Adivasi voices and intelligentsia took it upon themselves to resist and rebel against these discriminatory state practices and counter the dominant socio-cultural hegemony through movements and protests while claiming the rights of being first citizens of the land and ownership over the natural terrain of Indian civilisation by giving the clarion idiom of Jal-jangal-zameen. But history has always painted these physical markers of discriminatory attitudes of the country and mainstream communities with the idiom of development and progress while posing the disadvantageous position and dissatisfaction, resentment amongst Adivasi populations in opposition to the national interest. Thus, citizenship becomes a pertinent question for tribes and Adivasis in the modern democratic system where they are rendered to a position of non-existence in their own land called India. But the allegiance and their human labour are extensively extracted, boosting the affiliation to the same nation-state and fellow citizens (mainstream community and consciousness) ever since the early years in schools and various formal and informal institutions. This nurturing of unquestionable dedication towards the nation-state and its composite betterment is the first thing that gets challenged and fragmented in children when they suffer attacks and scars on the collective body of the Adivasi beings by their fellow neighbours and society. This gets escalated by the failures of the state machinery towards them and raises questions about their own legitimacy in the country and their relation with the state.

Exploring Becoming and Identity in *Becoming Me*: An Analysis of the Protagonist's Journey

In the text *Becoming Me* protagonist Liya returns to school in Class 6 after living in a rehabilitation camp for more than half a year after riots break out in her town Kokrajhar and nearby villages where her grandfather, relatives and members of Adivasi communities live. Her scarred mind and self fail to connect anymore with the pledge of unity and devotion to the country in the school's morning assembly as she thinks:

> Oh, this makes no sense to me anymore. It remains only an ideal. Whose well-being are these lines talking about? Am I not included in that? Are we not all brothers and sisters? Do we not love our country? Are we striving towards the country's honor or dishonor? Do we have respect and courtesy for teachers, parents, elders, and each other? This pledge just remains empty lines for me. (Marandi 2014: 47)

This is the third chapter of this auto fictive tale and is titled 'Barrenness', signifying a fissure in her sense of personhood, which had been a coherent series of celebration, love and security of her family and community portrayed in the first chapter titled 'Belonging'. Her belongingness and self are whole as she visits her grandparents and uncles in the village and spends days full of life, celebrating *Sohrai* with them while learning about the rituals and mythical stories of her community from elders. And this whole self and its consciousness become disrupted by the riot in Kokrajhar; she has to leave her hostel and school midterm and she experiences the first instance of being cut off from her surroundings and waits two days for her parents' arrival in the hostel as her friends and classmates leave early with their parents. 'I couldn't make out what exactly was happening' (Marandi 2014: 26). And upon the arrival of her mother, she s was instructed not to speak in their 'mother tongue' and they followed a journey of silence, fear shadowed by patrolling police in her hometown. This is the intermediary section between belongingness and the state of barrenness, the 'crossing over' that narrates the violence and attacks inflicted on Santhals and other Adivasi communities, displacing people from their villages, burning their houses and farms and pushing them into a state of disarray, threatened for their lives, hungry and desolate hunger and desolation. 'The night seemed so disturbed… I could sense that it was not just a thought in my mind but a reality that had agitated the silence outside. The sounds that I could hear were of guns being fired and the howling of dogs' (Marandi 2014: 29).

The schismatic shift in the child's mind and surroundings becomes poignantly etched as a catastrophic event of violence, which pushes them and their families into a state of homelessness. Upon finding themselves in a relief camp brings her the knowledge about the precarious position of their life's value in the previously enjoyed continuum of relationship with their

society being fractured. This trauma of witnessing murders and the reduction of their lives to the extent of being compared to that of animals in relief camps creates a division between self (individual and community) and the world; they get trapped in a cyclic victimisation of self, become insecure, losing their faith and trust in the outside world, which is already a fragmented site for their sound subsistence and development. In such times, when fragile childhood witnesses and listens to numerous memories of repeated violence against their communities, they become prone to feeling scared and assume a position of being fugitive in their deepest core even after the period of traumatic times is over. Similar is the case with Liya, a child who spends months listening to the horrors of the ethnic violence, its causative reason lying in the tussle between the political demands of other communities and their state. This is followed by a series of compromises made by her grandfather, relatives, and parents; Liya finds herself in a position of unfamiliarity with her surroundings and school upon her return to the 'normal days of life':

> We are so naive, dear, that's why we become prey for them. We have no value in this society. Our lives make no difference to our neighbors, this is how others and the government treat us – Nilu said, unable to contain her anger. My father is a farmer, he toiled day and night to enable me to study in this school but now I may have to stop my studies, because we could not return to our lands and we have no means of rebuilding our lives. (Marandi 2014: 48)

'Crossing Over' and 'Barrenness' are emblematic of the displacement from her sense of belongingness in the previous world wrapped in a secure blanket to a self-feeling unequipped to go on with the current world and its requirement of being an ideal citizen of the state, indulgent of the efforts and practices to support the growth of society and country.

The subsequent chapter follows the schismatic development and challenges in her life to cope with the aspirations of upward mobility in Adivasi communities by making efforts to transcend the barriers of structural differential treatment towards them. The younger generations of ostracised communities also experience moments of dilemma and numerous conflicts in the dynamic socio-cultural and political construct where the determinants of identity and legitimacy are intricately held and mastered by the mainstream. Liya's fragmented self fails to come up with the terms of new reality and the possibility of moving forward as she begins to realise her position of rightlessness in the macro system of things. It affects her performance in studies, generating a diminished sense of self, leading her to indulge in melancholic dialogues in her mind and making her unable to voice her fears and question even to her parents, who are aspirational about their growth and becoming 'legitimized citizen[s]' by climbing the ladder of upward mobility through education. This condition reflects the affective state experienced by

the traumatized, corresponding to what Judith Lewis Herman calls the 'meaning of the word unspeakable' that surfaces when 'certain violence of the social compact are too terrible to utter loud' (Herman 1992: 1): 'My mind was a jam-packed house now. I didn't know how to forget these difficult events. I didn't want to return to the relief camp life again. Dad was upset because he felt insulted in my previous school' (Marandi 2014: 58). She is shifted from her school to another one, an Adventist mission school where she struggles even more as the medium of instruction and the social and cultural surroundings are starkly different from her 'home state' in Assam. Here, even though she finds herself surrounded by a majority of Santhal students and teachers she gets caught in the duality of their non-Santhali behaviour, language, practices, and adherence to the mainstream legitimising customs of going about with life. Her years in the new school also reveal the challenges of upward mobility and class formation in Adivasi communities. She ruminates about the difference between her previous educational institution and the new one:

> What is the difference between this and my previous school? A majority of teachers there were from the group that attacked us in the riots; so, it was only natural that I stayed away from them but here the majority were Adivasis but were still inaccessible. [...] I sometimes longed to learn the subject in my mother tongue but none of the santal teachers speak santali on campus or even outside the class. (Marandi 2014: 72)

Class formation amongst Adivasi communities brings about the realisation of the process of otherisation for adolescent Liya, in which the first 'other' is the mainstream communities amongst whom she felt unsafe in her hometown, while the second 'other' is the formation of Adivasi members striving to adhere to the normative parameters of citizenship. Moving on, in the higher secondary her sense of self and identity become conflicted and she begins to look for answers about her own identity in the present where she is born, the 'modern condition', where her community's anxieties of identity are not resolved and are situated within volatile enquiries into their social-cultural and linguistic position. This results in insecurity, and she feels humiliated about belonging to what is called 'baghaniya'/tea tribe community in Assam. She finds it difficult to fit in an atmosphere where neither Santali nor English (her medium of academic learning) is practiced. She feels compelled to lie about the range of non-vegetarian food her family eats and conceals her identity by buying the Assamese *mekhla* to survive and gain acceptance in that 'diku's town for another year and a half – "See, don't step on the clothes drying outside – she smiled. Come sit – she let me sit on the floor in the corridor"'. This 'humiliation' experienced by Liya is an outcome of insidious comments and treatment at the hands of her classmates and teachers as well. 'So they think this *baghania* girl will enjoy good classes in Assamese' (Marandi 2014: 85). J. Brooks Bouson, taking cue from Elizabeth Waites, notes that 'the

personality of individuals suffering and even overcoming the effects of post-traumatic experiences in childhood brings out disruptive symptoms'. These disruptive symptoms manifest not just as e impacted competencies of the children but also the attempts to recover are challenged as the responses to trauma are complex and trauma shapes one's very self-concept and 'the childhood victim can develop scapegoat identity [...] into his or her self-concept' (Bouson 2000: 8.) Liya's compelled acts of concealment and her coerced adaptation into dominant cultural codes can thus be read as symptoms of this "scapegoat identity," where she is made to embody the community's prejudices and bear the burden of projected inferiority. Both her peer interactions and neighbourhood encounters demonstrate how mainstream non-Adivasi communities reproduce localised mechanisms of power by enforcing shame and exclusion, ensuring that Liya's selfhood is fractured through humiliation and forced assimilation. 'Humiliation is an inwardly driven feeling (falling in one's own eyes) that gets defined in terms of reception (acknowledgment) of the humiliating meaning that the tormentor assigns to the victim' (Guru 2009: 7). Simultaneously, she learns about the outbreak of ethnic violence amongst Hindus and Muslims, which brings back the memories of her childhood and enquiries about how this affects her, belonging to neither community but still unsafe on the account of their feelings and thoughts that could get her in trouble in the part of town where Hindus are in majority.

At the same time, Liya experiences and realises the first instances of feeling 'shame', the reasons and practices of 'identity concealment' on account of conversations with her friend Aparna and the limitations of being a girl in an aspirational community when a boy Bikas shows interest in her and she faces criticism and backlash by members of her own community: 'I didn't want to be a burden on society and my parents. I wanted to study and I also wanted to marry a Santal guy, as my parents have always wished, and I did not want to bring disrepute to my parent's name again' (Marandi 2014: 100). She comes across the character assassination inflicted upon her gender within the community itself. Gershen Kaufman suggests that shame as an individual phenomenon is 'equally a family phenomenon and a cultural phenomenon. It is reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources as well as targets of shame' (Bousun 2000: 11–1). The tribal intelligentsia has critiqued mainstream intellectual discourses for reducing the Adivasis and tribes to their 'liberated social and sexual relations' a perspective that has often functioned as a tool of misrepresentation and a site of violation, particularly for tribal women. Resultantly, the idea of shame and restrictions on the movement and interaction between the two sexes amongst the Adivasi communities has been numerously constructed and viewed as a *Diku* / non-adivasi cultural influence. And such a culture of inflicting shame has been

observed and criticised as an element of the upward mobilising, newly educated members of Adivasi communities.

Upon witnessing the work conditions and the biases of the profession where her father is employed, otherwise a respectable job in the Block Development Officer's office but getting harassed on account of being baghaniya, she feels remorse. Liya finds herself conflicted and caught in the tussle of being a Santhal Adivasi and her explorations of self. Her exploratory self is often restricted by interventions from the outer world as she relapses into the grim reality of everyday struggles of situating, proving the legitimacy of her community and self in her own right. Yet, again Liya faces this duality as her relationship with Bikas goes through a troubled phase and another ethnic outbreak takes place amongst the Adivasi communities in Assam, a relative of hers Marcus Hansda gets murdered, and her childhood trauma resurfaces as she collapses.

The collapse brings her to voice her trauma beyond the confines of her inner self, as she confronts the external world through a direct address to her father: 'It has been eleven years since the riots yet I am haunted by it, paa' (Marandi 2014: 119). Upon finding assurance and support from her family and Bikas in the hospital, is when Liya's healing and coming to terms with life begins. She situates her personal suffering into the macro narrative of her community's continuous struggle to find a cure to the emotional pain which they have been bearing and fighting. '[I]t is easy to repair our body, but how difficult it is to repair the pain of feelings, whose location cannot be placed' (Marandi 2014: 121). We see a contrast in Bikas' character who also belongs to the Santhal Adivasi community in Assam and is a student leader and activist working for Adivasi rights in Assam, but has not witnessed any riots like Liya has in her childhood, so he possesses a more confident self and determination about the purpose of his life and being an Adivasi. '[Y]our suffering is not meant for pain but a channel to help' (Marandi 2014: 123). This exchange suggests that violent and traumatic experiences in early childhood profoundly shape one's personality and sense of identity in ways that are non-normative, marked by conflict and a continual struggle to find stability within reality and the surrounding world.

From this section onwards we see a growth in Liya's perspectives and maturation in her observations about the growing clashes between various STs and Adivasis, the discriminatory practices against Adivasis in her surroundings such as marketplaces, neighbourhood, railway stations (where she witnesses the trafficking of young Adivasi women), etc. She makes attempts to reconnect with her peers and school friends, which her now adult self terms as the 'sweet thoughts'. She also enquires and raises questions about the status of her community for it is not granted ST status, even though

she is a Santhal by birth, knows her language and culture but is called a Tea Garden Tribal and listed as MOBC. 'Why am I left out of Assam's tribal population?' (Marandi 2014: 139). The adult Liya possesses an active politically conscious self, which positions her memories and traumatised self to be an open self for interaction with the world outside her. Therefore, she begins enquiring and learning about the condition of women in her community, Adivasi history in Assam and the reader comes across the strategic narrative efforts of situating the historicity of Santhal Adivasis in Assam. She learns about the prevalence of knowledge in her community in P. O. Bodding's work on Santhal medicine and P. C. Chaudhary's text *History of the People of Assam*. She also recognizes how Santhals and other Adivasi communities in Assam have been misrepresented as a mere colonial entrepreneurial construct, whereas their presence in pre-British history is substantiated by several lesser-known historical records.Such textualised history of her community brings a sense of location for the self of Liya, who can see her identity as a whole in a continued structure of erasure from the textbooks she has been taught in school and the society where they are bereft of legitimised citizenship and are attacked on the account of being an outsider.

Autofiction as a Medium of Identity Assertion

Auto fictive bildungsroman as a tool for second- or third-generation learners like Rejina Marandi from Adivasi communities proposes an insight into the trauma and its effects inflicted upon the children and its disruptive symptoms being an obstacle in the growth of a sound personality. In India and other postcolonial countries, English fiction and its translations are a means to decolonise and voice, the 'previously overlooked histories and to bring hitherto marginalised or silenced stories to public consciousness' (Whitehead 2004: 82). But postcolonial India has so far witnessed a hierarchised structure and control of narrative power, held by the members of mainstream communities, which failed to recognise the representation of Adivasi communities, women and children in the literary sphere. The thrice removed position of Adivasis in Assam makes it pertinent to question their invisibility and lack of voice in mainstream literature as well as create a space for the inclusion of the experiences and conflicts of second-/third-generation learners of the community as active members of the social and national construct. The traumatic self of the protagonist Liya undergoes character development in the context of the historical violence against her community, her identity, and a being who is situated between the years of the late 1980s and 2010s. This auto fictive tale utilises the conflict faced by millennials (people born between the early1980s and 1996) belonging to Adivasi communities, undergoing challenges of a globalising world, developing technological advancement and

assertive dictums of the identity of their communities to record the significant political events in the memories of Adivasis and their political participation in the political sphere about their citizenship and legitimacy. The strategic grim narrative of trauma inflicted on the lives of individual protagonists of this bildungsroman becomes a medium to overcome the trauma, its disruptions and reconciliation with the reality of the present bring out a sense of continuity, faith and security for both the character and the community as they are a symbolic representation of each other. Auto fictive texts from the communities undergoing historical acts of violence are indispensable subjects to be enquired as the self-writing of the trauma and fictive narrative of her/his life employs the text as a medium to communicate her/his peculiar condition and predicament in the concurrent lived reality.

The autofictive bildungsroman, as seen in the work of second- and third-generation learners like Rejina Marandi from Adivasi communities, offers critical insight into the trauma experienced by children and the disruptive symptoms that obstruct the formation of a stable personality. In India and other postcolonial contexts, fiction in English and its translations have situated themselves as crucial means of decolonisation, giving voice to 'previously overlooked histories' and bringing marginalised or silenced stories into public consciousness (Whitehead 2004: 82). Yet postcolonial India continues to operate within a hierarchised structure of narrative power, largely controlled by members of dominant communities. This structure has often overlooked to acknowledge or represent Adivasi communities, women, and children within the literary sphere.

The 'thrice removed' position of Adivasis in Assam, as discussed earlier, calls attention to their invisibility and silenced voice in mainstream literature. At the same time, it opens a space for recognising the experiences and conflicts of second- and third-generation learners as active participants in both social and national life. The protagonist Liya's traumatic self undergoes development within the context of historical violence directed against her community and identity, situated amidst the socio-political upheavals from the late 1980s to the 2010s. This autofictive narrative explores the conflicts faced by Adivasi millennials (born between the early 1980s and 1996), who grapple with the challenges of a globalising world, rapid technological change, and competing demands around community identity. It also records significant political events in Adivasi memory, tracing their struggles for citizenship and legitimacy through active participation in the political sphere. The grim narrative of trauma in this bildungsroman functions as a strategy to confront and overcome disruptions, while reconciling with present realities. In doing so, it generates a sense of continuity, faith, and security for both the protagonist and the community, who symbolically mirror one another. Autofictive texts emerging from communities that have endured historical violence are indispensable sites of

inquiry. Through self-writing, they transform trauma into narrative, employing fiction as a medium to communicate the specificity of lived conditions and predicaments in the present.

Conclusion

The wholeness of the 'self' is achieved by Liya through mediation and the process of becoming an active political participant and the bearer of the trauma, history and memories of her childhood experiences along with her community's wounds. The shared camaraderie of looking forward beyond the individual self to a collective self also aids in this achievement. Through this auto fictive bildungsroman, the childhood trauma of violence inflicted upon the Adivasi communities in Assam is brought to the centre of the discussion, unravelling the disruptive effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and the role of memory and history. The collective consciousness of Adivasi communities' assertive tools are also explored and presented in this novel.

The inclusion of other forms of literature by the marginalised communities is crucial to enlarge the horizon of the earlier modes of knowledge production and decolonising exercises in academia as history has been exclusionary towards the individuals and communities at the margins. The centres of postcolonial discourses in India also are challenged about their position that the context and historicity of various communities and identity formation is the result of British intervention in India. Similar is the case of the popular knowledge circulation and information about the Adivasi communities in India, which upon researching every article and research publication suggests their identity as tea tribe communities/ *baghaniya* being a result of indentured labour migration from Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh in the British period. But the understudy text charts out a continuum of existence and interaction between the Adivasi communities in Assam and the concurrent population through various examples, and historicising instances becomes a corrective text in the public literary domain. Thus, publication and readership of auto fictive literature by traumatised members of marginalised communities is a challenge that needs to be discussed and overcome to move beyond the dichotomy of centre and margin as literature is the representation of life and even purely 'aesthetic representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions… then representation is exactly the place where 'life' in all its social and subjective complexity gets into literary work' (Dutta 2014: 17).

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Decentring the Discourses of the Metropole: A Study of the Rajbangsi Community of North Bengal and their Folk Songs

Sumadhura Roy

Abstract

Exploring the public sphere of colonial Bengal reveals a stark divide between the refined culture of the *bhadralok* elite and the rustic, vernacular, bawdy traditions of marginalised groups like women, lower castes and Muslims. This division played a significant role in shaping an image of independent India that leaned heavily on Western ideals of modernity and morality. This led to the erasure and appropriation of minority cultures, and expressive traditions of women and lower castes and classes, casting them as the 'other'. My paper focusses on the folksongs of the Rajbangsi community in North Bengal, a group whose rich history and culture are primarily preserved through oral traditions. Following the Partition, when many upper-caste Bengali Hindus migrated from East Bengal, the indigenous Rajbangsis faced discrimination and marginalisation based on their caste and culture. Besides, their homeland — the erstwhile Koch kingdom — fractured into various states in India and Bangladesh. In the spaces of these metropoles, their language and culture came under the threat of assimilation from dominant socio-linguistic groups and were labelled as 'inferior' based on their indigenous, racial, caste, and tribal identity. I will examine how Rajbangsi folksongs serve as acts of resistance, helping to redefine their identity and challenging dominant ideas and ideologies of the metropole.

Keywords: Rajbangsi, folksongs, resistance, nation, gender, postcolonial

Introduction

Anindita Ghosh, in the introduction to her book *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905*, writes:

> In the active intellectual climate that had been stirred up following the close encounter with the West, Bengali became the medium of self-expression of a conscious and

> articulate urban intelligentsia. At the centre of this process lay the efforts of the British and urban Bengali literati to create a new literary prose Bengali — as part of a "civilizing drive" — and to distinguish it from what they saw as earlier loose colloquial forms, allegedly polluted by rusticity and an abundant sexuality. The project redefined ideas of "obscene" and "genteel" in the emerging print-culture through the application of new standards… Prevailing ideas about literature and language served as an anchor for wider preconceptions about the nature of the social order… In the cultural milieu of contemporary Bengal, this was generated by contrived images of traditional, backward, and unrefined women, *chhotolok* (lowly classes) and poor Muslims, their status marked by their apparently coarse colloquial speech patterns and vulgar literary cultures. (Ghosh 2006: 4)

The Rajbangsis are a social subgroup inhabiting North Bengal and Assam in India, and Rangpur in Bangladesh. Swaraj Basu, in his book, *The Dynamics of a Caste Movement*, points out that they were treated as the 'antyaja' caste in Bengal, who occupied the lowest rung alongside the Namasudras and the Pods (Basu 2003: 61). The politics of exclusion and othering emphasised by Ghosh, therefore, had a strong bearing on the Rajbangsi community too. They thrived on a rich oral tradition and found themselves being alienated and pushed further into the margins with the rise of colonial modernity, print economy and implosion of ideas of Victorian morality. Not only was their language deemed inferior, their entire cultural heritage, exemplified in oral folk songs, tales and proverbs, was perceived as 'bawdy' and obscene, and therefore, either erased or sanitised and appropriated by the dominant cultural groups. Charu Gupta draws attention to the parallel process of linguistic standardisation and attempts at sanitising and erasing 'any hints of eroticism and obscenity in literature' because they represented the mark of a 'decadent, feminine, uncivilised culture' (Gupta 2001: 40). Their folk songs, *bhawaiya gaan*, however, continued to thrive on the fringes of the Bengali public sphere, being transferred and preserved in/through the oral traditions of the community. An exploration of these songs sheds light on their resistant, defiant nature. While the expressions of love and desire in *bhawaiya gaan* were rallied for being obscene by the metropole (represented by colonial as well as nationalist discourses), a decolonial, feminist reading of these songs can shift the way they are understood and perceived. The singers of *bhawaiya gaan* occupied a marginalised position in society, and their lives were marked by exploitation, disregard and oppression. While most of these songs were sung by women, some songs foregrounded male subjects like the *gariyal* (cart-puller), *moishal* (buffalo herder) and *mahut* (elephant herder), who occupied the lowest strata of society. The unrestrained, free articulations of love, desire and pleasure in their songs are weapons through which they carve out their freedom, and resist drudgery and oppression. Moreover, desire and love here are not bound within the norms of conjugality, rather these songs break through 'the

heterosexual/conjugal relationship as the only acceptable norm and recognises alternative patterns of sexual behaviour not simply as sites of resistance and rebellion but as possibilities both valid and acceptable' (Bose 2003: xiv). While commenting on the defining aspects of the 19th century folk culture of the marginalised, lower sections of the population, specifically of women, Sumanta Banerjee points out that the carnivalesque celebration of the physicality of the body, of desire, the keen focus on materiality and the everyday was in opposition to the strict order and discipline emphasised by the members of the upper castes and classes. He writes, 'But the bawdy … could become an important weapon in the hands of the lower orders to transfer the sanctimonious to the material sphere, in a gesture of protest against the ethereal world built up by the Sanskrit-educated Bengali Brahmin priests and their followers' (Banerjee 1987: 1201). Such expressions of desire had larger political ramifications within the context of colonialism and the nationalist movement. Shared notions of morality and respectability became the foundation on which was built the idea of the nation. Charu Gupta sheds light on the process of redefinition of sexual representations of women in literature as well as popular cultural traditions to construct a modern Hindu nationalist identity (Gupta 2001: 4). She writes, 'The woman was invested with new values, at once nationalist and Hindu. The dominant image of women as sexual beings was reversed and transformed into an ideology of female "passionlessness," thereby framing an oppositional womanhood against colonial assertions of derelict sexuality' (Gupta 2001: 48). *Bhawaiya gaan*, with its free-flowing expressions of female desire and sexuality, therefore, can be read as texts that defy these nationalist constructions, and, in turn, foregrounds a divergent image of the nation. These songs bring to the surface 'a new variety of experiences and practices, indifferent to and sometimes even subverting the tyrannies of respectability and standardisation' (Gupta 2001: 12–3).

On delving into the history of the community, we find that it has encountered several tides of cultural, social and economic dominance, which has given rise to identity crises; at various junctures in history, it has not only been classified as an inferior other on the basis of its tribal, racial or caste identity, but it has also defined itself in multiple ways to fight these forces of otherization. For instance, colonial historiographers, ethnographers and administrators constructed the Rajbangsi identity in racial terms. As Sanyal points out, while Dalton classified them as non-Aryans, Dravidians to be precise, Hunter refers to them as 'semi-hinduised aboriginals' and Risley is of the opinion that they are a Dravidian tribe with an admixture of Mongoloid blood (Sanyal 1965: 10–13). To counter these colonial discourses, the community reinvented the myth of Parasurama, as demonstrated by Sanyal in his book, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, to trace its Aryan ancestry. Further, Swaraj Basu stresses

on the treatment of Rajbangsis as the 'antyaja' caste, who faced caste-based discrimination in Bengal (Basu 2003: 61). To fight this discrimination, Rajbangsis started claiming Kshatriya status from 1910 onwards. This was the resurgence of an earlier wave of Hinduisation in the 15th century in the Koch kingdom. During this resurgence, they ritualistically initiated themselves into kshtriyahood, and registered themselves as kshatriyas in the census records. This can be considered as a move towards what M. N. Srinivas calls, 'Sanskritization', and can be read as an attempt to gain dignity through the attainment of higher ritual status (Basistha 2015: 103–4). Another prominent category through which the Rajbangsi identity was constructed was their tribal identity as Koch-Rajbangsi. The community was fractured due to the conflict between their identity as Koch (tribal) and Rajbangsi (Hindu, kshatriya caste identity). Basu highlights that colonial literature foregrounded Rajbangsis as Hinduised Koches (Basu 2003: 28). Starting from the 19th century onward, the rift between the Koches and the Rajbangsis only grew deeper. Writers like Manomohan Roy and Hari Kishor Adhikary asserted Rajbangsi's purity and superiority over the Koches on the basis of culture, customs, food habits, and behaviour (Basu 2003: 29). In this context, it is important to note that the tribals and other ethnic groups occupied an even lower position than the lower caste Hindus. Hence, their disengagement from the tribal Koch lineage may be seen as an attempt to reinvent a new identity based on dignity and respect. In the postcolonial period, the partition of the country had pushed the Rajbangsis into an economic and cultural crisis, where they face the threat of appropriation and erasure by the dominant Bengali community. Jyotirmoy Prodhani sheds light on the debilitating effects of the forced confiscation of land rights of the Rajbangsis under the land reform drives initiated by the upper caste-based left rule in Bengal post Partition (Prodhani 2021: 232–7). Additionally, he highlights the socio-cultural othering and casteist attitude of the new immigrants towards the indigenous Rajbangsis. In contemporary times, the Rajbangsi identity faces the threat of erasure as it has been constructed as a sub-part of the dominant Bengali identity in West Bengal, India, resulting in their language being perceived as a dialect of the standard and dominant Bangla, and their culture and customs being sanitised and appropriated by the dominant Bengali culture. Their expressive traditions, particularly their folk songs, have been facing a threat since the late 19th and early 20th century, and the crisis has deepened in the postcolonial era. This had led to the emergence of new developments in their struggle for identity, where we see a shift from a politics of assimilation to a politics of difference (Ray 2018: 29). This period initially saw the rise of separatist/secessionist movements through which the Rajbangsis demanded an autonomous Rajbangsi state of Kamatapur; at present the movement is driven towards claiming and

asserting an autonomous Rajbangsi identity, distinct from the larger, dominant Bengali identity. A demand for the recognition of Rajbangsi as an independent language has also gained momentum.

This historical overview of the community sheds light on the complex relationship they share with the metropole, sometimes revering it, seeking legitimacy from it, while at other times, questioning it, resisting it and replacing it with alternate, subversive discourses. It highlights the importance of Rajbangsi assertions of all forms — whether of reverence or resistance — in negotiating a space for voice and visibility, resiliently fighting against threats and continuing to remain relevant as a counter public. I would be focussing on the identity conflict of the Rajbangsis, particularly in the postcolonial period when the indigeneity debate became centre stage. As stated earlier, with the migration of upper caste and upper class Hindus from east Bengal, a growing rift and friction developed between the native Rajbangsis and the settler Bengalis. The Rajbangsis were treated as linguistically and culturally inferior and attacked on the basis of their identity. Therefore, during this time we see Rajbangsi folk music not only being appropriated for the power holding caste and class, but also being assimilated into a specific gender discourse, where the female body and idea of femininity is modelled on and recast according to middle class, Brahmanical conventions and norms. While some folk forms like Kati puja and Hudum puja songs were completely erased because of their explicit sexual content and focus on the female body and its desires, other forms like *bhawaiya gaan* were sanitised to suit the polite taste and sensibilities of the *bhadralok* class. When the recording and broadcasting of these songs began through the medium of the gramophone and the radio, the strong female voice of *bhawaiya gaan* faced gradual erosion, and male singers and performers gained centre stage. With the foregrounding of male singers, there was a parallel process of constraining Rajbangsi women according to dominant norms of Hindu femininity and domesticity (for instance, the replacement of the indigenous Patani with the Bengali sari). It is also no surprise that there was an emphasis on prioritising the spiritual rather than the material aspects of these songs, an attempt at diluting the sexually transgressive elements. In the words of Charu Gupta, 'The woman was invested with new values, at once nationalist and Hindu' (Gupta 2001: 48). The displacement of the female voice by the male voice can therefore be interpreted as an uplifting of the national ideal, whereby public performances were defined solely as an arena of male dominance. Therefore, when *bhawaiya* began to be circulated in the country, not only were male singers most sanctioned to sing them, but also specific songs were selected to emphasise on the spiritual, thereby higher, dimensions of this folk form. Rini Barman throws light on the appropriation of *bhawaiya* by All India Radio, where Pratima Pandey Barua was not only asked to translate

the songs into Assamese but also focus exclusively on religious or spiritual songs. She writes, '[t]he Bhadralok members of the AIR made bhawaiya difficult to be recorded in its rusticity' (Barman 2019: 24). Even the contemporary Coke Studio rendition of bhawaiya is interesting in this context. 'Diney Diney' is selected as the representative song, which underplays the sexual element and highlights the spiritual aspect. In fact, as Khandoker notes, Baul emerged as a national folk music because of its focus on spirituality, and it is precisely due to *bhawaiya's* emphasis on mundane, sensual experiences that it is considered inferior and lower than Baul and other folk music (Khandoker 2019: 92).

This period also saw the rise of professional singers of *bhawaiya gaan*, who represented *bhawaiya* to the world. While these singers worked closely with the community and played crucial roles in popularising *bhawaiya* as a folk form, most of them were neither Rajbangsis nor did they belong to the lower class of workers who originally sang them. There was a sidelining of the original workers and people from whose experiences these songs arose. These songs were now given a voice by the more privileged sections of society, which further rendered them silent. Pratima Pandey Barua and Abbasuddin Ahmed were two such names in the sphere of Rajbangsi folksong records. Though they did not belong to the Rajbangsi community, they were driven by their love and interest for this music to learn and sing these songs, and gradually become the face and voice of Rajbangsi folksongs. Awarding the Padma Shri to Pratima Pandey Barua in 1991 was not just a recognition of her talent as an individual, but it was also a recognition of the Rajbangsi culture and folksongs for which she was awarded. Abbasuddin Ahmed sang these folksongs in the South East Asian Music Assembly held in 1955 and in the International Folk Song Assembly in Germany in 1956 (Basunia 2015: 55). Both have undoubtedly played an important role in the popularisation of Rajbangsi folksongs across the world, yet the stark divide between 'folk singers' and 'singers of folk songs' is a problem that needs attention. Weissman writes, '[p]ossibly one key to the situation is the problem of how few of the folk were involved in folk music. Virtually none of the folklorists, politically oriented folk performers, or folk pop-singers learned these songs in their own families or "folk" communities. They were outsiders who, for musical, political, economic, or psychological reasons, were fascinated by these songs' (Weissman 2005: 13).

Alongside the sanitisation of content and displacement of the subaltern voice in bhawaiya gaan, attempts were made to appropriate the Rajbangsi language in which these songs were sung, which had larger political ramifications for their identity. Dhiren Das, in his book, *O Mur Hostyir Kanya Re* (*Oh My Elephant's Daughter*), draws attention to the pressure of linguistic

appropriation to which these songs were subjected in All India Radio's Guwahati Station (Barman 2017). He points out that since they were sung in regional dialects, they were not considered polished enough to be broadcast in their original form. The singers were asked to translate them to the standardised linguistic form of Bengali or Assamese. The trailer to Bobby Sharma Barua's 2017 film, *Sonar Baran Pakhi* also points to this problem. Such measures at linguistic appropriation went hand in hand with the refusal to acknowledge and recognise these songs as *bhawaiya gaan*, and rather superimposing the names of erstwhile geopolitical regions on them. By calling them Bengali or Assamese folk songs, the state reinstated their identity as being subsumed within the dominant cultural groups that had assimilated and appropriated them. In this context, it is important to point out that the Rajbangsi identity represents a cultural identity transcending the geopolitical markers of states and nations. At present, Rajbangsis represent a diasporic community scattered over various parts of Bengal and Assam in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. While they originally belonged to the areas under the Kamata kingdom, through the course of history the borders and boundaries of this region have undergone massive changes. The culmination of this exercise of drawing and redrawing lines on maps by the power holders was the disintegration of the kingdom in the aftermath of the independence of India, where parts of the kingdom was scattered and distributed amongst various Indian states; for instance, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar became two distinct districts of West Bengal, Goalpara went to Assam and Rangpur became part of Bangladesh. Against this backdrop of historical dispersion and fragmentation, we can say that the folk songs of this community, *bhawaiya gaan*, constituted for it, what Roma Chatterji terms, a cultural home that defied being tied down to geopolitical markers on the map (Chatterji 2016). The Rajbangsi language symbolically homes them as a community, and the borders of their 'imagined' homeland does not concur with the boundaries of states on the map. Home/nation for them is layered in nostalgia as well as hope or anticipation. Their linguistic identity symbolises their demands for cultural and political autonomy. These attacks can therefore be translated as an attempt to dilute the evocative power of these songs for being the mouthpieces of the Rajbangsi cultural identity.

The Rajbangsis, however, have devised diverse strategies to fight such attacks and attempts at subjugation and erasure, and carved out spaces of assertion. The simple act of singing *bhawaiya gaan* may be read as an act of resistance that defies and challenges the dominant discourses of the metropole. In the annual *bhawaiya sammelan*s, people of the community from India, Bangladesh and Nepal come together to celebrate their Rajbangsi identity. These *sammelans* may, therefore, be seen as a reflection of a micro-nation.

Singing becomes a process of homing, of finding a space of belonging. This abstract notion of 'home' is reflected in more concrete terms in their reiterating demands for a separate state. It also provides an implicit critique of the metropole which fails to recognise and respect them. In the face of indignity and erasure, *Bhawaiya sangeet sammelans* serve as spaces for the celebration of the Rajbangsi identity, for resistance, articulation and expression. They also represent alternate spaces for the expression of cultural pride, as opposed to the shame associated with it in the official domain. Rajbangsi was reduced to a dialect, and as a consequence it neither found acceptance as a language of instruction in schools, nor did it find legitimacy as a mode of official/ formal communication, yet there was one realm where this language continued to flourish — in the folk culture of the community. Though it was facing a process of erosion over generations as a medium of conversation, Rajbangsi folksongs continued to be sung and heard. For a second-generation learner like me, Rajbangsi is not my first language, but my connection with it is sustained through the folksongs. Therefore, even as Rajbangsi language lost currency as a mode of communication, Rajbangsi folksongs continued to flourish. And, alongside the literature produced in the language, these folksongs served as a rich resource for establishing its status as an autonomous language. They are also the carriers of their distinct cultural traditions. With abundant references to indigenous foods, rites, customs, they stand out as documents of Rajbangsi traditions and history.

At present, *bhawaiya gaan* has emerged as a literary field of study and practice. Bhawaiya academy, *bhawaiya sangeet parishad*s have been established in Bengal to initiate and spread the teaching and learning of this folk form for the future generations. These songs are no longer circumscribed within the margins but are gradually but powerfully marking their presence in the spaces of the metropole, which were earlier reserved for the dominant caste and class. Bengal has also initiated a scheme for the recognition and remuneration of folk artists, which provide visibility to the folk. Indigenous Rajbangsi singers are also getting national acclaim. In 2023, Mangalakanta Ray was awarded the Padma Shri for *bhawaiya*. Further, an indigenous Rajbangsi woman, Anindita Ray, from the 'margins' of the metropole — the mofussil of Maynaguri in West Bengal, recently represented *bhawaiya* in the Denmark folk festival. A process of reversal, of cultural and linguistic assertion, and reclamation of voice has therefore been set into motion. Songs like *bhawaiya* would earlier not be considered representative of the cultural ethos of Bengal, rather it was perceived as its other (as we have discussed in the beginning of the study); but now such preconceptions have been decentred, and media platforms are hailing Anindita Ray as the pride of Bengal, as a representative of the rich

cultural heritage of the state. Such contemporary interventions have enabled the subversion of our understanding of language, literature and cultures.

One of the parameters for the exclusion and marginalisation of *bhawaiya* from the realm of literature was the oral nature of these songs. At present, however, Rajbangsi singers, poets and lyricists have made consolidated efforts to break down such hierarchies between the oral/inferior and written/superior traditions. Jyotirmoy Prodhani published a book of Rajbangsi poetry in English translation. The book opens with the translation of an age-old *bhawaiya gaan* and continues to document old folk lyrics as well as newly written poems in the Rajbangsi language. I see this as the official entry of *bhawaiya* into the field of Indian writing in English. It transcends the confinement within oral traditions and represents a nascent heterogeneous genre that travels across multiple borders. It reconfigures and redefines the metropole and subverts the binaries of mainstream/standard/trendy versus regional/local/*anchalik*/ subaltern when it comes to (Indian English) literature. As we have seen with Anindita Ray, there is a gradual rise of indigenous Rajbangsi women singers, which signals the process of reclamation of voice, which was silenced, appropriated by colonial, nationalist as well as a neocolonial/postcolonial state. Tukhkha Academy is run by Dipti Ray, and trains women in the folk-dance form. We, therefore, notice a decentring of the predominance of male voices fostered by the state. Moreover, the Rajbangsi margins serve as a counter space of alternate discourses.

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Love and Disparity: Representation of Eroticism in the Compilation of Hala's Gāthā Saptasati

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Abstract

Gāthā Saptasati, the compilation of Satavahana king Hala, is a compendium of 70 poems dealing primarily with one of the three goals in human life. The poems talk about the everyday lives of common people, focussing on their private experience of love relations or *kama,* which stands for one of the most important goals of human life in conjunction to *dharma*, *artha* and *mokṣa*. The paper sets out to analyse the gender relations of human life within the private space. The definition of private space is often understood as a homogenous given entity, which actually suffers from oversimplification. Private space has different connotations in different stages of existence and is experienced differently based on the gender, caste and class categories. The patriarchal tradition is so naturalised that the difference in gender relations has been adapted in everyday life as a given. Therefore, it is necessary to retrieve the unheard voices existent in-between the lines of the textual traditions. The texts are usually composed by the patriarchal society, reassuring misogyny and heterosexual traditions. However, the disjuncture between the ideological model and the reality often generates a great deal of societal tension. Thus, we find a difference in representation between the normative texts and the narratives. The agenda of each sastric tradition is different in its own terms, mostly focussing on the four goals of human existence. Erotic literature forms a viable aspect of Indian culture. The manipulation of the patriarchal society through the textual tradition is worth examining.

Keywords: erotic, Hala, *Gātha Saptaśatī*, gender, textual traditions

Introduction

Gatha Saptasathi can be introduced as an anthropological treatise that belongs to the genre of *rasaśāstra*. It is written in Māhārāṣṭrī Prākrit language. The *Sattasaī*, or the Seven Hundred, mainly deals with love and conjugal relations

located mainly in the rural background of the Indian subcontinent. The geographical setting lies in peninsular India, with the Vindhya Hills in the north and fringed by the Godavari and the Narmadā rivers (Khoroche and Tiken 2014).[1] Radhagovinda Basak pointed out the difference between the Prākrit used in the ancient Nānāghat and the Nasik cave inscriptions, which were meant for easy understanding by ordinary folks, and the Prākrit used in the gāthā verses. The later were in the Māhārāṣṭrī Prākrit governed by grammar and its rules (Basak 2010: ix).[2] Basak makes a sharp point about the authorship of the anthologies. He states that the Sātāvāhana king Hāla composed and compiled the 70 poems. The major contribution is of Hāla himself. We also come to know about the passing reference of Hala's *Sattasaī* in Bana's *Harshacharita*. The text allows us to know about the people who belonged to the reign of Hāla, and relating mostly to the 2nd century B.C. and 2nd century A.D. On the historical setting, it is contemporary to the Gupta period in the northern part of India.

Sattasaī is said to be the verses of erotic ideas. However, it allows us to visualise the misogynist society that lies beneath the apparent description of the erotic sentiments of the rural men and women. Each of the stages of life in a woman from her younger unmarried days to married life in particular has been projected through varied trajectories. However, the most interesting aspect of *Sattasaī* lies in the fact that the female voice is attributed to the poems often in the form of monologues or dialogues. Shalini Shah commented very remarkably that it was a deliberate attempt to make œrñgāra rasa a part of the elite Sanskrit literary tradition. However, according to her Srinivasan has suggested that the ultimate inspiration of all Sanskrit and Tamil love songs are rooted in the Prakrit love songs of which Hala's *Sattasaī* is the most archaic (Shah 2009: 30).[3] In this paper, I would analyse gender relations as represented in the erotic compilation of Hala. The entire study would be divided into certain subsections:

- Representations of eroticism in the life of common folk at the young stage
- Married life and gender relations
- Portrayal of 'other' in everyday life

Representations of Eroticism in the Life of Common Folk at the Young Stage

Eroticism in Hala's *Sattasaī* plays an influential role in the literary genre of literatures dealing with love and love making. The poems construct erotic relations of the heterosexual world attributing female authorship. What is interesting in the compilation is the fact that the monologue and dialogues, despite the female voice, embolden the patriarchal norms. Issues of ideal

gender relations, the potential threats and resolutions are subtly constructed by attributing a subversive position to women in the ladder of gender hierarchy. This has been disseminated through the centuries in a variety of forms. Besides, nature plays a very decisive role in the poems. A classic example lies in the description of man and woman relationship in the rural setting of *Sattasaī*. A girl who goes to the fields during harvest gets a chance to meet her lover and she wishes for a prolonged harvest season which would allow her to carry on with the clandestine affair. Although we get an idea that parents of unmarried young girls are very protective about the girls' reputation, this girl manages to meet her lover (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 17).[4] The secret affair of the young girl and boy has been narrated in the poems. The segregation of both the genders from a very tender age often resulted in hidden infatuation with the opposite gender. The occasional festivals like Holi played a significant role in bringing them closer and yearn for the next meeting. However, the girl can be seen peeping through the fence of her house, making a show of her breasts to attract young men. These young men in turn fantasise about the developed body parts of young girls (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 622).[5] Once in love, the young girl leaves no stone unturned to reach her love. Often young girls convey their newly felt emotions to their aunts. In a desperate mode, the girl in love tells her aunt that she is not bothered about the strict protection and objection raised by the sanctimonious elders in the family. It is beyond her ability to withdraw herself from looking at the head man's son (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 610).[6] The poem attributes a voice to the young girl where she condemns the social shackles instead of embracing them. The aunt can be seen playing an important role. She is empathetic towards the suffering of the young girl and lashes out at the boy. She calls him a dimwit as he cannot respond to the approaches made by the girl. The girl took several risks to convey her message to the young man who failed to acknowledge it (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 370).[7] Festivals bring fresh opportunities for surreptitious affairs. The girl can be seen distributing festival cakes in the hope of catching glimpses of her beloved (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 328).[8] Unlike the older women who act as agents in a patriarchal society, the aunt in *Sattasaī* supports the young girl and advises her with effective ideas. She tells her to look straight into the eyes of her lover even in a crowd so that her innocence remains unquestioned (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 225).[9]

A young girl in another poem shares her emotions for her paramour with her mother. She becomes so overwhelmed with feelings that she tells her mother that the young man who drank the downriver water that was bitter with the turmeric soap won her heart with ease. The young girls are seen to be differently involved in their affairs than their lovers. She can be seen as emotionally involved and desperate for the next meeting for another glance of

the man. In one poem a young girl on hearing the voice of her lover rushes in the desire to see him. Once the man crosses the lane she has to be carried back (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 506).[10]

Nature and the harvest time play a crucial role in organising the lovers meetings. Young girls in rural areas were often employed in the fields during the harvest season. They not only involved themselves in their work but also utilised the time in secret meetings with their lovers. However, these were temporary arrangements that ended with the harvest season (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 9).[11] Nature is often used to make sense of the context. In another poem, a woman is deeply saddened at the sight of the last bloom of sweetwood flowers, which is similar to the last rites of loved ones (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 104).[12]

In many poems, women are attributed a powerful voice where she actually directs the entire business of love making. In a poem a restless woman kicks off her skirt and proclaims her immodesty (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 461).[13] In another poem, she can be seen provoking her lover to be active and not be intimidated by external interventions. She assures him that she will not call anyone and expresses her consent. The man can be seen timidly playing with sweetwood flowers and not making advances (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 877).[14] The young girl is quite expressive about her desire and guides him to unclad her.

At times, the meetings are short or do not happen as the girl is unable to locate the place or the boy doesn't turn up. Sometimes the boy is left waiting (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 385, 854, 20).[15] In spite of the portrayal of a woman as being insatiably restless and at times desperate to meet her lover, she is more of a contemplating subject and not gazed upon. This conveys a different dimension of gender relations. These poems also narrate a transgression from what is considered to be appropriate female behaviour. By their activities females gain an active subjective identity where love is treated as an emotion and a verb.

Despite risking all hurdles, women often fall victim to their wrong choices of lovers. The men they fall for, hardly share the same sentiment and do not reciprocate identically. In a poem, a girl can be seen lashing out at the man who does not remain by her (Khoroche and Tiken 2014:158).[16] Some poems bear the evidence of her complaints to her friend about her absentee lover and the friend in an experienced voice curses the man as a bastard and warns about the nature of men (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 688).[17] Though the girl repents in several poems, she does not play a subversive role. She analyses the situation and fervently blames the wrong doer. In another poem her concern is different. She states that no one stopped her from committing the blunder and instead remained mute (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 699).[18] Nature is used

in a poem allegorically to emphasise the intensity of the situation. A friend of the woman asks her to overcome the grief that overshadows her (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 10).[19] She mentions that like a tendril of a cucumber one's affection twines around an object that does not last. However, there are scarce references where men fall victim to their wrong choices. He is advised to avoid wretched women who will only lead to his downfall. He is told not to climb a trumpet flower tree that has no branches to hold on to because it would lead to his inevitable downfall (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 468).[20] Although nature is used to narrate the experiences of men and women in two separate poems, what is noticeable is the difference in the gender relations. A woman becomes victim to her affection and tender emotions like the tendrils of a cucumber tree, but a man is a climber of a wretched tree even when he is described as a victim to his emotion. In other poems, women are empathised with on their misery and pursuance of unrequited love for an unattainable man (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 202).[21] Whereas men are warned about insatiable and deceitful women. He is advised to avoid the company of wretched women (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 154).[22] Although scarcely we find references of men who are victims to their choices. A poem asks women not to fall for attractive men as they enjoy the company of many women. Thus, they are storehouse of grief. Yet we do not find any preventive words for men to refrain from such acts. However, there is a departure in these verses from the conventional gender equation as projected in the Sanskrit literature of a coy young woman and the bold tough male lover. Here the female voice is eloquent. She is vocal in expressing her desire and agitated in her repentance. If we analyse whether the verses are about love and locate the gender role, a clear perspective crops up. We do not find women and men on the same pedestal. A man is more a chaser of pleasure and does not get entrapped in emotion. He has a deep-seated social conditioning of the same. Whereas for women in most of the verses, it is an emotional experience and not merely physical gratification. From the standpoint of gender relations, love and physical desire and the difference between them is crucial. This perhaps hints at the society that had different notions of what is proper and improper for men and women. What seems to be valorising for a man is degrading for a woman. These verses were contextualised in a patrilocal gendered society. Yet we hear the female voice and some agency in her discretion. Shalini Shah makes us aware about being more cautious while scrutinising female voices through the texts. There are different types of consciousness that could be unearthed. Feminine consciousness is the one to start with. Here the woman defines herself in the context of patriarchal construct. Female consciousness is the concern about woman as a life giver. Feminist consciousness is interesting.

Here the woman is aware of the structural subordination. At times, a coexistence of all three is possible (Shah 2009: 167).[23]

Married Life and Gender Relations

We need to analyse the patrilocal context as portrayed in the verses. It is in this context that matrimony as an institution originates. The social scripting and the practices must be understood in terms of their conformities and departures. Marriages are the union of two souls and the families of both the bride and the groom yet characterised by embedded gender differences. Matrimonial alliances comprise varied components of negotiations, compromises and contestations. A verse suggests that in a patriarchal family young girls are guarded and their virginity is under strict vigilance. The seeds of asymmetry in the male–female conjugal relations are sown that early. A girl in expected to satisfy all the desires of her husband. Even a pregnant wife is expected to squat upon her husband and fulfil his desires. In a verse she is compared to Vidyadhari who is about to fly (Shah 2009: 446).[24] She has to conform to violence in the act of lovemaking as that motivates her husband. However, all the sacrifices and hard work hardly keep the husbands from having affairs with other women. A woman is socially conditioned to the idea of being a perfect wife, to which she concedes automatically. Whereas a husband is often polygamous, visiting other women, but his loyalty to the marriage is never questioned (Shah 2009: 529, 289).[25] The wife bears all the brunt to keep the marriage glorious. She has to protect herself from the indecent approaches of her brother-in-law. The threat is within the family relations itself (Shah 2009: 28).[26]

The double-edged crisis begins for her when she tries to spice up the lovemaking to ward off monotony for her husband. Yet the husband becomes insecure, wondering who has taught her the different techniques (Shah 2009: 476, 666).[27] Certain verses advise new brides to hide the tooth marks on their thighs as that would turn their husband into a laughing stock before others (Shah 2009: 607).[28] The body marks have different circumstantial connotations. In some cases, it satisfies the mother-in-law who eagerly awaits grandchildren. In many other verses, new brides flaunt those marks before their friends. The pain inflicted is often camouflaged as pleasure for women. Such experiences are unheard of for the man in the conjugal relation (Shah 2009: 830, 463, 100).[29] Often, we come across a lamenting bride whose husband has to leave her for keeping the fire burning in the home. She misses her husband, awaits his return and in *biraha* she reminisces their happy days (Shah 2009: 98).[30]

Gāthā Sattasaī is a popular anthology of love poems. The leitmotif of the text is the emotion of love in its purest form. Here the love and the act of love making between two opposite genders have been discussed in varied aspects

of human existence. Love is an emotion and an act that is divine and priceless. It is generated and delivered without any conditions or hope for rewards. This makes love a virtue that is a gift of nature. Yet society has different gender norms even in the act of love. As a wife, a woman is not on the same plinth as her husband in the conjugal relation. The verses in *Sattasaī* attest to the fact that a perfect wife is expected to be mindful of her husband and her in-law's reputation. She is expected to remain oblivious of her cravings during pregnancy and return all the gifts offered to her by her friends and maternal home (Shah 2009: 15, 472, 38).[31] A virtuous wife knows what is good for the household and even with an old decrepit husband she has to remain affectionate (Shah 2009: 293).[32]

The verses recount the instances of fallen wives who keep lovers outside the wedlock (Shah 2009: 767, 313).[33] Although rare but wives often befool their mothers-in-law and meet their lovers. Spring is the season that acts as the catalyst for lovers. Young brides feel desperate and often fall for people from low birth like the barber (Shah 2009: 291).[34] Here we notice that the infidel wife is transgressing the social norms that would otherwise make her a perfect wife. She is risking all the hurdles and bad reputation to overcome the conventional life bestowed on her by society. This hints at her independent mind, her discretion to challenge the given that failed to cater to her mental and physical desires. Thus, *Sattasaī* in many ways belongs to the women and acclaims women authorship.

Portrayal of 'Other' in the Everyday Life

Myriads of discussions take place on defining the 'other' and the 'self' in several contexts. It is common in society to recognise the other. The other can be accommodated through varied modes of confrontation and negotiations. If there is no resolution, there remains an option of co-existence (Thapar 2020: 14).[35] The text of *Gatha Sattasaī* belongs to women who had a voice to be vocal about their 'other'. At times they confronted and tried to negotiate but the instances are not rare where women actually co-existed with their 'others'. In several verses while describing the agonies of married life, women mention the improper advances of their brothers-in-law. She explains to him the sanctity of their relationship, referring to the relationship between Sita and her brother-in-law Lakṣhmaṇa (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 35).[36] Despite all such advances, a virtuous wife is not expected to let her husband know about the indecency of his brother. The onus to accommodate the indecent 'other' in the family rests on the wife. She is 'perfect' if she lets his impropriety remain hushed up to preserve the honour of the family. The verses also suggest the existence of other women in her husband's life apart from the co wives. If a man could afford, it was common to have more than one wife. These

wives are the 'rival other' of the previous wives. Ironically, the wives take pains to remain attractive for their husband, but the younger new wife with firm attractive breasts remains a constant threat to the old wives (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 382, 281).[37] The younger wife often flaunts her privileged position in front of the older wives who take freezing cold baths even in the chilling winter months to remain attractive for their husband (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 79).[38] Despite all the attempts made by the dedicated wife to satisfy her errant husband, the errant husband is not only polygamous but also has amorous relations outside the wedlock. The wives have to put up with politeness. She often asserts that a husband values the goodness in his wife only after encountering bitterness in other women (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 48).[39] She also prefers to remain sick as that will award her some attention from her otherwise inattentive husband (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 50, 51).[40]

The husband with all his mistresses and wives often mistakes the name of one with the other. Yet the mother-in-law intervenes in the situation and explains to the daughter-in-law that it was to make her jealous. She rebukes her son not to trick his wife who might pay him back in his own coin (Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 907, 908).[41]. On the flipside, when a woman keeps a lover because of her mental and physical needs society questions her motive. For instance, her clandestine affair with a barber is shunned as he is lowborn. Thus, the affair turns into a major offence. This hints at the restricted life rural women lead in contrast to their male counterparts.

The pulse of literature lies in the writer's engagement with varied emotions in the everyday life. In *Sattasaī*, the woman's voice allows us to believe that the conflicts are centred mainly on their conjugal life. By gendered social norms, often with the aid of normative texts, society attempts to shape public opinion about who deserves what and how things are to be perceived. In a similar vein, traditional hegemonies with its two legs in patriarchy and the caste system try to manipulate the stories told about self and other. Although female authorship is attributed to *Sattasaī*, it did not belong to women completely. Yet the verses attest to a certain kind of agency that women realise in themselves. We notice the cordial relations between the mother-in-law and the bride. Their worldviews may clash at some initial level but they come together to find solace in each other's company. At times, a woman has an affair out of sexual and emotional dissatisfaction in her marriage but is jettisoned by society for her choice and is marked as a fallen woman. Her relationship with her own mother and aunt is very close. They often feature as advisers and well-wishers. The verses often allow us to realise the camaraderie shared amongst the women themselves. The question remains that why such kind of space is allowed to women in a patriarchal setup?

Perhaps it is an act of hesitancy and careful self-preservation of the patriarchal society.

Notes

1 Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 1.
2 Basak (ed.), 2010: ix.
3 Shalini Shah 2009: 30.
4 Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 17. All further references are from this volume.
5 *Ibid.*, 622.
6 *Ibid.*, 610.
7 *Ibid.*, 370.
8 *Ibid.*, 328.
9 *Ibid.*, 225.
10 *Ibid.*, 506.
11 *Ibid.*, 9.
12 *Ibid.*, 104.
13 *Ibid.*, 461.
14 *Ibid.*, 877.
15 *Ibid.*, 385, 854, 20.
16 *Ibid.*, 158.
17 *Ibid.*, 688.
18 *Ibid.*, 699.
19 *Ibid.*, 10.
20 *Ibid.*, 468.
21 *Ibid.*, 202.
22 *Ibid.*, 154.
23 Shah 2009: 167.
24 *Ibid.*, 446.
25 *Ibid.*, 529, 289.
26 *Ibid.*, 28.
27 *Ibid.*, 476, 666.
28 *Ibid.*, 607.
29 *Ibid.*, 830, 463, 100.
30 *Ibid.*, 98.
31 *Ibid.*, 15, 472, 38.
32 *Ibid.*, 293.
33 *Ibid.*, 767, 313.
34 *Ibid.*, 291.
35 Thapar 2020: 14
36 Khoroche and Tiken 2014: 35.
37 *Ibid.*, 382, 281.

38 *Ibid.*, 79.
39 *Ibid.*, 48.
40 *Ibid.*, 50, 51.
41 *Ibid.*, 907, 908.

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Bionotes

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