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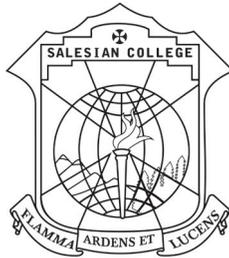
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“Approached by two southern women whose husbands were being held as prisoners of war, and told that the husbands should be released because they were religious men, Lincoln replied: “You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread on the sweat of other men’s faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven!” (December 6, 1864, cited in Lincoln [1992], pp.319-20),

Quoted as footnote 39, in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence Of Emotions*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 437.

# INTERSECTIONS: LITERATURE AND HISTORY

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## CONTENTS

### *Editorial*

v

*Gunjeet Aurora Mehta, Smita Banerjee & Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi*

### *Original Articles:*

**Oral Epics in India: Exploring History and Identity through the epic of Pabuji** 1

*Tanuja Kothiyal*

**Violence and Fear in Folk/Fairy Tales: Reading Burhi Aair Xadhu through Kothanodi** 13

*Violina Borah*

**Gendered spaces and histories: Feminist Re-tellings in Suchitra Bhattacharya's Dahan** 27

*Smita Banerjee*

**The Question of Dalit Body and Agency: Reading Sharankumar Limbale's The Outcaste** 41

*Ved Prakash*

**Shared Histories, Singular Trajectories: A Comparative Study of Women's Poetry in Urdu from Pakistan and Hindi from India** 53

*Urvashi Sabu*

**Reading Silence in History: Elizabethan Religious Settlement** 73

*Nabanita Sen*

**The Burden of History, the 'smell of oil lamp' and the failure of George Eliot's Romola** 83

*Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi*

**Between History and Memory: Remembering the Dirty War in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival*** 97  
*Mukul Chaturvedi*

**The Uses of Lives: Biography, History and Literature in Colonial South Asia** 109  
*Shaswat Panda*

*General Commentaries:*

**Uses of History and Literature: Intersections and Convergences** 125  
*Smita Banerjee & Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi*

**Interrelationship: History, Literature and Translation** 131  
*Anita Bhela*

*Book Reviews*

**Aruna Chakravarti, *Suralakshmi Villa*** 141  
*by Purusharth Chawla*

**Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantment*** 145  
*by Parth Pant*

**Our Contributors** 151

**Notes to Contributors**

## Editorial

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*Gunjeet Aurora Mehta, Smita Banerjee & Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi*

Intersections are interesting sites which are marked by spaces where boundaries and paths cross thereby giving rise to those overlapping zones of neither here nor there, or rather, both here and there. The intersection of history and literature is nothing new or novel. Both have always enjoyed a deep, synergistic relation though they have often been pitted against each other as well. The historical moment or event can attain a life beyond time through its representation in literature, while literature takes from history its sense of the temporal, and often seeks its subject matter in the past.

Regardless of their disciplinary markers, the two are often enjoined together and offer a rich tapestry through which human life can be understood from different perspectives. This special issue which is being brought out under the collaborative aegis of the Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Salesian College and the Department of English, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, explores these interesting spaces of liminality and confluence where the two collide or enjoin to facilitate complex discourses.

Stretching across a wide spectrum of subjects ranging from Elizabethan England, the Dirty War in Argentina, George Eliot to the issues of those marginalized and oppressed, the in-depth papers included in this special issue raise several important questions and concerns regarding the interplay of history and literature across ages.

The aim of this special issue is to point out the multiple ways in which history and 'histories' arise and become a part of our consciousness through their representations in literature. Even history, often constructed as a meta, is deconstructed and appropriated to enunciate the perspectives of those at the margins. It is important to embrace those individual histories which, though seemingly not visibly significant in the grand scheme of things, are worthy of attention as they point out to the individual's sense of the moment which is more

concrete than the distanced narrative of the grand historical event. The historical moment is mostly seen as a collective event which often leaves the individual moment in the periphery. This is where literature steps in to memorialise, historicise or recreate the little histories of our individual selves.

The literary recreations, retellings and transcreations of history are well known across nations and cultures. There are, however, no fixed rules as to how the historical moment can be represented, as literature by its very nature, is not bound by any rules. It is more like a free spirit in the world of humanities as it goes hand in glove with the flight of imagination soaring in its wayward paths. Thus, the intersection of the two brings forth many interesting narratives some of which have been discussed in the wide range of papers that follow.

There is also a consciousness of being present in the historic moment for all of us today as we grapple with the pandemic which has been raging since 2019, more fully exploding into our lives in 2020. We have all dealt with or are dealing with it, each fighting our own secret battles with the deadly scourge directly or indirectly in terms of the repercussions it has had on our lives. The full import of this calamity that has befallen humanity transgressing manmade geographical boundaries will be adjudged and assessed only when there is a certain time gap which will allow us to distance ourselves from the event to better understand its ramifications.

The collective and individual trauma of this pandemic is already being expressed by artists and writers across the world in their own unique way. The consciousness of our sense of mortality, the vulnerability of our existence despite our technological advancements, the fear of losing our loved ones, the traumatic burden of the survivor's guilt is finding expressions in various creative works. Humanity is fighting the invisible enemy hoping that no new calamity confronts us once again as it did for our preceding generations who lived through multiple traumatic events like pandemics, world wars and the like. The absence of a visible violence in this global war with the virus perhaps diffuses the extent of the pain and sense of loss that humanity everywhere has endured but it doesn't lessen the import or magnitude

of what has happened and is still happening. It remains to be seen how this translates itself into history and how literature attempts to provide a way to come to terms with the collective and individual loss that we have experienced.

The thought provoking essays that form part of this special issue deal with the multiple ways in which the intersections of literature and history manifest themselves across languages, genres, cultures and moments. The understanding that the two disciplines are not mutually exclusive but complement each other, as they always have, is testified through the various narratives and retellings of history across ages. The instinct to record events orally or in writing and the instinct to reimagine and recreate those moments, are both innate to human beings. Therefore, we leave you, the reader at these intersections to explore the many directions that are laid open before you.

History and Literature are and have always been closely related. This special journal issue aims to focus on the interesting relationship between history and literature that predates even History. We use Homer to understand much of classical Greek history and Plutarch has been the source of many of Shakespeare's plays. In India, too, the Ramayana and Mahabharata have provided invaluable insights into the socio-political contexts to reconstruct the history of ancient times. Texts like *Prithviraj Raso* composed in the sixteenth century attributed to Chand Bardai have been used to document history of Rajput kings in the absence of other historical evidence. In the contemporary Indian context the various representations and retellings in terms of biopics, mythological events get fictionalized and are then translated as films or television serials. The partition itself in *Dharamputra* (1961) or *Ice Candy Man* (1988) as *Earth* (1999), the 1993 Bombay bombings in the book *The Black Friday: the True Story of the Bomb Blasts* (2002) and the film, *Black Friday* (2004), the 2002 Gujarat riots in Parzania (2007) and Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008) in *Kai Po Che* (2013) are some examples of contemporary history's representation in literature and film in the Indian context.

The papers in this volume were originally presented at a UGC-sponsored National Seminar organised by the Department of English,

Delhi College of Arts & Commerce, University of Delhi, in collaboration with the Department of English, University of Delhi in March 2014. Out of the 40 papers presented over two days at the Seminar, the editorial board selected a few for publication in this issue. The selected articles aim to facilitate a dialogue between Literature and History through a multidisciplinary and heterogeneous approach, to deliberate upon the varied forms by which history gets embedded in the literary text and vice versa. The need to understand this link and relationship in the multilingual context of India is necessary. The area of focus here is on the plethora of representations in varied media of History and histories of past and present, in a variety of literary forms, the novel, poetry, films, biographies, testimonials etc. Two contributions move beyond the Indian context to focus upon the intersection between history and literature during sixteenth century Britain and the contemporary genre of life narratives and witness accounts from Latin America.

The contributions in this issue look at the symbiotic relationship between history and oral tradition offering a counterpoint to the hegemony of the 'written' accounts. For long the 'written' tradition has enjoyed an unparalleled supremacy over oral literature. India has a rich variety of folklore/ folk-literature/ folk songs which are shaped by the historical events of that particular region. Two contributions explore the interconnections between Orality and History to situate the embedded nature of oral narratives, folk repertoire and memoirs.

The papers in this collection traverse over areas as pertinent as History and Literature, Orality and Literature, Media Re-presentation and History, History and Partition Narrative, Literary Theory and History, The Epic and History, Historical Tragedy and Fact or/and Fiction in The Historical Novel, Testimonios.

Tanuja Kothiyal in her paper titled "Oral Epics in India: Exploring History and Identity through the epic of Pabuji" shows how Oral epic traditions are suffused in the consciousness of Indian people through multiple oral, visual and textual representations that retell the narratives through shifting imaginaries, both of the self and the others. The richness of this multidimensional oral archive across diverse sites of memory, both in acts of remembering and forgetting aid in

the creation of counter-history for communities, constantly fashioning identities.

Violina Borah , as the title of her paper suggests, “Violence and Fear in Folk/Fairy Tales: Reading *Burhi Aair Xadhu* through *Kothanodi*”, attempts an analysis of Bhaskar Hazarika’s famed film *Kothanodi* where he takes four stories from *Burhi Aair Xaadhu*, and presents them through the gory details which are usually overlooked when read or narrated. The fantastical depiction of the stories keeps one captivated throughout the film. The magic-realistic approach has captured the gruesome acts that a human is capable of doing in the narrative yet it hints at mental illness that drives people to do so. Villages where anything unexplainable is given the supernatural angle can be read as the symbols of such diseases. The independent stories are woven to a connection where the suffering and as well as the positivity becomes collective.

In her paper, “Gendered spaces and histories: Feminist Re-tellings in Suchitra Bhattacharya’s *Dahan*(1996)” Smita Banerjee analyses a literary text based on a real-life incident of a molestation of a woman in Kolkatta as demonstrating an interesting intersection between lived history and its literary retelling. The literary text uses the real event and its fictional imaginary reconstruction to write a feminist text that gives voice to women as active agents of social change. Methodologically Banerjee uses close textual reading of the novel, *Dahan*, and examines the characterisations of three women Jhinuk, Romita and Mrinalini to demonstrate how the author transforms the traumatic event of molestation to talk about gender and spaces. Her analysis draws on insights from feminist theoretical interventions and spatial negotiations of selves that have been put forward by Michel Certeau.

Ved Prakash’s paper, “The Question of Dalit Body and Agency: Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste*” examines the politics of the body which has always been a site of controversy and conflict in a society. Using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault in “The Political Investment of the Body” his paper shows that the body is a political field and politics of power cannot be separated from

it. He explores the unjust divide between the dominants and the subordinates in a prejudiced society and wonder on what parameters bodies are labelled, who decides that some bodies are pure while others are polluted, who adjudicates that some bodies are bestial while others are righteous and how in the name of law and order, the body of a Dalit is subjected to all kind of violence and violations by looking at the ontology of Dalit body while drawing references from select Dalit life writings.

Urvashi Sabu's paper, "Shared Histories, Singular Trajectories: A Comparative Study of Women's Poetry in Urdu from Pakistan and Hindi from India" focuses on women's poetry from India and Pakistan in the context of their shared histories, and analyzes why the poetic expressions of women from opposite sides of the border took on such different orientations. It concludes by inferring that though histories may be shared, the divergence in social, religious and political experience is responsible for the diverse trajectories taken by women poets in India and Pakistan.

Nabanita Sen's paper titled "Reading Silence in History: Elizabethan Religious Settlement" looks at the crucial period of Elizabethan history where researchers are working on the confusing and conflicting views of Queen Elizabeth's position on the issue of religious reformation and enquires into the epistemological and methodological problem involved in construction of history/historical narrative in the absence of proper documentation or factual data: how is knowledge constructed or continuity of narrative maintained in case the historian is confronted with silence in the archives?

Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi, in her paper, "The Burden of History, the 'smell of oil lamp' and the failure of George Eliot's *Romola*" discusses the only novel of George Eliot set in the historically distanced time of 15th century Renaissance Florence, while all other novels are rooted in the English Midlands of recent past. An ambitious work born out of the author's extensive archival research and her frequent tours of the city, the novel has suffered neglect since its publication on account of its erudition, formidable reconstruction of the past, its density and detail. The paper explores the reasons behind Eliot's engagement

with history of this period: how Medieval Florence's religious conflict between paganism and Christianity provides Eliot a suitable backdrop for treatment of her perennially favourite theme of egoism versus altruism; the study of various shades of egoism; and to put forward her theory of Positivism. The paper examines the failures of the novel and questions if Eliot's own belief system causes the protagonist Romola to remain only an idealised abstraction and if the novel then is a work of history in fictional form or if the author borrows some historical events only to belabour her thematic preoccupations.

Mukul Chaturvedi's paper, "Between History and Memory: Remembering the Dirty War in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival*" treats the blurring of boundaries between history and fiction, taking a cue from Hayden White who argues that representation of historical event is as much imaginative as it is rational and involves a narrative reconstruction or interpretation of the subject matter, and this is nowhere more apparent than in representation of historical trauma in literary testimony of Alicia Partnoy's 1986 work, a witness memoir of a survivor of death camp.

Shaswat Panda's paper, "The Uses of Lives: Biography, History and Literature in Colonial South Asia" maps what can be called the uses of biographies for those colonial subjects, whose writing of various 'lives' shaped their understanding of history and their vision of community and in the process he critically reflects on the dubious distinctions between literature and history insofar as biographical writings were concerned. He uses Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Krishna Charitra* (1886) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's short and incomplete "Prophet Mohammad and his Caliphs" (1907) as instances of biographical writings, which addressed primarily their respective "imagined communities."

The volume carries reviews of two strongly feminist works of fiction from Indian contemporary women writers. Pursharth Chawla's book review of Aruna Chakravarti's *Suralakshmi Villa* titled "Écriture Féminine: How *Suralakshmi Villa* Undercuts the Male Gaze" brings out the author's uses of history to comment on the circumscribed lives of women and the class divide rampant in India. Parth Pant, in his review

of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, (2019) highlights how the feminist retellings of primitive myths and legends have gained traction in the twenty first century, and how such retellings locate the patriarchal assumptions embedded in ancient texts and attempt to bring to center the peripheral voices in the story. Parth points out how the author not only aims to frame the story via Sita, but also tries to correct the hagiographic representation of the character as prevalent in Indian culture, popularly perceiving Sita as the "all good and meek and long-suffering" woman. The two novels highlight the different ways in which history and epic get refashioned and re-imagined as literary texts which to our mind exemplify the varied intersections between the two that all the articles in this issue have foregrounded.

The guest editors wish to acknowledge the debt to the editors of the Salesian College Journal for facilitating this exciting academic collaboration. It has been a great pleasure and we look forward to such exercises in the future.

## Oral Epics in India: Exploring History and Identity through the epic of Pabuji

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Tanuja Kothiyal

Oral epics traditions are suffused in the consciousness of Indian people through multiple oral, visual and textual representations that retell the narratives through shifting imaginaries, both of the self and the others. Historians trained to engage with fixed written archives often find the fluidity of oral traditions a methodological challenge. However, shifts in methodological vantage points have allowed disciplinary practices to explore the multidimensionality of the oral archive, and see these not as dormant recollections of past, but active sites of collective memory and amnesia, often leading to production of counter-narratives, and uncovering of hidden histories. In fact, the studies focusing on patterns in oral traditions help in understanding not just the past, but also contemporary processes of narrative creation, as well as secondary processes of orality supported by technological advances in areas of modern communications. This article seeks to engage with some of the methodological challenges encountered by historians, through examples from a wide range of oral traditions from across the country.

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**Keywords:** Rajasthan, Pastoralism, Rajput, Bhil, Raika/Rabari, Charan.

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*“O honkaria! Life is short...but the tale never ends”<sup>1</sup>*

There is no community in India which does not have a timeless tale to tell, which concerns its origins, past, and present state of existence. In fact, different groups in India can actually tell the same tale in many different ways as colonial administrators, antiquarians and linguistic surveyors like Richard Temple, William Crooke and George Grierson discovered when documenting folktales in colonial India. In the process of production of *Tribes and Castes* compendia, colonial administrators documented several origin narratives and community histories. Over the last century or so, ethnographers and folklorists have researched, recorded and analysed a wide range of oral traditions across the

<sup>1</sup> Bhagwandas Patel, ed., *Bhararath: An Epic of Durgri Bhils*, tr. Nila Shah (Vadodara: Central Institute of Indian languages and Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, 2012),105.

Indian subcontinent.<sup>2</sup> However, historians trained to engage with fixed written archives have often found the fluidity of oral traditions a methodological challenge.

Over the years newer perspectives have emerged from within the discipline of history, and in its relationship with anthropology, that complicate the notion of archive itself.<sup>3</sup> Historians have also shown greater acceptance towards the variable nature of historical expression and narration, particularly in the context of premodern regional texts.<sup>4</sup> There is also a greater awareness of marginal voices like that of Dalit, women and queer communities that were either missing entirely from the conventional archive or were represented through perspectives of the dominant contexts. Such voices could often only be found in oral narratives that allowed subjugated groups to counter, and at times invert the hegemonic voices of history.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of oral history and memory studies as widely accepted historical methodologies has also created space for a plurality of narratives. Overtime, the scope of oral history and memory studies has also moved from a focus on events, particularly traumatic ones, to the study of everyday memories. This has allowed historians to view oral narratives not merely as dormant recollections of past, but as active sites of collective memory and amnesia often leading to uncovering of hidden histories, and

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<sup>2</sup> G H Roghair, Brenda Beck, A K Ramanujan, Stuart Blackburn, Alf Hitebeital, John D Smith, Ann Gold, Susan Wadley, Aditya Malik are some of the important scholars who have extensively worked on oral epic traditions in India.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015) is a recent example of such scholarship. Saloni Mathur, "History and Anthropology in South Asia: Rethinking the Archive", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 29 (2000) :89-106, provides a good overview of the shifting discourse on archive.

<sup>4</sup> Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India 1700-1960* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013) and V N Rao, et al., *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) are two good examples of engaging with the idea of temporality and texture in historical narration.

<sup>5</sup> In my own work with mobile communities, I found that the only way to access histories of mobile communities that did not view them from the lens of state ascribed marginality and criminality was through oral narratives of such groups. See Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

production of counter-narratives.<sup>6</sup> In fact, studies focusing on patterns in oral traditions help in understanding not just the past, but also contemporary processes of narrative creation, as well as secondary processes of orality supported by technological advances in areas of modern media and communications.<sup>7</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the epic of Pabuji, to discuss how the study of this epic allows multiple disciplinary perspectives and methodologies to come together. A study of different dimensions of the epic allows arriving at understanding of historical changes in the social locations of various groups that are part of the narrative. The epic of Pabuji has been explored extensively by John H Smith who collated a transcription of the epic, and wrote extensively about it.<sup>8</sup> Further, scholars have focused on the historical questions associated with Pabuji, as well as those that are concerned with the devotees of Pabuji.<sup>9</sup> The visual narrative, or the *pad*, which is considered to be a mobile temple for Pabuji, as well as the songs that accompany the narration have also received considerable attention.

The epic of Pabuji is the saga of a Rajasthani Rajput hero who died while protecting the cows of a Charani cattle herder. Rajasthan's sacred landscape is dotted with *devlis* or hero stones dedicated to slain heroes who are worshipped as village deities, and are seen as protectors of the cattle and village communities. Among such deities Pabuji holds a very important place and his shrines with his image as a horse rider, sometimes accompanied by his fellow warriors, are found to be established in homes, grazing grounds and sacred groves. Pabuji's narrative belongs to standard tales of cattle protection in arid zones

<sup>6</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, First edition: 1985, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> John H Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, (New Delhi: Katha Books, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Some of these works are Elizabeth Wickett, *The Epic of Pabuji ki par in Performance*, (World Oral Literature Project, University of Cambridge, 2001). Vinay Kumar Srivastava, "The Rathor Rajput Hero of Rajasthan: Some Reflections on John Smith's The Epic of Pabuji", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 28, No3, (July 1994) 589-614. Janet Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death, History and Poetry in Medieval Marwar* (South Asia), (Leiden: Leiden University press, 2008).

of Rajasthan, where cattle are an important resource.<sup>10</sup> His primary devotees are the camel and sheep herding community of Raikas or Rabaris, who attribute the feat of bringing camels to them. His priests are the Dalit Bhil or Nayak *bhopas*, who carry his portable shrine, or a scroll called *Pabujiriphad* and sing his epic on the invitation of his devotees. There also exists a temple at his supposed birthplace Kolu managed by his Rajput kinsmen.

There is little clarity on the 'historical' Pabuji. There may have existed a heroic cattle protector of the name, to whom actions of many such heroes were attributed as his cult grew. The earliest text pertaining to Pabuji's heroic feats, *Pabuji ra chhand*, can be traced to the second half of the sixteenth century. Following this, several other texts like *Pabuji ra duha* and *Pabuprakas* were composed and some recensions have been preserved in various archival collections across Rajasthan. It would be pertinent here to mention that most such texts were composed by Charans, a bardic community associated with genres of heroic and panegyric poetry in medieval Rajasthan. Munhata Nainsi, a late seventeenth century chronicler also added *Pabujiri bat* to his compendium of Rajput history.<sup>11</sup> In recent years several hagiographical texts as well as commentaries have been locally published in Hindi and Marwari. Oral narratives of Pabuji vary, depending upon the singers, who sometimes refer to the texts, but often have their own compositions and explanations. There is also a wide selection of songs, video enactments etc. that is available on the internet.<sup>12</sup>

Pabuji is believed to have been born to a Rathor Rajput father and a mother, who was an *apsara* or a heavenly nymph, anywhere between 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Being the younger son of a second wife, Pabuji had to venture out in search for livelihood early on. For this

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<sup>10</sup> Shahid Amin's account of Ghazi Mian, a Muslim saint believed to be the nephew of Mamud of Ghazna falls in the same genre. Ghazi Mian left his wedding procession and died while protecting cows from a local Ahir king Sohal Dev. Shahid Amin, "On retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India" in *History and the Present*, eds., Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Narayan Singh Bhati, ed., *Munhata Nainsi Ri Likhi Marwar Ra Paraganan Ri Vigat*, (I-III), (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1966-74), 57-79.

<sup>12</sup> John H Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, 18-28.

purpose, he required a mare, which he acquired from a Charani cattle and horse trader called Deval, offering his protection to her herds in return. The gift of mare leads to enmity among Pabuji and his kin, particularly his brother-in-law, Jind Rao Khichi, who too had his sight on the same mare. Around the 15<sup>th</sup> century horses were becoming an important feature of military labour circulation in Rajputana, and were viewed as a scarce and much cherished commodity.<sup>13</sup> The enmity between Pabuji and Jind Rao Khichi came to a head when the latter abducted the herds of Charani Deval, when Pabuji was away to get married. Upon hearing about the attack on Charani Deval's herds, Pabuji left the marital pavilion, with rituals incomplete and came to defend the herds. In the ensuing battle, he almost defeats Jind Rao, though does not kill him as Jind Rao is his sister's husband. Soon enough Jind Rao's reinforcements arrive, and Pabuji is finally killed in the climactic moments. In the narration of the *phad*, Pabuji is depicted as ascending to heaven in a palanquin thus escaping a human death. Pabuji's elder brother is also killed in the battle, and his pregnant wife commits sati after cutting open her belly to give birth to a son. This son becomes a Nath ascetic called Rupnath, and on coming to know about the deaths of his father and uncle kills Jind Rao Khichi in an act of revenge.

While most oral and textual narrations more or less maintain a fidelity to the basic outline of Pabuji's life, the variations and shifts in different narratives follow trajectories of narrative building as outlined by Stuart Blackburn.<sup>14</sup> The growth of the Pabuji narrative is closely tied with increasing Rajput claims over him as not merely a deity but one who is part of the Rajput world through kinship affiliations, as well as the growing space that Pabuji occupies in the social worlds of his devotees.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Zeigler, "Evolution of the Rathor State of Marwar: Horses, Structural Change and Warfare", in *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, eds., Karine Schomer et al., Vol. II, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and American Institute of Indian Studies, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Stuart H Blackburn, "Patterns of Development for Indian Oral Epics", in *Oral Epics in India*, eds., Stuart Blackburn, et al., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 15-33.

One important way in which this claim is made is through the treatment of the character of Pabuji's mother. Pabuji's father Dhandhal Rathor is said to have met his mother in the forest where he was hunting. He brought her back to his village where he married her on the condition that she be given a separate house to live in, and that Dhandhal would never visit her without her permission. After Pabuji and a daughter were born to the couple, Dhandhal decided to visit his wife without permission and found that she had turned into a tigress and was suckling the infant Pabuji. Owing to this transgression, the unnamed Apsara disappeared, only to reappear in the narrative as the mare Kesar Kalami, who all Rajputs coveted but was only given to Pabuji. The unnamed *apsara* or nymph who heroes encounter in the forests, and who eventually disappears from the narrative, is an oft repeated trope in Indian mythology. In the context of Pabuji's narrative, the possibility that Dhandhal Rathor would have married/cohabited with a tribal woman, belonging to either Bhil or Mer communities living in that region, cannot be ruled out. Ramya Sreenivasan points out that around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as Rajputs began to consolidate themselves as an endogamous caste group, marriages with women from other caste or communities began to be looked down upon, leading to creation of categories like Daroga or Gola Rajputs for children of mixed progeny.<sup>15</sup> As the Rathor Rajput identity consolidated and framed itself around endogamy and hypergamy, Pabuji Rathor could not be considered an exalted kinsman, if he were of mixed progeny. Moreover, the creation of separate space of habitation, and to various animal forms that of tigress and mare, that are attributed to Pabuji's mother could be seen as allusions to the tribal world that the mother came from, and one that Pabuji had to be distanced from.

Bhils, who are the *bhops* or priests of Pabuji, and who sing his narrative, play very important role in the epic. As he ventured out of his family space, in search of land and other resources, Pabuji,

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<sup>15</sup> Ramya Sreenivasan, "Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Kinship in Pre-colonial Rajasthan" in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 46-73. Interestingly Bhils continue to be addressed as *mama* or maternal uncles in various parts of Rajasthan, perhaps with reference to such unions in the past.

encountered a group of seven Bhil brothers, who had escaped from a neighbouring kingdom, after having sought revenge for their father's killing. After becoming certain of his divinity, the Bhils decided to become his followers and are depicted on the scroll along with him. They participate along with Pabuji in various military campaigns demonstrating valour that is usually considered a Rajput reserve. Janet Kamphorst argues that both in visual and semantic contexts, representations of Bhils undermine their valour by using terms like *pardhi* or representing them as archers rather than swordsmen.<sup>16</sup> This is seen to indicate that Bhils preferred to fight hidden from sight and from a distance as compared to Rajputs who fought using swords, thus engaged in face to face combat. Bhil brothers and their kinsmen fight and are killed in the climactic battle that takes place between Pabuji and Jind Rao Khichi. One of the Bhil brothers Dembho fights most valiantly and even feeds his entrails to a vulture in the fashion of sacrificial Rajput heroes. While the Bhil brothers are represented on the *phad*, and at times on some of the icons as horse riders, a Rajputs preserve, Bhil valour does not bring the same kind of social position to the Bhils as they do to the Rajputs.<sup>17</sup>

When asked about their position as the singers of the Pabuji narrative, Bhil *bhopas* claim that as the climactic battle was taking place, the blood of Bhils and Rajputs mixed on the battlefield.<sup>18</sup> As he ascended to heaven in a palanquin, Pabuji dropped one of the garments that he was wearing that became stained with the blood of the warriors who fought in the battle. This stained cloth transformed into the painted scroll with the narrative of Pabuji, including the Bhil brothers. Thus, Bhil Bhopas in narrating Pabuji's tale, are in some sense narrating their

<sup>16</sup> Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death*, 196-220.

<sup>17</sup> Even today news of violence against Dalits for riding mares in marriage procession is fairly common. To ride horses was seen as a Rajput privilege and they sought social acceptability as the ones allowed to ride horses. It also has become a mark of resistance with Dalit groups using riding mares in marriage procession as mark of prestige, resulting in upper caste violence against them. Nandita P Sahai, "To Mount or Not to Mount? Court Records and Law Making in Early Modern Rajasthan" in *Iterations of Law: legal Histories from India*, eds. Aparna Balachandran et al., (New Delhi: Oxford, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, 134.

own role and their own claim to history. In fact, when enquired about their origins most Dalit groups in Rajasthan claim to have been Rajputs in past, and refer to actions like consumption of proscribed meat like camel, contact with dead bodies or cattle, or proscribed marriages with women of lower castes as reasons for their fall from Rajput status. It is worthwhile to invert such claims and to see the emergence of caste stratification through the lens of the rise of Rajputs as a superior group, rather than the fall of Bhils from Rajput status. As the Rajputs emerged as a dominant landholding ruling group, they controlled the written historical narratives through systems of patronage to priestly, scribal and bardic groups that composed panegyric poetry as well as genealogies listing Rajput ancestry from divine sources of light like sun, moon and fire.<sup>19</sup> This genealogical orthodoxy delegitimised other groups with claims to kingship and martiality, which were later labelled as *jangali* or tribal groups.

In various precolonial as well as colonial accounts, tribal groups are represented through tropes of wildness and rebellion, and yet of servility and honesty, but never through claims to polity. Ajay Skaria points out that civilizational claims and ascriptions of wildness have been used to justify violence against tribal groups. On the other hand, primitivist celebration of wildness can also be “ethnocentrism masquerading as anti-ethnocentrism”. Skaria argues that groups like Mers and Bhils were pushed to margins, socially as well as physically, from where they continued to assert their kingship through raids or *dhads*.<sup>20</sup> Shail Mayaram similarly posits the Meo group’s banditry and rebellion through the lens of political claim to kingship and views the Meo oral traditions as spaces for assertion and counter-narration.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, it is in oral narratives like that of Pabuji that a marginalized group like Bhils, who had little space in the world of history writing create space for themselves by owning the narrative and inserting themselves in it. In doing so, they re-appropriate Pabuji

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<sup>19</sup> Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, 93-97.

<sup>20</sup> Ajay Skaria, “Being Jangli: The politics of wildness”, *SIH*, 14, (1998): 193-215.

<sup>21</sup> Shail Mayaram, “Kings versus Bandits: Anti-Colonialism in a Bandit Narrative” in *JRAS*, Third Series, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Nov, 2003): 315- 338.

as one of their own, and worship him as an ancestor.<sup>22</sup> These inversions create the possibility of counter-narratives to dominant narratives. In another narrative about Devnarayan, the Gurjar deity, it is claimed that after a climactic battle where several groups were fighting, men were decapitated. Devnarayan gave them life but in the process ended up attaching wrong heads and torsos, thus mixing the bloods of different caste groups. The text claims that it is because Devnarayan gave them their heads that Sisodiya Rajputs (*Sis + diya*) are called so.<sup>23</sup> Thus, oral narratives allow for the inversion of dominant historical representations, which would not be acceptable otherwise.

While on the one hand the Pabuji narrative provides space for Bhil claims, on the other hand it also allows for the avatarization of Pabuji, for the expansion of the scope of his cult for newer devotees who might not be able to form kinship based associations. Some recensions of the narrative claim Pabuji to be an avatar of Lakshman, who was forced to face Jind Rao Khichi, an avatar of Ravan, as he had ferreted the secret of Ravan's death by deceit. Therefore, in another life Lakshman was destined to face Ravan and be defeated by him. In an expansion of this narrative, he is destined to get into an unconsummated marriage with Phoolwati, who was Surpanakha in her previous life, disfigured by him.<sup>24</sup>

Rabaris or Raikas who are the principal devotees of Pabuji worship him because he is supposed to have the red-brown she-camel breed *thok* for them.<sup>25</sup> At some point in the narrative Pabuji promises to gift red brown she-camels to his niece. He sends a follower called Harmal Raika to Lanka to scout for camels. Harmal Raika goes to Lanka as a Nath ascetic, and brands the camels in Pabuji's name. After Pabuji

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<sup>22</sup> In yet another case of inversion Dalit Meghwals lay claim over the Rajput deity Ramdev, asserting that he was born a Meghwal and only raised in a Rajput house hold. Dominique Sila-Khan, "Is God an untouchable? A case of Caste Conflict in Rajasthan", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18 (1), (Spring 1988): 21-29.

<sup>23</sup> Aditya Malik, *Nectar Gaze and Poison Breath: An Analysis and Translation of Rajasthani Oral Narrative of Dev Narayan* (New York: OUP, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> John Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, 46. The expansion of Pabuji's cult follows patterns of development proposed by Stuart Blackburn.

<sup>25</sup> Vinay K Srivastava, "The Rathor Rajput Hero of Rajasthan", 589-614.

brought the she-camels back, he left half of them with the Raikas appointing them herders of the camels. Raikas pay their respect to Pabuji by becoming patrons of the recitation of the *phadvachan* by the Bhil bhopas. They commission the making of the *phad* or the painted scroll and invite the *bhopas* to their hamlets. In addition, they sing *bhajans* dedicated to Pabuji on their long migration with camels, which is called *jhurava* singing. By doing so, they appear to become a part of Pabuji's veneration system, but in reality they are reiterating a narrative of their own origins. In retelling the story of how Harmal Raika brought the camels they restate their instrumentality in the fulfilment of a vow that Pabuji made.

Yet another community whose history is closely tied to the narrative of Pabuji is the community of Charans who are known to play multiple roles of bards, priests, cattle rearers and traders, caravan guides, and negotiators in medieval Rajputana. According to Janet Kamphorst, Charans are accorded a special place in the Rajput world as they are worshippers of Charani *sagatis*, or living goddesses of Charan origins who were deified after their death. The sacred landscape of the Thar desert is dotted with shrines dedicated to Charani goddesses like Hinglaj, Avad, Karni, Khodiyar, Bahuchara etc. Charani goddesses are believed to have helped Rajputs by providing food, shelter, passage, helping them acquire horses and weapons as well as guiding Rajputs towards moral obligations.<sup>26</sup> The figure of Deval, the Charani *sagati* who gives the mare Kesar Kalami to Pabuji is an interesting one, as she appears to be the primary instigator of this epic. As a Charani *sagati*, she supplies the mare to Pabuji, thus sowing the seeds to discord that would eventually lead to his death. Deval guides Pabuji towards his destined death, his moral obligations as a Rajput, as well as an avatar of Lakshman. She interferes in the rites of marriage thus ensuring that marriage is not consummated. In the climactic moments of the epic, as Pabuji prevaricates, she delays his victory by forcing him to find a lost calf, thus ensuring that Jind Rao Khichiis able to gather reinforcements and defeat him.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death*, 220-262.

<sup>27</sup> John Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji*, 51-2. Female characters with destructive agency are often found to push the narrative forward in many of the oral epic traditions. These

Charans, who composed several of the poetic texts dedicated to Pabuji, as well as a number of other heroic narratives and panegyric poems, ensured the perpetuation of Rajput folk deities as ideal warriors and protectors of cattle rearing communities. In doing so, they obfuscated the possibility of Rajputs sharing origins with cattle rearing and trading communities and engaging in warfare with each other over cattle. Around the 15<sup>th</sup> century as Rajputs began to consolidate themselves as sedentary land based clans, they patronized texts and genealogies that erased their nomadic and pastoral origins that they could have shared with a number of groups that appear in the narrative of Pabuji.

It is the constant telling and retelling of the tale of Pabuji that has given rise to a “pluriform tradition.”<sup>28</sup> The multifaceted narrative of Pabuji has some sections that relate to a particular community. The devotional hymns dedicated to Deval relate to the Charans. The escapades of Dhembo or the seven Bhil bridal parties relate to the Bhils and the escapades of Harmal Raika to the Raikas. It is this multilayered narrative that provides a meaning to all communities that relate to the epic adventures of Pabuji. It also indicates the two-way process of the emergence of written narratives from oral ones and their subsequent reinterpretation through oral narration. While this tradition is seemingly situated in the medieval martial ascetic world of the Rajputs, it has been reframed several times over through the narration by the Bhil Bhopas and by being heard by Raika devotees. It thus constitutes, in a sense, a counter narrative to the prevalent dominant Rajput histories. This process has turned Pabuji into a *lok devata*, who is not merely to be propitiated like a *bhomiaji*, or a slain ancestor, but revered as a deity. Therefore, we can say that an attempt at understanding the Pabuji epic in its oral as well as written form leads us to see the changes in the community identity of pastoral and tribal groups. We can also see that oral epics like that of Pabuji (and also others like that

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include Jaimati in Dev Narayan tradition, Bela in Alha, and the third twin sister in Annanmar.

<sup>28</sup> Janet Kamphorst, “The Deification of South Asian War Heroes- Methodological Implications”, in *Epic Adventures: Heroic Narratives in Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*, (Verlag Münster, 2004).

of Devnarayanji, Ramdeoji, Tejaji), question the idea of fixed social identities. A notion of ambivalent, flexible, and indeterminate social identities emerges through repeated oral narrations. These epics are able to bring forth both the conflicts and the cohesion in the mutual relations of different communities, in the processes of transformation of community identities.

## Violence and Fear in Folk/Fairy Tales: Reading *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* Through *Kothanodi*

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Violina Borah

Fear and violence used in the fairy and folk tales appears to be a belligerent issue which irradiates incongruences of societal variance between those resolutely ingrained in the beliefs of morality and the others that think folk and fairy tales are not harmful for children. It is not appreciated that children should be exposed to violent content in the form of audio or visuals so that they are not prompted to inflict it on themselves and others around them. Studies are mostly inconclusive in deciding whether print or visual violence contributes to potentially sinful activities in children. These studies read in the completely opposite direction of making them aware of the evils of the society and make it safer. Societies rich and rooted in oral tradition have seen such tales changed and morphed from generation to generation. Elements of society are mimicked in the tales to provide a platform for sharing fears, caution and values and entertain children and adults alike through fantasy. Always with a moralistic ending, folk and fairy tales over the centuries have reserved important fragments of the original story lines along with developing culture specific details and elements. Child abuse, sibling rivalry, evil stepmother, and racism etc. are very common in such stories. This paper attempts an analysis of Bhaskar Hazarika's famed film *Kothanodi* (2015) where he takes four stories from *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* (2009), and presents them through the gory details which are usually overlooked when read or narrated. The fantastical depiction of the stories keeps one captivated throughout the film. The magic realistic approach has captured the gruesome acts that a human is capable of doing in the narrative yet it hints at mental illness that drives people to do so. Villages where anything unexplainable is given the supernatural angle can be read as the symbols of such diseases. The independent stories are woven to a connection where the suffering and as well as the positivity becomes collective.

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**Keywords:** Folktales, Violence, Patriarchy, Women, Assamese.

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Since the beginning of time, this is known as the land of magic. Here what is, isn't, and what isn't, is. What can be seen is unseen, what can't be seen is revealed. (*Kothanodi*<sup>1</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> *Kothanodi*, dir. Bhaskar Hazarika. Metanormal Motion Pictures. 2015. (Film)

Tucked in the far eastern corner of India, Assam has often been depicted as a mystical land in many travelogues, old and new. Various tales of sorcery, magic, witchcraft and Tantra are found embedded in the folklore and history of Assam. Folklores and folk-tales passed on through generations blur the line between fiction and reality. Narratives of encounters with various supernatural<sup>2</sup> beings find many believers. *Baank*, *Dout*, *Burha Dangoria*, *Jokhini*, etc<sup>3</sup>, commonly featured in such oral narratives. Compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, *Burhi Air Xaadhu*<sup>4</sup> (1912) is one such collection of narratives that paints a vivid picture of the land and its inhabitants with an element of fantasy. India has a rich reservoir of such tales in all regional languages. Stories of *Hitopadesha* and *Panchatantra* use fables to explain concepts like war, friendship, strategy, governance and so on. While *Burhi Air Xaadhu* does not necessarily assume the position of moralistic teaching for children, these stories certainly serve as an introduction to any kind of literature for many within Assam. As children, these stories mesmerised many as they read/heard about evil stepmothers, animals who could talk, tricks and connivance saving the day, damsels in distress and many more. However when glanced through an academic lens, the problems embedded within such stories are highlighted. For instance, patriarchal attitudes play a significant role in the plot of the stories. Portrayal of women as evil stepmothers, witches, and mere objects of men's desire is rampant in the stories. For example, most stories would have two wives; one along with her children would be considered

<sup>2</sup> The word may represent a phenomenon that lies beyond the understanding of humans, therefore, a mythical as well as mystical reception of the same.

<sup>3</sup> *Baank*: believed to be a water demon that lives on fish and can take the form of human beings. There is supposed to be a pouch that the *baank* carries. If a human can acquire the pouch, the *baank* can be controlled for their benefit.

*Dout*: believed to be a poltergeist kind of being that is known for notoriously hounding passers-by on the roads by laying bamboos across and flicking them as the cross. They are known to bring stone showers on people's houses.

*Burha Dangoria*: This apparition is not considered to be evil. Unlike other spirit apparitions he is known to have a handsome appearance clad in white dhoti-kurta who appears in front of people with good fortune.

*Jokhini*: a tree demoness with a distorted figure that harms children.

<sup>4</sup> Lakshminath Bezbaruah, *Burhi Air Xaadhu*, (Guwahati: Bhabani Prints and Publishers, 2009).

'desired' and the other 'undesired'.<sup>5</sup> These undesired women mostly have a pitiable life without agency. There is a definite reversal of fortune for the 'undesired' women when their daughters are rescued by powerful merchants, princes and kings due to their beauty. More often than not the 'undesired' wife is murdered by the 'desired' wife leaving her children orphans. The male figure is otherwise absent from such stories except when they claim responsibility for a destitute beautiful girl, or abide by the manipulation of the 'desired' wives. Murder is so commonly found in these stories that one might wonder whether it is something to be even considered worthy for the consumption of children. Many such stories from the book talk about rich merchants, passing by the river bank where they encounter a beautiful girl whom they take along to be their sixth, seventh or eighth wife. There is no voice of consent, no protest, in some cases the girl is intentionally not given a language to communicate. This erasure of female voice somewhere conveys the dominance of patriarchal social order normalising the male voice and desire. This paper explores how the multifarious nature of violence is accommodated within folk narratives and tales to convey a meaning. This paper looks at the film *Kothanodi* by Bhaskar Hazarika to analyse the depiction of violence in the folk/fairy tales used in the film, through a critique of the patriarchal framework of the society to understand particular instances of violence in the stories. This enables a focus through a feminist perspective of understanding the violent content in the stories.

One can take the example of *Silonir Jiyekor Xaadhu (Tale of a Kite's daughter)*<sup>6</sup>: this story illustrates all of the issues mentioned above. The story tells of a baby girl who was put in a basket and thrown into the river because her father desired a son. The baby was spotted by a kite who raised her in her nest. Her hair fell into the water, it was eaten by a fish, caught by fishermen, and sold to a merchant. A merchant wanted to marry the girl with long hair. The search party sent out by the merchant found the girl and brought her to the merchant. As she was raised by a bird, she did not know any human ways. She only knew a bird-call which would bring her adoptive bird mother to her aid when

<sup>5</sup> Literal translations of the words *lagee* and *elagee*.

<sup>6</sup> *Siloni-Kite* (bird).

she had to adjust to her human life. Incidentally the merchant already had seven wives who did everything to torture the new addition to the harem. They find out about the kite and murder her so that there is no one to help *Silonir Jiyek*. These women then sell her to a fisherman in exchange for jewellery. The fisherman makes her take care of the dried fish on the river bank. She is later rescued by her husband who, while coming down the same route, recognises her singing about her fate. He punishes his other wives by dumping them in a ditch full of thorns. Despite the 'happy ending', the presence of violence is central to the story, especially as it is used to demean and hurt the young girl.

Violence is ever so often found intricately woven into children's literature, but in present times it has been questioned whether violence should find a place in children's literature or not? This is demonstrated by modern storytellers' choices of modifying the gruesome details of classic fairy tales to make them acceptable for modern consumers. Disney remains the major industry to monetise various watered down versions of the classic fairy tales. It is found in modern versions of Cinderella story like *A Cinderella Story* (2004)<sup>7</sup>, *Another Cinderella Story* (2008)<sup>8</sup>, the details about her step sisters cutting their toes and heels in order to fit in the glass slippers is not included. However *Ever After* (1998)<sup>9</sup> includes the scene where a pair of doves warn about the misdeeds of the stepsisters. The gruesome details of torture of the evil queen in Snow white is left out in the Disney versions of the films as well as other re-telling of the stories. Professor Maria Tatar's collection contains the original sanguine details. "Roo coo coo, roo coo coo blood's in the show: the shoe's too tight, the real bride's waiting another night."<sup>10</sup> Some storytellers have chosen to re-tell their own versions of these stories focusing on issues which often get overlooked due to the focus on the moralistic lesson at the end of it. Prince Cinders by Babette Cole<sup>11</sup> changes the story of Cinderella to a story of a scrawny boy being bullied by his macho brothers. In a similar way Emma

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<sup>7</sup> *A Cinderella Story*, dir. Mark Rosman, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004. (Film)

<sup>8</sup> *Another Cinderella Story*, dir. Ramos Santostefano, Warner Premier, 2008. (Film)

<sup>9</sup> *Ever After*, dir. Andy Tennant, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1998. (Film)

<sup>10</sup> Maria Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, (New York: WW Norton and Co, 1999), 121.

<sup>11</sup> Babette Cole, *Prince Cinders*, (London:Puffin Books, 1997).

Donoghue<sup>12</sup> constructs the story of Rumpelstiltskin with a completely new point of view. Here the demonic representation of Rumpelstiltskin is replaced by a girl who saves the child from a mother's neglect who is engrossed in her work beyond necessity. Many can relate to violent situations portrayed in children's stories, and, when used effectively, these situations can be used to teach children how to avoid violent resolutions in their own lives. This continues to be a contentious issue whether children should be shielded from such violent content or use these as life lessons. The folk/fairy tales we are familiar with have roots in the oral tradition which has seen changes from one generation to the next including and mimicking the current societal mores and evils. Such stories have been usually seen as vehicles for sharing values, caution and fear mingled with entertainment for adults and children alike. The storyline is developed keeping in mind culturally specific details and elements. Jack Zipes says,

At the beginning, the literary fairy tales were written and published for adults, and though they were intended to reinforce the mores and values of French civilite, they were so symbolical and could be read on so many different levels that they were considered somewhat dangerous: social behaviour could not be totally dictated, prescribed, and controlled through the fairy tale, and there were subversive features in language and theme. This is one of the reasons that fairy tales were not particularly approved for children.<sup>13</sup>

Cautionary tales are common all over the world. Ogres, witches, demons from forests, hills and water etc. are used in these stories to warn children not to go astray by instilling a sense of fear. The gullible, impressionable minds of young children believe such fantastical stories, making it something to be expected even in reality. The children are shown a world divided between good and evil where evil gets punished, goodness prevails and in the end all live happily ever after. Apart from the cautionary tales there are stories that have an abundance of sexual innuendoes, graphic violence, cannibalism, incest

<sup>12</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 14.

etc. Presently challenging the good and bad binary, problematised depictions of fairy tales are made into films and gruesome details are put forth for interpretation. We see why *Maleficent* (2014)<sup>14</sup> cursed Aurora, we see how the Red Queen turned evil in *Alice in Wonderland* (2010)<sup>15</sup> and we see *Hansel and Gretel* (2013)<sup>16</sup> becoming witch hunters. Zipes says,

Both the oral and the literary traditions continue to exist side by side today, interact, and influence one another, but there is a difference in the roles they now play compared to their function in the past. This difference can be seen in the manner in which they are produced, distributed and marketed.<sup>17</sup>

In the present time oral and literary traditions exist together, influence each other and get adapted through interactions. The functions/purpose of these tales have changed now compared to the past and the difference can be seen in the way they are produced, distributed and marketed through the modern culture industry. Films are representations that have to imitate and resemble realities or derive a base on which the cultural signifiers are constructed. Even in the construction of fantasy for either fairy tales or cinema, shades of life as we know it get reflected. Cultural practices, folklores, tales, songs and other aspects of social life get translated into visuals in a film. Bruno Bettelheim calls the fairy tales a reflection of our inner struggles.

For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a deep, quiet pool which at first seems to reflect only our own image; but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul - its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Maleficent*, dir. Robert Stromberg, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2014. (Film)

<sup>15</sup> *Alice in Wonderland*, dir. Tim Burton, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2010. (Film)

<sup>16</sup> *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*, dir. Tommy Wirkola, Paramount Pictures, 2013. (Film)

<sup>17</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Revised ed. (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (New York: Random House, 1975), 309.

Bhaskar Hazarika has attempted to highlight such collective struggles of a society by adapting four very popular stories from *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* into a mesmerising film called *Kothanodi* (River of Fables). Hazarika chose to weave the stories together and link them in the film and made certain changes to the original story, dispensing with the happy endings to focus on the murkier side of these stories. The stories adapted by him are *Tejimola*, *Champawoti*, *OuKuwori* and *Bhagyawati*. All the titles of these stories are the names of the protagonists who are female characters. Within the Western literary tradition, in the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, The Grimm's Brothers and Aesop etc. there is a gender hierarchy in the portrayal of both the sexes. While women are submissive beauties in need of constant rescuing and pampering, men are seen as active, dominant and more often than not, violent. Although there are male protagonists in the stories of *Burhi Aair Xaadhu*, the hierarchical portrayal is not a dominant mode despite the patriarchal set up of the society. Specifically in the stories with female protagonists, the presence of the male characters is negligent. Yet through characters like Champawoti's mother it is depicted how deep rooted are patriarchal notions in a society. Set in pre-colonial Assam, the film is steeped in grisly human behaviour and irrational judgements. The elements prominent in these stories are, stereotypical stepmother, shape-shifting, motherly love, child abuse/infanticide, and polygamy. The stories that feature in *Kothanodi* have two kinds of mothers, the sacrificial mother who will forgo everything to protect her child and the stereotyped evil stepmother.

The first point to discuss here is the depiction of the evil stepmother. The stepmother is presumably the most common of all cruel and evil relatives that persecutes the protagonists of the stories. Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Cinderella are a few of the most common ones. The stepmother is invariably portrayed as a wicked woman who victimises the innocent stepchild. Usually, the stepmother is distinctly distinguished from the stepchild by portraying her as physically ugly, or she has children of her own who are no match for the stepchild. Though this film doesn't depict Tejimola's stepmother in 'A Murder' as physically ugly, in mannerisms she's polar opposite to Tejimola. Against a docile, mild mannered Tejimola we have a drunk, angry

stepmother. Champawoti's real mother on the other hand wants everything better for her daughter. Stepmothers are usually shown not only to mistreat their stepchild but also attempt to and eventually succeed in murdering them, for example Snow White's murder was attempted many times until it was successful. Driven by jealousy, hatred and greed they try to harm their stepchildren and more often than not they are shown as witches who manage these tasks through witchcraft. The stepmothers in this film, instead of being witches, are depicted as having an agency which the protective loving mothers or the daughters and stepdaughters have no access to. However, it is the misuse of agency that needs to be critiqued. Tejimola's father is a merchant who is away from home for long periods of time and leaves the child in the stepmother's care. Not having a child of her own and not being the priority of her husband drives her to maddening jealousy. Tejimola is accused of the mistakes she did not commit and killed by the stepmother with a *Dheki*.<sup>19</sup> It is important to mention the weapon used for murder because it is an inevitable part of any village household in Assam. It is the site where women bond when they help each other make flour for sweets, pound rice from paddy. During festivals the sound of *dheki* is music to the ears at night which indicates the preparation for the festivities. Tejimola is asked to help in the *dheki* and is killed by her stepmother who crushes her limbs and hands. The pounding sound of *dheki* that signifies domesticity and fertility becomes a gruesome site and aid to the crime. An interesting addition by Hazarika to the story of Tejimola is a character like a devil on one's shoulder. This character is constantly whispering instructions into the stepmother's ears about how to punish Tejimola. In one scene it is shown that the stepmother boards a boat along with this being in the middle of the night. This can be interpreted as an evil force that directs her actions, or a schizophrenic entity. It can also be a manifestation of her depressive state due to prolonged periods of loneliness, or the personification of a society's expectations from a stepmother. While this story in the film has an added element of the demonic figure that whispers instructions into the stepmother's ears in order to understand the behaviour of the stepmother, the other three stories in the film do not make this obvious.

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<sup>19</sup> A long wooden device to pound rice, husk paddy by stepping on it at one end.

In the story of Champawoti the stepmother has a daughter of her own and the envy comes from wanting something better for her own child. Driven by greed this mother brings doom for her own child after an unsuccessful attempt at killing her stepdaughter. This woman too has an upper hand in the matters of the house while the other wife of her husband is the docile submissive one. She gets Champawoti married to a python who used to answer to her call in the fields, in the hope that it will swallow her but fortune takes a different turn and this python turns out to be a demigod who rewards Champawoti with wealth. In the hope for the same fate for her daughter she manages to marry her own daughter to a python caught on her order by her servants, but the python ends up swallowing the daughter. This mother tries to overlook the cries of her daughter by dreaming about the wealth and pleasure her daughter must be showered with. Both the mothers in the mentioned stories have power and agency and could have directed it towards something positive but corrupted by the power that they had, they fulfilled the criteria of stereotypical evil stepmothers through their actions.

With the fantastical touch in folk tales, it is possible to believe that anything can happen. Stories of humans turning into birds, animals transforming into another person are common. Explaining this phenomenon, Maria Warner notes,

Shape-shifting is one of fairy tale's dominant and characteristic wonders: hands are cut off, found and reattached, babies' throats are slit, but they are later restored to life, a rusty lamp turns into an all-powerful talisman, a humble pestle and mortar becomes the winged vehicle of the fairy enchantress Baba Yaga, the beggar changes into the powerful enchantress and the slattern in the filthy donkey skin into a golden-haired princess.<sup>20</sup>

Shape shifting is a common factor in *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* too.

This brings out another significant point that was a common practice for a long time i.e, Witch Hunting. Witches are common features of folktales, but believing that someone is a witch because of their behaviour is a social issue. A woman gives birth to an elephant apple that follows

<sup>20</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), xv-xvi.

her everywhere. The people from her village drive her away believing that she is a witch. This mother sacrifices her identity and gets displaced for a non-living entity that she gave birth to. She is an expert weaver who comes in contact with Tejimola's father in order to sell her woven materials. With suggestive measures directed by Tejimola's father she restores the child that was trapped in the fruit. He asks her to keep an eye out for the child when it leaves the shell of the fruit to eat food at night and burn the pulp so that it does not have anything left to hide inside. She kept a bowl of curd handy so that it can be smeared on the body of the child to maintain the temperature. The change in the story's protagonist in the film is important because the original story features a king and his queens among whom, one gives birth to the fruit. The witch hunting and burning have always targeted women specifically from the lower class with less or no defences and without any authority for protest. The weaver in this story is symbolic of that evil practice. Hazarika in order to link the stories in the film has used the character of Tejimola's father who helps the woman in the story to get the child out of the fruit. He pursues the woman despite her attempts to ward him off. As mentioned earlier, the male figures are mostly absent from the content of the story as the stories are mostly centred around the women. Similarly, Tejimola's father is also away from home for trade where he helps the weaver. Hazarika uses intertextual reference in this story. Through Tejimola's father he narrates another story, *Mekurir Jiyekor Xaadhu*<sup>21</sup> (*Cat's daughter's tale*). In this story a cat gives birth to two human girls. He convinces the weaver of his intent to help her and his knowledge about such issues through the reference of this story. Circumstantially he mentions Mayong, which is a place in Assam well known for its magic. While being unaware of the happenings at home, the worldlywise man compensates by helping another woman in need.

The last story in the film titled *An Acquittal*, derived from the original story *Bhagyawati* deals with another helpless mother who has to let her husband kill her babies because he obeys everything his uncle commands. Three of her infants are killed. This character too wants to protect her children from getting killed. She tells her husband that they don't need a baby that is going to make them prosperous. She

<sup>21</sup> Mekuri-Cat, Jiyek-Daughter, Xadhu-Tale.

just wants a baby. She decides to kill the uncle if he pronounces the murder of her next child. The title of this story in the film is interesting which talks about an acquittal. The only male character, shown as evil in the beginning of the story, is redeemed, when he sends the couple to visit the graves of their dead children. There they hear them talk from their graves with plans to murder the parents. This justification of infanticide is problematic in this story. The uncle is acquitted for the crimes that the mother thought was unforgivable. She didn't have any scope for protest either and later she is made to believe that it was done for something better.

The medium used by Hazarika is vividly visual and that greatly impacts the minds of the audience. A grandmother telling such stories to the grandchildren which are laden with violence towards children need to have at least moralistic lessons in them. However, the deviation from the original storyline too couldn't debunk the stereotypes against the figure of the stepmother. Tejimola's stepmother is shown as schizophrenic in the film in an attempt to justify her actions or violence towards Tejimola, but this still remains more of a vehicle to instil fear against stepmothers instead of deriving a cautious notion. A deeper reading into it can still symbolically highlight how some girls are forced into marriages without their consent just because there is promise of a wealthier life. The choice of Champawoti's stepsister is not taken into consideration while the mother pushes her to a strange marital fate. Similarly, the story *A Rebirth/Ou Kuori* can be seen as the struggle of a single mother that society ostracises. It is blatantly clear that such stories mostly depict violence towards women by both women and men. Even though instead of taking a socio-realist view Hazarika sticks to magic-realist depiction of the stories, it cannot be denied that visual imagery used in the film has uncovered the dark underbelly of the popular tales which get sugar-coated while listening to them as grandmother's tales, or some cinematic adaptations that erase the violence altogether. Hazarika has used the trope of night to highlight the darkness and violence in the stories adapted in the film. Tejimola's stepmother takes a raft across a water-body in the night. It was at night when the stepmother crushed Tejimola's limbs and head with a *dheki*. It is common practice to hear a *dheki* pounding sound

at night because a lot of women prefer to get the rice or flour ready for the next day. Similarly, the python swallowing Champawoti's stepsister happens during their wedding night. The darkness of greed in the mother is filmed through the night while she awaits in the dark outside her daughter's room to find out what riches her daughter has been bestowed with. Bhagyawati's story brings the viewers to the place where all the babies had been buried and how they converse amongst each other with sinister plans for the parents had they lived. Ow-Kuwori is retrieved from the shell of the fruit at night. Maria Tatar says that power is passionately attached to violence. This is a fact found in most popular tales. In such stories the body becomes an object as well as a target of power. This power is displayed with various ceremonious torture.<sup>22</sup> Some examples from this collection can be seen as instances of ceremonial torture as explained by Tatar, Tejimola being murdered by her stepmother with prolonged torture, the infanticide in Bhagyawati, a python swallowing a woman whole in Champawoti, and even forcefully extracting the child from the fruit in Ow Kunwori are a few such episodes.

In conclusion it is important to add that *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* was revised recently to suit the current mind-set by removing the racial, sexual and violent details under Dr Nagen Saikia and Samudra Kajal Saikia.<sup>23</sup> But it is inevitable that post scrutiny the stories will not remain the same. The stories in the film were not modernised and settings of the film captures the old-world charm removed from modernisation. Still, it remains inconclusive that a new medium could have portrayed these women in a different light than the original. It is generally contended that the collective unconscious of a community is informed by its bodies of folk wisdom and manifests itself in everyday forms of cultural

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<sup>22</sup> Maria Tatar, *The Hard facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Expanded Edition, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Dr Nagen Saikia is an Assamese writer known for his book *Andharot Nijor Mukh* that won him Sahitya Akademi award in 1997. He has been the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship. He retired as a professor from Dibrugarh University and has been a Rajya Sabha member in the past. Samudra Kajal Saikia practices multidisciplinary art forms that includes performance art, visual art etc. He specialises in Art History. He is the founder and Creative Director of *Kathputlee Arts and Films*. He currently archives Performance art in India for Asia Art Archive.

and social relations. It is apparent therefore that the representation of women in Assamese folktales goes on finally to constitute the limits of a patriarchal consensus in the popular imagination. It strikes one as no surprise that the cinematic medium too should continue these legacies of social cultural dominance through a reification of gender stereotypes, albeit in contemporary culture.



## Gendered spaces and histories: Feminist Re-tellings in Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Dahan*

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Smita Banerjee

This paper analyses a literary text based on the real-life incident of the molestation of a woman in Kolkata as exemplifying a significant intersection between lived history and its literary retelling. The forging of the text then becomes a way of suturing the real and the fictional where the fictional acquires a concrete presence that is further cemented by its later retelling into a film. However my concern in this paper is to read the literary re-telling to explore issues of a feminist concern regarding the space/place accorded to women as agents of resistance against forms of everyday violence that are important to map. This mapping alerts us to the multiple ways in which women choose to negotiate questions of self and the other demands on their identities in the familial, social and politico-legal spheres. Using the method of close textual analysis, this paper examines the characterization of three women in *Dahan*; Romita, Jhinuk and Mrinalini. The characterizations of Palash, Romita's husband and Tunir, Jhinuk's fiancé, shall also be examined as comparisons with the women characters. The questions that this paper addresses are the following: What forms of feminist intervention does the novel stage? What are the contours of gendered spaces and cities that are foregrounded in the narrative? How does the question of women's resistance get narrated? The paper is divided into two sections: section one provides a brief summary of the criticisms regarding the literary retelling and the cinematic adaptation. In section two, the analysis examines the novel's narrative to explore the critical questions raised above.

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**Keywords:** Gendered Spaces, Feminism, Sexualities, Marginalization, Resistances.

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Based on a true incident that occurred in 1992 outside the Tollygunj metro station in Kolkata, the novel *Dahan* was written by Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015)<sup>1</sup> and translated into English. Bhattacharya is a very well-known and critically acclaimed popular writer whose

<sup>1</sup> Suchitra Bhattacharya, *Dahan*. ed. Mohua Mitra. trans. Debjani Sengupta. (Srishti: New Delhi, 2001). All references to the text are from this print edition.

writings have been instrumental in voicing women's experiences through her novels. This novel was later adapted into a popular and award winning film by the noted film director Rituparno Ghosh (1963-2013) in 1997. It earned the best screenplay award for Ghosh, and the two actresses Rituparna Sengupta (Romita) and Indrani Halder (Jhinuk), shared the best actress award at the National Film awards in 1998.

*Dahan* tells the story of two women - Romita an exceptionally beautiful housewife belonging to an upper class family and Jhinuk - a young school teacher. Their narratives intersect one rainy evening in the middle of a bustling metro station in Kolkata when four men molest Romita. In that "impotent jungle of humanity,"<sup>2</sup> the crowd remains a silent spectator while Jhinuk intervenes and manages to save Romita from being abducted and raped. The narrative explores the aftershocks that tear these two women from the circle of their commonplace lives. It maps Romita and Jhinuk's negotiations of their spaces, selves and sexualities. The attendant publicity, the court case and its aftermath impacts the two women's romantic and marital relationships. The immediate families and the men, Palash, Romita's husband and Tunir, Jhinuk's fiancé, react in a predictable and stereotypical manner to contain the women's quest for legal justice after the harrowing experience of sexual violence. The two women lose the case as the perpetrators use their political clout to prove their innocence. Jhinuk too faces a salacious slander campaign as she is accused of humiliating 'respectable' men! Jhinuk's struggle to protest and fight on an issue that centers on the "question of a woman's right to fight for a cause"<sup>3</sup> is an articulation of a feminist appropriation of masculine hegemonies which does not end in a legal victory but enables a critical examination of modes of resistances that are necessary for women to articulate and voice. Jhinuk's grandmother Mrinalini's decision to retreat to a woman's home becomes another way of resisting social and familial strictures which gestures to the possibility of a different negotiation of her commitment to fighting for wronged women. The refusal of any

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<sup>2</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

prescriptive or simplistic answers to these fraught gender negotiations makes the novel a rich and complex narrative that enables critical questioning of gender stereotyping.

The genesis of the literary text lies in a well reported near abduction and assault that had received wide coverage in the media of the 1990s. The retellings though became controversial as the young journalist Ananya Chatterjee (Jhinuk) who had helped the molested woman and her fiancé resist the group of culprits was upset with the manner in which the real incident was fictionalized. As mentioned in a 2015 article by Mandal, Chatterjee was especially critical of the cinematic version and its characterization of the young husband as an insecure, stereotypical male who is unable to accept or understand the trauma that his wife had to undergo in public. She contended that in 'reality' the man was extremely supportive of his girlfriend and later wife and helped her to file the case and seek justice against the perpetrators of the violence.<sup>4</sup>

The entire controversy and contestation regarding the 'real' underlies the myriad debates about 'authentic' retelling of real life into literature and increasingly into film versions. The problems become further magnified when it involves traumatic experiences related to sexual/caste violence against real women as it happened in the case of Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994).<sup>5</sup> The film had also garnered many awards and accolades but became extremely controversial. To state briefly, the arguments that are common to these retellings involve the question of consent of the victimized woman, the politics of the 'speaking voice', usually belonging to a collaborating writer and the laying bare of the traumatic lived experience of the person involved. In this instance both the print, *India's Bandit Queen: The True story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen<sup>6</sup> and the film version were charged with sensationalizing the caste violence and rape of young Phoolan and

<sup>4</sup> Somdatta Mandal, "Rituparno Ghosh: 'The Woman's Director' of Bangla Cinema" in *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*. eds. Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai. (Jaipur: Rawat Publications 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2015), 17-38.

<sup>5</sup> Shekhar Kapur, dir. *Bandit Queen*, 1994, (Film).

<sup>6</sup> Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, (London: Pandora/HarperCollins, 1993).

using her traumatic experience for commercial gains that accrued to the writer and the director.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of this incident, the experience of the real woman victim and her quest for justice was 'news' for a few months during 1992. The issues of lived history, city spaces and women's experiences that emerged out of this incident were revisited afresh once it was fictionalized and later adapted for screen as *Dahan* five years after the actual event. The point to note is that myriad such 'lived histories' get erased. They remain newsworthy only till the next such incident captures the media attention. Often these events that intersect the 'personal', the 'social' and the 'politico-legal' domains become difficult to retrieve and trace in the absence of newspaper archives or documented cases. The difficulties get further accentuated if the real victims are not important enough in terms of social status thereby assuring media coverage or choose to remain anonymous. In effect the events can only be accessed if they appear as fictionalized narratives. The actual reportage, the court case and the fight for justice of this real event is however not germane to the paper. Nevertheless some further comments about the changes regarding the event and its narrative are discussed below to cite to the ways in which 'real' gets transformed into fiction.

The molestation and near abduction attempt of the young woman was retained in the novel. However the real-life couple were engaged at the time and the marriage took place later. The novel and the film 'deviated' from the 'real-life' in so far as Romita and Palash are shown to be married. Further the novel and the film chose to depict Palash as a stereotypical insensitive man who is more concerned about his reputation and social status than supporting Romita through her traumatic experience. It is a significant deviation as the fictional marriage enables the writer to critique familial and marital violence that Romita experiences in the aftermath of the molestation. In 'real-

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<sup>7</sup> See Brenda Longfellow, "Rape and Translation in *Bandit Queen*" in *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*. ed. Brinda Bose. (New Delhi: Katha 2002), 238-254. Longfellow summarizes the multiple losses and problems of both the film and the book versions as they attempt to 'tell' Phoolan's story.

life' the couple fought the injustice together, while in the fictional and cinematic account, the woman and her savior Jhinuk are shown to be lone voices seeking justice, thereby positing the possibilities of female solidarity. The young journalist Ananya Chatterjee was critical of these departures and the negative portrayal of the boyfriend/fiancé.<sup>8</sup>

*Dahan's* reception was not as controversial as that of the *Bandit Queen*. The novel was quite popular, got translated into English and the film adaptation was appreciated and garnered awards as well. Despite the accolades, it is important to draw attention to the unease expressed by one of the principal real life persons involved in the incident, whose intervention was fictionalized in the novel and the film as is indicated above. This underscores the complexities involved in transforming the 'real' into the fictional. To cite Bhattacharya's comment on the cinematic adaptation,

My story was a little different from the original film. A lot of my readers asked me why I had portrayed Jhinuk, the sole witness to the assault of the couple, as a loser in the end. Because I wanted women to realize the pain and suffering; I wanted readers to act.<sup>9</sup>

This statement makes it clear that the writer herself transformed the real experience into an imaginative retelling. This zone of transformation and intersection between history and literature, which is a productive tool for interpretation and analyses, is thus what the paper emphasizes, controversies about 'authenticity' of representations notwithstanding. The objections about using 'male stereotypes' and negative characterization of the young man raised by the journalist are valid; though in my opinion popular literature or cinema using stereotypes to demonstrate patriarchal prejudices and constrictions experienced by women characters becomes necessary to foreground contentious gender relations.

The intersections between lived histories becoming literature can be understood better if one grants that the fictional representation

<sup>8</sup> Somdatta Mandal, "Rituparno Ghosh: 'The Woman's Director' of Bangla Cinema", 21.

<sup>9</sup> Suchitra Bhattacharya cited in Somdatta Mandal, "Rituparno Ghosh: 'The Woman's Director' of Bangla Cinema," 20-21.

transforms into a text that can illuminate issues about gender and oppressions. That is power and affect that literary renditions of real events can evoke. The novel under consideration therefore emerges as a seminal feminist text. It voices concerns about women's experiences and unmasks the hegemonies of patriarchal domination that constrict and circumscribe women's agency. One of the crucial impetuses of feminism is its investment in the quest for equality and empowerment and raising consciousness about oppressions and marginalization. Additionally the novel also draws attention to the organization and economy of the city space. Mobility and navigation of the city is a matter of right, which should be available across time for all inhabitants, irrespective of gender, class or any other category. In its retelling of the molestation and its aftermath, the novel explores the implications of a gendered city space that becomes a contested territory where masculine desires reign while the 'other', the feminine is marginalized. It further explores the complex ways in which other forms of marginalizations are enacted on women in familial and social spaces.

This section briefly indicates the meaning of a gendered city space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel Certeau<sup>10</sup> offers a thesis of our modern/postmodern practices and cities. Borrowing from his thesis of everyday practices, the paper extends his terms of analysis to include gender. If our everyday practices - the way we do things, walking, window-shopping, and our practices in our workplaces - are not merely obscure backgrounds to our social activities, then they can also operate as signifiers of our masculinities, femininities, sexualities and identities. Following Foucault, we accept that sexuality is a political category that organizes our social and cultural behaviour. Permissible sexual behaviour or places where sexual activities may be acceptably performed are all a part of the economic and political life of a city and its social relations of productions.

Within this grid of everyday practices, space and sexuality, how does a city organize a woman's sexuality? Are our modern city spaces demarcated along axis of usage and availability and is the city space

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<sup>10</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. tr. Steven Randall (California: University of California Press, 1984).

available on equal terms for women? Or is the city itself a gendered terrain where hegemonic notions of masculinity get enacted? Can women demand the right to safety at all times across all spaces, including the right to address marital rape, laws against sexual violence notwithstanding? Or do we accept that the city is a gendered terrain where masculine hegemonies squeeze out and marginalize the 'other' – the feminine, the deviant, the poor, and the less powerful? These questions become pertinent as we are confronted almost daily by news reports of sexual assault and violence against women. One can mention a few incidents that have evoked strong public reaction in the last decade: the abduction and rape of a Swiss diplomat in Delhi, the rape of a young college student at Dhaula Kuan, Delhi who had stepped out to buy paranthas at night, the young woman Nirbhaya, who was brutally raped and killed in a DTC bus; all of these 'real' incidents have repeatedly led to numerous discussions about women's rights over city spaces. This paper is an attempt at formulating a response to these anxieties by analyzing this literary narrative about our spaces, sexualities and identities impacted by and informed through violence. Let me now turn to Romita and Jhinuk's story as they negotiate the complexities of spaces and sexualities through the novel.

Romita's leisurely evening window shopping with her husband Palash translates into a horrifying and humiliating nightmare of molestation at a crowded metro station. The narrative enacts the macabre spectacle in a filmic mode "... the brave heroes decided to have some fun with Romita. Her saree was pulled down to bare her breasts, while black T-shirt held her tightly in his arms singing lustily, "*choli ke peechay kya hai?*"<sup>11</sup> The public fondling of Romita seems to provide the crowd with a vicarious sexual titillation, as it seems unable to distinguish between the real and the image. The sexy and sexist television or cinematic images seem to get transmuted in our cities. The crowd seems caught in a voyeuristic spectacle mode as it is transfixed at the scene playing out. This incident which is staged outside the

<sup>11</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 16. A catchy song from the Hindi film *Khalnayak*(1993). Loosely translated it would mean 'what is beneath the blouse'. The song was very popular but drew criticism for its sexually explicit metaphors and double meanings and objectification of the female star Madhuri Dixit's dance sequence.

crowded Tollygunj metro station in Kolkata is narrated using familiar tropes of an exhibitionist display of the virile male figures staking their claim and sexual rights over the female body in the public gaze. This scenario is played out with repeated variations on multiple screens as some suggestive titillating and catchy song is used to project this kind of 'acceptable' male enactment of sexual power and privilege. The text at this point clearly configures the city as a masculine domain where the male sexual desires can be articulated and enacted. The city does not seem to demarcate the spaces or boundaries of sexual performance of the men! Within this sexual economy a woman is simply a commodity with no rights over her own body!

Romita's experience of sexual violence is not limited to the public domain. The molestation gets translated into a horrifying and numbing marital rape as her husband forces himself on her in a fit of rage and anger for being the 'victim' of lurid and salacious comments and questions about his wife's molestation. Palash appears as an insecure stereotypical male who chooses to construct himself as a victim while denying any understanding or empathy to his wife. His threatened masculinity can only translate into an exercise of sexual domination of the wife, who is further traumatized in the so-called safety of her own bedroom in her marital home. If the charges of stereotyping the husband need to be unpacked then one can argue that what we see is an attempt to use this construct to narrate the glaring and insidious working of masculine hegemony on the woman's body. As a feminist text, the novel lays bare both the public and the private hegemonies that marginalize the woman across spaces; the city and the bedroom.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nivedita Menon, "Embodying the Self: Feminism, Sexual Violence and the Law", in *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*. ed. Brinda Bose. (New Delhi: Katha, 2002), 200-237. Menon provides a comprehensive analysis of the ubiquity of sexual violence against women and her explanations of the legal discourses that inform rape laws in India. The critical question to ask is; what meanings can be derived from the dehumanizing and humiliating sexual assault called rape? My analysis of Romita's experience provides one interpretation as it agrees with Menon's conclusion that this kind of violence on the woman's body cannot merely be addressed via a demand for justice through law. It is evident in the novel that while the public assault can be legally challenged, the private remains unarticulated.

At this point Romita is constructed as a victim both in the private and public space. Her worst nightmares are realized as she conceives after the rape. The husband is ecstatically happy; as he does not remember the circumstances of conception. Romita is shattered but she cannot articulate her rage and anger except in silence to herself. She is unable to fathom "... why her desires, likes and dislikes count for nothing?"<sup>13</sup> Why her public molestation calls for ritual purification while the marital rape cannot even be talked of to her husband? What kind of language is available to speak of her experience?

The use of free indirect speech is significant, as we see Romita carrying out conversations in her own mind or writing a secret diary. The language of protest and resistance is denied to Romita due to her status as the daughter-in-law of a '*bonedi*' family.<sup>14</sup> The '*bonedi bhadra mahila*'<sup>15</sup> paradigm of a 'cultured' 'class' and 'status' family that she has been married into imposes the codes of silence and respectability on her that she is not strong enough to break. In a desperate act of defiance she accepts the court summons, yet is forced to lie in court and refuses to identify the culprits, to save her 'reputation' and 'marriage'. As she confronts the fragility of her relationship with her husband, she feels increasingly alienated. Her protest remains muted and unarticulated. She seeks comfort and solace in gazing surreptitiously at a newspaper photo of Jhinuk, which she keeps locked in her almirah locker. The narrative seems to collapse Jhinuk's image as that of her saviour and her beloved as she stares at a disjunctive sterile and circumscribed marital and familial space. In Romita's negotiations the grids of space, marriage, class, sexuality and the rhetoric of silence and respectability completely overwhelm and contain her.

How can one read Romita and her muteness? It might be worthwhile to use the formulation suggested by Spivak in her seminal and

<sup>13</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 147.

<sup>14</sup> *bonedi*, an upper middle class family. It is a term that denotes social status and carries immense prestige.

<sup>15</sup> *Bonedi bhadra mahila*, middle class woman, female counterpart of *bhadralok*, a term used for Bengali middle class male. It denotes a particular class status defined by cultured gentility.

provocative essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988)<sup>16</sup> It can be productive to suggest that much like the muting and silencing that Spivak refers to with respect to both the practice of *sati* and the suicide of the young woman Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, Romita in *Dahan* is also unable to voice her rage or even articulate any protest. The patriarchal weapon of shame, silence coded through the demands of acceptable modes of respectable behaviour completely engulfs and silences Romita. She becomes the subaltern subject who is denied speech. The hegemony of social class and family contains Romita. Her voice remains confined to her private thoughts and her private diary, hidden from view.

In contrast, the novel presents the other woman Jhinuk as an exemplary and courageous woman who enacts resistance. If Romita is muted, Jhinuk embodies voice. Her speech and articulation is used repeatedly to stage her protest at multiple points in the novel. Through her, the novel attempts to reclaim a space and voice for the woman, to subvert the masculine hegemony and gendered spaces of the city. Her appropriation works through various acts and practices namely-- on the city street when she manages to save Romita from the clutches of the four molesters, her act of taking Palash and Romita to the Police station to lodge the F-I-R and argue with the Police Inspector over framing adequate charges, going for the identification parade after the molesters are arrested and appearing as the only material witness in court.

Initially Jhinuk captures the public imagination as a 'courageous and plucky' young woman who is held up as a figure of admiration and adulation feted all across media spaces as the 'modern Rani of Jhansi'<sup>17</sup> the only cautionary voice being that of Jhinuk's grandmother who cannot understand the furore and fuss showered on her granddaughter. But as she persists in fighting for the cause of a

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<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Spivak. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 1988. [http://abahlali.org/files/Can\\_the\\_subaltern\\_speak.pdf](http://abahlali.org/files/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Rani of Jhansi, the warrior queen of the 1857 battle who fought valiantly against the British. While it is a celebratory comparison, Jhinuk's unease stems from the fact that the only model for a woman's courage is to be found in a battle warrior's example. The narrative raises these uncomfortable questions to critique these exemplifications which codify acceptable and non-acceptable performative gender codes.

“woman’s right to justice,”<sup>18</sup> she finds herself isolated and lonely. The city that propped her as the fighter queen Rani Jhansi, ostracizes her as a ‘manly woman’ who fearlessly goes to the Police station or the courts. For her family and her fiancé she is arrogant, insolent, haughty and brazen, her “behaviour would put even men to shame” for Tunir, her fiancé, “there (was) no trace of womanliness in her.”<sup>19</sup>

Jhinuk is disturbed and agitated by these constricting gender stereotyping and wonders why she cannot become a complete human being without falling into either category of man or woman. Therefore the novel effectively critiques the very idea of gender stereotyping which is mobilized differently for both men and women. As noted above, Palash and Tunir are both unable to step out of their stereotypical masculine selves. Both men then cannot provide any support to their partners. Alternatively Jhinuk’s mode of action and protest gets coded via further stereotypes of female heroic cultural icons which lead to her ostracization in her family and romantic relationship. Jhinuk however refuses to give in. It is through her practices of ‘walking’ and ‘speech’ that we see her enact resistance despite attempts at muting her. The paper has already explained how social practices and ways of behaving constitute acts that designate resistances and agency. These acts draw upon Certeau’s interventions which are summarized below.

In ‘Walking the City’, Certeau has compared walking with the act of speech. Walking has the same relation to the city as speech has to language “walking affirms, suspects, guesses, transgresses, respects etc. the trajectories it speaks.”<sup>20</sup> In the novel, Jhinuk becomes both the affirmer and the transgressor of the city space through her walking the terrain. As she walks the city, she affirms her right to appropriate the terrain and fight for what she believes in. Walking almost in a trance, she finds herself back at the metro station, “criminals were known to return to the scene of crime. But Jhinuk was not a criminal. This was possibly a different kind of guilt that had shaken her. Was it guilt or a sense of obligation?”<sup>21</sup> Yet her other walk – her presence at the metro

<sup>18</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 216.

station on a rainy evening all-alone is projected as a transgressive act by the defence lawyer at the trial. He refutes her testimony as that of a “slut, a girl from a respectable family gone astray, someone who walks the metro station by night in search of prospective customers and takes revenge on innocent people who refuse to fall into her trap.”<sup>22</sup> Predictably Jhinuk loses the case and the city seems to reassert its masculine hegemony.

The novel does not end with the celebration of a liberatory female utopia as Jhinuk realizes that it is not possible. With Jhinuk we the readers too are forced to rethink and reformulate our subjectivities and the nature of our resistances. What is to be privileged as resistance? Is it the act of articulation or the end result that matters? Judith Butler’s work on gender alerts us to the idea of gender as performance.<sup>23</sup> Through Jhinuk and Romita’s narratives we are able to understand the social constructions of gender that dictate permissible and acceptable gendered behavioral grids within which women are expected to enact themselves. Romita lapses into silence after her husband and his family fail to sympathize with her trauma and expect her to be ‘normal’ and not articulate her rage and anger at her husband’s marital rape. Jhinuk is also expected to forget her activism and give in to her fiancé’s demands of being ‘happily married’. If the molesters, Romita’s husband, and Jhinuk’s fiancé all perform masculinity, then the women too are enacting prescribed performances of femininity. Jhinuk transgresses, but she is soon brought back into the fold. Does she too get silenced? Spivak’s essay has alerted us to the multiple ways in which discourses collide to mute and silence subjects. Jhinuk’s narrative shows us that within the existing familial and social constructs, being a ‘manly woman’ or a ‘slut’ is not desirable. Despite her convictions and protest she gets co-opted within the structures and discourses of patriarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>23</sup> See the summary of Judith Butler’s idea of gender as performance as explained by Dino Felluga. Dino Felluga. “Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex.” Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. Purdue U.

<https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/genderandsex/modules/butlerperformativity.html>. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/genderandsex/modules/butlergendersex.html> Accessed on:10 March 2021

The question then is whether the novel ends on a defeatist note? It can be argued that it is Jhinuk's grandmother, Mrinalini and her story as well as Jhinuk's honeymoon experience which gives us a different model of resistance. Mrinalini retreats from the familial space to an old age home to follow *vanprastha*.<sup>24</sup> Towards the end of the novel, she decides to move away from the oppressive masculinity of the city to help in a home for destitute women. Set up by the failed public prosecutor Sharat Ghoshal, Jhinuk rejects this mode of retreat as a viable alternative and marries Tunir, her fiancé.

Is she co-opted into the very structures of gender and sexuality that she had tried to contest and that Romita is trapped into? It is evident that the author is following the demands of popular fiction in providing a conventional end to the Jhinuk-Tunir story. However an imaginative deconstruction of Jhinuk's notion of a stable gendered self is provided through Romita and Mrinalini's narrative. This indeterminacy of selfhood and questions about the value of protest does not lead to an abdication of responsibility as the narrative gaze focuses on Jhinuk and Tunir making love on their honeymoon as Jhinuk cannot keep her "thoughts free of the city that lay hundreds of miles away," and knows "it would certainly return again and again. Till death came and blinded her."<sup>25</sup> The disconnect with Tunir is also a realization that all states of self, even the sexual, all rebellion and resistance is contingent and that the category woman is not fixed or static but an ever temporary construction, forming continuously along various axes of new subject positions.

To conclude, one can cite the words of Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan who notes that the process of feminist and political appropriation "... must provide the grounds of gendered subjectivities that will enact more contingent, varied and flexible modes of resistance."<sup>26</sup> It is never monolithic. It is contingent upon what performative tropes are mobilized and how women choose to enact themselves. Romita seemingly remains trapped in her marital location; Jhinuk enacts

<sup>24</sup> *Vanprastha*, the last cycle of a Hindu's mortal life. It implies retirement from society.

<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharya, *Dahan*, 264.

<sup>26</sup> Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, *Real & Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, Post colonialism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 11.

resistance but soon finds herself isolated, Mrinalini moves away from her city and home to a different space to help destitute women. The narrative gives voice to multiple and contradictory articulation of sites and forms of resistances and appropriations that are enacted and staged. Both identity and emancipation need to recognize the contingency of varied experiences and the different possibilities of how resistances get articulated in given social and historical locations. Menon too makes a similar point.<sup>27</sup> She says that 'bodies' and 'selves' are not fixed, the feminist intervention tentatively recognizes that the 'concretizing' of the woman's body cannot be available in law, but rather resides in recognition of emancipation and not the demand for justice. It is more productive to realize that "indeterminacy of identity" is not a "political paralysis," rather it leads to a position of "radical doubt and constant negotiation of "me" as a "woman" in some contexts."<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion the paper has suggested that through this imaginative re-telling of a 'real' incident, Bhattacharya's novel not only raises questions about the intersections between lived history of women getting narrated into fictional reconstructions, but while doing so it fashions a revisionist feminist narrative which questions and critiques assumptions, prejudices and circumscribed boundaries imposed on women. The resistances to these boundaries are multiple and contingent, sometimes articulated, vocalized, sometimes silenced and muted, yet important and significant to contend with.

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<sup>27</sup> Nivedita Menon, 'Embodying the Self: Feminism, Sexual Violence and the Law', 200-237.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

## The Question of Dalit Body and Agency: Reading Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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Ved Prakash

The paper will look into the dominion of the body and its socio-cultural and political formation, keeping the politics of agency in mind. The paper will explore Sharan Kumar Limbale's, *The Outcaste* while discussing the question of existence and belonging concerning the Dalit body. While studying the discourse of humiliation and violence, the paper will attempt to understand, why Dalits in India have been pushed to the periphery? What challenges and hurdles do Dalits face when it comes to the free movement of their bodies in a society that largely remains hierarchical and caste-obsessed? The paper will also look into the politics of segregation and inequality while taking up the question of Dalit identity. There is no doubt that violence in the name of caste is a living reality in India and 'caste violence' exists both in the urban as well as rural settings. The constant assault of the Dalit body by the Savarna Caste Hindus is a way to normalise the flawed imagination that makes them believe that they are superior, while Dalits are inferior.

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**Keywords:** Caste, Violence, Dalit, Body, Humiliation

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The body of a Dalit oscillates in between visibility and invisibility. It remains visible in its location within the caste hierarchy, but in its struggle to overcome the oppressive culture of discrimination and prejudice that results in humiliation, it remains invisible. It is the gaze of the Savarna Caste Hindus that often scrutinize the movement of the Dalit body concerning the public as well as the private domain. It is this quest to assert the notion of 'being' without a sense of shame, that foregrounds the primary concern of this paper. Concerning society in general, the body has always been a site of controversy and conflict. It goes through a process of change, and often bodies are perceived through socio-cultural as well as the political lens. One cannot rule out the assumption that humans inhabit a society that is unjust and extremely prejudiced and the divide between the subjugator and subjugated is getting wider by the day. In such a scenario, the body and its movement without any visible or non-visible restriction become a serious matter of concern. On what parameters are bodies labelled? Who decides that some bodies are pure while others are polluted? Who

adjudicates that some bodies are bestial while others are righteous? The hierarchical social structure often engages with the politics of disparity while dealing with different bodies depending upon various markers such as social, political, religious, or caste-related. In the name of law and order, the body of a Dalit is subjected to all kinds of violence and violations. Dalits have been facing caste-based ostracization for a long time. Why are certain bodies attacked time and again? What makes a particular body a site of threat? And who gives the license to penalise and lynch bodies of a kind? The paper will attempt to have a theoretical look to understand the ontology of the Dalit body while drawing references from Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003).

To begin with, the entry point into the whole discourse is to pronounce that the paper will look at the body of the "other" the so-called "oppressed". The attempt is to look at the challenges and conflicts which are encountered by the suppressed "other" across spaces of hierarchy. Michel Foucault (2005) in his article "The Political Investment of the Body" opines that the body is a political field and politics of power cannot be separated from it. He postulates: "The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."<sup>1</sup>

When one talks about the body and its movement in society then one must be aware of the fact/possibility that some bodies are freer than other bodies. Some bodies have to abide by several norms, laws, rules, and regulations. Within the hierarchical social structure, there is a further hierarchy in terms of the scanning of certain bodies. Some bodies are scanned and scrutinized more than the others, the body which is comparatively scanned, checked, or examined more is the body of the so-called "vulnerable other." It is not only examined time and again because it is seen with the biased eye but its movement is also restricted consciously. It is seen as a site of threat that may disrupt the harmonious social framework. It must go through the multiple check-points on multiple occasions and when the body of the "other" is checked, it must remain docile. It must welcome the institution of

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Political Investment of the Body," in *The Body: a Reader*, ed. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 100.

scrutiny with all humility and self-effacement. The idea is to create a binary opposition in terms of the normal and non-normal body. Dwaipayan Banerjee (2011) in his article "Introduction: Conceptions of the normal body" remarks "Normativization dictates the terms in which a mode of living together might be imagined...the concepts through which we might imagine the emergence and coherence of a subject are already laid out for us by the state."<sup>2</sup> It is therefore understood that the state plays an integral role in deciding the agency of the body. The state/dominant groups have the ability and the power to criminalise and decriminalise certain bodies on grounds that they may consider appropriate. One may further propose that this body is not only a site of conflict but it is also a site of negotiation. Certain bodies must negotiate through the tags which read acceptance and rejection. When it comes to the question of autonomy then the state does not permit the body of the "other" the utmost freedom. There have been innumerable cases of bias and prejudice when it comes to the body of the so-called "other." In the present context, one could propose that there has been a conscious as well as conspicuous othering of the Dalit body by the hegemonic groups.

When it comes to the Dalit body and its movement in society then the politics of spatial separation practised by caste Hindus has been an effective tool of oppression. The Dalit body is separated from other groups so that it can be identified and upon identification, it can be subjected to scrutiny and gaze. The question which becomes rather essential is what is distinctive about the body of a Dalit? Why is the Dalit body attacked time and again? G. N. Devy in his introduction to *The Outcaste* talks about how the notion of caste has conditioned Indian society. Moreover, Devy points out that the trope of education played an imperative role in the social and political awakening of Dalits. It is "the glory of the alphabet" that further strengthened the literate Dalits in voicing out their suffering.<sup>3</sup> As Dalits gained education, they started to question the politics of segregation proposed by the institution of caste. Surinder S. Jodhka in his book *Caste* (2012) mentions that

<sup>2</sup>Dwaipayan Banerjee. "Introduction: Conceptions of the normal body," *Social Research*, 78, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 303.

<sup>3</sup> Sharan Kumar Limbale, *The Outcaste* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), xviii-xix.

the caste system represents “naturalized inequality”<sup>4</sup> that is further damaging to the whole social fabric. If ‘inequality’ is naturalized based on caste then the struggle of Dalits to seek justice multi-folds. In such a scenario, the subjugators attempt to seek hegemony over Dalits by the virtue and privilege of the caste they are born into.

Limbale’s *The Outcaste* talks about the uncertain nature of subjectivity when it comes to the issue of belonging and existence. Limbale’s mother named Masamai belongs to the Mahar Dalit community. However, his father is Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil, a non-Dalit. It needs to be highlighted that Hanmanta Limbale never took cognisance of this relationship. Hanmanta Patil did not consider Sharankumar to be his son. Sharankumar states, “Hanmanta did not acknowledge me as his offspring.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when Hanmanta’s name was added to Sharankumar’s school register mentioning him as his father, Hanmanta was not at all pleased. He attempted to threaten the headmaster at gunpoint for writing his name next to Sharankumar in the school register.<sup>6</sup> Hanmanta felt a sense of shame in identifying Sharankumar as his son in public. However, when Hanmanta would meet Sharankumar in private away from the caste gaze then he would be at ease with him. It was this policy of dualism that made Sharankumar Limbale feel that he had a father and yet he was fatherless. One doesn’t have to go back to the patriarchal notion of identity formation within which the title of the father is seen as an essential signifier of association. However, one cannot rule out the conundrum that existed within Limbale as he could not decide whether he is a Dalit or a non-Dalit. Sharankumar also elucidates that it is a common practice in many villages, wherein, a Patil, who is often a big landowner, has a Dalit woman as his whore. And children born in such a relationship have no legal father.<sup>7</sup> Hanmanta and Masamai did not have any formal or legal ceremony given their relationship, this further problematised the identity of Limbale. At the beginning of *The Outcaste*, Limbale talks about his school days and how Mahar boys and girls would be asked to sit separately. Once during the school

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<sup>4</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka, *Caste* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

picnic, students who belonged to the Mahar community were asked to have their lunch under a separate tree.<sup>8</sup> What I find pertinent is not just the bodily separation of the Mahar and the non Mahars but this very premise that one cannot question this politics of separation. While one may be of the view that it is education that has the potential to bring about a change but the roots of caste differentiation are so deep and pervasive that at times it is the so-called educational spaces that further normalise caste practises like untouchability. For instance, Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography, *Joothan* (2007) recounts the torture and abuse he had to face in his school for being a Dalit. He would be asked to sit away from the upper caste students and he would not be given any mat to sit on. Valmiki recounts, he would be forced to sit at the door of the classroom and it would barely be possible for him to read the letters on the board from there. Furthermore, while the whole school would study, Valmiki would be asked to broom the entire school by the headmaster.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he would be assaulted not only by his classmates but teachers too. The normalization of the practice of assaulting Dalit bodies needs to be counter-argued.

On the other hand, Limbale recounts the time when he was slapped by a classmate for being a transgressor by sitting with other boys in the class. This caste-based atrocity that was an experience of humiliation for Limbale is ignored by the class teacher and Limbale is asked to sit at the entrance of the class for no reason. Forcing someone to sit at the class entrance without a reason is another act of humiliation, it is quite shocking to observe how Limbale is humiliated first by the student and thereafter by his teacher. V. Geetha in her article "Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability" mentions that essentially humiliation is an experience that allows a person to re-examine one's relationship with oneself and humiliation is felt with relation to one's existence of being.<sup>10</sup> It is the several experiences of humiliation that made Limbale reflect upon his own identity. Limbale realized that education could be one of the tools to question the everyday experience of untouchability. As V. Geetha further goes on to point out that "untouchability is not an

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup> Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan* (Kolkata: Samya Publication, 2007), 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> V. Geetha, "Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability," in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

act of dramatic horror – it exists most powerfully in the everyday...<sup>11</sup> When Limbale went to Sholapur for his college education, he felt a new zeal as the environment in college was less toxic in comparison to his school. Limbale felt free in the new surroundings. Moreover, Limbale mentions that injustice was assuming a new meaning at this stage of his life. He and his friends who too belonged to the lower caste were awakening under a “new consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> Around this time, Limbale moved from saying ‘*namaskar*’ to ‘Jai Bhim’ while addressing friends and people.<sup>13</sup> This re-examination of Limbale’s own relationship with himself was an outcome of years of abuse and humiliation.

It is pertinent to highlight that it is the culture of humiliation that attempts to normalise the violence that Dalits face because of their caste affiliation. One doesn’t have to bring in the idea of rationality and intellect over here because for Caste Hindus, knowledge emanates from one’s caste position. A Dalit must always remain an irrational being no matter how educated, while an upper caste person must be the most learned irrespective of education because of his/her caste title. This analogy may sound absurd but so is the institution of caste.

Bhikhu Parekh in his article “Logic of Humiliation” talks about various degrees and levels within which the trope of humiliation exists within a society. Humiliation can be social, cultural, personal, political, singular, multi-layered, sexual, psychological, etc. Moreover, one can be humiliated both by words as well as silence. The silence of Limbale’s teacher then indeed becomes an important signifier of oppression. Parekh goes on to say that humiliation is deep and pervasive and it is normally a part of the language that is used to address the subordinated groups. In such a setup one doesn’t have to retort to an overt act of humiliation but a reminder of the caste hierarchy in place may just be enough.<sup>14</sup> Limbale recounts how the boys in school would throw stones at him and remind him of his caste and his marginal body by calling out loud ‘Mahar’. One day a boy named Ramya Jalkote hit Limbale on his

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<sup>11</sup> V. Geetha, “Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability,” 97.

<sup>12</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 82-83.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, “Logic of Humiliation,” in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

face.<sup>15</sup> This indeed is an overt act of humiliation and the normalisation of segregation and humiliation finds various references in Limbale's *The Outcaste*. For instance, a different part of the river bank (lowest) would be assigned to the Mahars.<sup>16</sup> The barber would refuse to cut the hair of a Mahar boy.<sup>17</sup> A Mahar boy would often be addressed as 'a son of a bitch'.<sup>18</sup> These everyday acts of vandalism not only normalise the pattern of prejudice but somewhere convey the message that Dalits are not welcome to be a part of the public discourse and the everyday interactions that take place amidst the non-Dalit groups. The simple denial of cutting the hair of a Dalit person is an announcement as well as a reminder that one has to be careful while crossing the line of separation else there can be serious consequences. While Limbale is subjected to these everyday moments of humiliation, the larger interaction with subjective humiliation lingers on because he is not sure whether he is a Mahar or a Patil or both or none? Did his mother love the upper caste Patil, who refused to acknowledge Limbale as his son, or his birth too was an act of humiliation? At this stage, one may look into the multi-layered existence of humiliation, both as a feeling as well as an act. Limbale was never comfortable with the fact that it is the upper caste Patil who is his father. There is a clear sense of hierarchy in between the relationship of Masamai and Hanmanta. Masamai could not claim any ownership over Hanmanta. This is pertinent to mention that Masamai had a husband named Ithal Kamble but the caste council forced Masamai to divorce her husband. This may have been done on the directions of Hanmanta so that he could take advantage of Masamai. Sharankumar Limbale asks, "why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world?... Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth."<sup>19</sup> This contradiction of existence can also be traced to the question that Limbale raises about his father staying in a mansion that he can never think of visiting him and his mother in a hut. He postulates about his roots.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

As Limbale moved to Chapalgaon for higher education, he gained a sense of confidence about the way he would go around the village. However, the caste Hindus hated this confidence.<sup>21</sup> Limbale and his friend Parshya would end up going to the police station to report Shivram, the tea shop owner, and his repressive practice of serving tea to Mahars in a separate cup and saucer.<sup>22</sup> This new confidence of questioning the caste-related violations and taking up the matter to the state machinery is an outcome of education and a new Dalit consciousness. However, the caste Hindus see this sense of pride in one's existence as an act of transgression, something the Dalit docile bodies must never do. Alok Mukherjee, who translated Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* in English, in his article "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*" (2004) talks about the binary that exists between Dalits and non-Dalits. Mukherjee writes that Dalits exist as the upper caste Hindu's Other. In this binary opposition of 'We' and the 'Other' lies a hierarchy that claims that it is the upper caste Hindus who are enlightened while the Dalits are not even worthy of being addressed as humans. The entire project of knowledge and enlightenment that justifies stratification based on outlandish assumptions needs to be counter-argued and questioned, something the Dalit bodies are doing already. Mukherjee states, "This other is a part of Hindu society, and yet apart from it. Inscribed in that apartness and difference is inferiority."<sup>23</sup> The question which becomes significant at this point is who is inferior? The one who is oppressed or the 'Other' who is the oppressor.

Even though the primary focus of this paper is concerned with reading the Body of Limbale through his life account, one cannot disregard the vulnerability of the Dalit female bodies. If one is to look at the mobility of female bodies primarily Masamai, Limbale's mother, and Santamai, grandmother in *The Outcaste*, then it is quite

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>23</sup> Alok Mukherjee, "Reading SharankumarLimbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*," in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* by SharankumarLimbale (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 2.

apparent. Limbale states, it was normative for upper-caste men to insult Dalit women. They would be beaten up as slaves. Some farmers would sexually harass them.<sup>24</sup> Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste through a feminist lens* (2018) talks about how the institution of patriarchy continues to control women irrespective of the caste they belong to. Moreover, patriarchy with relation to 'caste hegemony' continues to thrive by dividing upper-caste women from the ones who belong to the lower caste. It is important to mention that Dalit, as well as non-Dalit women, are abused by Savarna Hindu men alike and yet, at times, upper-caste women act as an extension of the Savarna patriarchal social order. Chakravarti states it is intriguing that women are complicit in systems and structures that subordinate them. Upper caste women may believe that they can access economic resources and social power if they imitate their menfolk.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the disregard for lower caste women by them. This belief further problematises the whole system of caste violence.

Furthermore, sexual crimes against Dalit women are a norm while laws claim to protect everyone. It is Hanmanta who ruined Masamai's married life and yet he could go on to have a sexual relationship with Masamai without any accountability. This privilege is only extended to an upper-caste Hindu man. Limbale recounts that the practice of using the female Dalit body for sexual gratification within the upper caste landowners is almost a tradition.<sup>26</sup> Limbale is caught up in the dilemma of whether his mother could have said no to the advances made by Hanmanta or she didn't have any other option. He goes on to ponder that Dalit women may have had to sell their bodies for acceptance and love.<sup>27</sup> However, the question remains, did they sell their bodies? Or were they reduced to selling their bodies? Or their bodies were claimed by the upper caste Hindu men without any consent? The body of Dalit women is often attacked by the Caste Hindus to exercise power and control. Anand Teltumbde in his article "Violence as Infrasound: Khairlanji, Kawlewada, Dulina, Bhagana..."

<sup>24</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a feminist lens* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2018), 136-137.

<sup>26</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

which is a part of his book *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (2018), talks about the 2006 Khairlanji incident in which four members of a Dalit family; Bhaiyalal Bhotmange's wife Surekha Bhotmange, and children Priyanka, Roshan, and Sudhir were stripped naked, assaulted, and thereafter lynched to death by the upper Caste Hindus. Their only fault was that Surekha Bhotmange had questioned the upper caste harassment. This act of resistance by Surekha had infuriated the caste Hindus. Bhotmanges were not the poor helpless Dalits, but, they had gained economic prominence along with a cultural awakening in terms of their roots and identity.<sup>28</sup> It is shocking to learn that Dalit bodies irrespective of their economic and social positions are attacked without any fear or shame.

Body for Dalits has been a site of struggle to establish their identity. The Dalit body is assaulted, threatened, beaten, and killed for banal reasons which show how vulnerable the "oppressed" body is. As far as the atrocities inflicted upon Dalits are concerned, one may mention a few reports of assaults. In October 2017, an over eight months pregnant Dalit woman Savitri Devi was punched and beaten up with a stick as she had 'polluted' the upper caste bucket with her touch. Savitri Devi was assaulted by Anju, an upper-caste Thakur woman and her son Rohit. Six days after the horrific attack, both Savitri Devi and her unborn child succumbed to injuries.<sup>29</sup> On 17 June 2018, Prashant Solanki, a Dalit man was attacked for sitting on a horse during his wedding procession. Many insisted that riding a horse is an upper-caste privilege and Dalits should refrain from this. The incident took place in Guradia village in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh.<sup>30</sup> In January

<sup>28</sup> Anand Teltumbde, "Violence as Infrasound: Khairlanji, Kawlewada, Dulina, Bhagana..." in *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2018), 155.

<sup>29</sup> "Dalit woman, unborn child die after being attacked by upper caste woman for touching bucket," *The New Indian Express*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/oct/26/dalit-woman-unborn-child-die-after-being-attacked-by-upper-caste-woman-for-touching-bucket-1683585.html>

<sup>30</sup> Rakshitha R, "Madhya Pradesh: Wedding Procession of Dalit Groom Disrupted, 8 Arrested," *The Logical Indian*, February 10, 2021. <https://thelogicalindian.com/castediscrimination/8-arrested-for-disrupting-wedding-procession-of-dalit-groom-in-mp-26767>

2021, Jeyasri Kathirvel, a Dalit garment worker from Tamil Nadu's Dindigul district was murdered by the factory supervisor named V Thangadurai and his relative B Jaganathan. Both Thangadurai and Jaganathan belonged to the Kongu Vellala Gounder community, a dominant caste in western Tamil Nadu.<sup>31</sup> These incidents reflect how pervasive caste hatred is in India. Dalit bodies are viewed with a sense of abhorrence by Savarna Hindus. Gopal Guru in his article "Dalits from margin to margin" writes about the different degrees of marginalisation concerning the Dalit body. There is social as well as political marginalization, and caste prejudice exists within educational as well as electronic media spaces. Moreover, Guru goes on to highlight that Dalit bodies are pushed to the periphery in both rural as well as urban spaces.<sup>32</sup>

The policy of prejudice in dealing with caste-related cases leads to the construction of bodies that can be taken for granted, bodies that can be ridiculed and dehumanised. It is this fear of getting into trouble even when one wants to counter the upper caste Hindus legally, further strengthens the creation of vulnerable and non-vulnerable bodies. The mainstream/dominant shall never be ready to treat the "suppressed other" as equal because it destabilises the position of power which is taken up by the authoritative institutions/groups. Chris Shilling in his book *The Body and Social Theory* (1993) writes that the body is a corporeal phenomenon and it goes through several changes throughout the life of an individual. Thus, the body should not be seen as a finished project. It needs to be examined in multiple ways.<sup>33</sup> If such is the case then why is it that the body of a Dalit is often categorised in rigid notions that are imagined by the caste Hindus. It is this rigid notion that Limbale attempts to question in *The Outcaste*. Towards the end of the autobiography when Limbale gets a job transfer to Latur, he finds it difficult to settle down as the whole town was caste conscious. Being a Mahar, Limbale could not find a room for rent. Limbale argues that

<sup>31</sup> Sowmya, "Caste impunity and gender violence behind murder of Dalit garment worker in Tamil Nadu," *The Caravan*, February 28, 2021.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/caste/caste-impunity-and-gender-violence-behind-murder-of-dalit-garment-worker-in-tamil-nadu>

<sup>32</sup> Gopal Guru, "Dalits from margin to margin," *Indian International Centre Quarterly*, 27, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 111-112.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publication, 1993), 100.

he wears clean clothes, takes a bath every day and yet he is perceived as unclean. On the other hand, a high caste person who is dirty is still considered touchable.<sup>34</sup> Limbale despite being educated is denied basic respect by high caste members as his caste identity is given preference over his merit. This brings in the idea of humiliation as multi-layered by Bhikhu Parekh.

Denying Limbale a room for rent is nothing but a reminder to the preposterous system of Caste that social as well as bodily differences and hierarchies need to be maintained to keep the institution of caste alive. While on one side, one may see the denial of the room without any substantial reason as an act of humiliation but on the other side, it is more of a representation of the ignorance and imbecility the upper caste people suffer with. The refusal of a room to a Dalit in an upper caste locality is a way to establish a sense of ghettoization that separates the Dalit bodies from the non-Dalit bodies. Limbale would feel humiliated when people would treat him as an inferior because of his caste. Eventually, Limbale had to settle in a house in Bhimnagar, a locality away from the town. Bhimnagar had residents who were mainly poor and from the lower caste. The houses here did not have toilets and bathrooms. People would defecate out in the open. Bhimnagar was also a graveyard for the Marwari community. As a result, the whole place would smell of burning flesh.<sup>35</sup> The marginal location of Bhimnagar intersects with Limbale's own marginal status. The spatial and the social ghettoization then circumscribes the Dalit body; that can perhaps seek to escape only through the act of writing. It is the power of the alphabets that may bring about a change in society.

Dalit writings are both political as well as subversive in their nature. Dalit life accounts, while critiquing the history of exploitation in the name of caste, highlight the issue of subjectivity and identity. Dalit bodies and voices have been forced to remain absent from the public discourse by the dominant groups and it is writing about the self that may make people take note of the injustice Dalits have had to face. If society fails to notice the everyday humiliation that Dalits face then Dalit stories and narratives can be an effective way to resist as well as access subjectivity.

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<sup>34</sup> Limbale, *The Outcaste*, 106-107.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

## Shared Histories, Singular Trajectories: A Comparative Study of Women's Poetry in Urdu from Pakistan and Hindi from India

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*Urvashi Sabu*

India and Pakistan share a common geography and history. With the inception of Pakistan after India gained independence from British rule in 1947, a fresh phase of writing started on both sides of the border. Literary writing in Pakistan acquired a different nature mainly on account of the new historical predicament that the country had to deal with: the formation of a new political setup, the necessary coalescing of multiple tribal and communal identities into the idea of a single nation, and the creation of a civil society from a preexisting traditional patriarchal framework. This volatile socio-political scenario in Pakistan has been the primary impetus for the writing of poetry by women, the primary thematic thrust of which is on protest. The overarching hold and reach of religion in the socio-political fabric of the state and the repressive and discriminatory nature of its political regimes has spurred women to use poetry as an instrument of denunciation and struggle. On the other hand, women's poetry in India, particularly in Hindi has taken on other hues. India has had a comparatively stable political order. Although society and religion in India are also for the most part patriarchal, they have not been used by ruling regimes to oppress and exploit women as those on the other side of the border. Women poets in Hindi literature have been writing on primarily conventional themes like love, marriage, religion, women's empowerment, man-woman relations and nature. The anguished protest so clearly visible in Pakistani women's poetry is conspicuous by its absence in Hindi poetry by women. This paper attempts to study women's poetry in Hindi from India and Urdu from Pakistan in the context of their shared histories, and makes an attempt to analyze why the poetic expressions of women from opposite sides of the border took on such different orientations.

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**Keywords:** History, comparative literature, protest poetry, Hindi Poetry by women, Urdu poetry by women

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India and Pakistan have shared about three millennia of history. However, their social, political and religious trajectories have

diverged significantly since the Partition of 1947. As in other fields, the literature of the two countries also witnessed a divergence after this event. While pre-independence India had a rich literary heritage both in Urdu and Hindi, this legacy was fractured with the migration of numerous Urdu writers to Pakistan. After Partition, Urdu was adopted as the national language of Pakistan in which a substantial body of its literature was produced. On the other side of the border, Hindi as the national language of India witnessed a prolific flowering of both prose and poetry. In both cases however the richness of this linguistic and literary phenomenon presents an astounding anomaly. Both Hindi and Urdu literature have been dominated by male figures whose reputations, established and confirmed by male critics, have remained colossal in comparison with those of women writers. While the continued dominance of men across all bodies of literature is an accepted fact, it is starkly visible in the literature of the subcontinent.

Poetry is a potent tool of literary expression. Women poets from the subcontinent have extensively used poetry for creative expression as its symbolic nature offers a subterfuge for disaffections, and effectively serves the purpose of protest. Women poets from the subcontinent differ from their western counterparts in as much that theirs is a history of overt subjugation in the name of religion, culture and society and a systemic lack of opportunities for growth and expression. Despite, and sometimes because of this stifling scenario there has been a rich tradition of poetry by women on both sides of the border; but there is a striking difference in the thematic, structural and stylistic manifestation of literary expression in the poetry of women from Pakistan and India:

Punish me

For I have imparted knowledge and the skills of the sword to the murderer  
And demonstrated the power of the pen to the mind ...

Punish me

For I have freed womanhood from the insanity of the deluded night ... <sup>1</sup>

...Punish me

If I fail to heed

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<sup>1</sup> Kishwar Naheed, 'Talking to Myself', in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, ed. and trans. Ruksana Ahmed, (Great Britain: The Women's Press, 1991), 55-56.

The twitter of swans  
Sailing under the blue sky  
If I turn my face away in loathing  
On seeing the vast  
Colourful spread of the earth... <sup>2</sup>

One of the aspects that set apart the poetic expression of women from Pakistan and India is reflected in the two excerpts above: one, a scathing indictment of the suppression of women and the other, an eco-feminist perspective that reflects a joyous realization of the beauty of nature and the desire to be one with the bounty of the earth. 'Punish me', the phrase common to both, becomes the ironic marker of this difference.

The overarching reach and hold of religion in the socio-political fabric of Pakistan and the repressive nature of its political regimes in the late 70's and 80's has spurred Pakistani women to use poetry as an instrument of denunciation and political struggle. Carol Hanisch's statement that 'the personal is the political'<sup>3</sup> could be appropriately used in the case of poetry by women from Pakistan. Literary expression by women in Pakistan took on hues of protest during the military regime of General Zia ul Haq (1977-88), due to the promulgation of the Hudood Ordinances.<sup>4</sup> These led to the writing of intensely feminist poetry by writers such as Kishwar Naheed, Fehmida Riaz, Zehra Nigah etc. Unprecedented exploitation and suppression of people in general

<sup>2</sup> Kirti Chaudhary, 'Dand do Mujhe' in Kirti Chaudhary: *Samagra Kavitayein*, ed. Ajeet Chaudhary, (Delhi: Medha Books, 2010), 96. Author's Translation from Hindi.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal is Political', [webhome.cs.uvic.ca/Attached Files/ Personal Political.pdf](http://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/Attached Files/Personal Political.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The Hudood Ordinances, promulgated on 10th February, 1979 as part of the process of Islamisation by General Zia's regime and implemented by Federal Shariat courts were directed towards imposing maximum punishment (Hadd: limit) on offences like theft, drunkenness, bearing false witness and adultery/rape. It was the last mentioned offence of adultery (Zina) which was a sub-category of the Hudood ordinances and which included Zina-bil-Zabr (rape) which was most derogatory and discriminatory towards women. Although gender equality was specifically guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan adopted in 1973, many judges upheld 'The laws of Islam', often misinterpreted, over the constitutional guarantee of non-discrimination and equality under the law.

and women in particular in the name of religion resulted in the rise of rebellious attitudes which could be witnessed in art and other aspects of day to day civil life. The continuing volatility of the socio-political and religious situation in Pakistan has, in fact, been instrumental in the creation of a rich poetic harvest by women, expressing contemporary issues in a critical, rebellious and questioning tone. As noted in the Editorial of 'Pakistani Literature', Women's Writings Special Issue:

In the last half century, women poets from Pakistan have emerged as a powerful and influential force on the literary scene. Not faltering, fearing, concealing or whispering, they are distinctly voicing their truths, exposing new vistas, new areas of thought and emotion, revealing a new vision, a new interpretation of themselves and their environment. The woman has finally begun to speak, not only talking about men in her own right but about the entire world enveloping her inner and outer self.<sup>5</sup>

The scenario for women's poetry in Hindi in India has been altogether different. Hindi poetry has traditionally been the exclusive preserve of men. Publication of women's poetry in India has largely been a private affair with volumes being published for circulation within a limited circle. This intellectual neglect, strangely, has not prompted women poets to take up literary cudgels against the male dominated literary establishment, unlike their counterparts in Pakistan. For the most part, women's poetry in Hindi has stayed within the bounds of content and structure as dictated by popular literary movements and subjects/themes in current coinage and fashion.

Kishwar Naheed, arguably Pakistan's most powerful female literary figure began her literary career writing in the traditional form of the *ghazal* and the *nazm*, along with several stories for children. Over the years, her writing became more and more political in response to the political climate in Pakistan which became increasingly intolerant towards women during the military regime of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq. The Islamisation policy initiated in small measures by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 70's was carried forward with alarming persistence by General Zia. He banned women from participating in or being spectators of

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<sup>5</sup> *Pakistani Literature Women's Writings, Special Issue*, (Islamabad: Pakistani Academy of Letters, 1994), xv.

sports and promoted *Purdah*. A nation-wide campaign called *Chadur aur Chardiwari* was launched to enforce the seclusion of women. Thus, the women's issue was used by Zia to control society in a much more repressive grip. Naheed was amongst the 17 women who came together on September 16, 1981 to oppose this oppression. The Women's Action Forum (WAF) came into being in Karachi, pledging to resist Gen Zia's newly formulated Hudood laws that reduced the status of all Pakistani women to second-class citizens. It was during this period that she wrote her scathingly defiant poem 'We Sinful Women', now an iconic piece that has come to be the corner-stone of women's resistance and struggle in Pakistan:

It is we sinful women  
Who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns  
Who don't sell our lives  
Who don't bow our heads  
Who don't fold our hands together  
...Who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold  
Who find the tongues which could speak have been severed <sup>6</sup>

A note of determination infuses the last few lines of the poem:

...now, even if the night gives chase  
These eyes shall not be put out  
For the wall which has been razed  
Don't insist now on raising it again. <sup>7</sup>

The defiance of this poem stands in sharp contrast to the disgust against and distrust of women's movements as evinced in this Hindi poem written in the 1980's by Snehmai Chowdhary of India:

Just think  
A flag of liberty  
Has been handed to women  
Multicoloured not tricoloured  
...Flag in hand

<sup>6</sup> Kishwar Naheed, in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

In drawing rooms, schools, offices, hotels, auditoria  
Or roads  
They march to prove themselves...  
They are fully engaged in the effort  
To turn liberty to bondage  
Just think  
What progress are they moving towards ?  
Unaware of this  
But aware of the news and trusting the news  
They are running, running  
Flag in hand <sup>8</sup>

Denunciation of repression and rebellious political overtones are missing from post-independence Hindi poetry by women because *political* oppression was by and large absent from their daily lives as women. In fact, Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India during the 1970s and early 80s, believed that more and more women should enter politics as a gateway to empowerment and opportunity. She herself famously denied being a feminist though, stating at one time that ‘the under-privileged in the world are not only the women...Don’t think that men are liberated by any means’.<sup>9</sup> Most laws in India are pro-women, while Pakistan has a documented history of anti-women laws.

Kishwar Naheed expresses her anger at the curtailment of freedom and expression, the exploitation of women under the pretext of social mores and religion, and the intellectual strangulation that is endemic to oppressive dictatorial regimes in other poems such as ‘Nightmare’,<sup>10</sup> ‘The Grass is Really Like Me’<sup>11</sup> etc. India’s political scenario on the other hand has been comparatively less oppressive for women, and more democratic and liberal at least in law. In Pakistan, even the laws have been anti-women. The one woman Prime Minister that Pakistan

<sup>8</sup> Snehmai Chaudhary, ‘*Ek Kavita-Vaktavya*’. *Chautarafa Ladai*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1986), 40-41. Author’s translation from Hindi.

<sup>9</sup> *Indira Gandhi: Selected Speeches and Writings 1972-1977*, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984), 525.

<sup>10</sup> Kishwar Naheed, ‘Nightmare’, in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, ‘The Grass is Really Like Me’, 41.

has had could not do much to repeal the harsh ordinances put in force by General Zia. While India has had a strong secular political tradition, Pakistan has been in a state of flux ever since its inception, in the context of its politico-religious identity. These factors could account for the strident rebellious tones of Pakistani women's poetry in Urdu and the comparatively milder note in Indian women's poetry in Hindi.

On gender issues too, women poets on both sides of the border have expressed themselves in strikingly different ways. Kishwar Naheed's poem 'A Prayer before Birth'<sup>12</sup> expresses the desire of an unborn daughter to be guaranteed happiness, freedom and the bounties and blessings of nature and mankind that have always been denied to women. Sara Shagufta's heart rending poem 'To Daughter Sheely' begins thus:

Whenever someone gives you a sorrow  
Name that sorrow 'Daughter'.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Ishrat Afreen, in 'The First Prayer of my Elders' recounts her mother's first reaction after she was born:

Turning on her side, weakly  
My mother started, then keenly  
She gestured...  
Oh! Is it a girl?  
Such deep sadness in that voice, Oh God!  
In my very first breath it stirred  
The bitter poison of defeat as I heard  
Oh! It's a girl.<sup>14</sup>

As opposed to this note of sadness, resignation, and despair is Kirti Chaudhary's 'Under the Open Sky' where the poet looks on indulgently as her little daughter plays happily:

<sup>12</sup> Kishwar Naheed, 'Paidaiash se Pehle ki Dua', *Dasht-e-Qais Mein Laila*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2010), 871. Author's Translation from Urdu.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Shagufta, 'To Daughter Sheely', in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ishrat Afreen, 'The First Prayer of my Elders', in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 152.

In the midst of mud and dust...  
Alone and uncomplicated  
She makes acquaintance with everyone new or strange  
Unhesitatingly she extends her hands towards friendship  
Carefree and careless  
...She's a free flowing stream of innocence and love  
Droplets of which spring  
From her eyes and lips  
And the smile of her milky teeth.<sup>15</sup>

The poet continues in a tone reminiscent of Yeats's 'A Prayer for my Daughter':

Stay away from her  
O Dark shadows  
...Away...Away!  
Don't you dare come near her  
Thinking she's alone.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to this, the elders in Ishrat Afreen's poem quoted above hover around the newly born daughter, 'Is it a girl? / Pray for her good fortune then...'<sup>17</sup> a chant that like molten lead pours into the ears of the hapless new-born. Though gender discrimination is a stark reality even in India, women's poetry in Hindi unlike its Pakistani counterpart in Urdu has by and large stayed away from strident protest or even horror at its existence.

The plight of lower class women has been chronicled equally by women writers from both countries but there again is a difference of tone. Pakistani women have raised hauntingly poetic voices against the double marginalization of lower class women. For example Parveen Shakir's poem 'The Wife of Basheera':

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<sup>15</sup> Kirti Chaudhary, 'Khule Hue Aasman ke Neeche', in *Kirti Chaudhary: Samagra Kavitaeyin*, 63-64. Author's translation from Hindi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ishrat Afreen, 'The First Prayer of my Elders', in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 153.

Oh, you pitiable thing!  
The lowliest of mammals!  
You rib-born, worn as a shoe!  
When your brother would butterfly in the garden,  
Your flower like hands  
Would carry a broom stick taller than you  
...your father hated you even more.  
At the first opportunity,  
The day you turned sixteen  
One man unburdened his soul  
To the body of another  
The sty and master changed  
Your job remained the same  
In fact, increased  
Now your duties included  
Humoring the bread-winner  
At night as well  
... Alas! It seems, your life  
Is the punishment for sins  
Committed in past lives  
If you sell your body  
You're a prostitute  
You trade your soul  
And are called a wife <sup>18</sup>

Compare this with the matter of fact manner in which the Hindi poet Sunita Jain describes the angst of her domestic help in her poem 'Listen Madhu Kishwar' interestingly, addressed to India's vociferous feminist of the 80s:

Today again she's come  
Having been thrashed.  
Swollen face

<sup>18</sup> Parveen Shakir, 'The wife of Basheera', in *Talking to Oneself: Translation of Selected Poems of Parveen Shakir*, ed. and trans. Baidar Bakht & Leslie Lavigne, (Islamabad: Murad Publications, 1995), 90.

Heavy, brick-laden feet  
...She's lost in thought  
As she washes the utensils  
...I, her obese, middle aged employer  
Bored with my own boredom  
Tease her, 'Didn't come to work yesterday Madhvi  
Were you unwell?  
She's silent at first  
Then suddenly, a fiery volcano bursts  
'His corpse was being carried out!'  
'Tch, tch... you mustn't talk like that.'  
'The wretch, doesn't work himself  
And beats me all the time  
Is always clamoring for more money  
Says, 'Harlot!'  
You hide money, and never give me any.'  
'He neither works nor dies  
I give him his meals  
Now should I give him his drink too?'  
Listen Madhu Kishwar,  
And all feminists of India  
This is a lower class woman.  
When he used to earn  
  
She would get beaten.  
Now she wears the pants  
And is still thrashed...<sup>19</sup>

Heterosexual relations and explorations of female sexuality find prominent space in both Hindi and Urdu poetry by women. The expression and thematic thrust however is widely different. In Urdu poetry, the emphasis is on subjugation of women in the name of patriarchy, the infidelity and insensitivity of men, and on the act of physical intimacy being a torture inflicted by male selfishness

<sup>19</sup>Sunita Jain, '*Suno Madhu Kishwar*', *Suno Madhu Kishwar*, (New Delhi: Ayan Prakashan, 1995), 36-37. Author's translation from Hindi.

that leaves a woman emotionally and physically wounded. Primary amongst women a poet writing on women's sexuality in Pakistan is Fehmida Riaz, whose '*Badan Daridah*',<sup>20</sup> (The Body Lacerated) created controversies across the literary world for its uninhibited and vigorous exploration of female sexuality. She rejected the passive, virginal woman of conventional Urdu poetry by men in favour of a living, throbbing, vocal and passionate reality. Her early poems contain themes of motherhood, desire, love, menstruation, taboos all intertwined in unprecedented patterns of boldness and subtlety. Her poems such as 'She is a Woman Impure' celebrates femininity in a way that later French feminists were to do. Riaz was writing fearlessly about blood, milk and tears well before her western contemporaries began to formulate theories of women's writing as grounded in bodily experience:

She is a woman impure  
Imprisoned by her flowing blood  
In a cycle of months and years  
Consumed by her fiery lust  
In search of her own desire.' ...<sup>21</sup>

Several of Riaz's poems such as 'Doll' and 'Vital Statistics' question the roles that women are forced into playing. Their commodification as objects of sexual desire and the expectation from them to be picture perfect at all times are conveyed by Riaz through subtle satire:

Small, so small  
...so pleasing- that's what she is meant for  
Pouting lip, reddened cheek  
Blue eyes wide  
She sits and stares  
Play with her as you will  
Or  
When you wish  
Shut her up in the cupboard

<sup>20</sup> Fehmida Riaz, *Badan Daridah*, (Karachi: Danyal, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Fehmida Riaz, "She's A Woman Impure" in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 97.

...there is no thirst on her small lips  
Nor need you be concerned  
With the way her blue eyes  
Sometimes seem to wonder  
Lay her down  
And she will be as if asleep again.<sup>22</sup>

Even Parveen Shakir, the more feminine of Pakistani women poets, is trenchant in her criticism of male chauvinism, and explicit in her denunciation of male infidelity. For example, 'To the Life Partner':

You are amused to see it rain  
In the sunshine  
It seems you have  
Never touched my smile!<sup>23</sup>  
Similarly, 'The Other Woman':  
So it is decided  
Someone else can also drink  
From these eyes  
And your body  
Which could read only me  
As an incantation  
Will learn somebody else by heart  
The moment  
Whose intensity  
Has been mine so far  
Will kindle your face  
With somebody else's name as well.<sup>24</sup>

Women poets writing in Hindi are on the other hand vocal but not vociferous in their criticism of male domination. In fact, their poems still adhere largely to the conventional themes of romantic love, fulfillment in marriage and satisfaction in the bonds of the relationship.

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<sup>22</sup> Fehmida Riaz, 'Doll', in *Four Walls and a Black Veil*, ed. Aamir Hussein, trans. Patricia Sharpe, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Parveen Shakir, 'To the Life Partner', in *Talking to Oneself: Selected Poems of Parveen Shakir*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 'The Other Woman', 51.

For example, Sunita Jain's 'She Chose':

She chose a courtyard for her house  
And plastered it with clay  
She chose a crop for her mind  
And sowed it  
She chose a sky to fly in  
A sky too small  
She chose the leisure of her beloved  
To sing a song  
Plastering, sowing, flying, singing  
These are the only pilgrimages a woman knows.<sup>25</sup>

Another poem, 'Ways and Means':  
When he breaks stones  
Under the blistering sun  
The woman sitting in the shade  
Breaks bit by bit...  
When he fills, night after night  
Black letters on white paper  
The woman sits, gazing at him alone  
In the glow of the lamp  
A woman in love  
Does not know  
Any ways and means  
To live separately'<sup>26</sup>

Jain's poem 'Satiated' is a timid exploration of female sexuality:

This festival of her being  
Which she created  
Had no iota of her body  
It had a glorious energy  
A raging storm

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<sup>25</sup> Sunita Jain, 'Usne chuna', in *Prem mein Stree* (New Delhi: Remadhav Publications, 2006), 23. Author's translation from Hindi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, *Taur Tareeke*, 26.

And all around, something fluid, like water...  
The first bird of dawn  
was singing outside the window  
Her body was replete with honey  
and she slept on  
satiated...<sup>27</sup>

Jain's poem 'Limit' emphasizes the self-created radius of a woman's existence:

In his home, the woman knows her place  
She doesn't wander  
Here or there  
In the circle of her own space  
In the night of her divine union  
The woman creates a ceremony  
Of her own satisfaction  
In her own limited space.<sup>28</sup>

Hints of dissatisfaction are visible in Snehmai Chaudhary's 'Object of Decoration':

Like the picture on the wall  
Keep seeing it all  
No one will hear  
Your falling words  
Still and silent  
Stuck in the frame  
Keep hanging there  
Where you had been installed  
Years ago  
...You are an object of decoration  
Do your job...<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Tushtita, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, *Auk*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Snehmai Chaudhary, '*Shobha ki Vastu*', in *Apne Khilaf*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Publications, 1982), 15-16. Author's translation from Hindi.

Compare this with Kishwar Naheed's cynical exposition of a marital relationship in 'How Crazy Are Those Who Love You So Much':

With words of chastity he adorned my hands,  
Chained my feet like prisoners  
And called it modesty  
How lovingly and hopefully built  
This home full of ideals and dreams!  
It's been tested with screams  
Making sure that if a sound  
Dare penetrate some crevice  
It will turn to foam, exhausted  
And nothing will get through.<sup>30</sup>

Images of a woman defining herself in her own idiom come forth in Champa Vaid's 'Cohabitation,'<sup>31</sup> Sunita Jain's 'If I Sit and Think,'<sup>32</sup> and more sharply, in 'Sorry':

Sorry! You cannot  
Make me feel  
That I am still backward  
That whatever I have done so far  
Is not enough  
...Because your saying this  
Is the icing on the cake  
Of your masculinity  
...It's not an expression of your concern  
But of your double standards  
That you know yourself  
And know, in advance of me  
What I am

<sup>30</sup> Kishwar Naheed, 'How Crazy Are Those Who Love You So Much', in *The Distance of a Shout*, ed. and trans. Asif Farrukhi, (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 26.

<sup>31</sup> Champa Vaid, 'Sahvaas', in *Sannate ke Ird Gird*, (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1997), 82-83. Author's Translation from Hindi.

<sup>32</sup> Sunita Jain, 'Yadi Main Baith Tumhare' in *Suno Madhu Kishwar*, 25. Author's translation from Hindi.

...I claim,  
That I do not wish to be someone else  
...In writing poetry  
I first mine my two yards of earth  
And then live in it  
And friend, listen. My silence  
Is my loudest word  
In that silence  
I tower over and high jump  
Your entire existence  
I am 'me'.<sup>33</sup>

However, the strident rebellion and unflinching criticism of male hegemony that emanates from Pakistani women's poetry is conspicuous by its absence from poetry in Hindi by women.

Religion too does not escape the censure of Pakistani women poets. Their angst is directed against the patriarchal tenets of both Islam and other religions like Hinduism. They find blatant discrimination and prejudice against women even in sacred scriptures and do not hesitate to point it out in their poetry. Zehra Nigah, otherwise the more conventional of Pakistani women poets, implicitly presents a poignant portrayal of the loss of faith in 'Exile':

...Look! Sita crosses the flames unharmed  
And her husband's trust does win  
She sees Rama, his arms open wide  
Waiting to fold her in  
She walks up to him, having crossed that extra mile  
But from that day onwards, she lives in true exile.<sup>34</sup>

Also worth mentioning is Fehmida Riaz's 'Aqleema':

Aqleema

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<sup>33</sup> Sunita Jain, 'Sorry'. *Iss Akele Taar Par*, (New Delhi: Kitab Ghar, 1995), 41-43. Author's translation from Hindi.

<sup>34</sup> Zehra Nigah, 'Banwas', *Shaam ka Pehla Tara*, (Karachi: n.p., 1980), 76-77. Author's translation from Urdu.

Sister of Cain and Abel  
Born of the same mother, but different  
Different between her thighs  
And in her breasts, different  
Inside, in her womb  
...Aqleema stands on a blazing hill  
She's a prisoner of her body.  
...look, above the long thighs and the rounded breasts  
Above the labyrinth of her womb  
Aqleema has a head too.  
Allah, speak to Aqleema  
For once, ask her something.<sup>35</sup>

The poem is a cry of anguish against the traditional socio-religious concept of woman as a commodity to be valued only for her reproductive abilities and fecundity.

Women's poetry in Hindi has steered clear from any such confrontations with God or religion. If anything, poems like '*Shri Range Raas Leela*' by Sunita Jain reaffirm the presence of a benevolent God in her very soul. God is viewed as an entity that provides solace in troubled times:

...no matter how much I suffer  
Living, continuing to live  
...every moment I've found it blooming  
...Sometimes I met *Narayan* incarnate  
Sometimes *Lakshmi* with him  
And in the depths of my being  
Danced *Krishna*, his divine dance<sup>36</sup>

International events particularly those concerned with the larger Muslim world find prominent mention in Pakistani women's poetry. Zehra Nigah expresses poignantly the effects of the Afghan War on

<sup>35</sup> Fehmida Riaz, '*Aqleema*' in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Sunita Jain, '*Sri Range Raas Leela*'. *Seedhi Kalam Sadhe Naa*, (New Delhi: Bhartiya Prakashan Sansthaan, 1996), 95. Author's translation from Hindi.

children and women. 'Gulbadshah,'<sup>37</sup> the poignant but bleak tale of a thirteen year old *jehadi*, and 'Gulzameena'<sup>38</sup> about a young girl who continues to read and write the holy name of Allah on the ruins of her school wall even after it has been bombed to rubble, are two examples. Kishwar Naheed leaves no international issue concerning Islam or the Asian-Arabic world untouched. Whether it is the plight of women in war ravaged Basra and Damascus, the heinous ideology of the Afghan Taliban, the snobbery of the West towards the East, or the victory over Apartheid won by South Africa's Nelson Mandela, all find eloquent mention in her poems. For Pakistani women poets the international stage becomes a larger metaphor for the vicissitudes of their own country. As female citizens oppressed in their own land, they find resonances in oppressed and marginalized peoples all over the world and their poetry expresses empathy and solidarity with them.

Hindi poetry by women has on the other hand been comparatively silent about burning international issues. Of the Indian women poets under consideration, not one had a poem on issues not directly concerned with their immediate socio-political sphere. Call it the satiation of peace or the relative stability of the political order, but their poems, if any, are mostly concerned with the corrupt ways of politicians or the meaning of independence for women.

The most significant point of departure between Pakistani and Indian women poets is in the sphere of poetic structure and stylistics. In direct defiance to the stylistic devices of the traditional *Ghazal* as written by male poets, Pakistani women poets have concentrated on the *nazm* for their creative expression. They have consciously debunked the poetic traditions of Urdu poetry posited by their male counterparts and given poetry a unique feminine/feminist/female vocabulary. This is visible in the vibrant poetry of Sara Shagufta, Parveen Shakir and Fehmida Riaz; doing away with the conventional portrayal of women by men and the use, like Kishwar Naheed, of the *Nasri Nazm* (prose poem) or the Haiku as structural framework for their content. Even

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<sup>37</sup> Zehra Nigah, 'Gulbaadshah', in *Celebrating the Best of Urdu Poetry*, ed. and trans. Khushwant Singh et al, (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2007), 45.

<sup>38</sup> Zehra Nigah, 'Gulzameena', quoted in *Women, Literature, and Society: Discovering Pakistani Women Poets* by Urvashi Sabu, (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2020), 122-23.

when writers like Parveen Shakir, Ishrat Aafreen or Zehra Nigah have used the conventional format of the *Ghazal*, they have endowed it with a characteristic female sensibility.

Women's poetry in Hindi is still confined to the various 'isms' that have defined Hindi literature. The main literary movements in post-Independence Hindi literature have been '*Pragativaad*' (progressivism) and '*Pravogvaad*' (experimentalism). Since the 80's the buzz word has been *Adhunik Kavita/Samkaleen Kavita* (New/Contemporary poetry) which uses unrhymed, broken lines and terse vocabulary to convey the stress and fragmentation of modern existence. Women poets in India have by and large toed the line; talking about their experiences as women but doing so well within the structural framework of the new poetry movement. The current situation is perhaps best conveyed by these lines from Sunita Jain's poem 'Won't do':

No *baba* no/this language won't do  
Write 'happy', not 'joyful'  
Write 'man', not 'human'  
And what's this?  
'Demise'? no no!  
Write 'death', did you hear? 'Death!'  
What did you say? God!  
*chi chi!*  
He hasn't existed  
For a long time  
...Love?  
Listen, I don't think I can make you understand  
That love like God, is also dead  
And these days  
Poetry is in a phase of post-modernism.<sup>39</sup>

Women poets both from Pakistan and India posit the woman as the 'self' as opposed to the 'other' which is male. In doing so, they give voice to female and feminine experiences which have traditionally been

<sup>39</sup> Sunita Jain, '*nahi chalegi*', *Seedhi Kalam Sadhe Na*, (New Delhi: Bhartiya Prakashan Sansthaan, 1996), 10-11. Author's translation from Hindi.

ignored or regarded as unworthy of inclusion in the literary canon. Contemporary women poets face many challenges and a multiplicity of direction. The issue is not only whether to break from tradition, both literary and societal, but also to create a new tradition that would define them and establish their identities. Women's poetry is now a unique amalgamation of expression and ideology. However, the divergent socio-political realities of their respective countries determine the tone and tenor of their poetry. In all respects, poetry remains the most personal of literary genres, the symbolic nature of which serves as an outlet for suppressed tropes of thought and emotion.

## Reading Silence in History: Elizabethan Religious Settlement

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*Nabanita Chakraborty*

The paper examines the epistemological and methodological problem involved in the construction of historical narrative in the absence of documentation. In case there are gaps/silences in the archives, the historian needs to introspect the meaning of silence rather than construct a narrative based on speculative and deductive logic. A historian examining the Elizabethan Religious Settlement (1559) would find no public speech of the queen on the policy of religious reform. The paper argues that the silence of the queen in the parliament on the issue of religious settlement was a rhetorical strategy not to antagonize either the Marian Catholics or the Edwardian reformists, but to avoid criticism and maintain a diplomatic distance from both religious factions till the parliament passed the Bill.

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**Keywords:** Silence, Historical Narrative, Rhetoric, Elizabethan Religious Settlement

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No sooner she taketh the scepter in her hands, but she put on a resolution to make the greatest, the most important, the most dangerous alteration that can be in a state, the alteration of religion...neither does she reduce or reunite her realm to the religion of the states about her, that the evil inclination of the subject might be countervailed by the good correspondence in foreign parts: but contrariwise she introduced a religion exterminated and persecuted both at home and abroad. Her proceeding herein is not by degree and by stealth, but absolute and at once. (Francis Bacon, *The Praise of his Sovereign*)<sup>1</sup>

Yet was not this [religious] alteration brought in suddenly (as in other places it was done) but by a more felt than seen manner of proceeding... (John Hayward, *Annals*)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon, "The praise of the worthiest person, Queen Elizabeth", *Elizabethan Manuscript preserved at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Sir John Hayward, *The Annals of the First Four Years of the Reign of Elizabeth* (The Camden Society, 1839).

The Elizabethan Religious Settlement was the most arduous task undertaken by Queen Elizabeth I<sup>3</sup> soon after her succession to the English throne (1559). The two contrasting reports of Hayward and Bacon on the Elizabethan reforms attempt to assess the motives and the rhetorical agency of the monarch in establishing the state religion. John Hayward refers to it as a “more felt than seen manner of proceeding,” underlining the less codified set of formulations made in the first parliament on the issue of religious reformation. Bacon speaks of the settlement as preordained and decisive, without any hesitation or fear on the part of the queen. What is the source of these two contrasting historical narratives? Do the chroniclers use different sources or are their opinions biased? How does a modern historian working on Elizabeth’s religious ideas and reforms make sense of these two contrary chronicle accounts? The historian will resort to parliamentary documents and repositories of information available in Public Records Office, London. However, there is no public record or formal speech of the queen on the issue of religious policy after her coronation to the throne. Elizabeth’s silence has confused historians who require testimonial evidence, largely missing from her public speeches and documents of this period. In the absence of documentary evidence about the intention of the queen in making the religious policy of the state, the historians have exercised speculation and deductive reasoning to fill in the lacunae within the archives. One needs to understand the complexity of the situation for the historians, given the limitations with which their research methodology has to deal. There are few parliamentary proceedings or other repository of official documents extant of the sixteenth century England, and most of them are subjective and biased accounts by either Catholics or the Puritans. This paper enquires into the epistemological and methodological problem involved in construction of history / historical narrative in the absence of proper documentation or factual data. How is knowledge constructed or the continuity of narrative maintained when the historian is confronted with silence in the archives?

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<sup>3</sup> England under Queen Mary was a Catholic nation where Protestants were persecuted and were forced to flee the country. When Elizabeth I ascended the throne, she had to ensure peace in the realm by bringing about a religious settlement.

It is necessary to clarify the contentious term 'silence' in history. Feminist scholars have argued that silence is a trope for oppression, passivity and submission.<sup>4</sup> They have emphasized upon the act of silencing of marginalized groups from historical or cultural discourses. Cheryl Glenn has underlined the paradoxical powers of silence – its powers and limitations, in her discussion of silenced women in history.<sup>5</sup> However, this paper deals with early-modern political history and clearly treats questions of power and resistance, authority and legitimacy, state and its laws. The question of silence in history in this case does not refer to the marginalized, oppressed groups whose voices have been silenced in historical and cultural discourse. Nor does this paper attempt a reading of Queen Elizabeth as displaying feminine reticence in a male dominated society.

This paper focuses on a more simplified meaning of silence, that is, the absence of the voice of the monarch during a crucial period of religious settlement in parliament. There are no official or formal speeches or writings of Queen Elizabeth within the court or the parliament. However, silence in this simplified form of 'not speaking' has complicated our understanding of Elizabethan history and has had wider implications. One needs to interrogate silence as a rhetorical trope and a powerful strategic tool of the queen. The paper aims to read multiple interpretations by several historians concerning this crucial juncture in the Elizabethan parliamentary history in which the voice of the queen is absent from the archives. Elizabethan historians in their concern to present a meaningful narrative or 'explanation by emplotment'<sup>6</sup> have made no reference to the silence of the queen. One has to analyse the varied historical readings of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement (1559) and suggest an alternative methodology to read a discourse of deliberate silence.

Holinshed begins his chronicle of Elizabethan England with optimism. Official history of Elizabeth's succession after her

<sup>4</sup> George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* (State University of New York, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

sister Queen Mary's death on 23 November, 1558 and Elizabeth's coronation on 15 January 1559 is replete with accounts of celebration and conviviality among English subjects. However, contemporary historians and biographers<sup>7</sup> of Queen Elizabeth inform us that Elizabeth was aware of the religious and political instability of the kingdom she had inherited. Religious intolerance and persecution during Queen Mary's regime had brought about a daring disquiet among the English subjects, and shrewd Elizabeth could sense that the English soil had become a fertile ground for rebellion to germinate. She was aware of the threats imposed by Catholic countries like France and Spain on England. Responding to the challenges posed by the Roman Catholic Church and the other foreign Catholic nations through warfare was not economically and physically viable for Elizabeth. Her claim to the English crown was questioned by the Roman Church due to her status as an illegitimate daughter of Henry VIII; yet unlike him, Elizabeth did not contemplate a decisive breach with the papacy at present. She recognized the necessity of being on even terms with both Marian (Papists) and Edwardian (reformists) supporters as a prophylactic measure against Spain, France and even Scotland. The peril as the Queen foresaw was not so much from the authoritarian power of the Roman Church as from its dissenters. These apparent well-wishers of the Queen, the Puritans, challenged the despotism of the queen. Elizabeth realized very early in her reign that her authority, supremacy and her absolutist 'monologic' discourse could be established only when she would be successful in suppressing 'heteroglossia' or diverse 'verbal ideological points of view'.<sup>8</sup> However, instead of articulating her royal

<sup>7</sup> Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion and Other Various Occurrences in the Church and State of England from the Accession of Queen Elizabeth to the Crown, anno 1558 to the Commencement of the Reign of King James I. Vol 1 edited by John Strype.

Wallace Mc Caffrey, ed., *The History of the most renowned and victorious princess Elizabeth Late Queen of England*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970)

J.B. Black, *The Reign of Elizabeth I 1558-1603* (Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (USA: University of Texas Press, 1981).

For Bakhtin, the idea of heteroglossia depends on a notion of rhetoric in which figurations and ideological intentions collide.

intentions, she chose to remain silent until the new parliament had formulated a religious policy that would secure the allegiance of as many of the queen's subjects as possible. Elizabeth's strategy was to keep her religious conviction and opinions hidden till she was sure of the support of her subjects. Amidst all the ideological discursive practices adopted by both the Papists and the reformers to legitimize their religious convictions, Elizabeth maintained a dramatic silence and a mask of secrecy throughout the first parliamentary session.

The most prominent biography of the queen written by Sir John Neale celebrates the figure of the heroic queen triumphing over the dangers of a divided nation by uniting it against military aggression.<sup>9</sup> He suggests that Elizabeth's ambitions were to legitimize her royal supremacy without concerning herself with religious convictions. Doctrinally, she believed in her father's Anglo-Catholicism but was forced to make radical alterations to gain support from her Protestant parliamentarians to defeat the Marian bishops. Neale thus interprets the silence of the queen as her indifference to religious policy. Other historians like J.A. Froude also portrayed the queen as a rather indecisive and mediocre politique, reliant upon her group of efficient ministers and Privy Council members.<sup>10</sup> A completely different interpretation comes from A.F. Pollard who sees the religious settlement as consistently pursued by a Protestant Queen but obstructed temporarily by the Marian supporters in the House of Lords.<sup>11</sup> T.A. Morris agrees that Elizabeth had a vested interest in moderate Protestantism since Catholicism denied her supremacy over the Church.<sup>12</sup> While most historians have agreed to the notion of Elizabethan policy of moderate Protestantism, that is, a middle ground between Catholic Papacy and Puritanism, they differ on the issue of Elizabeth's motives. Yet there is hardly any detailed study on her rhetorical strategy of silence at this crucial juncture in English parliamentary history. It is important to underline

<sup>9</sup> John Neale *Essays in Elizabethan History* (1958).

<sup>10</sup> J.A. Froude, *History of England from the fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). He portrayed the queen as an indecisive and mediocre politique, dependent on outstanding ministers like Burghley.

<sup>11</sup> A.F. Pollard *The History of England from the Accession of Edward VI to the Death of Elizabeth (1547-1603)* *The Political History of England*, vi (1910).

<sup>12</sup> T.A. Morris, *Tudor Government* (Routledge: London, 1999).

Elizabeth's silence as a pragmatic tool to deal with crises rather than disregard or obliterate it from the pages of history. My intervention is to suggest an alternative methodology that is a rhetorical analysis to deal with the strategic silence of the queen.

Elizabeth's motto has been *video et taceo* "I see and (yet) am silent".<sup>13</sup> Prudence taught her when to speak and when to be silent. Silence is not mere renunciation of language; silence, I argue, is a rhetorical trope of 'not speaking' what is expected, either through circumlocution or through evasion, thus liable to multiple interpretations and innumerable possibilities. Christian theology has always maintained the primacy of 'the word' or *logos*. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."<sup>14</sup> 'Word' became a controversial term in the Elizabethan age; both religious groups, Papists and Reformers, claiming to have true knowledge of God's Word. Thus in Western cultural discourse, word (whether verbal or written language) was symbolized as positive and silence as negative. Similarly, classical rhetorical theory has valorized forceful, cogent self-expression as a central social principle, thereby, undermining the importance of silence. The retreat from word does not mean nonverbal communication but indirect, ambivalent speech that conveys implicitly more than it states. Włodzimierz Sobkowiak explains in his pragmatolinguistic study that the meaning of silence falls into two rubrics: acoustic (absence of sound/noise, state of silence) and pragmatic (withholding of knowledge, omission of mention, failure to communicate, oblivion or obscurity). However, I refer to a pragmatic kind of silence which is to refrain from speaking or communicating. In rhetorical theory, pauses, slow tempo of speech, soft voice are aspects of communicative silence for aesthetic and dramatic effect. The meaning of silence is more ambiguous than that of speech and it is this ambiguity which is exploited by Elizabeth at the beginning of her reign. Elizabeth's strategy of keeping silent emphasizes 'meaningful absence of speech' that is volitional, substitutive and contextual aspects of communicative silence.<sup>15</sup> Elizabethan religious settlement

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Thomas Crane, 'Video et taceo: Elizabeth I and the Rhetoric of Counsel' *Studies in English Literature 1500 -1900* vol 28, no 1 *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1988) 1 - 15

<sup>14</sup> Hymn to the Word, Gospel of St John.

<sup>15</sup> Włodzimierz Sobkowiak, "Silence in Markedness Theory" in *The Power of Silence:*

was a policy developed early in her reign to address the complex ephemeral problem of interdependent yet counteracting forces: religion and politics, the Church and the state, the spiritual and the temporal realms of power. Unlike Henry VIII, Elizabeth did not have any ulterior motive to renege her terms with Rome for the time being. While Elizabeth, the astute rhetorician made a virtue out of obscurity, giving no testimony of her religious convictions, avoiding criticism and maintaining a diplomatic distance from both religious factions; her audience was kept in a state of abeyance or a suspension between hope and fear.

The only religious measure Elizabeth took soon after her accession to the throne was to issue a royal proclamation: 'Prohibiting unlicensed Preaching; Regulating Ceremonies, December 27, 1558'. This proclamation forbade all ministers to preach or expound the Scripture until further orders to be taken in Parliament:

Certain ministers assembling great number of people whereupon rises among the common sort not only unfruitful dispute in matters of religion but also contention and occasion to break common quiet. (Royal Proclamations, 1558)<sup>16</sup>

This royal injunction clearly underlines the queen's policy of tacit silence to attain consensus and peace, while at the same time it underlines her awareness of the dangers of public speaking on the pulpits. She did not distinguish between Roman Catholic ministers and Anglican Protestant ones but imposed restrictions on all ecclesiastical representatives to preach openly and spread ideological propaganda. The fear of 'civil discord' is underlined by limiting assemblies of "great number of people" who might "break common quiet". While Elizabeth's learned and experienced councilors had analyzed the looming threat from Roman Church and other Catholic nations in case of reformation of religion and offered political strategies to evade the crises; Elizabeth's rhetorical approach of reticence and consensual silence regarding her religious conviction "outwitted" veteran political

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*Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, edited by Jaworski Adam (Sage Publications, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Sir Simon D' Ewes, *A Compleat Journal of the Votes, Speeches and Debates, both of the House of Lords and House of Commons throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth of Glorious Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1923).

players of early-modern Europe like King Philip of Spain. There is no record of any public speech on religious reformation by the Queen either before or during the course of her first parliament. This has very often been construed as her indeterminacy, her indifference or her habit of procrastination by historians over the ages. However, her abstention from any formal speech on religious settlement cannot be underestimated in given circumstances when the nation waited impatiently to hear the 'word' of God and God's elected, the monarch. It illustrates Elizabeth's rhetorical performance - maintaining a consensual silence that allowed both Marian and Edwardian subjects to trust her. At the same time, the peace treaty with France made no mention of the religious question at hand. This was the same reason that the Catholic Church of Rome did not feel threatened at the accession of Elizabeth. Though the French disputed the claims of Elizabeth to the English throne and threatened to have informed Roman Church to disprove her rights, the Roman ecclesiastics did not oppose Elizabeth's succession for a long time while she silently proceeded to institutionalize moderate Protestantism through her first Parliament.

Throughout the long parliamentary session, the Queen reserved her judgment; allowed Lord Keeper Bacon to open and conclude the sessions. This conformity and silence was a strategy of taking the audience into partnership to establish her identification and thus inducing them to act on her behalf. Apparently, Elizabeth neither participated in drafting the bill, nor was seen to legitimize her absolute power through royal prerogative/proclamation unlike her predecessors. Her absence from daily parliamentary sessions which carried forward disputes regarding her personal and dynastic security, her authority, power and political stability, reflect her carefully rehearsed role of a silent beholder to the turbulent sessions of the parliament. The queen authorized the lord keeper to open and close the parliamentary session, thereby providing a republican sense of choice, free space and participative politics. Bacon's entire opening speech however was interspersed with phrases like "Her Highness willeth", "most earnestly requireth you all", "her Majesty meaneth and intendeth" - the underlying premise being to

guarantee an idea of freedom bounded by the majesty's will.<sup>17</sup> This parliament was instrumental in building up the fabric of the national church – 'The Church of England as by Law Established'. The major legislations concerned were:

- Act of Supremacy: an act for restoring to the crown the ancient jurisdiction over the state ecclesiastical and spiritual abolishing foreign power'.
- Act of Uniformity of Common Prayer and Service in the Church, and administration of the Sacraments'. The act ensured a uniform order of common service and prayer, administration of sacraments, rites, ceremonies in the Church of England and reinstating Edwardian Book of Prayers.<sup>18</sup>

The act of supremacy was undoubtedly one of the most momentous acts of Elizabethan government since it legitimized the absolutist tendencies of the Tudor monarch; yet throughout the parliamentary proceeding when bills were discussed, rejected and modified, and ultimately passed, the queen did not publicly intervene or articulate her intentions.

My concern in this paper has not been to trace the history of the Elizabethan religious settlement but to focus on the rhetorical strategy of silence to settle religious debate. I have argued that silence is as much a part of rhetoric as speech is since this approach of silence is 'deliberate' and 'pragmatic' in a particular context. A combination of rational calculative self and foresight made Elizabeth a wise and prudent leader who could employ silence as a rhetorical tool of governance. Elizabeth's formal silence on religious policy made possible a strategic alliance with various religious groups whose interests were opposed to gain particular ends. Historians have criticized Elizabeth's indecisiveness, her equivocation, prevarication and her dependence upon her councilors in the beginning of her reign; feminist critics have seen her manipulating gender roles to deal with a predominantly male

<sup>17</sup> Bacon's Speech 1559 in Sir Simon D'Ewes, *The Journal of the House of Lords, Regin Eliz. A.D. 1558, 1559* (1682).

<sup>18</sup> Sir Simon d'Ewes, *A Compleat Journal of the Votes, Speeches and Debates, both of the House of Lords and House of Commons throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth, of the Glorious Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1923).

council. This paper argues that her procrastination, her deliberately holding back her judgement and her public silence were rhetorical tools adopted by her to strategize her moves carefully while keeping everyone at tenterhooks. Her silence allowed her decision to remain in a state of suspension, a tacit approval, till she was sure of her support from both Houses of Lords and Commons. Elizabeth's formal reply to the Roman bishops displays her ability to enact power through rhetoric. To conclude, in the absence of evidence or gaps/silences in the archives, the historian needs to introspect the meaning of silence rather than construct a narrative based on speculative and deductive logic.

## The Burden of History, the 'smell of oil lamp' and the failure of George Eliot's *Romola*

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Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi

Almost all of George Eliot's fiction, except her last, is set in the recent rural past of the England that she was born into. *Romola* (1863) is the only novel set in the historically distanced time of 15th century Florence in the throes of Renaissance. It is an ambitious work borne out of her extensive archival research and her frequent tours of the city. However, the novel has suffered neglect since its publication on account of its erudition, formidable reconstruction of the past, density and detail. This paper attempts to explore the reasons behind Eliot's engagement with history of this period which made the work so inaccessible not just to modern readers but to her contemporaries as well. Trollope warned of the over-preparedness of the author and Henry James complained of the odour of midnight lamp emanating from this work which reeked of toil. Medieval Florence's religious conflict between paganism and Christianity provided Eliot a suitable backdrop for the treatment of her perennially favourite theme of egoism versus altruism; the study of various shades of egoism; and to put forward her theory of Positivism. Through the historical figure of the religious preacher Savonarola, she depicts the rigid and dogmatic aspect of religion where *Romola*'s initial slavish adherence to his teachings finally gives way to her realization and rejection of his extreme position of self-righteous egoism. Transcending her narrow preoccupation with the Self, *Romola* attains that sublime state of altruism where good is attained without God, the ultimate credo of the Religion of Humanity, which Eliot espoused in life. The paper investigates if the author's moral strictures weigh the novel down. Does *Romola* herself remain only an idealized abstraction? Is the novel then a work of history in fictional form or does the author borrow some historical events only to belabour her thematic preoccupations?

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**Keywords:** Egoism, Altruism, History, Renaissance, Religion of Humanity

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Almost all of George Eliot's fiction, except her last, is set in the recent rural past of the England that she was born into. *Romola* (1863)<sup>1</sup> was

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Romola* (1863). EBook of Project Gutenberg, released 24 December 2007, updated September 24, 2018.

the only novel set in the historically distanced time of 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence in the throes of Renaissance. It is an ambitious work born out of Eliot's extensive archival research and her exhaustive tour of the city but the novel has suffered neglect since its publication on account of its erudition, formidable reconstruction of the past, density and detail. The remoteness of the novel has made it as inaccessible to the modern reader as it was to her contemporaries. Anthony Trollope warned of the over-preparedness of the author and Henry James complained of the odour of midnight lamp emanating from this work which reeked of toil. This paper explores the reasons behind Eliot's engagement with the history of this period which not only allowed her to express her love of high culture, art and architecture but also provided her a suitable backdrop for the treatment of her perennially favourite theme of the clash between egoism and altruism. Renaissance Florence's religious conflict between paganism and Christianity proved a fertile ground for her to replay her own religious crisis which culminated in her breaking away from Christian orthodoxy. Through the historical figure of the religious preacher Savonarola, Eliot depicts the rigid, dogmatic aspect of religion where Romola's initial slavish adherence to his teachings ultimately gives way to her realization and rejection of his extreme position of self-righteous egoism. The novel's arc then leads Romola to that sublime state of altruism where good is attained without God, the ultimate credo of the Religion of Humanity, which Eliot espoused in her own life. This paper raises some concerns arising out of Eliot's uses of history and investigates if the author's moral strictures weigh the novel down; whether Romola herself remains only an idealized abstraction, embodying her creator's beliefs and if the historical framework of the novel proves subservient to the author's desire to belabor her thematic preoccupations.

George Eliot's letters and journal entries provide us with invaluable insight into the composition of her novels. After the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) she left for Italy, along with her partner George Henry Lewes, for a three-month tour and wrote a detailed description of the grandeur of the cities, the magnificence of its art and paintings, which resulted in her essay "Recollections of Italy 1860"<sup>2</sup> written

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<sup>2</sup> *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris & Judith Johnston, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ.Press, 1998), 327-368.

perhaps with the intention of using it as raw material for her novels. Drawing upon the essay, she did use Florence for *Romola*; the sadness she saw in Rome provided the backdrop for the doomed honeymoon of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and in her final novel *Daniel Deronda*, she returned to Genoa. In this essay Eliot writes about how she hoped her travels would yield cultural and historical awareness more than just visual sensations; bringing new elements "to my culture, than with the hope of immediate pleasure."<sup>3</sup> She valued knowledge over immediate pleasure accruing from sightseeing and it was this pursuit of high culture for self-improvement rather than just gratification, which according to her biographer Nancy Henry, defined Eliot's European excursions. The Lewes couple, specially fascinated by Florence, explored the city thoroughly and avidly read up on the city. The readings and sights yielded rich personal and artistic dividends to her - the sights of the Duomo and the Campanile overwhelmed Eliot with the richness of the past, for these were the very spots where the revered Dante, "the great man [had] looked from more than two centuries ago."<sup>4</sup> Dante is a pervasive presence in her novels and Andrew Thompson in his work, *George Eliot and Italy* traces Dante's journey in the trajectory of *Romola's* life - from her hellish marriage to Tito, to her purgatorial state under Savonarola's influence to that paradisiacal state where she is confused with the Madonna herself. Italian culture and influences are clearly discernible in the last two novels of Eliot giving them a rich allusiveness and symbolism. The germ of the idea of *Romola* was first planted by Lewes, a philosopher, writer and thinker himself who was researching the life of the controversial fifteenth century Dominican monk Savonarola. Lewes was fascinated by this complex man of the church embroiled in political intrigue, who had preached against the extravagances of the aristocracy, especially the Medici, hectoring against the vanity of the world, had sought to reform the church from its excesses and finally paid with his life for his excessive religious zeal. Lewes saw immense potential in the complex history of this martyred man who held sway over Florence between 1494-1498. He observed to Eliot that Savonarola's "life and times afforded fine material for an

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 120. Ebook.

<sup>4</sup> George Eliot quoted by Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, (London: The Penguin Press, 1996), 243.

historical romance"<sup>5</sup> and the same journal entry notes how George Eliot caught upon the idea with enthusiasm.

In the interstices of her two visits to Italy in 1860 and 1861, Eliot wrote the fable-like *Silas Marner* and after its publication in 1861, once again returned to Florence in order to carry out a detailed research for what she was conceiving now as an 'Italian novel'. Eliot carried out immense preparations for this work, read all the primary and secondary works on the city and on Savonarola's treatises, sermons and writings, spending days in the Magliabechi Library, just as she did in the British Museum.<sup>6</sup> She met Anthony Trollope's nephew Thomas, a resident of Florence, a writer of historical Italy-centric novel himself, to tutor her in the nuances of the Italian language and historical questions. Eliot's Italian journal ceases to be a mere travelogue and as with all her writings, it shows her preoccupations with the philosophic issues of realism, representation and the very Wordsworthian problem of recollection:

One great deduction to me from the delight of seeing world-famous objects is the frequent double consciousness which tells me that I am not enjoying the actual vision enough, and that when higher enjoyment comes with the reproduction of the scene in my imagination I shall have lost some of the details, which impress me too feebly in the present because the faculties are not wrought up into energetic action.<sup>7</sup>

She is raising the issue here of 'double consciousness' while she is viewing the impressive architecture in present time and how she would record it later—would she lose something in the process or should she forcefully 'enjoy' the sensations in the immediate moment so that she can store it like Wordsworth for later use? It is pertinent to remember that George Eliot was a woman of formidable intellect—she was a polyglot conversant with German, Greek and Hebrew languages, she had translated the works of Higher Critics of the Bible, Feuerbach and Strauss and as the first woman editor of *The Westminster Review* was fully informed of the current debates on religion, philosophy, geology

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<sup>5</sup> Lewes's letter dated 21 May 1860 quoted by Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot & Italy: Literary, Cultural & Political Influence from Dante to the Risorgimento*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris & Judith Johnston, 336.

and the sciences, all of which imbue her writings with her immense knowledge. Her learning percolates into her novels giving them an intellectual rigour and earnestness and the cumulative effect of these is most prominently felt in the novel under discussion.

*Romola* (serialized July 1862-August 1863, published in book form in 1863) is the eventual product of all her research, readings and immersion in the cultural past of Italy. But this mammoth undertaking and meticulous learning also took a mental and physical toll on the writer. Eliot was a journalist before she became a novelist and from her biographies, we glean a certain diffidence and apprehension about her new career when 'the storm-tried matron of thirty-seven' started to write fiction. Lewes despaired, "that there never was so diffident and desponding an author, since the craft first began!"<sup>8</sup> it was with his constant encouragement that she, like Virginia Woolf, felt more confident about her enterprise. All of Eliot's fiction prior to *Romola* are set in a not too distant past of the provincial England into which she was born in November of 1819, and one she was intimately familiar with. Assured of her childhood recollections, she only had to scour her memory for the setting, local dialect, rural characters for the early set of works, referred to as the 'Novels of Feelings'. Their writing came easily to her but leaving this secure English ambience behind when she started work on *Romola* on January 1, 1862, Eliot keenly felt the immense burden of treating the remote historical past of Florence. Her early novels, *The Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill* and *Silas Marner* depict the domestic tragedy of lawyers, carpenters, millers and weavers, enmeshed in a web of personal relationships but the very subject of her new novel demanded a canvas of epic proportions where the historical figures of philosophers Savonarola, Machiavelli, painter Piero de Cosimo strode across. In February 1862, Eliot wondered: "Will it ever be finished - ever be worth anything?"<sup>9</sup> Much later in life, she confided to her husband Cross about how she was assailed by self-doubt during the exacting exercise of writing *Romola*: "I began it a young woman - I finished it an old woman."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lewes' letter quoted by Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, 232.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot's letter dated 26 February 1862 quoted by Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, 259.

The tradition of the historical novel in the canon of English literature was inaugurated by Sir Walter Scott, Eliot's predecessor whom she greatly admired but closer to the time of *Romola*, there were several other works attempted on the Italian subject. The Browning couple and Thomas Trollope who assisted Eliot with her Florentine sources had written about it, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862) was set against the same fifteenth century backdrop featuring Savonarola, but as Nancy Henry asserts, Eliot's conception of history was far more complex than her contemporaries': "*Romola* was different in many ways, including its self-consciousness about how great historical changes affect the private lives of individual people."<sup>11</sup> The novel is set in the aftermath of the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1492, who ushered in the Italian Renaissance, and is today remembered as Lorenzo the Magnificent. Florence at the time of his death was caught in the opposition between those, like Romola's father who believed in the Medicean revival of classical art and aesthetics and the acolytes of Savonarola who wanted to purge the world of such vanities, bring in religious reforms and rid the church of corruption. The novel depicts the rise of Savonarola, his sway over Florence and his downfall brought about by his religious fanaticism and involvement in political intrigue. Amidst this drama of actual historic events and a few real personages from history is foregrounded the tragic triangular romance of the fictional Romola, Tito and Tessa, their microcosmic world of love, deceit and betrayal reflecting the larger political world around them.

The novel opens with a shipwreck which brings a morally deviant Tito to the door of Romola's scholar-father who has spent his life collecting and annotating valuable manuscripts in his library, his prized possession. Tito secures a position as his amanuensis and eventually marries Romola. Tito harbours a dark past; during the shipwreck his foster father Baldassare was taken captive by the Turks, whom Tito could have freed with his father's jewels in his possession. But Tito betrays both his father and father-in-law by slyly selling the jewels and the library along with its antiquities in order to purchase his way into the elite echelons of the society. Meanwhile, during a raucous city revelry, he marries a young waif Tessa in a mock marriage ceremony

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<sup>11</sup> Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, 130.

and over the span of the next four years of the novel, has two children with her but keeps it a secret from Romola. The marriage of Tito and Romola although born out of love, was doomed from the start as it was founded on greed and mistrust. Romola runs away from the stultifying marriage but is forced to return when Savonarola reminds her of duty and obligation in marriage. Savonarola himself gets actively involved in ousting the Medici from Florence and letting the Council of God rule the city, unleashing powerful factionalism to prevail. Disillusioned by the narrowness of Savonarola's teachings and Tito's betrayal, Romola once again escapes Florence, only to stumble upon a plague-stricken village where she selflessly serves the diseased. Once she has healed the village, she returns to the city to discover Tito's murder by Baldassare and Savonarola burnt at the stake. The novel ends with her altruistically deciding to take charge of a forlorn Tessa and Tito's children. The story is far more complex than this simple outline; with many sub-plots involving Romola's brother and godfather, the arrival of foreign powers and their impact on the political and private lives of Florence, the network of espionage and Tito's shifting allegiances, discursive observations on art, culture, morality ethics and religion. Besides, there is a gargantuan panoply of Florentine festivals, sermons, revelries, vignettes of everyday life and polyphony of voices from aristocracy, the cultural elite to the hoi polloi.

The lives of Romola and Tito are intricately enmeshed with the real historic events and their marriage plot is embedded in the actual political and religious developments of fifteenth century Florence. Intertwined with the uses of history are Eliot's favourite thematic concern with conjugal infelicity, gender, female education, class, loyalty and betrayal, money matters, unregenerate egoists and altruism. The milestones of Romola's spiritual growth are measured against the moral lessons imparted by Savonarola, his rise and fall. We first see Romola under the tutelage of her classicist father who has a distrust of Savonarola's growing popularity and strictures, and she subscribes to her father's views. She first meets Savonarola at the bedside of her dying brother, who has given up all filial ties to blindly embrace his teachings. Brought up on natural piety his dereliction of family duties

instils “ an unconquerable repulsion for her in that monkish aspect”<sup>12</sup> as she impresses on him the futility of abandoning worldly ambitions, for which she is chastised by Savonarola’s imperious commandment: “Kneel... bend thy pride before it is bent for thee by a yoke of iron”<sup>13</sup> Romola’s disposition to rebel against command, doubly active in the presence of monks”<sup>14</sup> is humbled by the hectoring preacher as she symbolically receives her dead brother’s crucifix from him, demanding her subservience to the implacable will of God. Listening to his rousing speech in the Duomo, she detects a certain absolutism in it, for it is untempered by mercy and sympathy for the frail.

The novel registers passage of two tumultuous years of her married life, on “17<sup>th</sup> of November 1494... the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy.”<sup>15</sup> The Medici family is driven out ; Florence is invaded by the French king; there are warring factions for control of the city, Savonarola and his Council of God being one of them. The vandalising of the Medici art troves by Savonarola’s fanatics cause Tito to surreptitiously sell off Romola’s library to the French. Romola is shocked not just at Tito’s mercenary act but also for breaking the promise to her dead father that together they will realise his dream of bequeathing a rich library, bearing his name, to posterity. The brief period of her married life also revealed to her Tito’s political machinations in aligning with whoever holds power, his opportunism, his growing estrangement from her (he has already married Tessa) and worse, she fears that he has somehow wronged the old destitute, who turns out to be Tito’s foster father. With a plaintive cry, reminding him of duty and faithfulness: “You talk of substantial good, Tito! Are faithfulness, and love, and sweet grateful memories, no good?”<sup>16</sup> Romola flees Florence, steeped in despair, encounters Savonarola, who accuses her of narrow self-absorption and exhorts her to submit

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<sup>12</sup> George Eliot, *Romola* (1863). EBook of Project Gutenberg, released 24 December 2007, updated September 24, 2018, Chapter 15, no pages.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch., 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch., 32.

to "a higher law than she had yet obeyed."<sup>17</sup> He asks her to resume her domestic duties and here, Eliot touches upon the ubiquitous 19<sup>th</sup> century 'woman question' to describe women's circumscribed existence. Savonarola impresses upon her the importance of wifely duties and her lack of vocational space, "Ask your conscience... You have no vocation such as your brother had. You are a wife. You break your ties in self-will and anger, not because the higher life calls upon you to renounce them"<sup>18</sup> stressing the legitimacy of her brother's rebellion while hers' is willful. Romola had suffered a similar disparaging sibling comparison from her father's complaint against "the wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind"<sup>19</sup> which hindered her in scholarly pursuits. The subject of girls education had occupied a substantial part of 'Boy and Girl' section of *The Mill on the Floss*,<sup>20</sup> in which Maggie Tulliver's eagerness and aptitude for learning far exceeded Tom's but formal education was reserved for her brother, even though she herself was more suited for it while he was a failure.

Romola returns to Tito under Savonarola's advice and throws herself into a renunciatory life, but such self-sacrificial impulses are demanded by the priest, not one prescribed by the authorial voice. Romola decides to unquestioningly bear the burden of the physical crucifix he had given her earlier but Savonarola's severe commandments to her, to 'bear the anguish and smart', 'the iron is sharp, it rends the tender flesh' are suggestive of rigorous self-mortification reminiscent of one embraced uncritically by Maggie Tulliver during her Thomas a Kempis phase. Both the protagonists practice extreme form of self-abnegation by abjuring fine clothes and giving up all comforts of life under the influence of their respective philosophers, but the flawed nature of the moral imperative demanded of them becomes apparent in the end. Maggie attains true altruism unaided by any philosophical strictures when she decides to sacrifice her love for Stephen Guest to honour love, fidelity and loyalty to her cousin Lucy to whom he is betrothed. She bravely countenances social opprobrium but listens to

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Ch., 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Ch., 51.

<sup>20</sup> See George Eliot, Book II, "School Time" in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. A.S. Byatt, (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

her inner voice. In her death, Maggie's braving of the flood to rescue Tom raises her to the level of sainthood making her synonymous with the legend of St. Oggs. Both Romola and Maggie understand the true value of obeying a higher law, where their pure, altruistic actions accord them a near-canonized state.

Romola's first catechism with Savonarola had made her skeptical of his hard-line positioning. She saw the unreasonable bonfire of vanities ordered by him which had consumed her favourite Ovid. But her final encounter with him reveals the extreme shortcoming in Savonarola, the "hardness which is caused by an egoistic prepossession,"<sup>21</sup> when he makes the politically expedient decision to not save her godfather from death. She feels the inflexibility of this man of God when she realizes that she cannot appeal to him in the name of justice or mercy, "made her trust in him seem to have been a purblind delusion."<sup>22</sup> Disillusioned in her mentor and betrayed in her marriage, she leaves Florence the second time, but this time only with inner resources of pity, compassion and sympathy. She sets herself adrift in a boat which takes her to a village hit by pestilence, abandoned by the able bodied. For the first time in the novel we see Romola come out from her moribund house, free from the shackles of her socially imposed obligations, out in open, panoramic spaces, responding to the Mediterranean "rhythm on the shores of the loveliest sea" in a chapter appropriately titled, 'Romola's Waking'. She resolves to look after the abandoned sick, with complete disregard for herself and reaches the acme of her spiritual growth. But as in the case of Maggie, the author's uncritical admiration for her heroine is apparent in the near canonization of Romola. She is confused with an apparition of Virgin Mary as she sets about nursing the ailing and cures the entire village. The divine comparison is obtrusively made in the twin chapters, 'The Unseen Madonna' and 'The Visible Madonna' at the heart of the novel. While the first describes the extravagant ceremony marking the city's obeisance to the hidden image of Madonna in a shrine, the second sees a very visible Madonna incarnate Romola going around the city providing succour and solace

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch., 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

to poor and the sick. It is this self-sacrificial service which helps her care for the plague-ridden at the end of the novel. Once she has reached this zenith of altruism, her decision to look after the helpless Tessa and Tito's children only serves as a coda to her spiritual growth.

The problem with Romola is that her character remains completely flawless. There is none of Maggie or Gwendolen's fierce rebellion or Dorothea's wide-ranging conflicting emotions. The triangular love story involving love, marriage and betrayal, handled ever so often as in Godfrey-Nancy-Molly in *Silas Marner*, The Transome ménage-a-trois in *Felix Holt* and Gwendolen-Grandcourt-Lydia in *Daniel Deronda*, provides the only human touch, which resonates with actual human emotions in this otherwise emotionally sterile novel with its insistence on historical events overpowering all else. But unlike other conflicted heroines who necessarily undergo 'baptism of fire', Romola never transitions painfully, like Nancy, Mrs. Transome or Gwendolen from a joyful, expectant bride to a betrayed one. The story skips forward two years from Romola's marriage to summarily present her as a disenchanted wife and the reasons of her estrangement from Tito in those years are slightly nebulous. Tito's own resentment against her is born out of his acute consciousness of his wife's moral superiority, nobility and beatitude. Romola remains too good and idealized a figure in the novel. Even her discovery of her husband's infidelity is not accompanied by a natural wifely harangue but is followed by her trying to ascertain how, when and under what circumstances Tito married Tessa. Eliot struggled with the writing of Romola's dialogues. She had complained to her publisher and friend Blackwood, that she had trouble 'hearing' the voice of Romola, which did not come as naturally to her as her English Midland novels. While the anguish of Dorothea, Janet or a Gwendolen had reverberated within Eliot, Romola remains an epitome of altruism from the beginning of the novel when we see her valiantly battling her father's uncharitable remarks on her inadequacies to resiliently living with Tito, to her uncomplaining acceptance of her husband's child-wife and children at the end, bearing

Henry James criticism that despite being a “magnificent romance,”<sup>23</sup> the novel does not seem positively to live.<sup>24</sup>

The figure of Romola then remains an abstraction of that absolute goodness which Eliot had learned from Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*. She had translated this work by the proponent of the Higher Criticism of the Bible in 1854 from German into English and embraced the virtues of secular humanism enunciated in it. Eliot was greatly influenced by the scientific, sociological and philosophical ideas current in her time and these thoughts permeated her novels. She subscribed to the worldview of social scientists Herbert Spencer and August Comte, the ‘meliorists’ who envisaged the human society as constantly evolving towards progression. They saw the world ruled by an invariable sequence of action and consequence, therefore recommended that the prime duty of the individual was to thwart his egoism, keep his own self subservient to society; for Comte insisted that, “the chief problem of human life was the subordination of egoism to altruism.”<sup>25</sup> Eliot embraced their idea of the Religion of Humanity, which Lewes had espoused too, one which transcended all schisms and divisions in orthodox religion and posited an all-embracing, non-dogmatic religion of human fellowship in its place, and this subordination of egoistic impulses to altruistic purposes contributed to a morally advanced society. In 1842, Eliot suffered a crisis of faith, doubted the veracity of religious scriptures, broke away from orthodox Christianity and stopped going to the church, much to her family’s horror. Her religious doubts were further compounded by her translation works of Feuerbach and Strauss by rationally scrutinizing the Gospel, thus espousing a belief in innate humanist morals, the goodness of man, without God’s mediation. Many readers see a parallel between the religious uncertainty of the fifteenth century Florence and the height of Victorian era, constantly in need of moral assurance.

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<sup>23</sup> Henry James’s essay on George Eliot in *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1885), in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 500.

<sup>24</sup> James’s essay on George Eliot in *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1885), in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Dentith, *George Eliot*, (London: The Harvester Press, 1986), 24.

Thus, Eliot's readings coupled with her growing up in the English countryside to experience first-hand, the ties of fellowship which bound a community, contributed to her everlasting belief in altruism as the goal of humanity. The character of Romola as an epitome of the tenets of these beliefs, becomes a 'Utopian heroine', an embodiment of her creator's overwrought treatise on ethics and religion. Eliot herself was acutely conscious of her experiment with the 'Italian novel'. She wrote to close friend Sara Hennell about her uses of history in *Romola*: "the book is addressed to fewer readers than my previous works" and that it wasn't meant to be "as 'popular' in the same sense as others."<sup>26</sup> There is no dispute regarding the historical verisimilitude of the *Romola*, critical opinion is unanimous in declaring it a well-researched novel; Anthony Trollope praised the immaculate descriptions – "little bits of Florence down to the door nail" but he also warned the author not to "fire too much over the heads of your readers."<sup>27</sup> It is a meticulous exposition on the cultural and historical life of fifteenth century Florence, but one which sacrifices spontaneity and human interest at its altar. Ashton detects an "air of historical guidebook about it."<sup>28</sup> Even though Henry James found *Romola* a work of exquisite beauty and a 'masterpiece' he declared that *Romola* "sins by excess of analysis"<sup>29</sup> and "It is overladen with learning, it smells of the lamp, it tastes just perceptibly of pedantry."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, 264.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Gordon Haight, ed. *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, (London: Methuen, 1965, rpt.1966), 80.

<sup>30</sup> James's essay on George Eliot in *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1885), in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, Ibid.



## Between History and Memory: Remembering the Dirty War in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*

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Mukul Chaturvedi

The blurring of boundaries between history and fiction has been famously discussed by Hayden White who argues that representation of historical events is as much imaginative as it is rational and involves a narrative reconstruction or interpretation of the subject matter.<sup>1</sup> Much of the debate on the distinction between history and fiction has centered on the question of 'truth', and this is nowhere more apparent than in representation of historical trauma in literary testimony. Taking forward this discussion, this paper examines Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*,<sup>2</sup> a witness memoir of a survivor of a death camp, during the period of Dirty War in Argentina, which forewarns the reader in the Preface itself that, "the boundaries between story and history are so subtle" that even she cannot find them.<sup>3</sup> Captured, blindfolded and 'disappeared', Alicia Partnoy's fictionalized testimony bears witness to a period of severe repression and torture in Argentina's history and is a moving document where 'witnessing' becomes a crucial means of survival. The fragmented narrative attempts to recreate the memory of the death camp and echoes many voices of both the dead and the living. Interestingly, while the text is a fictionalized testimony, the desire for verisimilitude finds expression in paratextual devices like maps and list of actual prisoners in the camp.

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**Keywords:** Memory, Fiction, History, Torture, Testimony

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Alicia Partnoy's memoir recounts her experience of torture in one of the clandestine detention camps that had mushroomed in Argentina during the military regime (1976-83), a period also known as the Dirty War. In 1976 the Argentine military overthrew the government of

<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5-27. Accessed June 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174>.

<sup>2</sup> Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Isabel Perón which was part of a larger series of political coups called Operation Condor<sup>4</sup> a campaign supported by the United States. The Dirty War unleashed a reign of terror against its own people and ushered in a period of state sponsored torture. The junta dubbed all those people suspected of being aligned with socialist or leftist causes as ‘subversives’ and kidnapped, incarcerated and killed thousands of them. Nearly 30,000 people suspected to be ‘subversives’ were killed and disappeared during the Dirty War. “Victims died during torture, were machine-gunned at the edge of enormous pits, or were thrown, drugged, from airplanes into the sea,” explains Marguerite Feitlowitz.<sup>5</sup> These individuals came to be known as ‘disappeared’ or *desaparecidos*. Alicia Partnoy is one such suspected subversive who was abducted from her home in 1977 by the military and sent to the detention camp called “the little school,” where these alleged subversives were tortured. Imprisoned without charges, Partnoy spent more than three months blindfolded and bound, cut off from friends and family, including her child, until being inexplicably released. Later she was transferred to a state prison, where she stayed for more than two years. Partnoy’s narrative tells of all the people that she met and saw through a tiny hole in her blindfold. The guards made sure prisoners did not talk with each other or see each other. Prisoners were beaten for almost any reason and many were killed. In her testimony, the blindfold becomes a metaphor for a deceptive regime that denied witnessing even by its victims. Julia Alvarez in the introduction to the text points out that these are not short stories in the form of fiction but in the genre of survival tales. “Partnoy is a Latin American Scheherazade bearing witness, telling her stories to keep herself alive.”<sup>6</sup> Partnoy testified before the Commission (CONADEP)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Operation Condor was a US backed campaign of political repression that began in the context of the Cold war in the Southern Cone countries of South America. The military governments used special intelligence and operations systems to hunt down, seize, and execute political opponents across national borders. (<https://www.history.com/news/mothers-plaza-de-mayo-disappeared-children-dirty-war-argentina>)

<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: OUP, 1998), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Partnoy, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Spanish acronym (Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas). CONADEP recorded forced disappearance of about 9000 persons from 1976-1983, although it says

appointed to investigate disappearance and also gave her testimony to the Organization of American States, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations in Argentina.

The injunction to bear witness and remember has arisen within the context of the Jewish Holocaust and it provides a useful frame of reference for testimonial writing from Southern Cone countries in Latin America. According to Partnoy, there is an ethical and political imperative to remember. "As a survivor, I felt it was my duty to help those suffering injustice."<sup>8</sup> The Jewish experience of atrocities in Argentina echoes a similar vocabulary when compared to the Holocaust writing. In one of her essays Partnoy draws parallel between the two genocides and argues that Holocaust literature and Latin American testimonial texts from Southern Cone almost serve as "instruments to preserve the victim's moral and emotional integrity."<sup>9</sup> 'Remembering' in both instances, becomes an act of resistance because not only does it recover voices fragmented by the pain of torture but it also becomes a chronicle for future generations. Other Argentine Jewish writers like Nora Strejlevich, Jacobo Timmerman and Alicia Kozameh<sup>10</sup> share a similar commitment, and both Holocaust and the Latin American dictatorships shape their imagination. While all these writers were

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that the figures could have been higher. The human rights organizations usually place the figures to be 30,000. The report also stated that 600 people disappeared and 458 were assassinated by death squads during the Peronist government from 1973-1986. The report was published as *Nunca Mas* (Never Again) in 1986 became an immediate best seller for it documented the most horrific stories of torture and brutalization. It has been published by (Farar Strauss and Giroux: NewYork) and (Faber and Faber: London and Boston) The report can be accessed online at <[www.desparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/english/librarynevagain/nevgain\\_001.htm](http://www.desparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/english/librarynevagain/nevgain_001.htm)>.

<sup>8</sup> Partnoy, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Alicia Partnoy, "Poetry as a Strategy for Resistance in the Holocaust and the Southern Cone Genocides", in *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory*, ed. Kristin Ruggiero (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) 234-246.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Kozameh, *Pasos bajo del agua*, trans. by David E. Davis *Steps Under Water* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

Timmerman, Jacobo. *Preso sin nombre, celda sin numero*, trans. by Toby Talbot *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1981).

Strejlevich, Nora, *Una sola muertenumerosa*, trans. Cristina de la Torre with the collaboration of the author, *A Single, Numberless Death* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

detained for being 'subversives' and not just because of their Jewish identity, the military's anti-Semitic view was well known. Argentina was the severest example of anti-Semitism during the repressive regime when Jews were specifically targeted. While Jews constituted two percent of the total Argentine population, they would account for as much as ten percent of those who disappeared.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, the larger Jewish community did not want a public acknowledgment of anti-Semitism despite being targeted by the military. The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Association (DAIA) on receiving complaints from the families of the disappeared did not denounce the action of the military government. Renee Epelbaum, from the well-known human rights group, Plaza de Mayo Movement, an organization of the mothers of the disappeared, notes that "we felt very disappointed and alone" as the Argentine Jewish authorities did not condemn the dictatorship despite there being adequate evidence that Jews were treated infinitely worse.<sup>12</sup> The 'discovery' of Partnoy's Jewishness in the camp does raise the subject of race but she admits that it was not for her race that she was being tortured. "So many rabbis thank God for the coup that has saved them from the 'chaos!'"<sup>13</sup>

The Introduction to *The Little School* carries a disclaimer. "Beware: in the little schools the boundaries between story and history are so subtle that even I can hardly find them."<sup>14</sup> In an interesting interplay of fiction and history, the text self-consciously draws attention to its own fictionality by drawing attention to the difficulty of 'seeing' when one has been blindfolded. One significant aspect of the Argentine military dictatorship's method of physical, mental and emotional abuse was that the prisoners were blindfolded throughout their entire stay in prison. Such was the terror that the inmates were brutally beaten and the guards summoned to put the slipping blindfold back in place. As the prisoners did not have any visual representation of their immediate reality, they relied on sensorial perceptions such as sound, taste, smell

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<sup>11</sup> David Sheinin, "Deconstructing anti-Semitism in Argentina" in Kristin Ruggiero's *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory* (Sussex Academic Press, 2005, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Partnoy, 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

and touch. Witnessing the world through the blind fold also involves the work of imagination since 'reality' is perceived in fragments. Ironically, thanks to the 'Semitic curve' of her nose which always bothered Partnoy, it doesn't let the blindfold stay fixed in its place and the "nose allows' her to "see " more than others.<sup>15</sup> Also, in the absence of sight, memory and imagination help her reconstruct reality. Thus, the narrator's veiled world is communicated to us through intermittent peeping and stolen glimpses from the blind fold. "Portions of the world parade before these small slits."<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, by drawing attention to an interplay between fiction and history and writing her own experiences in the third person, Partnoy's narrative distances the reader but in no way suspends the truth claim to the text. Diana Taylor argues that for Partnoy, the 'I' narrating the story finds it difficult to connect with the "I' who lived through the experience of violence.<sup>17</sup> In order to distance herself from the haunting traumatic memory, Partnoy chooses to fictionalize her narrative. As Taylor argues, "repetitive, intrusive recollection of past trauma that haunts victims of torture and the distancing and displacement through representation allows some of them to cope with, and somehow delimit, the memories."<sup>18</sup> The narrative focus is on ordinary and everyday moments of survival rather than depicting the torture and degradation in vivid detail. The multiple styles, polyphony of narrative voices embody the representational challenges facing the narrator. The nonlinear narrative is in the form of vignettes, or as Julia Alvarez calls it "twenty epiphanies of sight and insight."<sup>19</sup> However, following the convention of Latin American *testimonio*,<sup>20</sup> the text portrays collective memory

<sup>15</sup> Partnoy, 59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Diana Taylor, "Disappearing Bodies: Writing Torture and Torture as Writing" in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 168.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Partnoy, 7.

<sup>20</sup> John Beverley, well-known *testimonio* scholar, has defined *testimonio* "as a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet ... form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. (30-31) "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)." *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. ed. Beverley, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004),

and identity of the disappeared. Like documentary testimonios which denounce human rights violations the narrative is appended with a lot of factual information both in the introduction and in the detailed appendix towards the end. Situating it in the context of military repression during the Dirty War, the text gives an elaborate layout of the detention centre, Little School, along with the list of the inmates, their biographical details, list of the guards and shift supervisors with their aliases. The layout of the camp includes sites marked for various activities; bathroom, kitchen, torture room and metallic bed for torture. By providing meticulous factual details the text retains the historical and political status of the narrative, however, what is at stake is not the truth of factual details or the logic of causality but the 'truth' of survivor's experience. For Partnoy it is the experience of resistance and survival that is the ultimate object of bearing witness. As Dori Laub points out with regard to Holocaust survivors, "survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive."<sup>21</sup>

Alicia Partnoy's story derives significance from the fact that it is about the lives of many other prisoners and talks about a period of repression that had attacked an entire generation. The text skilfully intermixes personal memory with the collective memory of all the inmates in the camp. Partnoy's narrative does not present experience of detention and torture as a unique personal experience, but like much of Latin American testimonial writing, the individual story represents the collective and speaks for the silence of the disappeared. As Gillian Whitlock points out, "In testimonial narrative a narrator speaks

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29-44. Another often cited definition is by George Yúdice who defines "testimonial writing as Testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.) Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (44) "Testimonio and Postmodernism," in *The Real thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberge, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 42-57.

<sup>21</sup> Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, (London and New York : Routledge, 1992).

publicly on behalf of the many who have suffered, and lays claim to truth and authenticity in accounts of social suffering”<sup>22</sup> According to her, testimonial life narrative is a potent tool in campaigns for social justice. In fact, “it demands recognition, advocacy, responsibility, and accountability”.<sup>23</sup> Partnoy’s narrative shares a similar commitment while writing her testimony and strives to recreate for the reader the atmosphere of terror in the detention camp. However, while torture and deprivation is experienced by the inmates in real terms, the reader experiences it in a more distant way as the narrative is fictionalized. The text foregrounds the challenges of representing intimate violence to the human body, as for the survivor, reintegrating the traumatic memory into her life poses a challenge. Elaine Scarry in her landmark study of torture says that the very nature of pain and the traumatic memory associated with that pain marks a verbal and epistemological resistance to language. “It is precisely because it takes no object that pain, more than any other phenomena, resists objectification in language.”<sup>24</sup> Addressing herself to both the material and verbal inexpressibility of pain in language, Scarry notes that the:

attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain, forcing *pain itself* into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequences.<sup>25</sup>

Scarry’s concern rings true for Partnoy’s narrative and the text embodies this ethical dilemma when it wants to communicate the experience of intense bodily suffering and pain, without objectifying it or overwhelming the reader’s mind. As discussed earlier, writing in the third person, distances both the narrator and the reader, but at the same time the vulnerability of the human body is indicated through the ever present threat of torture described in the narrative. As Laura E. Tanner notes:

<sup>22</sup> Gillian Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2015), 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 (italics in original).

Because violence in general and torture in particular depends upon body's susceptibility to pain, any representation of victim's experience of torture must recreate for the reader an ever present, ever – vulnerable body. Whether or not pain is actually inflicted upon the body in torture, it's the threat of that pain, the constant awareness of its potential to intrude upon and destroy the self that leads the torturer his power.<sup>26</sup>

Cathy Caruth<sup>27</sup> adds another important dimension by pointing out that the survivors of violence are often unable to experience the traumatic event as it occurs, as a matter of survival, and often experience it belatedly. Caruth also argues that trauma may not be assimilated at the time of occurrence and is usually experienced as an aftermath in relation to people, time, and places other than itself. Partnoy's narrative depicts that at the moment of torture, it is the instinct of survival that helps them to bear most gruesome moments. Later, when she goes back to Argentina in the summer of 1984 and meets the families of the dead and the disappeared the memories surface again and she says that "the voices of my friends grew stronger in my memory"<sup>28</sup> and she wants to record them so that they do not pass unheard. The text transforms the unstructured experiences of traumatic event into narrative memory and provides an accessible framework to those who witnessed the event. Partnoy's fictionalized testimony conveys the horror, as Dori Laub notes in a different context, "only as an elusive memory that feels as if it no longer resembles any reality. The horror is, indeed compelling not only in its reality, but even more so, in its flagrant distortion and subversion of that reality." Partnoy's narrative technique subverts the attempts of the torturers at debasing the humanity of inmates of the detention camp by choosing to highlight moments of tenderness and empathy and tries to restore dignity which is being denied to them.

Alicia Partnoy's brilliant reconstruction of the memory of the prison camp gives a new dimension to the disappeared by representing them as 'real' human beings stealing moments of human bonding to

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<sup>26</sup> Laura E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading rape and violence in Twentieth Century Fiction* (Library of Congress Cataloging publication data USA 1994), 36.

<sup>27</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: explorations in memory* (Baltimore Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Partnoy, 17.

keep themselves alive. The torture in the death camp works slowly but effectively and is designed to make them “lose memories of ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> The inmates are “forced to remain silent and prone, often immobile or face down for many hours, our eyes blindfolded and our wrists tightly bound.”<sup>30</sup> Unable to fulfil their daily bodily functions in privacy like taking a shower, brushing their teeth, going to the toilet to relieve themselves, adds to their daily humiliation and torture. Interestingly, the nonlinear narrative has ‘Birthday’, ‘My Nose’, ‘Toothbrush’, ‘Latrine’, ‘Puzzle’ as the title of the short tales which describe how the inmates cope with everyday humiliation in an absolutely absurd situation. These tales provide a human face to the lives of the disappeared and we get a glimpse of the shared humanity of the inmates of the detention camp. In one of the tales titled “Bread”, sharing bread becomes one of the most crucial ways of bonding with each other. Other than offering to a friend secretly in times of hunger, it also provides a non-verbal communication of feelings of affection and care. By passing around the pieces of bread surreptitiously, “behind the curtain the pieces of bread go up and down at the will of stomachs and heart”, there is a fellow feeling of warmth.<sup>31</sup> Rather than just provide the survivor with space to testify about the horror of her experience, the text focuses on strategies of survival. “When we feel our isolation growing, the world we seek vanishing in the shadows, to give a brother some bread is a reminder that true values are still alive. To be given some bread is to receive a comforting hug.”<sup>32</sup> By adding wry humour even in humiliating and absurd situations the text suitably distances the reader and does not overwhelm their mind with fear. One such episode is “Latrine” where the narrator tells us that the inmates of the camp suffered from constipation as a result of months of immobility, inadequate food and lack of privacy to empty their bowels. However, they come up with a novel idea to overcome that situation. “Yeah, just pretend that Chiche’s face is inside the latrine and shitting becomes a pleasure.”<sup>33</sup> Chiche is the shift supervisor who takes turns to torture

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29.

the inmates. Cut off completely because of the blindfold the sense of touch, smell and taste are evoked to connect with each other and the outside world. In an overall atmosphere of death and destruction, the images of life abound. The leaking roof of the "Little School" provides much needed affirmation of life. "A drop fell on her forehead, just above the blindfold, and slowly began to make its way to her heart."<sup>34</sup> Placing cans under the leaking roof produces the "sweetest music she had heard in a very long time."<sup>35</sup> Aware that human kind cannot bear too much reality, the text recreates painful memories of torture by tempering them with images of life and regeneration.

Laced with black humour and irony, the narrative recreates the experience of extreme degradation and loneliness without making the prisoners objects of pity. Though the 'tales' describe situations of complete enslavement, the narrative subtext highlights moments of solidarity and shoring up of defences in moments of crises. In elaborating the human need for bonding, care and affection the text constantly draws the reader's attention toward the strategies of survival even as it describes the most painful situations. In one of the touching moments in the text, when the narrator's husband is being tortured, a nursery rhyme runs constantly through his mind which he used to recite to his daughter, Ruth. "My girl, my tongue is hurting and I can't say *rib-bit rib-bit*...But this poem soothes you when you cried."<sup>36</sup> The narrative deflects the reader's attention away from the agony of the victim and towards the love he feels for his daughter and how it gives him strength to bear the pain. One of the inmates wears a friend's denim jacket while receiving blows from the guards with the hope that it might shield him from injury. In "Toothbrush" the narrator saves her broken tooth in a matchbox, her only "non-edible belonging" because of her desire to feel "whole." Not only does fiddling with the tooth provide an activity to "combat boredom" it also provides a symbolic way of feeling "whole" and complete.<sup>37</sup> One of the chilling moments in the text is the rape of one of the inmates by the shift supervisor. Titled "A Conversation under the Rain" it describes how she withstood her

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 81.

humiliation in almost a stoic manner, without any feeling of self-pity, “the hatred she felt for them shielded her.”

She took off the rest of her clothes. She felt as if the guards did not exist, as if they were repulsive worms that she could erase from her mind by thinking of pleasant things ...like rain falling inside the cans, her conversations with Maria Elena. She thought the conversations had been worth it, despite the beatings that could come, despite humiliation. They tied her hands behind her back.<sup>38</sup>

Bearing witness to one’s own oppression is paradoxical because torture is designed to objectify the victim and destroy her sense of being. As Diana Taylor notes, for a survivor, “the only way to tell the story so that it neither consumes the life of the witness, nor is perceived by her futile is to tell it within the discourse of solidarity. Such a discourse will continue its building process in every interaction with our multiple readers, multiple realities, and will in turn trigger countless acts of resistance to state terrorism.”<sup>39</sup> Partnoy’s narrative recuperates the silenced voices and by witnessing on their behalf reasserts her own subjectivity agency and humanity which had been annihilated. The discourse of solidarity informs the narrative as prison inmates try to create a community amidst an atmosphere of despair and death. The tales highlight “moments of grace and durability” in degrading situations, dwelling on the intimate texture of lives that the inmates have built in the prison to survive complete annihilation of their selfhood.

Remembering, for Alicia Partnoy, is both personal and political. Not only is it a way of working through individual trauma, but it is also a way of denouncing injustice and highlights the excesses of the Argentine military junta. As a fictionalized testimony, the narrative structure engages with representational dilemmas of how to synthesize issues of veracity with fictionality and attempts to reclaim dignity and humanity for the disappeared which had been destroyed during terrifying moments of captivity. Partnoy’s literary testimony

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>39</sup> Alicia Partnoy, “Poetry as a Strategy for Resistance in the Holocaust and the Southern Cone Genocides.” in *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory*, ed. Kristin Ruggiero (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 238.

is a beautiful blend of a literary and a political voice which resists any attempt at closure by the authorities. In the context of Dirty War in Argentina, the state sponsored acts of memory and memorialization have sought to sanitize the history of political repression and torture by constructing official narratives of the past in the form of museums, commemorative days and memorabilia. The civilian governments that followed the military want to contain and co-opt the traumatic memory in order to secure their identity as defenders of human rights and liberal democracy.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, though memory sites pay homage to the past and commemorate the victims, they also tend to erase the uneasy gaps and silences of history. The governments want to preserve the memories through the various memory sites in order to have a seemingly national consensus over memory but human rights groups notable among them, the Madres de plaza de Mayo<sup>41</sup> have worked consistently to keep alive the memories, particularly of the disappeared, for it might fade from public discourse. The memories are a reminder of the unfinished business of justice for the families of the disappeared. Fear of oblivion is crucial to the discourse of memory especially when memories become a site for struggle, and the 'disappeared' inhabit a liminal space between memory and history. Partnoy's literary testimony traverses this liminal space and evokes for the reader moments of resilience and creative survival. In resisting the silence and erasure of history through memory work, 'The Little School' collapses the binary between fiction and history.

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<sup>40</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Elizabeth Jelin and Susan G. Kaufman "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years after in Argentina" in *The Politics of War Memories and Commemoration*, eds. T.G Ashplant et.al (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Madres de Plaza de Mayo, is a well-known human rights organization, founded in 1977, by the mothers of the 'disappeared' during the Dirty War in Argentina. They successfully challenged the military by holding meetings in the town square and have fought assiduously to ensure that 'disappeared' are located and restored to their families.

## The Uses of Lives: Biography, History and Literature in Colonial South Asia

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*Shaswat Panda*

This paper aims to map what can be called the uses of biographies for those colonial subjects, whose writing of various 'lives' shaped their understanding of history and their vision of community. In doing so the paper critically reflects on the dubious distinctions between literature and history insofar as biographical writings were concerned. What it instead suggests, is that the blending of historical consciousness and literary imagination became crucial ways of critiquing colonial intellectual traditions and were parts of a larger exercise of community building. Unlike in Britain, where the widening of gap between literature and history placed biography uncomfortably at the interstices of the two disciplines, in South Asia, reading and writing as indispensably political activities merrily overlooked such schisms. The coming together of literature and history becomes conspicuous in biographies, more than any other form of writing.

Biographical writings were not new to South Asia. For, if not anything else, there were century old traditions of hagiography writing and courtly chronicles of kings. But the introduction of western biographies brought about important changes such as a sense of historical time and verifiability of the narrated life. This paper attempts to show that empirical awareness did not automatically lead to a blind imitation of western forms of writing or complete jettisoning of existing models. Through a complex interpretation of history, biographical writings sometimes undermined western historiographical traditions. Similarly, the rigidly historical aspects of biographies were pushed to the margins to make space for their so-called universal value. This paper will take into account, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Krishna Charitra* (1886)<sup>1</sup> and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's short and incomplete "Prophet Mohammad and his Caliphs" (1907) as instances of biographical writings, which were written primarily for their respective "imagined communities". For Bankim the community comprised his compatriots

<sup>1</sup> The text was first serialized by Bankim in a magazine called *Prachar* which he himself edited, in the year 1884. In 1886 the text was published in the form of a book.

which had become unquestioning followers of western scholars; Gandhi's preoccupation was creating a "moral community [which] needed exemplars" (2005).<sup>2</sup> While Bankim sought to discover history in scriptures, Gandhi overlooked the specificities of history in favour of the moral economy of illustrious lives.

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**Keywords:** Biographies, Literature, History, Community, Chronicles

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The biographical tradition in India has had a long history. Unlike the closely related genre of autobiography, the history of biography in India can certainly not be attributed to the arrival of colonial modernity. One of the earliest specimens of the genre, Banabhatta's *Harshacharita* dates back to the seventh century. Although the text enjoys a canonical status, it would not strictly count as a biography in the western sense of the term. What are those Western standards, we might ask? Presumably – adherence to facts, chronological narration of events and as an obligatory gesture, emphasis on the moral import of life. These traditions are often argued to have emerged from the Greek literary tradition.<sup>3</sup> The dominant biographical form<sup>4</sup> in India was that of the Charita, which offered adulatory accounts of the lives of Kings or saintly figures. The Charita, as Ipsita Chanda (2015) notes:

...is the literary representation of the lives and deeds of persons or groups, noble or common. The material for the charit is either *kalpa*, i.e., created out of the writer's imagination, or *prakhyat*, i.e., through selection and arrangement of extant material. The material for the charit text, accordingly,

<sup>2</sup> Tridip Suhrud, "Indian Opinion and the Making of a Satyagrahi" in *The Public Sphere from Outside the West*, ed. Divya Dwivedi and Sanil V. (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015), 118.

<sup>3</sup> There is a vast body of scholarship on the issue of the origins of biography in the West, from Arnaldo Momigliano's *The Development of Greek Biography* (1993) to more recent works like Sandra Cairns and Trevor Luke's *Identity through Lives* (2018) and Robert Fraser's *After Ancient Biographies: Modern Types and Ancient Archetypes* (2020), which trace the genealogies of modern western biographies to the Graeco-Roman traditions. The significance of these works lies in their emphasis on the different practices of writing biographies even within the Graeco-Roman literary traditions.

<sup>4</sup> Dominant but not the only form. In medieval India, for instance, there were other practices of chronicling the rule of Kings like the *Bakhar* tradition in Marathi and the *Nama* in Persian. The Charita however is important for this paper because of its lasting impact on writers in colonial India like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

may be literature or popular tradition or even *itihasa*. But regardless of the source, the charit is written according to the rules of *kavya*.<sup>5</sup>

As Chanda's definition makes it amply clear, adherence to aesthetic principles as opposed to historical consciousness determined the nature of the text. But even though aesthetics became the overriding concern in the writing of Charitas, the use of extant sources was nevertheless important in at least one of the two styles of writing that Chanda mentions. Arguably, the Charitas were not without any trace of historicity. If anything, there was a well-defined practice of using 'sources' even if the work was avowedly literary in its proclivities.

The alleged absence of history in Indian biographical writings was rather a misreading of historiography in India by colonial historians. Their emphasis on developing a rational approach towards history, efforts to collect sources and create archives in fact seriously undermined the Indian texts and their historical value.<sup>6</sup> It was as though the British scholars were desperate to straitjacket Indian historiographical practices into only those models of history writing that were available to them. Narrow positivist reading of history and prejudicial attitude towards the natives led British scholars like J.S. Mill to swiftly dismiss traditions of history writing in India.<sup>7</sup> Georg Bühler, the translator of an important text like *Vikramankadevacharitam* (1875)<sup>8</sup> only begrudgingly acknowledged the historical dimension to the text he himself had translated. Bühler was only one among many who held such an unsympathetic view towards Indian historiography.<sup>9</sup>

If the absence of any evidence-based and positivist history in India was a major bugbear for the British scholars, the virtues of

<sup>5</sup> Ipsita Chanda, "Charit as a Genre", *Sahapedia*, 11 December, 2015, [www.sahapedia.org/charit-genre](http://www.sahapedia.org/charit-genre).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the misuse of Indian historical sources, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velcheru Narayan Rao and David Shulman, eds., *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, (New York: Other Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Rama Mantena, "The Question of History in Precolonial India" in *History and Theory*, Vol.46, No. 3, October 2007. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4502266>, 397

<sup>8</sup> Vidyapati Bilhana, *The Vikramankacharita: The Life of King Vikram - Tribhuvana Malla of Kalyana* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 1875).

<sup>9</sup> Rama Mantena, "The Question of History in Precolonial India", 398.

rationality was only a recent discovery back home in England.<sup>10</sup> The impulse to write history with a so-called scientific objectivity and dispassionate rationality, which had its roots in Enlightenment, swiftly gained momentum in Victorian England. Such developments found a congenial intellectual climate in Britain, which was characterized preeminently by the pervasive presence of positivist philosophy. The professionalization of history as a discipline, which demanded rigour and steadfast commitment to truth on the part of its practitioners drove it away from literature. David Amigoni (1993) reasons that it was possibly for such professionalization that literary forms like biography and autobiography were held suspect over their truth claims by academic historians.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Thomas Carlyle, who was one of the most famous biographers of the age, was criticized by professional historians for his eyewitness-like account of the French revolution published in 1837.<sup>12</sup>

Although professional historians were skeptical of the biographical genre, 'lives' (as biographies were often alternatively called) garnered enormous success in the print market. The cheap editions deserve a special mention. The phenomenal success of Victorian biographies and its huge demand among readers has been aptly described by Julie Codell as "biography mania."<sup>13</sup> Many of the life narratives of this period were imbued with a strong sense of history and other forms of knowledge such as positivism.<sup>14</sup> An outcome of this infusion of historical consciousness led to the publication of many historicized hagiographies of religious figures.

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<sup>10</sup> Rama Mantena, "The Question of History in Precolonial India", 398.

<sup>11</sup> David Amigoni, *Victorian Biographies: Intellectual and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2017), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1837).

<sup>13</sup> Julie F Codell, "Constructing the Victorian Artist: National Identity, the Political Economy of Art and Biographical Mania in the Periodical Press", *Victorians Periodicals Review*, 33, No.3, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Nandini Bhattacharya, "Ecce Homo – Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity." *Religions*, 11, No 300 (June 2020): 3. [www.mdpi.com/journal/religions](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions), doi:10.3390/rel11060300

Notable among these were several biographies of Jesus Christ. Some of the historicized biographies of Christ included David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (famously translated by George Eliot and published in 1846), John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Works of Jesus Christ* (1865) and Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (translated into English in 1863). The recasting of hagiographical accounts of religious figures in the light of history, as Nandini Bhattacharya (2020) argues, contributed to the shaping of the "national imaginary"<sup>15</sup> in the broader context of imperialism.

But when the national imaginary was "stretched over the vast empire" (to borrow Benedict Anderson's expression)<sup>16</sup>, the consequences were not always desirable. T.B. Macaulay's ambitious project of creating a "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, and English in tastes", could materialize partially as writers and thinkers brought up intellectually on colonial education would make use of the same training to challenge some of the foundations of colonial thought. A subject of the empire and brought up intellectually on its knowledge repository, Bankim too found historicized lives immensely useful and thoroughly indispensable to the formation of his national imaginary.

In the section that follows, the paper argues that Bankim's exposure to western intellectual traditions did not naturally lead him to uncritically reproduce their dominant modes of thinking. Historical consciousness in Bankim, as can be seen from a reading of *Krishna Charitra* was an amalgamation of classicism and rational thinking borrowed from the West, which ironically led him to challenge colonial interpretation of India's history. It further led him to modernize the indigenous biographical genre called Charita. A clear manifestation of Bankim's critical and ambivalent response to the West can thus be seen in *Krishna Charitra* (1886).

<sup>15</sup> Nandini Bhattacharya, "Ecce Homo – Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity", 4.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 86.

In the conclusion to his *Krishna Charitra*, Bankim clarifies his objective behind writing the book, as:

1. Demolishing the age-old myths surrounding the life of Krishna.
2. Reconstructing the truth about him.<sup>17</sup>

In trying to rescue Krishna from the timeless and fabled world of myths, Bankim, like several biographers in the West, tries to assign historicity to a divine/mythological character. But his second point is worth observing closely. Dissociating Krishna from his mythical origins does not automatically imply a vindication of history. Unlike his western counterparts, Bankim, the biographer is faced with a daunting task. Given the absence of a “tradition of history writing”, he has to piece the historical truth together. Since, there is no recorded evidence available, rational interpretation becomes Bankim’s way of finding the truth about Krishna’s life.

As Sudipta Kaviraj (1995) rightly observes, Bankim is compelled to search for “cognivistic” truth of empirical facts which would dispel factual errors.<sup>18</sup> Or as the author of the text himself contends, the readers “must find out the truth for themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

Such a reading of Bankim’s text reveals that the biography is fraught with contradictions; the biographer has set ambitions which are impossible to achieve. Bankim himself admits that “reconstructing the whole truth about [Krishna] would be an extremely difficult proposition... I did the reconstruction as best as I could.”<sup>20</sup> While commenting on his own findings, the otherwise self-assured Bankim leaves it to his readers to judge whether Krishna was a human being or of divine provenance. His own assessment of the figure of Krishna is that “he rose towards godliness on the dint of his own abilities.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. *Krishna Charitra*, 1866, trans. Alo Shome. (New Delhi: V&S Publishers, 2011), Conclusion, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Kaviraj, Sudipta. “The Myth of Praxis: Construction of the Figure of Krsna in *Krsnacarita*.” *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 83.

<sup>19</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna Charitra*, How to find the Real Krishna, Kindle.

<sup>20</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna Charitra*, Conclusion, Kindle.

<sup>21</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna Charitra*, Conclusion, Kindle.

As an exemplar of human perfection, Bankim's Krishna progresses towards the attainment of godliness. The life of Krishna is read as a tale of moral progress, and not as divine *leela* performed by the incarnation of Vishnu.

The Krishna that Bankim portrays is significantly different from the way he is depicted in *Puranas* and in medieval lore. Not surprisingly, Bankim repeatedly rubbishes the supernatural tales as mere extrapolations and is particularly careful in debunking the stories of his protagonists' amorous escapades. The playful and virile Krishna makes way for an astute strategist, a just but compassionate ruler and an impeccably disciplined statesman. In other words, the protagonist of Bankim's biography is radically different from how he appears in popular memory; he is cast in the mould of a Greek hero or a Roman statesman.

Bankim urges his "rational" readers to not believe in the miraculous origins of Krishna; instead, he offers to trace it from textual sources. Just like the truth of Krishna which must be reconstructed, his origins must also be figured out using texts after the excision of "unrealistic elements and hearsay" of oral sources.<sup>22</sup> The biographer's primary source in this case is *The Mahabharata*, for the reason that among the available sources, it is apparently the oldest, preceding *The Harivansha* and *The Puranas*.<sup>23</sup> Besides, *The Mahabharata*, for Bankim is *Itihasa* (literally meaning a record or narration of events as they unfolded over time).

It may be added that reconstituting the *Mahabharata* as *Itihasa*, was also part of Bankim's endeavour to challenge a widely held belief (especially among the Western philologists) that the text's claim to historical authenticity was a dubious one, which had been marshalled by the cunning priestly class for centuries.<sup>24</sup> But Bankim also exercised the benefit of doubt in his own favour in not denying the possibility of

<sup>22</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna Charitra*, The Mahabharata from Historical Point of View, Kindle.

<sup>23</sup> Bankim argues that *The Harivansha* and *The Puranas* are the two other sources which mention Krishna.

<sup>24</sup> Nandini Bhattacharya, "Ecce Homo – Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity", 15.

the epic having some semblance of historicity in it. And here Bankim was not in complete disagreement with the same group of Indologists, who read the *Mahabharata* as a record of the conflict between the Aryans and the Dravidians. They only had issues with the text in its extant form, which had been amalgamated with elements of orature and turned into a literary narrative.<sup>25</sup> Bankim too articulates a similar point in his biographical account in suggesting that indeed the long oral tradition prevalent in India might have added unrealistic and supernatural elements to the epic.

The matter of fact mentions of Krishna as a friend of the Pandavas in *Mahabharata*, and not the protagonist is crucial for Bankim because the text then does not purposefully project Krishna as a human manifestation of divinity or does not give in to inclusion of fantastical elements in the narrative.<sup>26</sup> It does not similarly portray Krishna as a mischievous young boy. The war setting helps Bankim present Krishna as a stoic and astute strategist. Occasionally he is also a compassionate humanitarian. All that is supposedly great about him is judged against his behaviour and actions as a human being. And that is reason enough for Bankim to consider Krishna as a subject worthy enough of a *Charita*. Whether Krishna is a divine figure or not, is left for the readers to deduce, just like the writer Bankim himself sets out to interpret the life of Krishna through a series of logical deductions. The following section highlights the importance of community of readers for an author like Bankim. Building on this section, the paper will move on to discuss Gandhi and his community of readers.

Bankim, who creatively uses rationality to historicize Krishna through a logical interpretation of textual sources, tries to persuade his readers in endorsing his arguments. It is important to understand Bankim's concerted efforts at creating a new image of Krishna by using a modified form of *Charita*, and his careful attention towards the readers as being constitutive of a larger endeavour. In biographical literature, readers occupy a unique position, which sets them apart from readers of novels or even autobiographies (genres which have shared affinities with biographies) in that it is not only an interpretative community but

<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharya, 15.

<sup>26</sup> As several medieval hagiographies were wont to do.

one that is supposed to fulfill the moral purpose of life by emulating the ways of the biographical subject.

Both the biographer and the readers are expected to acknowledge in all humility the exceptionality of the biographical subject. As opposed to fiction, which demands a leap of faith or autobiography, in which humility is not necessarily the dominant virtue, the Charita variant of biography is centered on self-effacing devotion to a higher figure or ideal. The case of *Krishna Charita* and its author may be considered unique because it not only introduces a new kind of life writing but also a new category of biographer.

The writer of the new form of Charita is known not so much for his piety and devotion (of course these attributes too exist) as for his ability to reason and convince.<sup>27</sup> The sighting of miracles by the hagiographer, is now replaced by forceful arguments meant to exhort the reader. In Bankim's case dialogism is a recurrent practice, as Nandini Bhattacharya rightly argues. The reader is believed to be learned and has the ability to think for himself.<sup>28</sup> The readers are persuaded into believing in the greatness of Krishna, and in a more subtle way, in his godliness.

But the purpose behind this exercise, it can be argued, is set in the larger context of cultural nationalism. The advent of colonial modernity and the spread of Western education in India, did not automatically imply an outright rejection of existing tradition. That is possibly why in the later half of the nineteenth century, Indians were keen on reforming religion as opposed to repudiating it. The re-fashioning of Krishna needs to be seen in a similar light. In fact, Bankim's writing of *Krishna Charita* is a way of challenging colonial presumptions through a reworking of traditions.

The selective appropriation of Western knowledge and colonial modernity was Bankim's way of responding to a crisis of identity that is typical of colonization. In his avowed critique of colonial

<sup>27</sup> For more on persuasion in biographies, see Robert Fraser, 'Biographies as Persuasion: The Christian Gospels' in *After Ancient Biography: Modern Types and Classical Archetypes* (London: Palgrave, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Nandini Bhattacharya, "Ecce Homo – Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity", 8.

scholarship, Bankim still functioned within the “derivative discourse” of nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls it.<sup>29</sup> His literary practices and his sense of community, still borrowed from the vocabulary in which the nation was but an extension of a homogenous community formed around religion.

The paper now turns its attention to Gandhi who, in the opening decade of the twentieth century (almost two decades after Bankim), in spite of considering himself a loyal citizen of the empire, and who in spite of being brought up on colonial pedagogy, sought to challenge its claims to civilizational superiority through the ethical apparatus of Satyagraha. But before that it would be helpful to pause and think how and why may one wish to pit Bankim against Gandhi? What could be the similarities and differences? It is not possible to analyse their ideologies in detail here. I shall restrict myself to explaining their activities in the sphere of letters as gateways to their vision of community.

When Bankim passed away in 1894, Gandhi had barely spent a year in South Africa, the country that was to decisively shape his political career. The two never met. In 1924 he made a passing reference to *Krishnacharitra*<sup>30</sup> as one of the many books he had read that year. More importantly in 1936, he again evoked Bankim’s text at the Gujarat Sahitya Parishad, expressing his misgivings over the text’s reception among “illiterate folks.”<sup>31</sup> Bankim’s understanding of the nation (often coextensive with Bengal) was shaped by reading of both vernacular and western literature. Gandhi was undoubtedly well-read even though his reading practices can be considered different from Bankim’s in some way. This can be gleaned from a few chapters of

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<sup>29</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Kirit K Bhavsar, Mark Lindley and Purnima Upadhyaya. *Bibliography of Books read by Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vidyapith, 2011), 35.  
Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Kirit K Bhavsar, Mark Lindley and Purnima Upadhyaya. *Bibliography of Books read by Mahatma Gandhi*, 35.

his autobiography and from recent studies.<sup>32</sup> There were texts that he valued and drew valuable lessons from. If Bankim critically engaged with colonial historiography and used Victorian positivism to his advantage, Gandhi's intellectual makeup was no less influenced by similar sources of knowledge. Unlike Bankim, though, he resisted those very sources; *Hind Swaraj* (1909) is a telling example.<sup>33</sup> The same text became Gandhi's powerful vehicle to critique the western understanding of history.<sup>34</sup> In spite of all the reservations he has against the West's uncritical celebration of modernity and education, Gandhi borrowed from it in significant ways.<sup>35</sup>

This paper discusses two such borrowings, and the way he invested those with ethical purpose: one was the printing press, the other was the commercially successful genre of biography. Gandhi comes across as a contrast to Bankim, notably in the way he invests biographies with a purpose. Through my discussion on "Prophet Mohammad and his Caliphs" (1907), I contend that acknowledging differences and diversity was integral to Gandhi's understanding of communal amity.

Isabel Hofmeyr (2013) rightly remarks that Satyagraha follows "a practice of sovereignty that is rooted in the individual rather than as an abstraction like 'nation' or 'movement'."<sup>36</sup> That is, the self is the very crucible in which the experiments of Satyagraha are to be performed, and that the community is a collective of such individuals, who could

<sup>32</sup> Kirit K Bhavsar, Mark Lindley and Purnima Upadhyaya. *Bibliography of Books read by Mahatma Gandhi*.

Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). As the subtitle of Hofmeyr's book suggests, she argues that Gandhi often contrasted slow reading as a desirable practice against the violently fast-paced life under industrial modernity. She also suggests that gist or moral import of texts were indispensable for Gandhian notion of reading. Hofmeyr's second observation is particularly important to this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, eds. TridipSuhруд and Suresh Sharma (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), "Education", Kindle.

<sup>34</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, "Passive Resistance", Kindle.

<sup>35</sup> Vinay Lal, "Gandhi's West, the West's Gandhi" in *New Literary History*, Spring 2009, 40, NO.2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27760259>

<sup>36</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3.

rigorously follow such ethics. One of the effective ways in which Gandhi put the idea of Satyagraha into practice was through reading, writing and printing.<sup>37</sup>

The International Printing Press, which Gandhi ran in South Africa, envisioned a role of press whereby it could be divested of its mercenary predilections and be used for uniting a community of imperial citizens on the threshold of disenfranchisement.<sup>38</sup> I do not wish to belabour the point on print and ethics in the Gandhian scheme of things, since Isabel Hofmeyr's path breaking book *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (2013) has extensively discussed those issues. For the purpose of this paper, I wish to highlight the following: Gandhi's awareness of the (linguistically and culturally) heterogeneous nature of his community of readers, the publication of short biographical sketches in the periodical *Indian Opinion* and the controversial biography of the Prophet that he published, apologetically withdrew but let it occupy a unique place in his memory.

The *Indian Opinion* (hereafter *IO*) was the link, which could connect Gandhi with his fellow Indians, who were of different tongues,<sup>39</sup> caste and religions. Right from its foundation, Gandhi used *IO* to stress on the idea of duty instead of rights (possibly because the rights of each group could be at loggerheads with others), and it was precisely this notion of duty that could make individuals rally to the idea of a nation.<sup>40</sup> In order to inspire and motivate his readers Gandhi wrote brief biographical sketches, particularly those that valorized dutifulness, truthfulness and sacrifice. He published a six-part biographical piece of Socrates titled "Story of a Soldier of Truth." There was similarly a short sketch of the Italian revolutionary Joseph Mazzini. It may help to note that Mazzini became an iconic figure in the early decades of the twentieth century for revolutionaries across the world, and there

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<sup>37</sup> Bankim had hailed the printing press as the "mightiest instrument of civilization."

<sup>38</sup> Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptations of Violence* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> In paying attention to the linguistic diversity of his readers, Gandhi simultaneously published *IO* in four languages-English, Hindi, Tamil and Gujarati.

<sup>40</sup> See Hofmeyr and Devji's respective accounts on how Gandhi's idea of nation was not premised on territoriality.

were several biographies written to inspire people of various political hues.<sup>41</sup>

For Gandhi, Mazzini was important because of his emphasis on the importance of duties particularly in his essay "Duties of Man."<sup>42</sup> There were others apart from Mazzini, whose lives appeared exemplary to Gandhi, such as Florence Nightingale, Maxim Gorky, Abraham Lincoln, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar et al. *IO* also sometimes carried visual portraits of eminent individuals; Gandhi urged his readers to hang those portraits on their walls and draw inspiration from those role models. The biography of the Prophet, should therefore, appear as a continuation of what Gandhi was doing. But it stood out for other reasons. The biography was meant to carry Gandhi's message of uniting Hindus and Muslims in South Africa. It aimed to foster a sense of service towards each other, and to "spread education" and culture among them.<sup>43</sup>

When he began the biographical series on 22 June 1907, Gandhi declared that

we propose to give every week the biography of the Prophet written by a famous writer, Washington Irving. The biography deserves to be read by both Hindus and Muslims. Most Hindus are ignorant of the career of the Prophet. Most Muslims are ignorant of the research made by Englishmen and of what they write about the Prophet. The history by Washington is likely to be of benefit to both these classes.<sup>44</sup>

An avid reader of several biographies (especially of religious figures), himself, Gandhi urged his readers to understand each other's faith better by reading about their leaders. Gandhi had read two biographical accounts of the Prophet though he came to paraphrase

<sup>41</sup> See Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> See Gita Srivastava, *Mazzini and his Impact on the Indian National Movement* (Meerut: Chugh Publication, 1982), 261.

<sup>43</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 7* (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Government of India, 1962), 16, <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-7.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Gandhi, 16.

only one of them. He had read Thomas Carlyle's famous opus *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841)<sup>45</sup> and had been particularly pleased by Carlyle's portrayal of the Prophet, as he had been with Irving's *Life of Mahomet* (1850).<sup>46</sup> Such was the impact of these books that on several occasions he fondly recalled reading them, admitting that these books had raised the Prophet to a higher pedestal in his estimation.<sup>47</sup> But Gandhi singled out Irving for praise for not maligning the Prophet's character as several others in the West had previously done. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the nature of Irving's biography of the Prophet.<sup>48</sup> So, I shall restrict myself to Gandhi's use of the well-known narrative of the Prophet's life.

Gandhi chose to present to his readers not a full-fledged and chronological account but only the 'substance' of the Prophet's life.<sup>49</sup> A common practice among popular British periodicals was to publish brief sketches for readers to quickly consume; it was also simultaneously a prudent step to cut down the printing cost. Certainly paucity of space would not have allowed Gandhi to write an extensive narrative, but the moral, educative and political purpose of writing the biography (or rather the summarising of it) took Gandhi to the roots of those biographical traditions, in which 'life'<sup>50</sup> was considered distinct from and superior to historical events.<sup>51</sup> At a time, when the Indians had to be brought together under a common platform and

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* 1841, eds. David R Sorensen and Brent E. Kinsler, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Washington Irving, *The Life of Mahomet*, (Henry G. Bohn, 1850).

<sup>47</sup> For more on Gandhi's access to these books, see Kirit K Bhavsar, Mark Lindley and Purnima Upadhyaya. *Bibliography of Books read by Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vidyapith, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Predictably there are quite a few works on Washington Irving's biography of Prophet Mohammad, both critical and adulatory. For more on the writing and reception of the book, see Jeffery Einboden, "Washington Irving in Muslim Translation: Revising the American "Mahomet" *Translation and Literature*, Spring, 2009, 18, No. 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40340117>

For a survey of various biographies of Prophet Mohammad in the West, see Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 7*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Fraser, "Ancient Biographers and Modern Classicists: What is Truth" in *After Ancient Biography: Modern Types and Classical Archetypes* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 50.

made to rally around a cause that was over and above their cultural and religious differences, the biography of the Prophet could have served an important purpose. However that was not how things were meant to be.

The remaining parts of the biography were written and set in type, as Mahadev Desai tells us but were eventually not published after protests from Muslims over issues of the Prophet's marriage and "pre-Islam pagan Arabia."<sup>52</sup> In other words, it was when the biography took a historical turn, it ran into trouble and could never see the light of the day. On 31 August 1907, Gandhi rued the untimely rescinding of publication. It might be worth quoting his message to his readers at some length,

In utter good faith and out of great regard, we started publishing a translation [of Irving's book], with a view to serving the Indian community and, in particular, the Muslim brethren. Among the biographies written by white men, Washington Irving's work is regarded as excellent. On the whole, he has shown the wonderful greatness of the Prophet, and has presented the good teachings of Islam in shining colours. Whether this is so or not, we believe it is the duty of every Muslim to know what the whites write about Islam and its Founder. In translating the book, our object was to help them perform this duty. While the translation was being given, some of our readers were pained to read the account of the Prophet's marriage in chapter V, and suggested that we should stop publishing the life.<sup>53</sup>

He underlines the idea of 'Indian community'<sup>54</sup> and reiterates that such a biography was written not just for any one religious community. But what is important to note is that his Indian community, unlike what we saw in the case of Bankim could not have been premised on the idea of one religion alone. In fact he carefully adds that, "this journal belongs to the whole of the Indian community. We have no desire to injure needlessly the feelings of anyone in any way."<sup>55</sup> The community had to be imagined as a homogenous lot only if the constituent elements were individually identified, their distinctions

<sup>52</sup> Tridip Suhrud, "Indian Opinion and the Making of a Satyagrahi", 118.

<sup>53</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 7*, 172.

<sup>54</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 7*, 172.

acknowledged and their sentiments respected. But keeping an eye on those who might have wished to read the discontinued biography of Prophet Mohammad, Gandhi asked them to write to him so that the possibility of bringing out the biography in book form could be considered later. But that did not happen. However, at several stages in his life, he kept going back to Irving's biography of the Prophet, and read several other accounts of the lives of Muslim saints.<sup>56</sup>

To conclude, I have attempted to show in this paper, the role that biographies play in shaping communities and the ways in which biographers imagine their roles in the process. Referring to the wider context of colonialism, I have analysed Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's respective biographical accounts of two different religious figures. My intention has been to show how South Asian biographers like the two I have mentioned, selectively appropriated and even critiqued the idea of history writing, used literature in new and imaginative ways to forge not just interpretative but also ethical and political communities.

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<sup>56</sup> For more on Gandhi's reading of Islamic texts see Amit Dey, "Islam and Gandhi: A Historical Perspective". *Social scientist*, 41, no. 3/4, March/April 2013. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23610469>.

## Uses of History and Literature: Intersections and Convergences

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Smita Banerjee & Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi

In popular imagination History is associated with facts while literature with fiction. However the boundaries between the two are not so stark; indeed despite the disciplinary domains History is no longer understood to be 'authentic' and 'true' based on facts and concrete evidence of the archive, and literature as 'merely' imaginative or creative. The word intersection means a place where two or more things or terms intersect or cross each other to converge, collide, blend, disrupt or coalesce. Both History and Literature are constructed through language except of course older forms that predate the written word where oral literature and oral history were differently narrated through stories that were retold and sung by bards. History and fiction intersect in epics. Instances of these oral artefacts are epics such as the Homeric epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, the Sumerian epic *The Epic of Gilgamesh* etc. For instance *The Iliad* presents the conflict between the Greeks led by Agamemnon and the Trojans led by King Priam and it took place in the late Bronze Age. Even a surface reading of the epic shows the profusion of stories, of heroic adventures, the moral strictures woven alongside the depiction of the epic battle of Troy which is accepted to be an actual war.<sup>1</sup> In the Indian context, the contentious and complementary relationship between history and literature plays itself out in the context of the two epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. However it is pertinent to note that these two epics are not monolithic documents that provide unmediated insight into some imagined Vedic pure past, the diversity of scholarship and debate testifies to the presence of competing viewpoints and multiple

<sup>1</sup> See Introduction to *The Iliad*, trans. Peter Green (Oakland California: University of California Press, 2015). Kindle edition. He mentions the varied ancient historians from Herodotus to Thucydides and Aristotle whose accounts mention the Trojan war. See also *The Iliad*, Homer, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Barry B. Powell, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Kindle edition, for other evidence regarding dates and sources.

traditions of understanding history and lived life that constitute the compendium of ideas contained in these two epics.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest English epic *Beowulf*<sup>3</sup> draws upon history to create its storyline. While it is difficult to separate historical elements from narrative elements, we come to know a great deal about ancient Germanic culture; about the relationship between a lord and his thanes; and hints of ancient battles not recorded elsewhere. Chronicles, an older form of history, is a chronological account of events of a nation, an era or a king's rule; *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, published in the sixteenth century<sup>4</sup> is an invaluable historical source that incorporates stories. History recounts past events through language, literature too imagines the past, the future or the contemporary through language.

<sup>2</sup> Historians and archaeologists such as BB Lal, KP Jayaswal, AS Altekar, FE Pargiter, and HC Raychaudhury have all worked with the premise that the events of the epic are real ones, and have tried to establish a date and chronology for the story.<http://www.slideshare.net/sfih108/mahabharata-historicity-prof-b-b-lal>.

Others such as S.S.N Murthy reject the idea of historical veracity in *The Mahabharata*, and instead believe it to be fable. Murthy, S.S.N. *The Questionable Historicity of the Mahabharata* <<http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademy.com/ejvs1005/ejvs1005article.pdf>. For example A K Ramanujan's essay, "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1987) encapsulates the different 'tellings' of this epic that can be found across India and South Asia across 2500 years. See A. K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1991), 22–48. Both the epics have many literary retellings such as Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, (New Delhi: Viking Press, 1989), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), drawing upon *The Mahabharata*; Devdutt Patnaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2013) and Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* (Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019) based on the Ramayana, to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> *Beowulf*, Anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet referred to as Beowulf poet. It was composed between the eighth and early eleventh century in England, in Old English.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles England, Scotland, and Ireland*. ed. Vernon F. Snow. (New York: AMS, 1965). According to Igor Djordjevic the *Chronicles* narrative contains themes and rhetorical figures that define heroic and chivalrous ideals about the nation, the ruler, the people. See Igor Djordjevic *Holinshed's Nation: Ideals, Memory, and Practical Policy in the Chronicles* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

If literary tools such as language are indispensable for historians, history too provides ready sources for different genres of literature such as the war novel or the historical novel. From the above-mentioned ancient and medieval epics to modern novels like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*<sup>5</sup> and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*,<sup>6</sup> these narratives use real historical events to plot the lives and experiences of the fictional characters detailing the conflicts and the impact of these on people and societies. War narratives need historical authentication without which they lose verisimilitude. War fiction is a creative effort that threads different histories, societies, nations, people and different periods of history into a coherent narrative. They are the best sources to link the past, present and the future by generating new meaning through a representation of history and narrative. Other examples of literature using historical events and historical personages could be bio-fiction<sup>7</sup> that attempt to reconstruct the past through personal biography of the historical figure. A fascinating account of co-related historical events that inspired literary texts is collated in Anthony Quinn's *History in Literature: A Reader's Guide to 20th-Century History and the Literature It Inspired*.<sup>8</sup> Listing historical personages or events alphabetically, this reader's guide provides a ready resource and enumerates literary texts based on historical events. Catherine Gallagher's book provides another way in which history can appear in fictional accounts which re-imagines factual historical events to construct<sup>9</sup> 'counterfactual narratives'. This enterprise that challenges the accepted and received

<sup>5</sup> Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), trans. Ann Dunnigan, (New York: A Signet Classic, New American Library, rpt. 1968) provides the historical backdrop of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 against which individual lives are played out.

<sup>6</sup> *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) describes a soldiers' experience in a fictional account of the Battle of Chancellorsville (May 1863) during the American Civil War (1861-1865). *The Red Badge of Courage* - American English <[https://americanenglish.state.gov/resource\\_files/PDF](https://americanenglish.state.gov/resource_files/PDF)>

<sup>7</sup> See Joanny Moulin short summary on this trend in literary writings and its use of historical events in *BIOFICTION* <https://biographysociety.org/2015/12/20/biofiction/>

<sup>8</sup> Edward Quinn, *History in Literature: A Reader's Guide to 20th-Century History and the Literature it Inspired*, (Facts on File: New York, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018).

version of history to create fiction can be understood with reference to the changing ideas about historiography that have taken place earlier.

The critique of ‘facticity’ of history is linked to the questioning of ‘grand narratives’ of progress and evolution of human society. History is no longer regarded as mere documentation of the past. History, too, is viewed as a discursive practice which is written/produced at a particular moment, within and from a specific ideological context and mediated through the individual historian’s subject position. Collingwood’s<sup>10</sup> notion of a subjective historian who writes history by critically reflecting on the sources, Foucault’s<sup>11</sup> idea of ‘history’ as one of the discursive practices which challenges the evolutionary model of teleological progress that history and traditional historians subscribed to and Hayden White’s idea of fictionality of historical discourses that use narrative emplotment,<sup>12</sup> have altered the field of historiography. He argues that history is most successful when it embraces the “narrativity”, since it is what allows history to be meaningful. It is important to remember that both literature and history use archives to document and narrate, these narratives need to be interpreted. The convergences and intersections between history and literature then are visible in the tools and structures that the writers of history and literature use; both oral and written archives, epics, folklore, stories, memories, all constitute valid sources for both. Both history and literature then are discursive, and provisional in nature, they need to be interpreted as modes of representation that can give insights into the socio-cultural, political, historical lives of peoples and communities or events, epochs. In effect Foucault argued in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that the nineteenth century western obsession with history is flawed as it does not address the relationship of power that is embedded in historical events and socio-political structures. Therefore in his view

<sup>10</sup> See R.B. Smith, R.G. Collingwood’s definition of historical knowledge, *History of European Ideas*, 33:3, (2007) 350-371. DOI: 10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2006.11.010

<sup>11</sup> See Dino Felluga, “Modules on Foucault: On History.” *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*.

<<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/newhistoricism/modules/foucaulthistory.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” <[http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)>

the historian should investigate the 'problem' or the emergence of institutions to understand a particular historical period.<sup>13</sup>

All of these approaches that examine the intersections of history and literature have also impacted literary theory and teaching of literary texts. One can cite the argument presented by Peter Barry in *Beginning theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (1995)<sup>14</sup> to understand these trends. Barry points out that an earlier model of literary criticism which used historical insights to analyse literature privileged the literary text over the historical context and considered history as background material to understand the literary text. This method was critiqued by theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt who coined the term, New Historicism. In his influential book *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*(1980), Greenblatt illustrates his theory by focussing on the writings of major Renaissance public figures and writers. He suggested that in this period questions of self and its imagination heavily influenced the literary texts. Moving away from a mere aesthetical appraisal, this book opened newer areas of critical inquiry into Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as a product of the immediate social, political and cultural conditions of its production and interpretation. Therefore history and literature are given equal weightage: "Instead of a literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other."<sup>15</sup> To quote the American critic Louis Montrose it "is a combined interest in the textuality of history, and the historicity of texts."<sup>16</sup>

This "interest in the textuality of history and historicity of texts" is an invaluable observation that alerts us to the uses of history and literature for students and teachers of both disciplines. In our current context we

<sup>13</sup> See Felluga, 'Modules on Foucault: On History' <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/newhistoricism/modules/foucaulthistory.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and cultural theory*, (Manchester University Press :Manchester & New York,1995).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

are continuously emerging as interdisciplinarians, navigating across both as we study, analyse and interpret texts and documents that are significant for reading and interpretation.

## Interrelationship: History, Literature and Translation

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Anita Bhela

The relationship between history and literature is infinite. We have historical narratives where truth and fiction intermingle. We quarrel over just and unjust representations of people and events in literature, and many a time run into controversies leading to the banning of books, for the idea of history is interwoven with the idea of nation and pride. Then there are events that history glosses over but which literature seeks out and focuses on, at times making historians rethink history. A constant tussle prevails between the historian who relies on facts and the literary writer who tries to refute recorded history/or create it anew. History and Literature act upon each other in very decisive ways. In fact, literary nomenclatures are often defined by historical events: Colonial and Post-Colonial literature; Commonwealth literature; and in the Indian context, Partition and Post-Partition literature. Historical events often lead to constructive creation of 'new literatures'. Similarly, Roman and Renaissance Literatures were also the outcome of historical and political processes. However, in both periods, the proliferating activity of translation played an extremely important role and brought about an intermingling of cultures that led to the creation of 'new literatures'. In the period of classical antiquity, Hellenism greatly influenced and contributed to the development of Roman literature. Later the contact with outside literatures, especially Greek and Roman, because of socio-political changes brought vast changes in the form, content and style of English Renaissance Literature. In both antiquity and Renaissance periods, the act and activity of translation led to adaptations, innovations and intermingling of cultures and ideas.<sup>1</sup>

During the Hellenistic Age i.e. the period between Alexander's death (323 B.C.E.) and the victory of Octavius at Actium (31 B.C.E.), Greek culture diffused most forcefully in different parts of Asia, North

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Taylor, "Introduction: The Translations of Renaissance Latin", <25780-Article Text-65567-1-10-20151015.pdf>.and "Translations from Greek into Latin and Arabic during the Middle Ages: Searching for the Classical Tradition", *Speculum*, Maria Mavroudi, Vol.90, No.1 (January 2015) 28-59.

Africa, Southern Italy and Egypt. Greek culture, as it spread, fused with the native cultures. The invasion of Hellenism into Roman life and letters was an event of enormous impact. During the period from 241 B.C.E. (the end of the First Punic War) to 70 B.C.E., Rome rose to great heights, completing the conquest of the Italian peninsula and extending its dominion in every direction.<sup>2</sup> The result was an influx of wealth and ideas from all over the Mediterranean world. The Roman politician Flaminius (265-217 BC) declared Greece free in 196 B.C.E. but Greece and Rome continued their close contact. Greek art, literature, and ideas flowed continually to Rome. Though the absorption of Greek culture by Rome was an intense process, it was also a slow one, because temperamental differences led to a certain initial resistance on the part of the Romans, the more conservative of whom tended to regard Greek culture as decadent, effete, and unmanly. Even so, the Hellenization of Roman culture continued in spite of this early distrust, and few cultural areas reflect this process more clearly than does Roman drama.

Moreover, the new Hellenism made itself felt on dramatic forms quite early; in fact, the most significant historical event in the Hellenization of Roman drama occurred before the First Punic War in 272 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> In that year, the fall of Tarentum, a seemingly insignificant element in the conquest of Italy by the Romans, brought to Rome one Livius Andronicus and with him knowledge of Greek Tragedy and New Comedy. This in time led to the domination of Roman drama by Greek models and the consequent suppression of all but a few of the native Italian dramatic forms. Early Roman Dramatic Forms that existed prior to the Hellenization of Rome were crude and undeveloped. *Fescennine*<sup>4</sup> verse was a merry, impromptu entertainment that grew out of wedding and harvest celebrations. An important element of this form was alternating song, sung by rival groups. Performers wore rudimentary masks, but *Fescennine* verse remained improvisational in nature and was never elevated to a literary form.

<sup>2</sup> *Western Civilizations*, Vol. A, (Special Indian Edition) ed. Edward Macnall Burns, Philip Lee Ralph et al., (Delhi: Goyal Saab, 1991), 211-229.

<sup>3</sup> *Western Civilizations*, Vol. A, ed. Edward Macnall Burns, Philip Lee Ralph et al., 238-40.

<sup>4</sup> For some of these terms, see *A Companion to Latin Literature*, ed. Stephen Harrison, (Blackwell Publishing, 2005, Kindle Version 2008).

The *Satura*, documented by Livy,<sup>5</sup> was a country stage entertainment. The *Satura* was a medley of song, dance, and dialogue. Though it lacked a connected plot, it was not mere improvisation, with dramatic elements more developed than in *Fescennine* verse. *Satura* would have evolved into Roman Comedy, had the influx of Hellenism not intervened with the import of New Comic models.

The *fabula Atellana* (Atellan farce)<sup>6</sup> is perhaps the most dramatic of the indigenous Italian forms. Originating in rural Campania, it flourished in the third century B.C.E. There was dialogue and music, and the masked performers acted out short plots based on country life. Cheating and trickery were important components of the plot, and riddles occurred often in the dialogue. The most distinctive feature of *fabula Atellana* was a set of fixed characters: Maccus, a fool; Pappus, a silly old man; Dossenus, a clever swindler; and Bucco, a glutton. These were the most important dramatic and pre-dramatic forms of early Italy. There were also Etruscan dances, accompanied by the flute, to which Roman youths later added dialogue and gestures. Gladiatorial contests, miscellaneous forms of casual mime, such as juggling, acrobatics, and animal imitation. Many of these continued a vigorous existence, in the shadow of the drama imported from Greece.

Though Livius Andronicus arrived in Rome as a slave, following the fall of Tarentum, he was manumitted. In 240 B.C.E., when it was decided to expand the customary *Ludi Romani* (Roman Games) in honor of the victory in the First Punic War, Livius presented one tragedy and one comedy, both Latin adaptations of Greek originals - a fifth century B.C.E. tragedy and a New Comedy. The event established among the Romans a taste for adaptations and in addition, a precedent was set for the use of New Comedy, rather than Old, as a model. The resulting Latin comedies came to be known by the term *fibula palliata*

<sup>5</sup> For a critical analysis see George L. Hendrickson, "The Dramatic *Satura* and the Old Comedy at Rome" in *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 5, No.1 (1894) 1-30. Accessed July 8,2021. doi: 10.2307/288208.

<sup>6</sup> References for *fibula Atellana*, Livius Andronicus, *fibula palliata*, Gnaeus Naevius, Quintus Ennius, *fabulae togatae*, *contaminatio* can be found in *Oxford References to Classical Studies*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com).

(literally, “a play in Greek dress”), because the Greek pallium, a cloak not worn by Romans, was retained onstage.

At this point, a single playwright would often write both tragedy and comedy, though increasing specialization followed soon afterward. The remains of Livius are few, but it is known that the plays were adaptations and not mere translations. Gnaeus Naevius (270-201 BC) began producing plays in 235 B.C.E., showing more independence and originality rather than an emphasis on the Trojan cycle. Naevius’s native spirit asserts itself in tragedies based on historical Roman events. In fact, he invented the genre. Some of Naevius’s comedies mixed several Greek sources in one play (a phenomenon later known as *contaminatio*). Alongside were the *fabulae togatae*, “plays in Roman dress,” which were original dramas performed in native Roman costume. Parasites, braggart warriors, slaves, masters, and lovers populate the comedies, and a vigorous, coarse spirit abounds. The fragments of Quintus Ennius (239-169 BC) include two comic titles, and some twenty tragedies. His tragedies show Greek Euripidean themes. Ennius’s tragedies demonstrate great originality in spite of their reliance on Greek models. Ennius advanced the use of meter and language and his tragedies mark an important stage in the development of Roman drama. Following Ennius, the writing of drama became specialized, and the composition of tragedy and comedy became separate skills.

Formal Roman comedies like their Greek precursors were always presented at state religious festivals. The most important of these were the Ludi Romani, in September, and the Ludi Plebei, in November.<sup>7</sup> The costume of the actors, which gave the *fabula palliata* its name, consisted of a tunic with a Greek pallium, or cloak, worn over it.

The Roman plays were not mere slavish copying but adaptations with a difference. Music was more prominent in Roman Comedy than in its New Comic models. Plays were accompanied throughout by the double-flute, except for the most prosaic dialogue, and all the actors could sing. This represented a marked change from the Greek New

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<sup>7</sup> See Lily Ross Taylor, “The Opportunities for Dramatic Performances in the Time of Plautus and Terence” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol.68 (1937), 284-304. Accessed July8, 2021. Doi:10.2307/283270.

Comedies, which used musical intervals only to divide the five acts. The spectators at Roman Comedies of this period were a rowdy group drawn from every level of society.

Titus Maccius Plautus (?-184 B.C.) was one of the two great masters of Roman Comedy, the other being Terence (185-159? B.C.). The plots of Plautus's plays are Romanized versions of earlier Greek plays of the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. written by the Greek playwrights such as Menander (242-291 B.C.) and Philemon (362-262 B.C.). Plautus translated, adapted and reworked the plays. He retained the Greek setting, but inserted Roman allusions and Latin puns to give his plays a Roman flavor for greater local appeal. Of this prolific playwright, there are twenty surviving plays and substantial fragments of a twenty-first; all are *fabulae palliatae*, based on Greek New Comedies. Plautus was no servile translator and he endowed the New Comic plots with his unique comic vigor. The Greek elements of the plays include the plots, the meters, the settings, the costumes, the clever slaves, the tragic echoes, and the general attitude toward life. On the other hand, there is much that is Roman and specifically Plautine: the use of language, the modification of the plots, the dialogue repartee, the severe treatment of slaves, the coarseness, the injunctions for the attention of the audience, and the specific references to Roman customs, institutions, and historical events. The characters of Plautus's comedies conform largely to the New Comic stock system, though there is less serious development and exploration of character than in Greek dramatist Menander. The plays were written in meters adapted and transformed from the Greek. Thus, the influence of Hellenism through translation, imitation and adaptation led to the development of Roman drama.

Perhaps unusually, "periods of both peace and war have been credited with allowing the Renaissance to spread" and become a European, then global, phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the end of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) between England and factions in France has been credited with allowing Renaissance ideas to penetrate these nations, as thoughts and expenses turned away from conflict. In contrast, the involvement of France in wars within Italy has been

<sup>8</sup> Robert Wilde, <http://europeanhistory.about.com/od/therenaissance/a/causesrenaissance.htm>

credited with aiding the spread of the Renaissance to that nation, as armies and commanders encountered Renaissance ideas in Italy and brought them back home.

The Renaissance was characterized by a revival of learning. The Renaissance that began in Italy passed from Italy to France and slowly spread throughout Europe reaching England in the 15th and 16th centuries. Scholars in Constantinople fled from the Turks to Italy with their precious books, when the Turks captured Constantinople. The invention of the Printing Press in mid 15<sup>th</sup> century helped spread knowledge by multiplying the books. The Renaissance movement freed men from the narrow limits of medieval thought and revealed to them the limitless possibilities of life. A spirit of inquiry and experiment developed. Some bad translations of Aristotle's Latin versions of the Arabic Aristotle's *Poetics* were available in Chaucer's time but were ineffective, maybe because the moment and the translation should combine to make an impact. Not until near the end of the fifteenth century did the Greek text of the *Poetics* become known in Italy. Even before this time, Englishmen were going to Italy to learn Greek. The study of the classical languages and literatures and the great revival of ancient learning slowly but surely made itself felt not only on the Continent but also in England, there fostered by distinguished scholars such as John Colet (1519-52), Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), William Grocyn (1446-1519) and Bishop Latimer (1487-1555). Englishmen rapidly became familiar with the great body of classical literature. As early as 1499, Erasmus (1466-1536) had noted the remarkable progress of Englishmen in ancient learning. Writing to his friend Robert Fisher (1469-1535) in Italy, he enthusiastically exclaims:

I have met with so much kindness and so much learning, not hackneyed and trivial, but deep, accurate, ancient Latin and Greek, that but for the curiosity of seeing it, I do not now so much care for Italy. When I hear my Colet, I seem to be listening to Plato himself. In Grocyn, who does not marvel at such a perfect round of learning? What can be more acute, profound, and delicate than the judgment of Linacre? What has Nature created more sweet, more happy, than the genius of Thomas More? I need not go through the list. It is marvelous how general and abundant is the

harvest of ancient learning in this country, to which you ought all the sooner to return.<sup>9</sup>

At first, in the middle of the fifteenth century itself English students were visiting Italian universities. This was followed by the introduction of the study of Greek in England. A transition from the medieval world to the modern age slowly took place. A new understanding of the historical process came about which gave birth to a modernity in which sacred and secular values were not necessarily opposed. Human beings were thought to be endowed with the power to create – a power previously reserved for God alone.

The medieval Church confined the laity to four walls of the church and frowned on the pleasures of life. Greek literature that celebrated life and man's achievements served as a source of inspiration for them. Greek art, literature and other philosophical works integrated art and spirituality. The study of Greek and Greek art fascinated the Italians. The more they read the more they wanted to read and discover. There was a continual search for new texts and new works of art. Volumes were pulled out from the deep recesses of the libraries and other works discovered in Roman villas. Besides, old known existing works were reread and reinterpreted. Aristotle was studied and revitalized, and Plato's philosophy keenly studied and appreciated. 'Human' and 'humanism' were the buzzwords of the Renaissance and the Renaissance scholars took pride in calling themselves 'humanists'.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Lodge (1558-1625), an Oxford man, was well acquainted with many of Aristotle's writings. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), as an Oxford man, had read some of Aristotle at an early age. In 1574, he wrote to his tutor, Hubert Languet,<sup>11</sup> of his desire to master Greek so that he might read Aristotle in the original; the current translations

<sup>9</sup> Preserved Smith, *Erasmus: A Study of his Life Ideals and Place in History*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1962), 82. <https://archive.org>

<sup>10</sup> Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2006). For a populist biography of the Renaissance, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*, (London: The Bodley Head, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Berry, "Hubert Languet and the 'making' of Philip Sidney" in *Studies in Philology*, 85, No. 3, 1988. 305-20. Accessed July 8, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174308>.

struck him as inadequate. In addition to his first-hand acquaintance with Aristotle, Sidney, in his foreign travels, evidently had seen the commentaries, on the *Poetics*, of the leading Italian critics, Scaliger (1484-1558) and probably Castelvetro (1546-1616). Therefore, his *Defence of Poesie*,<sup>12</sup> or *An Apologie for Poetrie*, probably written before 1583, but not published until 1595, became a typical Renaissance blend of Aristotle and Horace, with a good measure of Plato thrown in. The aim of poetry, to Sidney, was didactic; the ideal poet was more of a popular philosopher than an artist. His conception of poetic criticism, however, was the most marked advance towards the classical, and towards Aristotle, that any Englishman had yet made. Sidney was fairly well acquainted with Greek literature—with Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, and Xenophon, among others; and, with the aid of the Italians, he managed to grasp the outstanding features of Aristotle's theory of poetry.

Sidney's brief remarks on the drama are of peculiar interest to the student of Aristotle, for the *Defence of Poesie* marked the beginning of dramatic criticism in England. This beginning was essentially Aristotelian, and we shall find that for many years dramatic criticism continued to be so. With the aid of the Italian commentators, Sidney managed to grasp many of the leading doctrines of the *Poetics*. Thus, the *Defence of Poesie* stands out as an epitome of literary criticism in the Renaissance, and the beginning in England of that Aristotelian criticism which, with varying fortunes, has persisted to the present day. The scholars of early Tudor times established the study of classical literature while Sidney and his followers established a classical criticism. As far as Aristotelian theory goes the *Defence of Poesie* stands almost alone.

Sir Philip Sidney laid the foundations of English literary criticism with essentially classical and Aristotelian materials. For nearly two centuries, English criticism was to remain classical and Aristotelian. "Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* occupies a central and even a pivotal position in both the history of literary theory and the history of ideas."<sup>13</sup> Sidney structures his defense of poetry as a classical judicial oration—a classical oration. He "introduced the Aristotelian and

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<sup>12</sup> Ed. Henry Morley. Ebook, Project Gutenberg, release date October 8, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Mack, *Sidney's Poetics: Imitating Creation*, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 1.

Horatian strains to English criticism.”<sup>14</sup> Sidney describes the bards as “vates,” from the Latin for “Makers” and Sidney may be regarded as a major importer of Italian literary theory. Another central, representative figure of the renaissance is Edmund Spenser (1569-1599), in whom all influences – native, classical, French Renaissance, and Italian mingle and accumulate. To quote J. W. Mackail,

The classicism of the sixteenth century was a very mixed and intricate thing. On one side, following the great Italian humanists, it plunged deeply into Plato and the Platonic school. On another, Ovid was its master, and it sought to reinstate the brilliance, the dexterity, the accomplishment, which the Graeco-Roman civilization had reached before it fell into decay. On yet another, it read largely and deeply in ancient history, to gain knowledge of the past which might be applied to actual life, and to recover what it described in a compendious phrase as the wisdom of the ancients.<sup>15</sup>

The Platonism expressly set forth in poem such as ‘The Hymn to Heavenly Beauty’<sup>16</sup> by Spenser (1552-1599), was the side of Greek literature that appealed most strongly to the Renaissance. It satisfied, and fed to a greater intensity, their sense of vastness, their intoxication with language, their longing to transcend all limits.

In England, Hellenization took place on a much larger scale with a greater influence of ideas, which though originally foreign, were given native colors through copious commentaries that were written about them. In the commentaries, one fourth was the translated text and three fourth of the page was filled with comments and interpretations. This is what F.O Mathiessen says about the translation activity of the Renaissance:

A study of Elizabethan translations is a study of the means by which the Renaissance came to England. The nation had grown conscious of its cultural inferiority to the continent and suddenly burned with the desire to excel its rivals in letters, as well as in ships and gold. The translator’s work was an act of patriotism. He, too, as well as the voyager and merchant,

<sup>14</sup> Mack, “Sidney’s Poetics”, 5.

<sup>15</sup> J. W. Mackail, *The Springs of Helicon: A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Spenserians.cath.vt.edu/Text Record.

could do some good for his country; he believed that foreign books were just as important for England's destiny as the discoveries of her seamen, and he brought them into his native speech with all the enthusiasm of a conquest. An important thing to remember from the outset is that the Elizabethan translator did not write for the learned alone, but for the whole country. He possessed a style admirably fitted to this end.<sup>17</sup>

According to Matthiessen, the Renaissance translator "had an extraordinary eye for specific detail. Whenever possible he substituted a concrete image for an abstraction, a verb that carried the picture of an action for a general statement."<sup>18</sup> This imaginative translation resulted "in an increased liveliness, a heightened dramatic pitch that often carried the words into a realm of imagination and feeling unsuggested by the original."<sup>19</sup> Matthiessen further argues that though theoretically it might not be possible to defend this manner and method of translating, yet "in practice it succeeded as no other method could. For it made the foreign classics rich with English associations; it took Plutarch and Montaigne deep into national consciousness."<sup>20</sup> Historical events, imaginative and exponential translations, the moment, the shared culture and the literary genius combined to bring about great "new literatures" of the Romans and of the English Renaissance that continue to be read with enthusiasm even today.

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<sup>17</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *Translation, An Elizabethan Art*, (Cambridge, MA: CUP, 1931), 3. Accessed on July 8, 2021. [babel.hathitrust.org](http://babel.hathitrust.org).

<sup>18</sup> Matthiessen, "Translation", 3-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## Book Review

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Aruna Chakravarti, *Suralakshmi Villa*, (Delhi: Picador India, 2020), ISBN 9389109396, pp 313, Price: Rs 375/-

Purusharth Chawla

### Écriture Féminine: How *Suralakshmi Villa* Undercuts the Male Gaze

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

-*The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous

It is very well to say it is Allah's will and we have to follow it. He has made it nice and easy for the men and stamped a cruel fate on every woman's brow. No wonder! Being a man himself.

-*Suralakshmi Villa*, Aruna Chakravarti

Aruna Chakravarti does what Helene Cixous suggests in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). She creates strong women who liberate themselves and each other in her most recent work *Suralakshmi Villa* (2020). There are Ruksanas and Ojjus in this land—the self-effacing ones who have internalised patriarchy, considering their lives turned into hell by men around them as their only reality. Yet there is a Suralakshmi, Nayantara, Deepa in this world—the ones who know what they want in life and are capable of making their decisions, liberating not only themselves but for all Eiduns and Ojjus. Hence as Cixous says, “Women must write women”, Chakravarti sketches a land of women, for the women, the idea of sisterhood being at the core of the novel.

Chakravarti embarks on a journey of writing a chronicle set in two different worlds altogether. One a modern, upper-middle-class family of IAS Rai Bahadur Indranath Choudhury, a husband and a father to four daughters. The other is Moin-ud-din, a poor goatherd, with a wife and four daughters in the family to feed. Two extreme worlds—

from the elite world of Delhi to that of downtrodden Malda. There is an extensive use of the economic divide, class structure, religion, societal norms, patriarchy, et al. that Chakravarti uses to bring forth the struggle in the lives of her women characters. Delhi is a modern setting representing independence not only in the background but also in the actions of the characters. For instance, Indranath Choudhury's wife, Lakshmi Debi, announces that her daughters will study for as long as they want and will marry when they wish to, to men of their choice, after her first daughter, Mahalakshmi, is widowed at a young age due to comorbidities of her husband. In Malda, the setting and images of poverty and struggle leave a lasting impression offering the readers no ideal world but an insight into an uncomfortable society where women struggle yet fight the distorted reality of phallic being supreme subsequently breaking away from the shambles of patriarchy. We see this in Moin-ud-Din raping his daughter, beating his wife, or a community of men burning to ashes Zaitoon Bibi's hut. Characters such as Ojju and Ruksana have internalised patriarchy, with Ruksana believing it to be her destiny to be beaten by her husband and Ojju treating other women harshly because of her father's influence. From an account of these characters in the form of letters, memoirs, flashbacks—stories from a distant past—that add layers to the novel we are introduced to the character of Suralakshmi and her relationship with Eidun.

Indranath Choudhary's third daughter, Suralakshmi, is a gynaecologist based in Delhi. She is a headstrong woman, doing what she thinks is right for her, not giving an ear to her family and relatives' opposition, an enigma whose thoughts we are not provided access to. She decides not to marry despite family pressure and then chooses an already married man, Moinak Sen, when she is thirty-one and gives birth to a son. She adopts Eidun on one of her visits to Malda when she sees her vomiting blood and understands that it is due to an abortion using natural potions. After five years of her son's birth, she files for a divorce without stating any reason, leaving other characters and the readers in the sense of suspense. She abandons everything, including the house gifted to her by her father, called Suralakshmi Villa, and her medical career to start a free clinic for women and children in an

obscure village in Bengal with only Eidun by her side. It is only in the epilogue that we are informed about Moinak Sen's attempt to rape Eidun and Suralakshmi's decision to file for a divorce, protecting her from all men, beginning a new life with her in service of other women and children. Removing herself and Eidun from all men around them, Suralakshmi leaves behind the phallogocentric world and establishes a safe space free of all men, dedicating her life in medical treatment of women along with Eidun.

The idea of Mulvey's male gaze or heterosexual masculine gaze where women are seen as objects to gain pleasure from and are continuously suppressed is being undercut in the novel as women stand up against men, often collectively such as in case of Suralakshmi, her sister Ojju, and Eidun standing up against Ojju's husband to save her child, representing the idea of sisterhood. Additionally, the Foucauldian gaze or idea of a power structure is shattered at various points for all women in the novel. Women grow out of the hegemony of men, gain control of their lives and support each other in gaining a perspective, liberating one another. Suralakshmi adopts Eidun to protect her from the dungeon she was living in with her father raping her every single day. Ojju understands her mother and grandmother's pain and struggles when she is blessed with a child; it is the support from her mother-in-law and frequent visits from her mother during ill-health that adds sensitivity to her character. Zaitooni Bibi, Eidun's grandmother, despite her old-age, does not submit to the authority of men in her village and chooses to be burnt to ashes hugging the tree beside her hut. Lakshmi Debi, announces that none of her daughters will be married in an arranged marriage and shall marry when they wish to, while Mahalakshmi grows out of patriarchal traditions to begin her life as a working woman. Ruksana, Eidun's mother, never rebels and chooses to die in the hellhole that her husband resides in. Even then, her silence becomes a voice of protest and liberation for her daughters. She does not say a word when Jeeni is married or protest when Suralakshmi offers to adopt Eidun. Eidun making use of resources provided to her by Suralakshmi, becomes a nurse in her clinic, nursing poor women and children. The aforementioned are only a few instances that Chakravarti intricately plots in her chronicle

which is an ode to women of substance. Every character in the novel, especially women, has a story of their own which breaks the patriarchal monoliths in their own way. Chakravarti protects us from what Adichie describes as 'dangers of a single story' by providing us with an insight into the significant moments from multiple perspectives. The chapters with no significant contribution to the main story also hold the readers' attention. Chakravarti captures Bengal like no other. Readers are taken on a journey to historical monuments with the precision of a tour guide. The nooks and corners of Malda, Indranath Chaudhury's Karol Bagh, banks of Ganges are all described with intimate details transporting the readers to the scene.

*Suralakshmi Villa* can be interpreted as a place that represents patriarchy, a clarion call to all women who hear their 'farewell call' from the gambits of patriarchy. *Suralakshmi Villa* calls for every glass ceiling to be broken and women collectively fighting against the forces of patriarchy to create a better world for themselves. "I am Suralakshmi Villa. Soon I will cease to exist. But the thought does not sadden me. I am old and tired and lonely. I have lived long enough. It is time that I went." It is phallocentrism that is old and tired, has lived long enough, and is about time that it is discarded. It stands for all women's struggles and sufferings, a symbol of a home of patriarchy that all women step out of to fulfil their desires, live their lives.

## Book Review

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantment*, (Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019), ISBN 978-93-5302-598-4, pp 358, Price: Rs. 699/-

Parth Pant

### Voices from *Sitayan*: A Review of *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

In Rajkumar Santoshi's film *Lajja* (2001), one of the characters, Janki (played by Madhuri Dixit) is performing the part of Sita in a Ram-Lila performance at her local theatre. Just before the show, she is blatantly accused by her lover Manish (who is essaying Ram in the play) of having sexual relations with an older man. Janki is aghast at these accusations but swallows her anger with a sip of wine. Inebriated, she walks onto the stage and refuses to play the part where Ram asks Sita to prove her chastity via an *agni-pariksha* (ordeal through fire). Instead, she contests that since both Ram and Sita stayed apart for a year, Ram should also prove his purity by stepping into the fire. Her provocative reworking of the epic (that also bears a resemblance to her current predicament) horrifies everyone in the theatre. The audience of the show is bewildered at such a blasphemous understanding of their dharmic epic and begin to vociferously denounce the show. Santoshi through this episode in the film, radically challenges the monolithic truth-claim of an ancient epic and introduces a necessary feminist intervention (unfortunately, the film dilutes its radical message towards the end of the film). Acting in the same vein, celebrated author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her book *The Forest of Enchantments* (Harper Collins, 2019) fills in the fissures of a male-centered telling of the Hindu epic. While her work is not always as incendiary as Janki's monologue in *Lajja*, it nevertheless has enough sensitivity and iconoclasm of its own to re-tell the famous story through a feminist lens.

Feminist retellings of primitive myths and legends have garnered an upsurge in the twenty first century, leading to a prolific output from authors around the world. Such retellings locate the patriarchal

assumptions embedded in ancient texts and bring to center the peripheral voices in the story. Having retold Draupadi's story in the immensely popular *The Palace of Illusions* (Picador, 2009), Divakaruni is no stranger to this discourse. But in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni attempts a far more difficult feat. She not only aims to frame the story via Sita, but also tries to correct the hagiographic representation of the character as prevalent in Indian culture. Instead of seeing Sita like the "all good and meek and long-suffering" woman, as she is generally perceived (viii), Divakaruni stems away from such a hackneyed understanding of the character, hitherto perpetuated by the popular discourse around Ramayana, especially by Ramanand Sagar's televised adaptation *Ramayana* (1987). The television series (along with other cultural artifacts) cemented Sita's image as the subservient wife who obsequiously follows her husband—the ideal *patir vata*. As Divakaruni mentions in her "Author's Note", "I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her" (viii). The novel presents Sita as a multifaceted character, having enough agency of her own and whose decisions are not mediated by patriarchal agencies.

The narrative of the novel begins *in medias res* with Sage Valmiki having completed the epic *Ramayana*—"the story of the glorious king Ram." (1). Sita, though impressed by the poetry, is visibly upset at the epic's silence on her story. She complains to Valmiki about his lack of understanding of the women characters in the epic. Valmiki calmly advises Sita to write her own story and fill the lacuna left by *Ramayana*—giving her a sheaf of leaves and the symbolic red color to frame her own epic—the *Sitayan*. Beginning the novel with the act of writing itself—Divakaruni makes a tacit meta-commentary on the relevance of female writers to overturn the hegemonic male driven narrative. Moreover, as Sita begins to write her own epic, she realizes her goal would be incomplete if she were to merely tell a self-centered account and negate the voices of other women in her life who have also been "pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten" (4). This inclusion of the narrative of other female characters in *Sitayan* proves to be the highlight of Divakaruni's retelling and further accentuates how women's writing, by its very nature, is a communitarian enterprise.

While Sita does get her fair share of interior monologues which aid in a complex understanding of her character, other female characters are also given enough scope to bare open their own neglected stories. For instance, rather than giving into the popular narrative of King Janak of Mithila (Sita's father) as the most competent king, Divakaruni shows that the unsung hero of the story was his wife Sunaina, who controlled the stately affairs of her land. Similarly, Sita's sister Urmila, merely remembered as Lakshman's wife in *Ramayana*, is valorized as a woman who had to make several sacrifices when her husband unthinkingly placed fraternal duty to Ram above his duties as a husband. Thrown into the palace politics in Ayodhya, Sita also realizes the precarious position of Dasharath's wives, especially the elderly Kaushalya, who never got the love of her husband despite being a devoted wife. Male characters, otherwise celebrated in the epic, are constantly scrutinized in Sita's version as her counter-narrative constantly challenges their untarnished reputation. As Sita writes regarding Dasharath, "The problem was clearly with the king, but it was the queens who had to pay the price for it" (68). The narrative also extends sympathy to typically maligned women characters like Kaikeyi and Surpanakha, fostering a far more nuanced understanding of their personality than the *femme fatale* archetype ascribed to them. Kaikeyi, who just like any mother wished nothing but the best for her son Bharat, is publicly denounced by him and imprisoned. Surpanakha, who merely offered her sincere love to Lakshman, has her nose cut and face disfigured. The phallogocentric deeds that the epic celebrates as heroic and brave are constantly brought into question.

Sita's character also resists the patriarchal coding of her persona as a timid and duteous wife. When asked by her mother to never "bruise a man's pride" (46), Sita questions why a man's pride is accorded more importance over truth. Ram's character is also de-pedestalized as a quasi-divine figure, painting him with his human frailties. Rather than showing him as an altruistic king who did everything for his subjects, the novel presents him as an insecure individual who "becomes hostage to his desire to be the perfect king" (ix). Divakaruni also weaves in a convincing Freudian arc to help understand Ram's behavior: having witnessed a philandering father in Dasharath, Ram is determined to maintain his honor and reputation, even if it comes at the cost of

his own marital life. Using Sita's character, the novel also situates its ecofeminist concerns as hinted by its picturesque title. Sita, as an infant, rises from the earth itself and is born with a special ability to heal and cure the wounds and ailments of others. Throughout her journey, nature in different forms acts as Sita's companion, highlighting the role of nature in providing sanctuary to women. Moreover, the different wars so heroically detailed and celebrated in the epic, are described as carnage and acts of destruction, mounting an ecofeminist critique on the violent tendencies of male behavior, which harms women and environment in equal measure.

Narratively, the novel follows the same trajectory as of the major events in *Ramayana*, which perhaps to a familiar reader might seem repetitive. Interestingly even within the familiar premise, Divakaruni weaves in a clever and surprising plot-twist for Sita's origin story. Moreover, Divakaruni's elegant prose more than compensates for the plot's familiarity. Lucidly, Divakaruni crafts her scenery and descriptions with a perceptive eye with each location poetically symbolizing the psychological state of Sita's mind.

As a piece of feminist literature, *The Forest of Enchantments* does register its protest against the discriminatory practices which compel women to prove their innocence against the very system that wronged them. Sita in the novel too questions Ram's biases in subjecting her to unjust trials and tribulations. But although Divakaruni's protagonist interrogates (and also resists) the sexist culture which oppressed her, she never dares to inspect the roots of the system that propelled her oppression in the first place. Unlike Janki from the film *Lajja* (2001) who refuses to succumb to Ram's gibberish demands, Sita in Divakaruni's book ultimately ends up resorting to the old advice which her mother gave her—endurance. Hence despite its merits as a well-written feminist retelling, the book often falls short of the radical demands that a time like this calls for.

In 2020, following the covid pandemic, the old televised adaptation of *Ramayan* (1987) was aired on television following popular demand. People trapped in their homes grouped together to relive the nostalgic

days, which also led to a resurgence of the discourse in and around *Ramayana*. The same heterosexist and patriarchal myths about the epic were shared and re-shared on WhatsApp and Facebook. Sita was celebrated as the taciturn, ideal woman which patriarchy expects her to be; while Surpanakha's injured face became the vehicle for trolls and memes. To counter these narratives, a radical retelling of Sita's story still waits to be written. But in the meantime, Divakaruni's no less impressive version of *Sitayan* demands an urgent reading.



## Our Contributors

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**Parth Pant** has a degree in English from Delhi College of Arts & Commerce and is a masters student at Ambedkar University, Delhi for his MA in Film Studies. His areas of academic interest include gender studies, popular culture, postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. A prolific contributor to college magazine and newsletters, through his writings, he constantly aims to explore the intersections between different forms of oppressions and how art contributes in entrenching as well as changing these power structures.

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of a casteless society, where nobody is relegated to the margin, and everybody has a right to dream big and achieve.

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working on her second book, which engages with contours of history-writing in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Rajputana, addressing questions of constructions of historical consciousness and archives.]

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*Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi*

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