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Editor's Note

The essays gathered here reflect not only the intellectual rigour of our contributors but also the evolving concerns of our academic community - concerns rooted in memory, identity, justice, representation, and the shifting geographies of human experience.

Across disciplines and genres, this volume demonstrates how literature, cinema, performance, and cultural practices continue to serve as vital sites of inquiry. Many of the articles in this issue turn toward memory - personal, collective, historical, and traumatic - as a lens for understanding the self and society. From explorations of decolonial remembrance to examinations of forgetting, distortion and reconfiguration, our contributors explore how memory continues to shape identity and resistance in profound ways.

Several essays engage with the politics of gender, space and body, offering nuanced readings of feminist narratives, queer expressions, and the lived realities of women in post-millennial cultures. Whether through film adaptations, theatre practices, or textual analyses, these works foreground the ways in which gendered experiences are negotiated, articulated, and contested in both local and global contexts.

A number of studies probe the geographies of culture - ranging from nomadic spaces and heterotopias to transnational flows of media such as Korean dramas. These contributions expand our understanding of how place, mobility, and cultural circulation shape subjectivity and belonging. The issue also presents insightful discussions on violence, conflict, and displacement - themes that are unfortunately ever-relevant. Through literary and cinematic interpretations, our contributors examine how trauma is endured, remembered, and narrated across borders, from the terrains of West Asia to the landscapes of Indian cinema.

What stands out across this edition is the interdisciplinary fluency of the scholarship. Theory converses with narrative; memory intersects with media; philosophy meets performance. The articles collectively reaffirm that academic inquiry is most powerful when it remains open, critical, and responsive to the complexities of the world.

In a time when knowledge is mediated, accelerated, and often contested, it is reassuring to witness such depth of scholarship emerging from our community. This issue of *Singularities* hopes to inspire readers to reflect, question, and engage anew with the cultures and narratives that define our shared intellectual landscape.

P. K. Babu., Ph. D
Chief Editor

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Between Silence and Shelter : Reading Vinoy Thomas's *Puttu* through the Lens of Michel Foucault

Abstract

This paper explores the Malayalam novel, Puttu (translated into English as Anthill), written by Vinoy Thomas, through Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. Perumbadi, the fictional village at the heart of the novel, is read as a heterotopic space, one that exists both within and against dominant social structures. Drawing from Foucault's 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" and supported by spatial theories from Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre, the paper examines how Perumbadi operates as a subversive site of survival and resistance, and how its eventual commodification signifies its reabsorption into dominant ideological frameworks. The analysis situates Puttu as a critical commentary on society's moral order, caste, kinship, gendered violence, and the appropriation of resistance.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Space, Everyday Resistance, Gendered Violence, Marginality

Vinoy Thomas's *Puttu* (2020), translated into English as *Anthill*, narrates the lives of individuals expelled from Kerala's mainstream social order and gathered in the remote fictional village of Perumbadi. Women with incest-born children, unwed mothers, individuals burdened by unspeakable histories, and those fleeing moral surveillance arrive in this forested terrain seeking refuge. More than a geographical setting, Perumbadi functions as an "othered" social formation, one that unsettles the normative logics of kinship, gender, sexuality, and legality that structure dominant society.

This paper reads Perumbadi through Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a spatial formation that simultaneously mirrors, contests, and reconfigures normative social structures. While heterotopia has been widely deployed in literary studies to interpret dystopian spaces, islands, schools, and liminal zones, its potential for understanding regional literatures and caste-gendered geographies in South Asia remains undertheorized. Situating *Puttu* within this expanded framework, this paper argues that Perumbadi operates as a heterotopic site of marginality and alternative community-making, and that its eventual transformation into a leisure resort marks the reabsorption of spatial deviance into dominant ideological and capitalist structures.

By placing Foucault's heterotopia in dialogue with spatial theorists like Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre, this paper examines how *Puttu* renders the politics of refuge, secrecy,

exclusion, and commodification. It reveals how spaces of resistance are not merely physical shelters but fragile ethical worlds that can be undone by the very structures they seek to evade.

Since Michel Foucault coined the term in his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces,” heterotopias can be real places that exist within every culture but function as counter-sites, simultaneously representing, contesting, and inverting other spaces. Unlike utopias, which are imagined perfect societies, heterotopias can be real but “othered,” layered with contradiction, crisis, and deviance. While rooted in material geography, the idea of heterotopia has since evolved to include symbolic and representational spaces in literature and art. Fiction, in particular, offers fertile ground for heterotopic analysis, allowing writers to construct imaginary worlds that both reflect and contest the dominant social order.

Scholars have emphasized that heterotopic spaces in fiction often articulate deviance, crisis, or alternative modes of order, enabling critiques of power and normativity. Johnson (2006) clarifies that heterotopia is not a stable category but a relational function: a space gains heterotopic quality only through its tension with dominant society. Topinka (2010) further argues that literary heterotopias generate knowledge through spatial contradiction, producing meaning precisely by juxtaposing incompatible elements.

Perumbadi, as portrayed in *Puttu*, aligns with several key features of heterotopias. It is a space of deviation, inhabited by people marginalized for transgressing social and moral norms, such as incest survivors and unwed mothers. It brings together incompatible elements like familial dysfunction, sexual autonomy, and alternative moralities, within a single geographic and symbolic site. Inhabitants of Perumbadi live in a suspended, cyclical temporality shaped by memory, trauma, and survival, rather than by state-recognized milestones. This heterochrony reflects their broader detachment from the moral, legal, and bureaucratic order of dominant society. The village exists in a non-linear temporality, disconnected from state documentation or generational continuity, reflecting what Foucault calls heterochrony. While physically open to those seeking refuge, it remains socially closed off through stigma and exclusion by the outside world. Also, Perumbadi functions in relation to dominant spaces by mirroring and inverting society's mainstream ideals of respectability, kinship, and law, thereby offering a powerful critique of normative social structures.

At the beginning, Perumbadi is a refuge for people who have been expelled or marginalized by Kerala's mainstream society, women with children born out of incest, unwed mothers, and others burdened by unspeakable pasts, criminals, and social outcasts. This aligns with Foucault's classification of heterotopias of deviation, where society excludes those who do not conform to its norms.

Perumbadi's residents agree not to question one another's pasts, thus forming a fragile social contract based on shared trauma and discretion. There is no legal authority or

organized kinship structure. As such, it suspends the normative rules of family, marriage, gender roles, and respectability that prevail outside. It is a space where incompatible systems coexist: moral codes from mainstream society are abandoned, replaced by fluid relationships and devised its own dispute-resolution systems. The figure of Jeremias Paul functions as a mediator, trying to weave together individual traumas into a functional community. Yet, his inability to save his own family underscores the inherent limitations of this project.

The resort at the novel is a site of absolute freedom for outsiders who seek anonymity and pleasure, but it simultaneously erases the community's complex past and history of resistance. This marks the shift of Perumbadi from a heterotopia of crisis to a heterotopia of leisure, revealing how spaces of resistance can be reabsorbed into dominant ideological economies. It signifies a pivotal transition in the spatial and moral fabric of Perumbadi. The resort offers a new kind of refuge, but one that is starkly different from the organic, subversive sanctuary that Perumbadi originally represented. It becomes a space where anonymity is guaranteed, relationships are not questioned, and money is the only passport required. Anyone with means can enter with anyone else, free from the gaze of moral policing or social judgment. On the surface, the resort may seem to extend the radical openness of Perumbadi, but in truth, it transforms that openness into a commodified experience. The refuge once built on shared trauma, survival, and non-normative kinship is now reconfigured into a heterotopia of leisure.

This development signals the slow absorption of Perumbadi into neoliberal structures. The logic of the market replaces the logic of collective survival. Where Perumbadi once resisted categorization, the resort offers curated illegibility for a price. Its openness is regulated by economic access, not shared marginality. Jeremias, once the mediator of a fragile moral order born out of exile, now stands as the gatekeeper of this commodified version of freedom, marking the end of Perumbadi's subversive potential and its re-entry into a system it once stood apart from.

While Foucault does not explicitly state that heterotopias are eventually neutralized, his broader theory of power as productive suggests that no space is immune from surveillance or commodification. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts, "Power is everywhere, because it comes from everywhere." Perumbadi, initially a site of radical autonomy, is eventually folded back into capitalist and normative structures through its transformation into a resort. This reflects how resistance can be co-opted, becoming legible to the system it once resisted.

Reading *Puttu* through the lens of heterotopia reveals how Perumbadi functions as a counter-site that gathers Kerala's socially abandoned and morally condemned. Its spatial deviancemarked by secrecy, trauma, and alternative kinship, constitutes a fragile but meaningful challenge to dominant norms of respectability, family, and gendered morality. Yet, the transformation of Perumbadi into a leisure resort demonstrates how

easily spaces of resistance can be absorbed into capitalist and ideological structures, losing their subversive potential through commodification.

By situating *Puttu* within the theoretical framework of heterotopia and the spatial analyses of Foucault, Soja, and Lefebvre, this paper underscores the vulnerabilities inherent in alternative communities. Perumbadi exemplifies how marginal spaces momentarily disrupt normative orders, only to be reconfigured by the very forces of normalization they resist. In doing so, *Puttu* offers a powerful commentary not only on marginality and refuge but also on the spatial politics of contemporary Kerala, where social contradictions are negotiated, concealed, and ultimately appropriated through space itself.

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Unearthing the “Ghosts” of History : Biocentrism and Social Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Abstract

My paper endeavours to examine how Amitav Ghosh's novel The Hungry Tide links human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that play out in the Sundarbans – the tide zone, which lies between India and Bangladesh. To do so, there is a brief analysis of the manner in which Ghosh interweaves legends, myths and history as he tells a tale of human interaction with the non - human world. It then examines the narrative strategies and the historical context of the portrayals of the multiple claimants of the region. These include the 'peripheral people' – through whom Ghosh offers a critique of the accepted, sanitized history of West Bengal, especially the Sundarbans (which is now a UNESCO world heritage site).

Drawing upon Buell's conception of environmentalist protection and “biocentrism”, the paper's primary focus is on the examination of the numerous questions on the imbalance of conservation efforts versus the rights of economic migrants: Dalit refugees in the Sunderbans. By examining the links, the paper further argues that The Hungry Tide manages to relate and mediate between local, national and global levels of consciousness, endorsing a more even-handed consideration of the needs of man, animal and environment. In his conception of an ecological vision, William Rueckert writes of nature being protected by human laws, with “lawyers to articulate and defend [its] rights” (108). This, however, is based on the belief that rights of human beings are already safeguarded. Ghosh's writing persuades otherwise. In the final section, the paper tries to examine Ghosh's critique of the wisdom of Western environmental conservation efforts, which were imposed on the region with reckless disregard of local context and appropriateness.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; Hungry Tide; Ecojustice; Tiger Conservation; Refugee

Amitav Ghosh is often viewed as a 'historiographical torchbearer' casting light on the narratives of those unseen or dispossessed by history. While he has written essays and articles to bring these narratives to light, his preferred literary form, is often the novel. In an interview with a Duke University scholar, he confesses that this allows him to include narratives that “make history, rather than the telling of history, possible”. Viewed in this light, Ghosh's re-creations of historical events that occurred in the 'alien' and 'unfamiliar' locale of the Sundarbans and the exploration of land and its people in *The Hungry Tide*, serves as an intervention in the popular perception that the place is a mere wilderness with

no narrative. Ghosh states that the location of the novel functions as a character that is as important as are perhaps Kanai, Fokir or Piya. In the novel, he attempts to intervene and elaborate the history of the area, which although not far off from Kolkata but yet “was [previously] a vast blankness [and was shrouded in] a sort of darkness” with no “imaginative existence” (Ghosh, Interview). Through the novel he addresses the natural world as well as people's position within the natural world, and this is in line with his conscious and continuous engagement with the natural and human worlds (evidenced in his *The Great Derangement* as well). This paper examines how the novel links human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that play out in the Sundarbans – the tide country, which lies between India and Bangladesh. It analyses the manner in which Amitav Ghosh interweaves legends, myths and history as he tells a tale of human interaction with the nonhuman world. It also examines the historical context of the portrayals of the multiple claimants of the region. This last would include the Western environmental conservation wisdom that was wantonly applied to the region without regard to local context and appropriateness.

The Hungry Tide (2004) is set in the world's “largest mangrove ecosystem” that provide a unique intersection of land, water, humans and culture. From the very onset of the narrative, Ghosh warns his readers that “there is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in; yet, to the world at large, this archipelago is known as 'the Sundarban' (*Hungry Tide* 8). The islands have a highly unpredictable environment. The novel illuminates the complex reality of this region as an 'in between place' – between land and the water, river and sea. There are no borders to divide fresh water from salt water, river from sea or land from water. Much of Bengal is so, and the Sundarbans particularly so - located as it is between the now divided Bengals. It is a place in which sea, river, land, humans and animals all try to co-exist - sometimes harmoniously but this co-existence is all too often competitive.

The division of the book into the two parts entitled “Ebb: Bhata” and “Flood: Jowar” is particularly significant, since Ghosh upends the perception that man lives 'harmoniously' as one with nature. Instead, he displays a relationship between the various human and non-human inhabitants of the Sundarbans that is at once defined yet fraught with challenges. The environment here is “simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, feared and desired” (Huggan and Tiffin, 12) The terrain is unproductive and rewards inhabitants with only “hunger and catastrophe” and even the forests, despite being called “sundor - bon” meaning 'beautiful forest', are utterly hostile to human presence and seem determined to “destroy and expel [humans]” (*Hungry Tide* 7). Most of the trees here grow on 'stilt roots' – trying to stabilise themselves in the ever-shifting mud of the swamps. Life here is at the mercy of the tides which reach more than two hundred miles inland. The tides are ever hungry, racing in twice a day swallowing or regurgitating the land at every turn, constantly reshaping and uprooting anything permanent. The dualism of land and water is precisely what motivates the entire narrative. The natural environment is not just simple

scenery or a stage set in this novel; it plays a major role and its construction is extremely significant in demonstrating the novel's eco critical concerns. As Jens Martin Gurr claims:

While nature in many texts functions as little more than a sort of objective correlative, an illustration of moods and character-traits, or as a mere location, human beings here, to a considerable extent, function as an illustration of features of the ecosystem rather than the other way around. (74)

The inhabitants, in fact, eke out a precarious existence on the inhabited islands of the Sundarbans. This is echoed with remarkable imaginative accuracy in a statement in Nirmal's diary - "Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (*Hungry Tide* 8) And yet the inhabitants live on, since for most, this is home and the only home. Ghosh skilfully uses interaction between inhabitants and the ecosystem to portray cooperative lifestyles which involve different and contradictory behaviours. The interweaving of non-human and human narratives acknowledges that the non-humans are "an actual presence in the text", and suggest that the worlds are "interlinked" (Buell 7).

The legend of Bon Bibi, who serves a syncretic figure, reflects upon this interlinked nature of their worlds. Bon Bibi is seen to protect the island dwellers against the demon God – Dokhin Rai – who often takes the form of the tiger and is regarded by many the "supreme lord of tigers". Interestingly, the legend of Bon Bibi is based on Hindu and Islamic mythology. In fact, Sutapa Sarkar states in her book that the Gods of the Sundarbans were not "regular godheads" from the Hindu Pantheon but were reflections of the needs of the island dwellers. Over time they evolved, transforming into guiding spirits and "patron saints" (Sarkar 24) who would ward off the dangers of the harsh territory, especially the jungle and its horrors. It also relates the realms of the human and the non-human in recognition of their utter interdependence seen here as a constant reference to lines that must not be crossed especially since it might upset the careful balance. For instance, when Nirmal mentions how the priest and his guides were overtaken by a storm, Horen concludes that they may have crossed 'the line' that divided the realm of Bon Bibi from that of the demon Dokhin Rai. While, to the 'rational' Nirmal, this was "an atmospheric disturbance with "neither intention nor motive", to Horen there are larger forces at play. As Horen says "let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds" (*Hungry Tide* 147). To the dwellers of Sundarbans – Bon Bibi offers a strong psychological defence against the daily struggle (Jalais 15). These legends and beliefs mentioned in the novel may also be viewed as a 'transforming' culture that evolved in response to the challenges faced by the islanders in daily life. It also provides an insider's view of the patterns of survival dictated by a hostile space such as the Sundarbans.

The 'provincial' beliefs that 'informed' and 'inflected' the locals of the Sundarbans may require city dwellers such as Nirmal (as well as readers) to question the role that these

natural forces play in their lives, although they may not want to acknowledge this initially. Soon however, Nirmal (and Kanai) discover that the “terrors of border-crossing [are] not an illusion at all, they are very real” (Nayar 90) and these borders are to be feared and respected. Nirmal soon comes to realise (as do Piya and Kanai) that his previously held beliefs created according to “their taste and training, their memories and desires” (*Hungry Tide* 224) may not, and cannot, fully encompass or even begin to engage with the living reality of the Tide Country. Like the river and its islands, this reality constantly shifts, evolves and transforms. It is noteworthy that the novel sets up Nirmal's voice as an informative and framing narrative that simultaneously presents and is present in the stories of Kanai, Piya and Fokir, painting a picture of the Sundarbans for the reader. In fact, the text becomes a site witnessing the transformation of Nirmal and his “environmental consciousness” (Buell 17) as he increasingly acknowledges the power of nature and existence of non-human voices that can be heard only if one pays attention. The text constantly attempts to elucidate the complex negotiations that occur between human and non-human environments in this archipelago of islands. Instances include the sound of the crabs that are 'burrowing into the bādh and which will in the end cause it to collapse when the tide flows' as well as “the monstrous appetites ... of ... the tides, the winds and the storms” (*Hungry Tide* 12). By doing so, the author focusses the attention of his readers to a terrain that is harsh and disputed rather than a romantic and natural world celebrated by people.

The constant subversion of the idea that the Sundarbans and its islands as “easily knowable places” further encourages us to attempt a nuanced understanding of its environment and discourages forming a black and white estimation of the place. Pramod Nayar states how the land (along with everything else) is “unpredictable” suggesting uncertainty and unreliability of knowledge for the perceiver. Ghosh describes intense struggle of the human inhabitants to extract meagre living from the forests while simultaneously referring to the “predatory capacity” of these islands and its many claimants. There are varied kinds of death that are possible – by crocodiles, the forest, the river and tigers and extreme vigilance is needed in order to survive. The reality of the place is such and people who live in nature are not romantic about it at all. They may hold spiritual beliefs about the world around them, they may have a sense of the unity of nature or the aliveness of all things, but they still kill the animals and uproot the plants in order to eat, to live. If they do not, they will die.

The novel raises numerous questions on the imbalance of conservation efforts versus the rights of the indigenous people of the region. The tiger killing incident in the novel, in particular, questions the perceptions of right and wrong and how they may not always be weighed on the same scales of justice as in other societies. When a tiger enters the village, the villagers kill it. This act leads to the most explicit discussion of the issue of protection and anthropocentrism in the novel via Piya – “if we do not respect what was intended not by you or me but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive [and] if we

cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves . . .” (*Hungry Tide* 90). This is where readers are acquainted with the concept of the outsider and the insider, and the contentious space animals occupy in places such as Lusibari. To Piya (who is an outsider and lacks local social and ecological knowledge that exists in the community's memory), the act of killing the tiger is brutal and cruel. However, to the inhabitants of the islands, who suffer exceedingly because of tigers, it is only right to value their own protection and safety over that of the tiger. The customs of the land (for instance:.. women automatically don the garb of widowhood when men leave the house) are evidence of the ever-impending peril that tigers represent in this region. The accounts of Kusum and other inhabitants render a view of the tiger that is in stark contrast to the more western image.

In Western knowledge circuits the tiger is bestowed a more “cosmopolitan” character, which, according to Annu Jalais, champions West-sponsored calls for increased tiger protection. This further serves to confuse the ideas of environmental and animal conservation, which are often abstract constructs to begin with. Thus, while the ecological elements prey mercilessly upon the lives of locals and island dwellers, the environmental protectionist policies of the government make life even more challenging. The thrust of government programmes was towards protecting certain endangered species by banning their hunting, giving legal protection to their habitats, and restricting their trade. Subsequently, this prompted central and many state governments to establish national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and also announce projects for protecting specific animals (including the tiger) which were perceived to be gravely threatened. The novel manages to relate and mediate between local, national and global levels of consciousness, endorsing a more even-handed consideration of the needs of man, animal and environment.

In his conceptualisation of an ecological vision in his seminal essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, William Rueckert (1996) writes of nature being protected by human laws, with “lawyers to articulate and defend [their] rights” (Rueckert 108). This however, rises from the belief that human beings and their rights are already safeguarded. In contrast, the forcible eviction of refugees such as Kusum on the grounds that the forests they resided in had been declared as “protected territory under the Reserve Forest Act, a UNESCO initiative” and it “belonged to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” (*Hungry Tide* 216) exposes the government's lack of sensitivity for the inhabitants' safety or right to life. It highlights the ugly reality behind the motivations of the state in its fight to protect the environment - as long as these efforts are rewarded monetarily, the government is willing to use intimidation and aggression against whoever stands in their way, unmindful of the human loss. It is ironical, indeed deeply tragic, that people kill animals for sport and commercial purposes in one half of the world, and in the other half evict people so that animals can live. In an extremely tense moment in the text, Kusum desperately questions: “who [are

these people] love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” (*Hungry Tide* 262).

Annu Jalais comments that tiger friendly schemes wound up increasing 'self-worth' of the tigers while these poor, displaced people were viewed as nothing more than mere “tiger food” (Jalais, 2008, 5). Some believe that it was the killings encouraged by authorities that turned these tigers into “man eaters”. In fact, Manoranjan Byapari, in Deep Halder's text *The Blood Island* (2019) vouches for this - “do you know how the tigers in Sundarbans turned into maneaters? ... [they] developed a taste of the human flesh from the dead of Marichjhapi” (163). In the recent decades, the strongest international pressure on the Indian government has been for tiger, not river dolphin, conservation, in large part because the Bengal tiger represents a prime example of a global signature species at mortal risk. It is no surprise that this led to the inhabitants' “anthromorphisation” of the Royal Bengal tiger with that of the West Bengal government and the Bhadrakol intellectuals (as Annu Jalais has tracked in her 2008 article). This portrays that there is a very visible link between affluence and environmentally friendly attitudes - wherein valuable species was extensively protected and other species eliminated. In the novel, the genuine outcry of the locals in this competition between human–animal priorities is visible and is extremely heart wrenching. Ghosh endeavours to reveal the underlying unnerving details of power politics and the corruption which pervade the environmental protectionist and Tiger conservation programs. Indeed, the tiger-man debate may be seen as a “pre-designated ideological positioning” (Huggan and Tiffin 198) between the rights of local peoples and western conservationist objectives – the subject of an increasingly important postcolonial debate.

There is a need to examine the harmful consequences of environmental preservation which use predominantly Western norms and ideologies to understand the world. It is essential to recognize that all environments are simultaneously “political creations” (as Malcolm Sen claims). In the words of Jalais (2008), “the very presence of people in the region has been seen as a hindrance to its development as a 'natural' haven for wildlife” (9). The idea of 'pristine' nature and its zealous protection are typical of Western conservation programs that draw upon generalized and notions and partial knowledge to co-opt and 'preserve' environments in other parts of the world: notions promoting the perception of rescuing the environment from what the environmentalists believe are the unenlightened, degrading actions of 'savage' human beings. Decisions are often made on the basis of speculation, not evidence. However, as the colonial policies of the British indicate, these decisions were hardly taken to protect but always to procure. And the colonial policies of resource exploitation, that Daniel Hamilton is seen to have undertaken at the beginning of *The Hungry Tide*, towards the culmination of the novel (and indeed spilling over to the 21st century) may be seen as responsible for transforming Western environmental conservation programs into promotion of “human crises” in the guise of preventing “ecological ones”. Such crises have increasingly marginalised and

impoverished many forest-dependent communities, who directly depend on various components of the forest and wildlife for food, drink and medicine, as Horen indicates in the text. In his representation of the Sundarbans as an eco-sensitive region, Ghosh brings forth the idea that it is difficult to address the ecological concerns of the planet without a close appraisal of the human and cultural issues entwined with natural ecosystems. As the Bon Bibi myth also demonstrates, the fishermen, like Fokir, who catch crab and fish, need to occasionally collect honey and wood but they are respectful in their awareness of the forest and they neither 'deplete' nor 'disturb' it” (Jalais 2008). In keeping with the laws of the land and in conformance to the Bon Bibi myth, they would only take just enough to satiate their needs in the forest realm of Dokhin Rai. However, such imperatives did not exist for the greedy. While, it might be important to preserve forests and prevent overfishing, any intervention is problematic in case of the Sundarbans, because the culture in the Sundarbans was shaped by its ecology and environment, and the island dwellers are acutely aware of the tenuous balance they must maintain with nature.

More worryingly, the wildlife conservation schemes may become a violent rationale for the dispossession of some, such as the refugees of Morichjhapi indicating an ignorance of, or deliberate ignoring of, the issues of sustenance - 'livelihood' and distribution of resources - as well as issues of justice. They may also serve as convenient grounds for governments to ignore human attempts of survival in the name of protecting broader ecological concerns of the planet. This is significant, since politicians are not above using policies for monetary gains when their own coteries exploit conserved regions. They also promote the production of goods which are in fact harmful for the ecosystem, because such products, for instance nylon nets (that Moyna refers to) swell their incomes. As Ghosh reiterates through Kusum and Horen - 'This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world' (*Hungry Tide* 216) although there is no land saved for human inhabitants. Ultimately, under the “premise” of many of these Western environmental initiatives there are effort to grab and exploit land, sea and other resources solely for vested interests such as tourism. An example of this is the West Bengal government's realization of the Sundarbans' potential as a “tourist attraction,” and subsequent handing over large tracts of the islands in the year 2000 to a private company, which may be comparable to the British India sarkar handing over land to Hamilton to establish 'civilisation' because he had money to pay. It serves to highlight the unpalatable truth, and Annu Jalais reiterates this, that tragedy and hypocrisy were inherent in the conservation efforts, where although many people were killed and many displaced, the “world heritage site” was apparently perceived a suitable place for “a nuclear power plant” or a “modern tourism blockbuster” (Jalais, 2008).

The novel constantly highlights the need for their conservation and protection of those who truly need it (such as the dolphins and the people). Ghosh unravels the diverse scales of corruption and how these dominant forces always turn the weak ones as eternal

scapegoats, which in turn intensifies his attempt to satirize the policies. As Ross Mallick (1999) remarks in the concluding pages of his essay, it happens often enough that environmental interest groups influence preservationist policies in the postcolonial world that turn out to be “detrimental to the poorest people dependent on these natural resources” (118). In response, critics like Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier have called for the development of “environmentalism for the poor” (18). The call may be incompatible with these prevailing attitudes and values on environmentalism. It is significant then, that readers see Piya tell Nilima that though she had “several offers of funding from conservation and environmental groups” for her scientific work on the river dolphin, but has decided that if she is to take on a project in the Sundarbans, she would prefer it to be conducted under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, “so the local fishermen can be involved” (*Hungry Tide* 327). As Buell suggests, the new aims of environmentalist protection should be towards biocentrism where “all organisms, including humans” and everyone exists as “a part of a larger ... network or community whose interests must constrain or direct or govern the human interests.” The previously disinterested, 'metropolitan' Nirmal and later Kanai can be seen striving towards the “ideals” that Buell promotes. Nirmal states, “it was the storm that showed me that a man can be transformed even in retirement; that he can begin again” (*Hungry Tide* 179). He and Kanai are transformed when they encounter the struggle of others and attempt to 'write wrongs' (Huggan and Tiffin 17). They embark on a life that is “lived in transformation” just like the bhatir desh that is constantly undergoing transformation. Thus, Amitav Ghosh attempts to develop an ecological awareness among the readers that human and natural histories and futures are all interdependent. Humans must necessarily abandon their anthropocentric attitude and be willing to fight for the cause of the weak and dispossessed - whether in the human world or the non-human.

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Tea Consumption and Cultural Transformation in Kerala: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Evolving Social Spaces and Identity Practices

Abstract

This paper explores everyday tea consumption in Kerala through a cultural studies perspective, focusing on tea spaces as sites where social change becomes visible and meaningful. Drawing on Raymond Williams' idea of culture as an ordinary, lived practice, the study examines how tea culture in Kerala reflects ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity. Four interrelated dimensions are analysed: generational changes in the perception and use of tea spaces, linguistic hybridity and everyday code-switching, the feminist politics of space marked by women's growing presence in tea shops and cafés, and the increasing role of digital media in shaping contemporary tea culture. The paper argues that tea spaces function as cultural microcosms, revealing broader shifts in gender relations, identity formation, and digital lifestyles in present-day Kerala. While tea continues to occupy a central place in Kerala's cultural imagination, the practices, meanings, and social arrangements surrounding it have changed considerably. These transformations highlight the dynamic nature of cultural continuity and change within a postcolonial South Asian context.

Keywords: tea culture, cultural studies, Kerala, spatial politics, everyday practices

Introduction

Tea occupies a distinctive place in Kerala's cultural life. It is both ordinary and deeply social consumed across class divisions, regional differences, and age groups, and woven into the rhythms of everyday life. Precisely because of this ordinariness, tea becomes a productive site for cultural analysis. As Raymond Williams famously argued, culture is not limited to elite artistic production but is embedded in "a whole way of life," shaped through routine, everyday practices (324). Tea culture in Kerala exemplifies this understanding, showing how seemingly mundane habits are deeply connected to questions of identity, power, and social change.

This paper examines tea spaces in Kerala, tea shops, cafés, and informal stalls as sites where cultural meanings are continuously produced and renegotiated. Rather than treating tea merely as a beverage, the study approaches tea consumption as a social practice that reflects wider transformations in Kerala society. It focuses on four

overlapping dimensions: generational shifts in how tea spaces are perceived and used; linguistic hybridisation and code-switching in everyday interactions; feminist spatial politics marked by women's increasing visibility in tea spaces; and the integration of tea culture into digital platforms and online self-representation.

The analysis draws primarily from cultural studies, particularly Williams' conception of culture as ordinary and Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as fluid and continually formed. Feminist geography and sociolinguistic scholarship further inform the discussion, allowing attention to gendered spatial practices and everyday language use. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the paper argues that tea culture in Kerala offers valuable insights into how cultural continuity and change coexist, and how identities are negotiated within rapidly shifting social conditions.

Cultural Studies and Everyday Practice

Cultural studies emerged as a field committed to understanding how meaning is produced and lived within everyday contexts. In contrast to approaches that privileged elite or “high” culture, cultural studies foregrounded popular culture, routine practices, and ordinary social spaces. Raymond Williams' assertion that “culture is ordinary” remains central to this approach, challenging rigid distinctions between high and low culture and insisting that everyday life is culturally significant (325).

Tea consumption fits squarely within this framework. Drinking tea, gathering in tea shops, and lingering over conversations are not exceptional activities, yet they are deeply social and symbolic. Williams emphasised that cultural analysis must attend to lived experience rather than only formal cultural texts (328). Tea spaces in Kerala provide precisely such access to lived culture, revealing how people negotiate belonging, gender norms, class aspirations, and modernity through everyday interactions.

Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity further sharpens this analysis. For Hall, identity is not fixed or essential but shaped through ongoing processes of positioning and representation. Cultural identity involves both continuity with the past and transformation in response to changing circumstances. Tea culture in Kerala reflects this dynamic clearly: traditional practices persist, even as new meanings, spaces, and identities emerge around tea consumption.

Feminist geography adds another crucial dimension. Scholars such as Doreen Massey have shown that space is socially produced and deeply gendered. Tea shops in Kerala were historically coded as masculine spaces, and women's exclusion from them reflected broader patterns of patriarchal control over public space. Examining how women now enter and occupy tea spaces reveals how everyday locations become arenas for negotiating gender relations and social power.

One of the most visible transformations in Kerala's tea culture appears across generations. For older generations, tea shops were largely informal, male-dominated spaces associated with political debate, neighbourhood gossip, and homosocial bonding. These establishments were functional rather than aesthetic, with little attention paid to design or comfort. Their spatial organisation mirrored broader patterns of gender segregation in public life during the mid-twentieth century.

Younger generations engage with tea spaces quite differently. Contemporary cafés cater to aesthetic sensibilities, featuring carefully designed interiors, curated lighting, comfortable seating, and visually appealing presentations. These spaces consciously distinguish themselves from older tea shops, signalling modernity, leisure, and inclusivity. Tea consumption here is not only about refreshment but also about experience, lifestyle, and social visibility.

Digital practices further deepen this generational divide. Younger patrons often photograph their tea and surroundings, sharing these images on social media. Tea consumption thus becomes part of digital self-presentation, where cafés double as backdrops for online identity construction. Many cafés now design their spaces with social media visibility in mind, recognising that online circulation shapes offline popularity. These generational differences reflect broader cultural shifts in Kerala. Changes in gender norms, consumer culture, and digital engagement are all visible within tea spaces. While tea remains a shared cultural constant, the ways it is consumed and valued differ significantly across generations.

Language use in Kerala's tea spaces also reflects cultural change. Conversations frequently involve code-switching between Malayalam and English, particularly among younger and urban populations. This linguistic hybridity is not random but shaped by context, topic, and social positioning. Menus in contemporary cafés often combine English terms such as *latte*, *espresso*, or *cold brew* with Malayalam references to traditional preparations. This bilingual presentation signals cosmopolitanism and familiarity with global consumer culture, while still maintaining local linguistic identity. English carries symbolic capital associated with education, mobility, and aspiration, especially within urban middle-class contexts. Everyday conversations follow similar patterns. Discussions about education, careers, technology, or popular culture often incorporate English vocabulary, while family matters and local concerns remain largely in Malayalam. This functional distribution of languages highlights how identity is negotiated through everyday speech. Rather than indicating cultural loss, this linguistic hybridity reflects a complex negotiation between local rootedness and global orientation. Malayalam remains central to everyday interaction, even as English expands into specific domains. Code-switching thus becomes a marker of contemporary Kerala identity, hybrid, adaptive, and context-sensitive.

Women's growing presence in tea spaces marks a significant cultural shift. Historically, tea shops were overwhelmingly male spaces, and women's absence was enforced through social norms rather than formal rules. This exclusion reflected broader patriarchal controls over women's mobility and visibility in public life.

In recent years, this pattern has begun to change. The emergence of cafés designed to appear safe, respectable, and inclusive has played a key role. Well-lit interiors, transparent facades, mixed seating arrangements, and the presence of women employees all contribute to making these spaces more accessible to women. As a result, tea spaces increasingly accommodate mixed-gender groups and independent women patrons. Generational and class factors shape this transformation. Younger, urban, and economically independent women are more likely to occupy tea spaces confidently, using them for socialising, studying, or leisure. This reflects broader shifts in gender norms, education, and employment opportunities.

At the same time, these gains remain uneven. Women's access to tea spaces continues to be shaped by class, location, and social surveillance. While urban cafés offer new possibilities, traditional tea shops in many areas remain male-dominated. Tea spaces thus reveal both progress and persistent inequalities within feminist spatial politics. Digital media has significantly reshaped tea culture in Kerala. Tea consumption now frequently extends beyond physical space into online platforms, where images, reviews, and influencer content circulate widely. Posting photographs of tea, cafés, and leisure moments has become a routine practice, especially among younger users. This digital visibility transforms tea into a marker of taste and lifestyle. Café interiors and beverage presentations are designed to be visually appealing, anticipating their circulation on social media. In turn, online popularity influences footfall and commercial success, creating a feedback loop between physical and digital spaces. Influencer culture further intensifies this process. Food and lifestyle influencers promote cafés and beverages, often blurring the line between personal expression and commercial advertising. Even ordinary users engage in forms of self-branding through their posts, using tea culture as part of curated online identities. These developments reflect broader changes in how everyday life is experienced and represented. Tea culture now exists simultaneously in physical cafés and digital feeds, highlighting the increasingly hybrid nature of contemporary social life.

Despite these changes, tea remains central to Kerala's cultural identity. Its persistence illustrates that cultural change does not necessarily involve the disappearance of tradition. Instead, traditions are reshaped, reinterpreted, and re-embedded within new contexts. Tea continues to structure daily routines and social interactions across class lines. Its affordability and accessibility prevent it from becoming an elite commodity, even as premium cafés and specialised beverages emerge. At the same time, the meanings

attached to tea have shifted—from functional refreshment to aesthetic experience, lifestyle choice, and digital content. These transformations reflect wider processes shaping postcolonial societies: globalization, technological change, and evolving social norms. Tea culture in Kerala absorbs these influences without losing its regional specificity, demonstrating how local practices adapt rather than simply dissolve.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how tea culture in Kerala offers valuable insights into cultural continuity and change. Through everyday practices—drinking tea, gathering in cafés, sharing images online—broader transformations in gender relations, language use, consumer culture, and identity formation become visible.

Raymond Williams' claim that culture is ordinary finds clear expression in Kerala's tea spaces. These unremarkable sites reveal how tradition and modernity coexist, how public spaces are renegotiated, and how identities are continually reshaped. Tea remains culturally central, even as its social meanings and spatial arrangements evolve.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing tea cultures across regions, examining class and caste dynamics more closely, or tracing longitudinal changes through ethnographic study. Ultimately, tea culture in Kerala shows how societies adapt to change while maintaining meaningful connections to everyday traditions. Through the simple act of drinking tea, complex stories of cultural transformation continue to unfold.

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(Dis)solving the Self : Memory as Contention in Recovering Social Identity in *Still Alice*

Abstract

The dichotomy of memory vs forgetting has been an important field of memory studies where the associated intricacies are analysed through personal, social, political or cultural lens and with varied focus groups. Moreover, the gerontological aspects of this dichotomy in relation to memory loss and cognitive decline are major areas of concern for Medical and Health Humanities as well. However, the impact of early-onset dementia and subsequent social isolation with focus on academia is underexplored probably due to the “stigma” associated with the weakening body and mind. The paper attempts an analysis of Lisa Genova's Still Alice: A Novel through the lens of Social Identity Approach propounded by Henri Tajfel and John Turner to delve into the categorisation of “abled” and “disabled” bodies constructed in the academic context that adheres to intellectual productivity and how its internalisation affects persons diagnosed with memory impairing illness like Alzheimer's. Though various studies have previously been done on the novel focusing mainly on memory loss and dementia care, the impact of subsequent shifts in social identity of the characters is to be further explored, which the paper attempts to undertake.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, Memory, Social identity, Still Alice, Academia

Memory is an important functional aspect of a person's life as it defines his or her association with the past, present and future. It is deeply connected with the neurological, social, psychological, and other realms and provides the core of our everyday experiences. To put it in dictionary terms, memory refers to “the power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained especially through associative mechanisms” (“Memory”). The same event can have different impressions and thereby, different memories among different people. It reflects the individual's perceptions of the world and is also connected with his or her identity. Memory is, thus, the result of an ongoing process of encoding, storing and retrieval of information relevant to the context.

This important faculty of our cognition is sometimes affected as we age and over the course of time, we forget many aspects of our lives. Forgetting means the inability to retrieve relevant information related to the specified context and thus comes up as the antagonist of memory. However, instances of forgetting happen daily in everybody's life. This is primarily due to the lack of proper attention or multi-tasking at the same time. But forgetting becomes an issue when it occurs at a high frequency on a daily basis and affects our overall performance. The core cause of this forgetting is linked to the malfunction of

parts of the brain that are involved in memory, especially the hippocampus. While memory loss occurs when the brain is unable to retrieve information received earlier, dementia is a more complex neurodegenerative condition due to the loss of brain neurons that affects a person's memory, behaviour or cognition, of which Alzheimer's is the most common (World Health Organisation). What sets early-onset Alzheimer's apart from other types of dementia is obviously its diagnosis at an age less than sixty-five (Mendez 34) along with genetic components, rapid language and cognitive impairment, and spatial misunderstanding.

Addressing this dichotomy between memory and forgetting at the psychological, personal and social level has become an important area probed by literary studies recently, thanks to the emergence of Health Humanities at the macro level and Social Gerontology at the micro level. This paper focuses on identity transition in American neurologist-writer Lisa Genova's novel *Still Alice* by drawing references from the Social Identity Approach regarding depersonalisation and categorisation of individuals to analyse how social identity shifts in the academia drastically affect individuals with early-onset Alzheimer's.

In Social Psychology, the Social Identity Approach is a broad term that focuses on the cognitive ways by which individuals perceive themselves in relation to their fellow group members and categorize themselves in different social contexts with respect to members of other groups. The approach encompasses two specific theories- Social Identity theory, developed in 1979 by Henri Tajfel, a British social psychologist, and his student John Turner; and Self-categorisation theory by Turner and his colleagues in 1987. Focusing on intergroup as well as intragroup relations, this approach analyses personal identity (a person's behaviour, character or emotions) and social identity (the identity by means of social group membership and attitudes). It focuses on the aspects of social identity of the individuals and their attempts to form a particular place in society. This social identification also affects their cognition, behaviour and self-esteem.

An important aspect of Self-categorisation theory is the concept of “depersonalisation,” whereby members of a specific group categorise themselves in terms of the group's attributes and ideologies and not on individual characteristics, thereby depersonalizing themselves. Thus, they perceive themselves “as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype (Hornsey 208).” Hence, this social group identity “prescribes what kinds of attitudes, emotions and behaviours are appropriate in a given context” (209).

In summarizing Tajfel's and Turner's ideas, Richard Jenkins notes that “[s]ocial categorisation generates social identity” and thereby “social comparisons, which produce positive (or negative) self-evaluation” together (Jenkins 112). Different mechanisms like “cognitive simplification, comparison and evaluation, and the search for positive self-esteem” bring the group members together (113). This identity is the one that members try to maintain even under unfavorable circumstances.

Memory is generally considered to be inversely proportional to age. But what if memory loss happens at a relatively young age? Some people with dementia are diagnosed not at the later stages of their life, but sometimes when they are at the peak of their success in their profession, fame etc. Starting from misplacing at unusual places and forgetting some words, these people later experience increased disorientation and long-term memory loss, resulting in a change in their professional identity. For some, these instances may affect them mentally as they face a new dilemma. The American writer Lisa Genova provides an empathetic account of such a transformation of a professor at Harvard University in her novel *Still Alice*, through which she aims to raise awareness about persons with dementia, especially those with Alzheimer's disease. The postscript at the end of the novel marks her opinions about the need for awareness and humanistic approaches to such conditions. It puts forth the lingering philosophical question of "If I can't remember who I am, am I still me?" (Genova) and unfolds a story of struggles with memory loss, self-consciousness yet retaining the basic human qualities of love, compassion and reverence through the character of Alice.

Set within the timeframe of two years from September 2003 to September 2005, the novel focuses on Alice Howland, a renowned Harvard Professor of Psychology with specialisation in Linguistics and Cognition. She has a busy schedule with lectures, conferences, research supervision and peer reviews; and is a highly reputed intellectual. She enjoys her work and time at Harvard and is impressed by her important role in academia. Her work identity as a distinguished professor also contributes to her social identity, as she is treated with respect and dignity due to her accomplishments that are generally unattainable to women of her age. Moreover, she has a happy married life with John, a cancer cell biologist at Harvard and three grown-up children. However, the diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's at the age of fifty disrupts this identity almost threateningly and brings chaos to the work-life balance. The fact that she tries to cover this from her family until her physician directs her to bring a relative, amounts to the extent of fear of being ripped off one's identity, dignity and self-esteem, even amongst close relatives. It is only after some days of detecting Alzheimer's that Alice reveals it to John and much later to their children. The fear of being at someone's mercy and being a "dying, incompetent patient" prevents Alice from revealing the diagnosis to John, her intellectual and marital counterpart (Genova 75). She is not ready to face such humiliation because she wants to belong to the intellectual community and maintain this social identity.

Alice's appointment with Dr Davis in January 2004 for undergoing different tests provides the readers a glimpse of her future identity shift. These make her think about the nervousness of graduate students who sit for the exams and try to pass "a semester's worth of knowledge onto the pages of their blue exam books, hoping their heavily crammed short-term memories wouldn't fail them. She understood exactly how they felt" for she is now to be "a subject being tested" (68). For a moment, she mentally steps down from the

high pedestal of an intellectual and contemplates the student identity. As students anticipate their exam scores, Alice does with her test results. She scores high in reasoning and language fluency but her memory function relative to her age is decreased which leads to the diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's.

Alice's internal struggle due to the diagnosis reflects her attempts at social comparisons that produce negative self-evaluation (Jenkins 112) for she has associated her personal identity and esteem with social cum work identity of a professor, the identity which her memory loss puts in jeopardy. For instance, Alice's initial secret visit to the Alzheimer's Special Care Unit of Mount Auburn Manor Nursing Center to know about the care for dementia patients turns out to be her dissociation from those patients. She fears losing her occupational identity and shifting to a disease-related identity as a person with Alzheimer's. This points to the urge to categorise the self as distinct from another social identity group (here, the dementia patients) and remain in one's social identity group as propounded by the Social Identity Approach. Alice does not want those residents to be her new colleagues and feels emotionally distant from them.

Anna De Fina refers to social identities as “large categories of belonging such as those pertaining to race, gender, and political affiliation” (268). According to her, personal identities “are constructs that may include not only sets of membership categories, but also moral and physical characteristics that distinguish one person from another” (268). This aspect is relevant in understanding the gender identity of Alice. Being a healthy mom of three and a renowned academic intellectual is an achievement unattainable to many women. Her professional identity as a Harvard intellectual is something a woman dreams of and which Alice is proud of. She has twenty-five years of expertise in Psychology and is professionally as well as emotionally attached to it. This accomplishment sets her apart from the “faculty wives” (Genova 52) whom she meets at Eric Wellman's holiday party where the whole Psychology department joins. The fact that Alice's awareness about this difference contributes immensely to her social identity as a professor for she takes particular interest in sharing “a passionate quest to understand the mind, to know the mechanisms driving human behavior and language, emotion and appetite” (51) with her colleagues, while the other ladies form bond through shopping or attending book clubs.

Alice is also a healthy woman who maintains walking to her office from home, until for the past few months when she had to travel to various conferences and distinguished lectures. She had earlier contemplated her pregnancy, babysitting and raising children affecting her intellectual progress. It had been tough for Alice to watch “John, her male counterpart and intellectual equal, accelerate past her” while she was busy with her familial responsibilities (31-32). Later on, she becomes a well-known professor in Cognitive Linguistics thanks to her strenuous efforts and die-hard optimism.

However, Alice's teaching performance gets affected by early-onset Alzheimer's which eventually leads to her early departure from teaching position. She soon realizes

that her colleagues have started avoiding her. The earlier sympathy of her colleagues and friends gradually turns to avoiding her and the reality of her life. For them, “[f]acing her meant facing her mental frailty and the unavoidable thought that, in the blink of an eye, it could happen to them. Facing her was scary. So for the most part, except for meetings and seminars, they didn’t” (185). This implies her colleagues’ attempts at social categorisation making Alice an antagonist to their notion of “interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype” (Hornsey 2008). This distancing becomes more evident to Alice when she notices seats next to her being unoccupied during seminars or colloquiums.

The indifference from her colleagues comes as a blow to her sense of intellectuality and independence as she realises the gradual change in her identity. She is asked to relinquish her important academic roles as course instructor, research tutor and travelling Harvard academic. Her busy academic life slowly fades away and we see an Alice who struggles to remember things and at times contemplates her condition. The earlier urge to belong to the academic identity gradually diminishes as is exemplified in her disinterest in Eric Wellman’s party. She feels “like the biggest part of her self, the part she’d praised and polished regularly on its mighty pedestal, had died” (Genova 187). This feeling is partly due to the “generalized” notions regarding “normal professor body” (Fisanick 325), particularly in the higher education system. Elizabeth Marquis maintains that Alice’s struggle is that of a lady professor to fit into the academic circle and provides “a critique of the notion of a disembodied academic” (834). Quoting Robert Anderson and Margaret Price, she also argues that “[d]espite the prevalence of disability and impairment, academia is often imagined as ‘disability-free’ – a place of ‘rational’ minds unfettered by bodily concerns ... As a result, students and faculty who do not conform to normative standards are disabled by and excluded within higher education contexts” (830).

Cristina Garrigós stresses the importance of individual memory in creating a social identity “because, even if it is a medium for processing subjective experiences, it is interactively constructed and always connected with the memory of others” (19). Gradually, Alice comes to terms with her disease and forms Dementia Care Group, a support group for early-stage dementia patients in her locality, as a cure to her academic identity loss and loneliness, and as a medium to connect with such patients. There were many support groups for caretakers of the affected but none for the affected who deserve a platform to voice their ideas free of fear and social stigma. The novel also throws light on these patients who are part of Alice’s support group. Like Alice, memory lapses had come to them during their busy work life and had affected their work performance and their social identities. The idea of stepping down from their jobs was a mental blow to them as it made them “disabled” and unemployed. Alice gradually starts to accept her new identity and her new social group, forming a new personal and social identity. Genova brilliantly presents Alice during her speech at the opening presentation of the annual Dementia Care Conference, through which the gist of the novel is provided. Alice maintains that:

Being diagnosed with Alzheimer's is like being branded with a scarlet A. This is now who I am, someone with dementia [...] Please don't look at our scarlet A's and write us off. [...] I encourage you to empower us, not limit us [...] I'm no longer asked to lecture about language at universities and psychology conferences all over the world. But here I am before you today, giving what I hope is the most influential talk of my life. And I have Alzheimer's disease. (Genova 252)

The novel poignantly portrays Alice in transition from the famed intellectual to the Alzheimer's person and her acceptance of this identity shift through this powerful speech:

My yesterdays are disappearing, and my tomorrows are uncertain, so what do I live for? I live for each day. I live in the moment. Some tomorrow soon, I'll forget that I stood before you and gave this speech. But just because I'll forget it some tomorrow doesn't mean that I didn't live every second of it today. I will forget today, but that doesn't mean that today didn't matter. (253)

It is indeed an influential talk for Alice and the audience, including her family, new colleagues, doctors, caretakers and other medical professionals. Genova brings forth the idea of what it means when such patients experience identity change. The sense of belonging to one social identity is drastically altered due to this change, thereby affecting them mentally. The societal and group expectations, in Alice's instance, are those about an intellectual who makes discoveries and contributes much to the field of Cognitive Linguistics, which Alice also has enjoyed. Her increased yearning and self-categorisation to this academic group upon her diagnosis takes a toll on her as she is met with indifference from her former colleagues and she worries about identity loss and social prejudices. The intricate relation between a person's identity, self-esteem and occupation is of high regard here for a person's life is defined by his or her occupational identity that highly contributes to his or her social identity. The person attempts at meaning creation by exhibiting competence through various occupational tasks, the nature of which is affected due to illness or injury, resulting in “performance limitations” (Christiansen 547).

The dichotomy of memory vs. forgetting is an important aspect of *Still Alice* as is evident in the identity shift from the work-related one to a disease-related one. It is her intellectual memory and cognitive skills that constitute her identity as a Harvard professor. But changes in these abilities compel her to shift to another identity. Her engagement in the public sphere is reduced to delivering speeches at her Dementia care group. Genova poignantly presents the scene when Alice searches her folders in her office room:

She pulled all of the folders out of the bin marked HOWLAND REPRINTS from her file cabinet. She'd authored well over a hundred published papers. She held this stack of research articles, commentaries,

and reviews, her truncated career's worth of thoughts and opinions, in her hands. It was heavy. Her thoughts and opinions carried weight. At least, they used to. She missed her research, thinking about it, talking about it, her own ideas and insights, the elegant art of her science. (Genova 194)

This scene could be contrasted with the one at Stanford colloquium, where the professor Alice looks at the audience and contemplates before delivering her speech during her academic tenure. She marvels at the prospect of being considered a sought-after intellectual in conferences and meetings:

Alice switched places with Gordon and looked out at her audience looking at her. As she waited for the applause to subside, she thought of the statistic that said people feared public speaking more than they feared death. She loved it. She enjoyed all of the concatenated moments of presenting in front of a listening audience—teaching, performing, telling a story, teeing up a heated debate. [...] The crux of the talk did focus on the main tenets of linguistics, many of which she'd discovered, and she'd been using a number of the same slides for years. But she felt proud, and not ashamed or lazy, that this part of her talk, these discoveries of hers, continued to hold true, withstanding the test of time. Her contributions mattered and propelled future discovery. (9-10)

The narrative structure highly contributes to the portrayal of Alzheimer's as Alice's antagonist as it slowly exerts its power on her. It starts with occasional memory lapses at the beginning of the novel and accelerates its pace by affecting her other cognitive abilities like language impairment and long-term memory loss. The readers slowly get to know about her disease as the narrative is focused on Alice's perspective of things and the people around her. We thus come to terms with her increased disorientation and disease by the end of the novel. The chapters starting from “September 2003” to “September 2005” brilliantly present Alice as she moves through various stages of Alzheimer's, thus letting readers realise the extent of this disease. The words “the mother” and “the actress”, to refer to her daughters Anna and Lydia respectively, towards the end of the novel signify the increased rate of unfamiliarity that Alice faces. Her husband, John, becomes “the man” who owns the house. Such changes also make shifts in her identity from a professor to the “demented Other” (Bitenc 306).

The notion of self-consciousness and identity associated with remembering/forgetting is deeply analysed by the author. Alice's self-esteem is retained only as long as she can remember about her identity as a famed Professor. It is this social identity that has resulted in her friction with Lydia for the latter has opted liberal arts and acting as her career, and often has to end up in heated arguments. The urge to belong to the social identity group of academicians has made her to expect the same from Lydia and to project her unconscious urge to fit into this identity group, thereby creating categorised identities. Tajfel and

Turner maintain that in interpersonal contexts, individuals relate to one another based on their personal abilities and identities, while in intergroup contexts, individuals define themselves and others based on social identities or membership in particular groups. There is a sense of unified work for the same goals, similar ideas as well as emotions amongst the team members. This sense of social unity requires maintaining a positive social identity and a mechanism to address differences and issues in the group. Hence, members are encouraged to maintain an emotional and value-based attachment with the group they belong to. The individual is also more positive towards in-group members than towards out-group members (Jenkins 112-113).

It is this emotional attachment that is threatened by Alice's diagnosis with early-onset Alzheimer's. She feels "like a fraud, posing as a Harvard professor without a progressive neurodegenerative disease, working every day as if everything were just fine and would continue that way" (Genova 96). She is confused by the thought of continuing at Harvard with this medical condition, but "the thought of leaving Harvard terrified her much, much more. Who was she if she wasn't a Harvard psychology professor? (96). This whirlpool of thoughts and internalisation of the "abled" vs "disabled" academic concept contribute to her mental turmoil. She fears losing her fame associated with Harvard, a lingering fear that can torment anyone with academic credibility and contributions. Analysing various factors contributing to the modern notion of autobiographical memory, Maria Medved and Jens Brockeimer note that persons with "fragmented" or "confabulatory" memories "not only have their recollections and viewpoints dismissed, but also their right to self-presentation and moral self-positioning" for they are considered "unable to define a sense of self or be agentic subjects" (451). In a modern academic society driven by perfection and progress, Alice's position as a professor with dementia negates the idea of this agentic subject, thus contributing to her identity crisis.

But despite this identity shift, Alice's self remains the same, as denoted by the title *Still Alice*. She is the same Alice with the same emotional memory about love and kindness. When Lydia acts out a monologue, she immediately feels the love of a mother and kisses Anna's baby sitting on her lap. Moreover, this shift makes Alice reconsider her attitude towards Lydia who has chosen acting as her career instead of the "intellectual and academic" fields that her siblings had chosen. Earlier, their conversation always ended in heated arguments when it came to Lydia's career, and John, too, got chided for financially supporting her. But after her diagnosis of Alzheimer's, Alice and Lydia come to know each other more and it is Lydia who is with her most of the time. Alice realizes the futility of human existence without love and compassion and comes to know more about her daughter. This is poignantly presented when "Lydia reached out across the dishes and glasses and years of distance and held her mother's hand. Alice squeezed it and smiled. Finally, they'd found something else they could talk about" (Genova 162). Though Alice worries about the future in which she may not be able to express this love, she assures herself that the motherly love cannot be affected as it lies deep in her heart beyond the chaos of the mind (231).

A second morbid interpretation can also be explicated from the title. The diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's has affected Alice deeply to the extent that her life has become still and devoid of exciting moments. After the positive mutation tests that confirm her diagnosis, John stops asking her for help in getting his keys and glasses, which makes her wonder about this "independence". She often contemplates "the future her" (118) as Alzheimer's takes hold of her and even goes to the extent of wishing to be a cancer patient rather than being cognitively weak. Alice starts feeling helpless and dependent on John while travelling, thus contributing to her emotional vagaries. Her daily running exercise changes schedule according to John's availability. Upon receiving a new job offer as Chairman of the Cancer Biology and Genetics Program in New York City, John decides to take Alice with him. But their children contest the idea of making Alice uncomfortable against her wishes in a new environment. Despite the arguments, he decides to move alone to his new workplace making Alice feel sad. The feeling of being a "burden" has earlier tormented her and this episode adds more to it. Genova pictures Alice and John together at Chatham Cape, their vacation home when Alice asks him about the book *From Molecules to Mind*, jointly written by them. Seeing the authors' names, she says:

"I remember. I remember you. I remember I used to be very smart."

"Yes, you were, you were the smartest person I've ever known."

This thick book with the shiny blue cover represented so much of what she used to be. (284)

Alice tries to remember such fond memories of being together and her life accomplishments. This revival of the lasting memory she has can be considered an attempt to overcome her identity change. The fight that Alice puts up against Alzheimer's is thus, highly significant in this context. She tries to combat it by employing various mechanisms like remembering different words from her dictionary after set intervals, reading, jogging etc. Later, her part in the body vs. mind struggle is diminished as she loses control over her memory. Yet, she occasionally remembers herself as a person who was smart and had a distinguished career.

The notion of memory/mind connected with the body is highly symbolic in the novel as the narrative progresses through Alice's disease. She is a healthy woman with strong physical characteristics but has an "[u]nresponsive, disobedient, weakening" (166) mind. Her recurrent memory lapses and accelerated disorientation later contribute to the ageing of her physical body. When she catches her reflection on the mirrors, she is stunned at her "aged" body and considers the mirrors as faulty. The question of how the mirrors can distort a girl to make her look "ugly and old" is what ponders Alice which makes her paint them white. From a work-related social identification to a disease-related social identification, she struggles to accept the reality of memory loss.

The sense of fear associated with neurodegenerative diseases is mainly due to the

stigmatized notions by society about persons with such diseases. They fear the loss of dignity and self-worth due to the lack of cognitive abilities. Hence, an early intervention into the disease often does not occur, thereby increasing its seriousness. Coupled with this is the self-awareness of such persons about their cognitive degeneration, which in itself is a painful experience. This pain adds more to the identity shift from a professional identity to a disease identity, as is explicated in the character of Alice. Her fear of losing her academic identity and the resulting humiliation is confirmed by her colleagues' responses to her diagnosis and her being removed from the job position. Being shifted to an identity of “the demented Other”, Alice struggles to come to terms with the reality of her disease for she has internalised self-categorisation and depersonalisation with her occupational identity. She even goes to the extent of contemplating suicide if her memory deteriorates and plans steps for it on her Blackberry phone. Genova poignantly presents Alice's progressing Alzheimer's in frequent intervals through memory tests on her whereabouts, which at first evades the readers, but reveals its power at a second glance.

However, an increasingly disoriented Alice with no control over her memory is seen by the novel's end. This loss of control makes readers think about the futility of rigidly conforming to a particular social identity and disallowing others. She forgets her suicide plan and her ideas about a meaningful life have taken a dramatic twist towards the end of the novel. Earlier, she was focused on maintaining her social identity and progressing in her accomplishments. As the disease progresses, Alice is concerned (and able to think) only about happily and meaningfully living with her family. Thus, the novel forces readers to rethink the concept of identity formation and social stratification by taking readers through the identity crisis faced by Alice as she gradually succumbs to Alzheimer's disease. The general societal notions regarding self-worth and dignity are also deconstructed when the readers are taken through Alice's perspective.

Readers are thus made to realise what it means to be “the demented Other” through Alice's perspective while being in the position of a non-demented person. She becomes more positive towards the dementia care group and almost forgets her earlier identity as a famed professor. Hence, the earlier inhibition upon visiting the care centre gradually shifts to inclusivity by forming support groups and identifying with other dementia patients. The novel is “about identity, about living a life that matters, about family, and about what a crisis does to relationships (Genova). It also brings forth the necessity to recognise such visibly hidden neurodegenerative illness on par with the general physical illness and to address the associated stigma in the society. The stigma on mental illness often forces those affected and their relations to cover up and ignore the symptoms which later opens up physically.

The novel brings forth different philosophical questions on identity creation and the dilemma associated with identity shift. It intricately analyses Alice Howland's identities as a professor and a dementia patient and the subsequent effects on her relations with

family, colleagues and the society. The ethical question on sacrifice both from her part and her family takes up almost the entire novel. Through the theoretical framework of Social Identity Approach and Self- categorisation Theory, the paper analyses the concepts of occupational identity and the “abled” vs the “disabled” and maintains that self-categorisation and social identity construction affect the perception on “the demented other” when it comes to intellectual productivity. Though the novel ends with the interaction between Alice and Lydia regarding love and compassion, the readers have a lingering philosophical question of addressing the dichotomy of memory vs forgetting in relation to identity concepts and perception of identity shifts in the society.

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Inheriting the Nation : Partition and Postmemory in *Chachaji's Teacup* and *Mukand and Riaz*

Abstract

This paper examines how postmemory functions as a mode of national imagination through a close reading of two Indian picturebooks about the Partition, Chachaji's Cup and Mukand and Riaz. Drawing on Ernest Renan's idea that the nation rests on "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories," the study explores how inherited stories of the Partition, rather than lived experience, shape contemporary young readers' sense of national belonging. In a diverse country like India, where no single language, religion, or ethnicity unites its citizens, such postmemorial narratives play a crucial role in constructing nationalism for the next generation. Using Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, alongside insights from trauma and memory studies, the paper shows how familial storytelling and testimonial objects (such as the teacup and the caps in these texts) transmit embodied traces of the past, transforming historical trauma into emotionally resonant, child-accessible narratives. The way the Partition is represented through acts of postmemorial transfer is studied, while tracing the ways in which the event is mediated by older generations and reimagined for young readers. Through a thorough analysis, the paper also demonstrates how national sentiment is shaped through selective remembrance. Ultimately, the paper argues for a critical awareness of how postmemory operates, to understand what it preserves, what it softens, and what it strategically forgets in order to keep up particular visions of the nation.

Keywords: Postmemory, Partition, Nationalism, Children's literature, Indian Literature.

Roughly a decade before Benedict Anderson published *Imagined Communities*, Ernest Renan lyrically wrote that "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle" (19). He theorised that it is not language or culture or even natural frontiers that determine a nation, it is the spiritual belief shared by the people of that nation that constitutes it. This spiritual principle or 'soul' of the nation lies in two elements: the past, "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories", and "the present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (Renan 19). The second part corresponds in a way to Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as an "imagined community". However, this paper deals with the former, the significance of a common "legacy of memories" in ideating the nation. In a country like India, with its vast diversity, and no common language, race, religion or ethnicity that unites its citizens, "the appeal to a positive historical memory can play a significant role in constructing the nationalism of the present" (Tharoor 50). Perhaps this is why, almost

eight decades since Independence, children are taught national pride through stories and anecdotes drawn from the freedom struggle. As Kanchan Panday suggests, national narratives in postcolonial societies often draw not only on distant myths but also on the glorified struggles of the recent past, using such memories to weave communities together and sharpen distinctions between “us” and “them,” to produce a version of the past tailored to contemporary nation-building. The 'memory' of the struggle for freedom and the partition remains a powerful reservoir of values and symbols, which inform and influence young minds. Since the early 1960s, children's literature in India has continuously engaged with the freedom struggle for stories to inspire a sense of belonging in the nation. However, as P. Sainath poignantly notes, “in the next five or six years, there will not be a single person alive who fought for this country's freedom” (vii). As the decades pass and the generation with direct memory of those turbulent, nation-shaping years fade, memories are transformed into the realm of 'post-memory'. In this context, where lived memory is transformed into inherited memory, stories told to children become significant. It is important to ask- whose nation are they inheriting and how is that nation imagined for them? This study closely analyses two picture books for children *Chachaji's Teacup* and *Mukand and Riaz* through the framework of postmemory.

Marianne Hirsch, author of *The Generation of Postmemory*, a seminal work in the field, defines post memory as “the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up.” (5). These memories are passed on to the next generation with such feeling and depth that they become part of their psyche despite never having directly experienced the events in question. They are not entirely 'memories', but “approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects” (Hirsch 31). Reading together with Renan's ideas, the 'post-memory' seems to constitute an important part of the 'soul' of the nation. Subsequently, the memories that are inherited by the next generation play a crucial role in continuing the nation-shaping project. It is interesting then to examine what memories are preserved and promoted to the status of postmemory, and integrated with the collective national imagination, and which memories are erased, forgotten, because they do not serve to sustain the nation's carefully constructed image.

Recent research on postmemory and national ideology provides a crucial foundation for understanding how inherited narratives shape contemporary identities and national consciousness. Besides Hirsch, theorists like Cathay Caruth, Jan and Almeida Assmann, Eva Hoffman, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub among others have extrapolated on the concept of postmemory in detail. Some of their ideas are referred to in this paper, but it is crucial to note that their work is largely centered on the transmission of trauma in the context of the Holocaust. Though it is dangerous to draw a direct correlation between the historically distinct events, their ideas specific to memory, testimony and familial transfer of trauma can be applied to the Partition of India as well, as I have attempted to do.

Memory and its transfer involve a dimension of choice; choosing what to forget, and what to not pass on. This facet of memory is discussed by Gyanendra Pandey in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. He observes that scholarship on the partition in the Indian context has been shaped by concerns over national unity and by the belief that forgetting is necessary to preserve that unity (60). Similarly, Susan Sontag argues that “collective memory is not a remembering, but a stipulating” (86). For Sontag, collective memory is just another term for ideology, because social groups (like nations) define themselves by choosing the stories they prioritise and the values and anxieties they share. To explore the ideological dimension of postmemory in relation to Partition, it is necessary to consider how ideology is conveyed through children's literature, given that this study examines two picturebooks for young readers.

Children's literature as a route for ideological dissemination has been extensively studied in the recent past by theorists such as Perry Nodelman, John Stephens and Maria Nikolajeva. Creators of children's literature frequently operate on the belief that children's presumed innocence and limited experience require them to be “taught” through narrative about what they do not yet understand (Nodelman 157). It often reflects contemporary morality and intends to “foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values...shared by author and audience” (Stephens 3). Nationalism and a sense of national belonging is instilled in children from a young age as demonstrated by Martyn Barrett through quantitative studies. The way national sentiments are propagated through children's literature is studied in *The Nation in Children's Literature*, a collection of essays edited by Kelen and Sundmark. They opined that “the child needs to understand what the nation's dead died for because it is in those acts the meaning of the nation is enshrined” (3). Nupur Chaudhuri as well Michele Superle confirm that children's literature has been a vessel to disseminate nationalist ideals in India since its independence (Chaudhuri 78; Superle 4).

The sense of belonging to a nation is created during childhood, which is why it is important to study nationalism in children's literature through the lens of postmemory. The picture book *Chachaji's Teacup* by Uma Krishnaswami tells the story of a young boy who inherits the memory of partition from his grandfather. In *Mukand and Riaz*, Nina Sabnani recounts the story of partition told to her by her father through the picture book medium. In both texts, there is intergenerational transfer of memory and archival objects creating an affecting link to the past. The following sections will scrutinize these aspects in detail, and consider how postmemory constructs the idea of selfhood and the nation within this context.

Hirsch emphasises that post memory is “not a movement, method, or idea” but instead a “structure of inter and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (6). In *Chachaji's Teacup*, this structure emerges when Neel hears the story

of India's partition or "when India was split in two" from his Chachaji, who experienced it as a boy (12). Though the term 'chachaji' translates to one's uncle or father's brother in Hindi, when read along with the illustrations it is more likely that he is Neel's father's uncle or an elderly relative. As Chachaji describes walking miles on foot to reach the border, Neel relates this to how difficult it is for him to walk even short distances, and so how unbearable it would have been for his uncle to walk so long "weighed down with sadness" (13). Neel's empathetic response shows he has connected deeply with his uncle's trauma. This connection is intensified when Neel dreams vividly of Chachaji and his family becoming refugees after partition, almost exactly as he had narrated it to him. In this moment, the trauma is transferred from Chachaji's lived memory and becomes his own, a manifestation of postmemory.

The picture book *Mukand and Riaz* was initially created as a film by the animator Nina Sabnani for the Big Small People Project, Israel. It was later published in picture book form by Tulika publishers. What begins as a story of interreligious friendship between the two boys Mukand and Riaz quickly becomes one of fear and loss, initiated by the partition. Mukand, a Hindu, must flee by ship to India while Riaz is left behind in Pakistan. It is the final sentence that contextualises the story - "this is what Mukand told me. Mukand was my father". With this disclosure, the metaphoric fourth wall is broken and the creator Sabnani directly addresses the reader, revealing that the entire narrative is a creative retelling of her father's memory, as passed down to her. The vividity and detail with which the events had been told to her created such an impact on Sabnani that she was able to create such moving, award-winning art with it. In this way, the entire book becomes a testament of postmemory and its impact, functioning, as Hirsch puts it, "a consequence of traumatic recall but... at a generational remove" (6). Thus, the two picture books, written and published for children, discuss the partition of India and Pakistan as a manifestation of postmemory.

It becomes pertinent to clarify that 'postmemory' does not simply refer to a grandparent recounting their past to their grandchild, it involves passing on the remnant trauma as well. Hirsch emphasises that, "the term 'post' memory tries to "define both a specifically inter- and transgenerational act of transfer, and the resonant after effects of trauma" (4). In *Chachaji's Teacup*, Chachaji would tell Neel and his friend David stories from his past. These stories took on a life of their own. For instance, when Chachaji describes his time in the Indian Army, marching across snowy Himalayan passes, "the air would grow chilly in the living room, even in the middle of summer" (11). The memory becomes tangible to the young child. But as Chachaji gets older and physically unwell, the author writes that "his story faded" (18). This signifies a sense of losing significance, as he ages, and the need to 'leave something behind' deepens.

An important feature of memory is its ability to be externalised, as explained by Aleida Assmann. When one puts their memory into words, that memory becomes part of the

shared symbolic language system and is “no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property” (Assmann 36). It can then be exchanged, shared, verified, challenged, revised and, importantly, recorded in writing. This makes it accessible to people across time and space (Assmann 36). In order that his memory does not 'fade' with his lifespan, Chachaji passes it on, just as Nina Sabnani's father passed on his memories to her. The significance of postmemorial work is that it “strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 33). *Mukand and Riaz* is illustrated using collage-like prints of women's applique work common to both Sindh in Pakistan and Gujarat in India. Using this as a form of “aesthetic expression,” Sabnani brings her father's memory to life through this book. As Urvashi Butalia points out, “...collection of memories...is what makes up the reality of the Partition” (8). Memory, and how people choose to remember an event is a crucial part of history as she emphasises. This makes the act of transfer inherently sacred. Emphasising its significance, Hirsch points out, “less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone” (33). For victims of the partition, it is important that their lives are not forgotten. This is why postmemorial work and act of transfer is so consequential.

Yet, there is a need to further demonstrate how postmemory extends beyond mere documentation of events. The difference between memory and history in the words of Hirsch, is the “presence of embodied and affective experience in the process of transmission” (32). For Chachaji, the teacup, which belonged to his mother, stands as a fragile remnant of his roots. His mother had brought the teacup with her on the journey across the border and would say that “if this teacup got to India without breaking, she would get to India without breaking” (15). The frail teacup survived, as did she and now stood as a testament to her resilience and sacrifice. Chachaji invests the teacup with deep sentimental value and it is an integral part of his daily teatime routine that he shares with Neel and the rest of the household. When Neel accidentally drops the cup, shattering it, Chachaji is so devastated that he has to be taken to the hospital the very next day due to trouble with his heart. The teacup, along with Chachaji's mother's photograph placed in a prominent position on the wall signify the importance of the past in the living present. The transfer of those memories signals “an affective link to the past” or a sense of “material ‘living connection’”. Hirsch points out that this is “powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony” as evident here (32). The teacup is an 'archival' or 'testimonial' object that helps create this affective link. Testimonial objects which survive the traumatic event is “an expression of reassurance-of a will to survive” (Hirsch 186). It is after he accidentally breaks the teacup that Neel dreams of the partition and crossing the border as Chachaji had narrated to him. The guilt causes him to directly relate to the memory of loss and pain. He then 'fixes' the teacup by gluing it back together,

an act which is rewarded by a small smile from Chachaji when he returns from the hospital. Though it cannot be used to carry tea any longer, it takes a place on the mantelpiece, to 'hold memories' (31). To Chachaji, the teacup held memories of his own mother and her trauma, while for Neel it holds memories of his Chachaji. The memory is carried down through the object and the hands that have held it. Taking its place on the mantelpiece, the teacup becomes an important part of the household, none of whom (except the elderly Chachaji) had been alive during the partition. It carries forward a legacy in the form of postmemory.

In *Mukand and Riaz*, Mukand's red cap immediately appears as a coveted object that Riaz longs to wear but Mukand would not let him. The story follows the friendship of the two boys, until the circumstances shift and Mukand escapes to 'India' along with his family at the wake of the Partition. Riaz disguises Mukand in his own Jinnah cap so that he can safely reach the port. Mukand boards the ship wearing Riaz's Jinnah cap and throws his red cap to Riaz as he leaves the port. This final exchange is the last time they ever interact with each other. Sabnani transforms this poignant memory from her father's childhood into a powerful narrative for young readers, who, despite never meeting either boy, can fully register the grief of their separation. The Jinnah cap that Mukand is left with is a testimonial object because "...every time Mukand saw the Jinnah cap, he thought of his best friend". Throughout the narrative, the red cap recurs visually and in the last page, a single red cap is the sole illustration. The red cap, though physically absent in Mukand's life, functions as a testimonial object as well, its unseen presence evoking Riaz's side of the story. One can visualise Riaz, living somewhere in Pakistan, telling his children a similar story of boyhood and lost friendship and remembering Mukand fondly when he sees his red cap. Like the teacup, the cap becomes significant in the postmemorial work as a souvenir object authenticating the past. In Hirsch's words, souvenir objects "trigger memories and connect them indexically to a particular place and time. They also help to recall shared experiences and fleeting friendships" (186). Sabnani's artistic vision accomplishes exactly this, reconstructing the memory with emotional and narrative depth.

As demonstrated in this study, *Chachaji's Teacup* and *Mukand and Riaz* are embodied expressions of postmemory in children's literature. Both portray the partition as a painful event, remembered through a sense of loss and separation. While they gesture towards the violence of 1947, there is an intentional absence of explicit references to the extent of violence and bloodshed. This omission is presumably because the books are meant for much younger readers for whom detailed accounts of violence are not deemed appropriate. Even so, it still positions the partition as a significant historical moment and acknowledges losses on both sides of the border.

Further, the two picture books illustrate the role of family and ancestors in transmitting stories of the nation through narration and testimonial objects, instilling in the younger audience a sense of empathy and emotional belonging. Assmann identifies

the family as a “privileged site” for the passing down of memory (41). In her explanation of 'social memory', she emphasises familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation. Renan writes that “of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are” (19). Memory is thus passed down within a family from the ancestors to the younger generation as evident in the texts. The fact that these are examples of literature written by adults and passed down to children (the next generation) adds a layer to this process of transmission. That is why it is important to study how ideology is propagated through postmemory, especially through children's literature. Considering the impact of postmemory in shaping a nation, it is crucial to not be passive receivers of postmemory and be critical in the way we internalise it. Hirsch argues that we can only truly receive the testimonies earlier generations intended to pass down if we first recognise the distance between us and them, the layers of meaning, interpretation, and historical change that shape how we read their experiences today (199). Further, there is a need for closer study of what is being purposely and systematically erased or 'forgotten' to sustain a certain idea of the nation. Ultimately, as these picture books illustrate, postmemory is neither neutral nor automatic; it is shaped by the stories families choose to pass on and by the ideological frameworks embedded in the literature children encounter.

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Forgotten Voices : Exploring Trauma, Memory and War in Ruta Sepetys' *Salt to the Sea* (2016)

Abstract

The sinking of M V Wilhelm Gustloff is one of the deadliest maritime disasters in the history of the world. At the end of World War II, Gustloff, which ferried about ten thousand fleeing soldiers and refugees, was hit by three torpedoes on 30 January 1945. This forgotten tragedy forms the background to the historical novel Salt to the Sea (2016) by Ruta Sepetys. The novel brings out, through the multifaceted voices of the young protagonists, the trauma of war through their interwoven memories. The paper attempts to situate the young protagonists, who are exposed to the struggles and realities of war, at the centre of the narrative. By doing so this paper explores the study of one of the many forgotten tragedies, contributing to a growing body of research on silenced and marginalised histories. Finally, the article analyses trauma and cultural memory through young adult historical fiction.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, War, Maritime disaster, youth

Introduction

The *M V Wilhelm Gustloff* set sail from the city of Gotenhafen on January 30, 1945, that carried the fleeing Germans under Operation Hannibal; and, was among the many ships that were destroyed during this evacuation in the Baltic Sea. At that time attention was not paid to its sinking and it was only recently that this unreported shipwreck has found its way into discussion. Maren Johnson in her work has elaborated reasons as to why there was silence about this tragedy. She also mentions how this was one of the greatest tragedies on account of the number of deaths; she adds on to the discussion stating that, “more people died on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* than on the Titanic and Lusitania combined, yet the sinking of the German ship has never received attention” (Johnson 1). The ship that once was a sense of pride and luxury became a vessel that was destroyed and forgotten. In her discussion, Maren adduces reasons behind the forgetting of the tragedy included a sense of shame that many Germans felt for supporting Hitler, Hitler's own embarrassment to account for a tragedy of this magnitude, and the Russians' unwillingness to acknowledge a tragedy of this enormity. One primary reason for the anonymity that Johnson mentions is the complete absence of media coverage that the ship received after the tragedy and once the sinking was discovered. Johnson also highlights how the survivors of the tragedy were too embarrassed to speak about it, when feigning ignorance about the sinking seemed farcical; apart from that, newspapers were not

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allowed to publish anything in regard to this tragedy and the Hitler Youth were actively threatening the survivors to avoid any mention of the tragedy. And just like that “the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was forgotten amidst the victories and war”, “the loss was simply over nine thousand women, children, and wounded soldiers dying beneath the Nazi flag” (Johnson 12).

Edward Timms notes that “the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was not simply an unprecedented maritime disaster. It formed part of an even more momentous series of events: the expulsion of approximately twelve million Germans from the eastern provinces” (333). He wonders how an event of such magnitude was allowed to fade away from memory. In the same study, he mentions Heinz Schon, a rescued passenger, who had devoted his later life collecting data about the ship and published a series of books on the subject. His works inspired a 1960 black and white film, *Night Darkness Fell Over on Gotenhafen* (*Nacht fiel über Gotenhafen*), directed by Frank Wisbar. This movie however was not able to leave an impact on the audience. Thereafter, a historical fiction, *Crabwalk* (*Imkrebbsgang*), written by Gunter Grass and translated by Krishna Winston, published in 2002, revisited the tragedy. This became the landmark of the historical event, since the publication of the book prompted the way to a series of articles that not only talked about the sinking of the ship but also about the forgotten Germans lost at sea. A 2001 five-part documentary, titled *The Great Flight* (*Die grosse Flucht*) directed by Guido Knopp was made for television. This brought forward a new generation of viewers and readers that questioned the forgetting of the event.

Ruta Sepetys wanted to give voice to the hidden and forgotten histories of those who would not be able to tell their story. In an interview Sepetys mentions, “I was also inspired to write about the maritime disaster because although the magnitude dwarfs the sinking of the Titanic, the story of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* is virtually unknown” (“An Interview With... Ruta Sepetys”). In the Author's Note of *Salt to the Sea* (2016), she expresses how she was haunted by the thoughts of the atrocities of “the helpless children and teenagers—innocent victims of border shifts, ethnic cleansings, and vengeful regime” (382). She restates the importance of historical fiction and urges that, “When the survivors are gone we [readers] must not let the truth disappear with them” (Sepetys 383). She constructed the novel by piecing together “—letters, newspaper ads, memoirs, conversations with witnesses and photographs. This technique enables readers to revisit the experiences of the characters, making them not only witnesses but also a part of the collective trauma” (Žmuida 124). This historical fiction aimed at portraying the different experiences using a multifaceted narrative form, through children and young voices.

2. Trauma and Memory Studies in WW2 Historical Narratives

Scholars and theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have deeply influenced and have laid the foundation for the study of trauma and memory, which have become fundamental for an understanding of and for restructuring historical narratives

and historical violence. Caruth (1996) maintains the concept of the belatedness of trauma, that is, trauma is experienced not entirely in the moment but revisited later. She defines trauma as an experience that is too overwhelming to be understood in the present, often returning as a delayed response. The inherent latency and delay of the trauma result in the irrepresentability and the incomprehensibility of trauma. LaCapra (2001) adds to it by exploring how trauma is dealt with in history and literature. According to him the processing of trauma happens through “acting out” or “working through”, that is, a repetitive re-living of trauma or through attempting to process and narrativize it. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the notion of trauma started being applied to social groups (Madigan 45) and sparked discussions on cultural trauma. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2010) co-authored by Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Geisen, Neil Smelser and Piotr Sztompka is a landmark in the study of cultural trauma from a sociological lens. Recent scholarship on trauma has also focused on PTSD, generational and intergenerational trauma, resistance and resilience across varied contexts.

Anne Whitehead brings forward the paradox of representing trauma in fiction in her book, *Trauma Fiction* (2004), questioning the narrativization of an incomprehensible event. Her work “seek to remark on a resonance between theory and literature in which each speaks to and addresses the other” (Whitehead 4), trying to link trauma theory to literary criticism. Rosanne Kennedy avers that “The idea that literature could be read as a kind of testimony to unspeakable experience provided a new critical paradigm” (55). Similarly, others like Lothe hold “...that narrative— or perhaps more precisely, attempts to narrate, whether orally or visually or by writing— are an asset and a resource, possibly even an integral aspect of a human life” (160). He concurs with the view about there being a problematic relationship between trauma and narrative, and how traumatic elements can complicate the narrative structures.

Alongside the discussion of trauma, literature and narrative, Alieda Assmann (2011) shows how literature reconstructs memories of lost and suppressed narratives and serves as a repository of silenced histories or memory archives, exploring cultural memory, which shapes historical narratives. Many scholars such as James E. Young and Kate McLoughlin have, however, questioned the ethics of the representation of a traumatic event in fiction and discussed the narrative responsibility that the authors have when portraying and reconstructing a historical event. When Silke Arnold-de Simine writes “Memory indicates a relationship to past events that is shaped by, and in turn profoundly impacts, how we think, feel, and live in the present” (140), the paradigm of a forgotten tragedy is questioned.

Historical fiction becomes important as it provides a space where silenced or forgotten traumas can be addressed. Historical fiction found ample space in the literature of the Second World War, which has primarily been dominated by combat and Holocaust

narratives; however, recently the attention has shifted to civilian experiences including those of the marginalised and displaced. Additionally, Kate McLoughlin (2011) has discussed how literature acts as a space where historical traumas are reconstructed, thereby constructing cultural memory. In the 1990s, theoretical groundwork for cultural memory studies was laid down by German scholars Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, providing a systematic foundation to understand how the past is remembered, constructed and communicated through acts of remembrance, such as literature (Kennedy 59). Astrid Erll reminds that literatures “are [is] not 'memory', but rather media of cultural memory, which encode information and can prompt remembering or forgetting” (100). That is to say, the past is remembered and reconstructed through its representation through media (like film, literature). Rosanne Kennedy discusses how Erll and Rigney contend that literature shapes cultural memory and goes on to observe that:

They identify three roles that literature plays in the production and communication of cultural memory: (1) as a medium of remembrance; (2) as an object of remembrance; and (3) as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory. (61)

Literature thus becomes an important medium for the production of cultural memory. Young Adult (YA) Historical Literature opens avenues for young readers and promotes the creation of cultural memories among young readers. It is, however, debatable whether YA literature can or cannot truly express the weight of any historical atrocity. The growing body of writing in the canon of war literature for youth highlights how the “young may be victims and witnesses – and in some cases, perpetrators – of atrocities” (Reynolds, Kimberley 2011, 123). In the introduction to *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature*, Rachel Dean-Ruzicka observes that:

Historical fiction for young adults has the capability to play a significant role in their ethical development and may promote their ability to create recognizable and grievable lives from previously unacknowledged populations. Readers can, and should, and cosmopolitan ethics in the stories they read and teach... Historical fiction can create memories for young readers and these memories encompass experiences that may be far removed from their own. The combination of facts and character-based narrative created by historical fiction are central to larger considerations of how representation and literature function. (13)

Dean-Ruzicka underlines the capacity of young adult historical fiction and the significant impact it can have on readers. Themes of trauma and war have been explored by Young Adult literature authors like Markus Zusak who have used various techniques of narration like fragmented narration to make historical trauma more approachable to young readers, while also challenging the assumption of being overly simple and/or subjective. World War II historical narrative is mainly focused on Holocaust narratives or the battles fought on the Western front.

Trauma has been explored in other Young Adult Historical fiction- as in *The Boy in Striped Pajamas* or *The Book Thief*, but there has been very scant scholarship and research on Eastern European trauma, particularly on the tragedy of *Wilhelm Gustloff*. It is one of the deadliest maritime disasters that was long forgotten or ignored in the study of historical trauma. Therefore, by engaging with young readers, Sepetys' work highlights the significant role of literature in re-remembering forgotten events. By focusing on the lesser-known tragedy *Salt to the Sea* (2016) attempts a kind of historical recovery, which aligns with the creation of cultural memory in the larger context. Sepetys makes use of narrative techniques that Whitehead mentions, to explore trauma through the perspective of young adults, each carrying a different psychological wound and addressing the lack of engagement with civilian trauma as well that of the sinkings that happened when Operation Hannibal was being carried out.

The other historical fiction that talked about this tragedy was written in 2002, by Gunter Grass. His novel, *Crabwalk*, “unfolds around historical truths and is derived not just from the direct testimony of a survivor but from shared collective memories, illustrating how trauma is transmitted across generations through the oral tradition” (Žmuida 126). Sepetys on the other hand uses four alternating first-person narratives to reach the tragedy of the sinking. She slowly unravels their journey to the *Wilhelm Gustloff* which was supposed to be their saviour. The disjointed, abrupt and short chapters reflect the nature of trauma and memory. Despite the richness of the text and the growing attention to Young Adult Historical Fiction, *Salt to the Sea* has gained little attention in academia. The few articles, apart from the reviews, that have studied the novel have talked about the dissolution of identities and the delusional characters in the novel. In another article, Ewa Lukaszuk maintains that:

Sepetys' novel deals with something more than just the interwoven destinies of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It speaks of a catastrophic destruction of their identity and their inner sense of belonging, just as the intimate worlds they have left behind are totally erased. The war, culminating in the sinking of the ship as their last hope of salvation, leaves the survivors in a state of absolute cultural nakedness (45).

She discusses how the identities of the protagonists as well as other characters were dissolved in the shipwreck. Another study by Eugenijus Žmuida details the shared historical trauma depicted in *Crabwalk* and *Salt to the Sea*. She writes:

By bringing to light a war episode that had been condemned to oblivion, both authors show the enduring nature of the traumas of the past, which can be reconstructed even decades later and resonate down to our own time, enriching our understanding of the paradoxes of life and of the human condition. (127)

This study focused on the study of Historical trauma as part of Lithuanian cultural memory and history. The aspect of trauma and cultural memory seems to have received limited attention in the studies done so far in the context of the novel.

Moreover, *Salt to the Sea* expands the discussion on World War II and raises questions on how it is remembered and narrated across generations. The current study attempts to bridge this gap by analysing the individual trauma and the creation of cultural memory of a forgotten tragedy through the young voices in *Salt to the Sea*. The study aims to shed light on the lesser-known tragedies that happened at the end of the Second World War and show how trauma and memory are often negated, a theme discussed at admirable length by *Salt to the Sea*. This paper therefore contributes to the growing body of study of silenced and marginalized histories through a 21st century novel for young adults.

3. Trauma and Memory in *Salt to the Sea*

Sepetys makes use of short, disjointed narration, a technique used by authors to depict trauma in the novel. She makes use of unidirectional, multifaceted first-person narration that challenges the traditional linear narrative, which in turn speaks to the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory. By doing so Sepetys reiterates what Anne Whitehead in her book *Trauma Fiction* elaborates about the use of fragmentation, disruption and silence by novelists.

Additionally, Žmuida writes:

Salt to the Sea is based on real facts and real-life stories. The novel is structured retrospectively, starting from the end and piecing together the traumatic disaster through a pastiche of diverse sources—letters, newspaper ads, memoirs, conversations with witnesses and photographs. This technique enables readers to revisit the experiences of the characters, making them not only witnesses but also a part of the collective trauma. (124)

This approach is described by Geoffrey H. Hartman as “imagining a process in collective memory that focuses not on the historical facts used in the novel but, on the contrary, relies on history as a means of understanding the extent, consequences, and presentation of traumatic events” (260). It is the individual trauma in the novel that shapes cultural memory.

3.1 Individual Trauma

Nigel C. Hunt has described trauma as “a fundamental rift or breakdown of psychological functioning (memory, behaviour, emotion) which occurs as a result of an unbearably intense experience that is life-threatening to the self or others” (7). In *Salt to the Sea* the breakdown of memory, behaviour and emotion happens as a result of the life-threatening war, with each character affected by the pangs of war. Every character in the novel depicts different individual traumas, which serve as distinct psychological wounds.

Through multifaceted storytelling, Sepetys' novel provides a wide space for discussion of traumas that war leaves behind. The use of young adult characters provides us with nuanced and unblemished storytelling. It also depicts how young adults with unified expression share similar haunting visions, fears and scarce glimmers of hope. The motif of a “hunter” is the theme of the novel, where all the monologues echo a similar narrative structure. The central characters Joana, Florian, Emilia and Alfred are haunted by guilt, fate, shame, and fear, respectively.

The narrative employs a stream of consciousness form that constantly shifts and changes from one narrator to the other, giving us an insight to the inner psyche of the individuals; the narrative is often abrupt, short and nonlinear, and also oscillating between their past and present self. This technique emphasises the traumatic reality of the event that is broken and incomplete. The trauma in the novel is especially evident through the narrative form that Sepetys has used; the use of flashbacks, delusions and repetitions add volume to the traumatic aspect in the novel. Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11-12). Sepetys' has infused this concept in the four narrations where each central character is revisited or rather 'hunted' by their past.

In an interview when Sepetys was asked the idea behind the form of the novel, she responded thus:

I traveled to six different countries researching *Salt to the Sea* and met with many people who experienced the refugee evacuation of 1945. During the interviews, it was clear that each person viewed the experience differently—through their own cultural lens. So I created four separate characters to give voice to a particular regional experience and allow the reader to look through their “lens.” (“An Interview With Author Ruta Sepetys”)

Consequently, through the different experiences Sepetys validates and recognises the multifaceted trauma, giving voice to multiple forgotten atrocities that happened to people of different ethnicities and circumstances. In the end the individual trauma of the characters collectively reconstructs the forgotten memory of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* tragedy. The individual traumas depicted by the characters here are but cultural traumas that affect a broader social group. The forgotten voices are not of individuals but of the collective voices that drowned at sea. Alexander states that “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Through *Salt to the Sea* Sepetys has attempted to revive the group consciousness and to show “war through the eyes of youths from different nations, forced to leave everything they loved

behind”(382.) This shipwreck resulted in the loss of collective identity, which, as pointed out by Eyerman with reference to cultural trauma, is a “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric”(61).

3.2. Cultural Memory

Ruta Sepetys, asserts that her novel is “a work of historical fiction” (380) and in doing so attempts to give voice to the forgotten memories of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* tragedy of 1945. She notes that “When the survivors are gone, we must not let the truth disappear with them” (383). This also highlights her inclination towards preservation of memories, and the creation of cultural memory.

Anne Whitehead in her work *Memory* holds that:

‘Cultural memory’..., is primarily concerned with events from a more distant past, beyond living memory. The memory of events is retained either through cultural formation (texts, rites, or monuments) or through institutional commemoration (recitation, practice, observance). Cultural memory is particularly characterized by its distance from the everyday, or its transcendence. Often formalized through ceremony, cultural memory typically depends upon a specialized practice for its transmission, so that there are designated bearers of memory. (132)

It can be said that the novel, *Salt to the Sea*, plays a major role in re-constructing the cultural memory of the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which symbolizes many other ships that were destroyed during the evacuation. Moreover, the characters depict the collective trauma of all those who lost their life on their way to the ships, those who boarded the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, those who sank with the ship and those who survived. It brings together stories of people by talking of mass civilian suffering, loss of family, all of which culminated towards the end of the war. The protagonists play a major role in embodying the cultural trauma through first person narratives that are shaped by war, displacement, and trauma. Each character showcases a different aspect of war and trauma. For instance, Joana stands for memories of Lithuanians who were stuck in the angst of war and Florian for the Prussian Junkers, whose family was executed. Likewise, Emilia's story stands for victims of rape as well as of the Poles who had to flee. Alfred on the other hand stands for those youth who lost their mind and their faith in the ideologies by the end of the war. Apart from these, Emilia's daughter Halinka becomes the emblem of generational trauma in the novel. While discussing the multifaceted narrative style of *Salt to the Sea*, Eugenijus Žmuida notes that:

As readers dive into the consciousness of various characters, they become aware of their innermost thoughts and emotions, as well as their perspectives on the other characters and unfolding external events. Through this approach, the reader gains more insight than any individual

character possesses, comprehending the inner world of each character and their motivations. (123).

Each of the four protagonists carries a different narrative of their sufferings and trauma. Each displays different coping mechanisms, highlighting how different individuals deal with trauma differently. The other characters in the novel, Ingrid, the shoemaker, Eva, the little boy, stand for different experiences from varied lenses. The story not only highlights what the end of the war brought, but also the trauma that the survivors carried with them to reach there. Their journey and what they encounter during it highlights their struggle and loss. Their stories add to the memory of the many who drowned.

4. Conclusion

Salt to the Sea is a seminal work around which the cultural memory around the *Wilhelm Gustloff* tragedy revolves. The novel through multiple voices reconstructs the forgotten event that consumed the lives of around 10,000 people. The novel confronts erasure histories, like that of the sinking of evacuating ships, which forms an important part of the cultural trauma and memory, deliberately choosing to represent the Second World War through the eyes of youth from different nations, forced to leave everything that they had loved behind. Through historical fiction, Sepetys wants “a global human community striving to learn from the past.” and through reading “be united in story, study, and remembrance.” (383)

It reiterates all too apparently the perspicacious observations of Norman:

literature not only reveals the devastating consequences of the war, but further inspires empathy, support, compassion, and deep understanding of the tragic experiences endured by those affected. By narrating the stories of victimized people, literature invites humanity to connect with their struggles and challenges, encouraging a more nuanced and compassionate perspective on the impact of conflict. (2)

Sepetys makes use of multiple characters with four central narratives, and this plurality contributes richly to the multitude of the forgotten memories and experiences. Her overbearing haunted thoughts about the event transfigured into the form of a novel, through which the readers can empathize, understand and most importantly remember the sufferings of others. The novel navigates through trauma and contributes to the cultural memory through remembrance of a once forgotten history.

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The Traumatized Cop : A Study of the Life of Policemen in the Movies *Officer on Duty* and *Ronth*

Abstract

Policemen in our society are often criticised for their harsh behaviour and tough exteriors. Even in movies, they are not portrayed in a brighter light. This article looks into the unseen side of the lives of Indian policemen as depicted in two Malayalam movies Ronth and Officer on Duty. The basic research problem to be analysed in this article would be how the two movies portray the professional and emotional challenges faced by policemen in Kerala. The focus will be on realistic portrayals of policemen as against the archetypal macho, moustache rolling policemen. The study would look into the personal trauma in the lives of the main characters which have a direct effect on their daily activities and conduct of duty. A qualitative approach would be followed, analysing the movies with the help of trauma theory. The significance of the study is that it will motivate the readers to think about policemen in Kerala in a different perspective. Rather than passing on generalized opinions about their behaviour and attitude, the readers will be prompted to look deeper into their psyche and analyse what makes them respond in a particular way. The article attempts to present police characters in the selected movies in an empathetic light.

Key words: Trauma, psyche, personal, professional, empathetic

The lives of policemen depicted on the big screen always fascinated the public. There have been many Malayalam movies with policemen playing the main roles like *Action Hero Biju*, *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*, *Nayattu*, *Kannur Squad* and many more. It is interesting to note the various stages of law enforcement portrayals in Malayalam cinema. In the early 1980s and 90s, movies like *Aavanazhi* (1986) and *Commissioner* (1994) established policemen in powerful, heroic roles. *Dhrishyam* (2015) was one movie that depicted policemen being outsmarted by civilians. However recent movies are careful in placing their cop characters in a more realistic light. There have been studies on various police characters in Malayalam movies, as to how they are portrayed in positive and negative lights. There are studies based on the stress faced by Kerala police officials in real life. However there is a lack of in depth studies which look into the psyche of policemen as portrayed in Malayalam movies. Hence, this article would fill this research gap by looking into these not much explored areas in the lives of policemen. The article

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argues as to how Kerala policemen portrayed in the selected movies suffer from occupational as well as personal trauma, thereby rendering them ineffective in leading a normal life.

The article first provides a brief summary of the movie plots and then moves on to introduce trauma theory. Then an analysis of the characters' past is done as this is helpful to understand the problems in their present behavioural pattern. The analysis slowly turns into an exploration of features of PTSD followed by a detailed examination of the characters in the light of PTSD. A separate paragraph explains the types of occupational trauma faced by policemen in the movies, as that adds up to the personal trauma they have already suffered. A concluding paragraph will summarize the findings and explain how the psychological approach of the director/script writer enhances the value of the two movies.

Officer on Duty is a 2025 Malayalam crime action thriller film directed by Jithu Ashraf and written by ShahiKabir. Kunchacko Boban plays the lead role and his co-actors are Priyamani, Vishak Nair and Jagadish. The movie tells the story of Circle Inspector Harishankar (Kunchacko Boban) a seemingly haughty and short-tempered officer who is demoted for hitting an IPS Officer. He is introduced as an angry officer who shouts at his junior officers and kicks a woman on her stomach as she was accused of stealing a gold chain.

Ronth is also a 2025 Malayalam movie directed by ShahiKabir with DilishPothan as Yohannan and Roshan Mathew as Dinanath. Yohannan who is a Sub Inspector, along with Dinanath, a novice, goes on a night patrol. ('ronth' in Malayalam means to patrol). The movie covers the various incidents that happened during the night patrol and how both of them respond differently to each incident.

The principles of Cathy Caruth, Freud, Balaev and Judith Herman have been used to analyse the characters Yohannan, Harishankar and Dinanath. Cathy Caruth is an American Trauma theorist who makes use of Freud's principles to explain about trauma. In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth, says that suppose someone has a horrifying experience in life- unexpected/violent death of a loved one, physical/emotional abuse, sexual violence or a natural disaster. This event will leave deep imprints on the mind of the experiencer. (Caruth 11) She says that trauma originally refers to an injury inflicted on a body. However now it is used to denote a wound "inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind." (Caruth 3) Naturally, it is difficult to be identified and even more difficult to be healed. Trauma studies is an interdisciplinary field which aims to study the effect of trauma on individuals and society. "Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance." (Balaev 360) Many individuals around us suffer various kinds of trauma. This branch of knowledge helps to understand such individuals better by identifying their symptoms and delving deep into the reasons causing their

trauma. Its principles prove helpful in analyzing characters in fiction and films, providing a solid ground to build up their present condition, connecting it with their past trauma. Judith Herman is an American Psychiatrist who wrote the seminal work *Trauma and Recovery*. In this book Herman proposes that most of the symptoms of PTSD are the result of the individual's futile efforts to protect himself or herself against the stress caused by trauma. She says, "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force". (Herman 25)

Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* explains about "a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals." (Caruth 1) This pattern of suffering is explicit in the behaviour of Circle Inspector Harishankar who seems to be suffering from extreme traumatic conditions, which interfere in his conduct of duty. He has panic attacks and hallucinations. The audience realizes that his wife has left him and he is on the verge of a mental breakdown. This pattern of suffering is found in Dinanath, the junior police officer in *Ronth*. He is a highly sensitive person, afraid to go into a so-called haunted house and much affected when he had to witness the suicide of a housewife. Dinanath seems to hate his profession as a police officer and he silently suffers every moment of his duty. Dilish Pothan (Yohannan) who plays the lead role in *Ronth* also seems to be hiding some emotional trauma deep inside his heart. However, outwardly he appears to be a rash and outspoken police officer, finding happiness in bullying his co-officer Dinanath.

Going deep into the personal lives of these three characters, a pattern of suffering is clearly seen. All three of them had suffered severe personal trauma which now interferes with their life and work. Dinanath's share of personal trauma is connected with his mentally unstable father and his accidental death. Harishankar's daughter had hanged herself in her room, fearing the shame of facing her father, after he discovers her secret relationship. Yohannan confesses to Dinanath his share of traumatic past-how he lost his first child and how the incident turned his wife into a nervous wreck. Often people who have suffered some kind of trauma in their life may develop what is called PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Caruth believes that any traumatic event has a direct impact on the mind of the experiencer; it gains control over the mind and makes him resort to even external violence as its result. This is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as it affects the person several months and years after the real incident happened. In the words of Caruth, PTSD happens "to be the most destructive psychic disorder". (Caruth 58)

According to WHO, people who witness or experience traumatic events feel extreme fear, guilt, shame or irritability even months after the event. Most people come out of these behaviours over a couple of months. But for some others, these conditions continue to haunt them for several months or years. (WHO) A key indicator of PTSD is that the person has flashbacks or hallucinations related with the traumatic event. This in turn interferes with his day to day activities, personal relationships and professional life as well. (WHO)

This article will now analyse the features of PTSD as seen in the major characters. Harishankar experiences flashbacks and hallucinations the moment he witnesses the suicide of a young girl. He suffers from breathlessness and begins to sweat profusely. Yohannan finds it extremely difficult to maintain cordial relations with his fellow police officers. Dinanath's traumatic past has rendered him ineffective in his job as a police officer- he turns out to be a frail minded individual, highly sensitive and emotional and unable to handle the stress of his profession.

It is important to know the traumatic incidents in the lives of these officers to understand their present behaviour. *Officer on Duty* brings out C.I. Harishankar's past in a very subtle manner. Half way through a case investigation, Harishankar gets a shocking realization that his daughter has fallen into a trap of young drug addicts who had taken her porn video and circulated it. Harishankar rushes home to question his daughter only to find that she has hanged herself in her room. On seeing his daughter's body hanging in her room, he collapses and is unable to do anything to save her or even call for help. All this has settled down in his mind as an extreme feeling of guilt and repentance. Later in the movie his wife accuses him for causing their daughter's death and eventually leaves him.

Similarly, in *Ronth* too, the director makes an attempt to relate the haughtiness and irritability of Yohannan with his traumatic past. Salomi, Yohannan's wife had given birth to a stillborn child and the doctors had declared that she could never conceive again. Salomi suffered from severe PTSD after this incident. These two incidents- the death of their first child and its traumatic effect on Salomi, affect Yohannan very badly. He takes up the responsibility of making her comfortable by doing all the chores in his house and providing her all the emotional care she needs. However, he turns out to be an arrogant officer at his workplace, unable to maintain friendly relationship with his colleagues. Only later do we understand as to why he behaves in such a strange way.

According to Herman, there are three symptoms of post- traumatic stress namely hyper arousal, intrusion, and constriction (26). After a traumatic event, an individual is in a state of high alert to protect himself. He finds himself in a state of strong emotions like anger and irritability with a minimum level of provocation. (26) This phenomenon is called hyperarousal. The reason behind this is the destruction of the normal "baseline" level of "alert but relaxed attention" and the establishment of a new, elevated "baseline of arousal" where the individual had a feeling that he is always in danger (26). This theory explains why Harishankar and Yohannan turn out to be individuals with absolutely no control over their emotions, actions and words. Herman adds, "Traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory... She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why". (25) Thus the irritable nature of both Harishankar and Yohannan can be connected to their deep rooted traumatic experience and their futile attempts to avoid the danger of being traumatized again.

The second symptom of PTSD, according to Herman is 'intrusion' which refers to unwanted, involuntary thoughts that forcefully enter a person's consciousness. He gets a feeling that these events are happening in the present (Herman 27). Herman tried to explain the cause of intrusion and finally concluded that it is the brain's unsuccessful attempt to make sense of the memory. However, she believed that these intrusions are uninvited and that they caused the individual to be constantly "buffeted by terror and rage" (29). As a result, trauma victims often felt depressed, moody and irritable.

Another feature of PTSD is found in Harishankar's temporary memory loss after the suicide of his daughter. He brings chocolates to his younger daughter after work and asks her to give one to her sister, completely forgetting that she is no more. Balaev explains that a traumatic experience in a person's life has a negative effect on his mind and that it causes "internal changes to the mind and irreversibly changes identity." (Balaev 363) Harishankar who used to be a loving father and husband (as can be understood from the flashback scenes) finds it extremely difficult to manage his anger. He lashes out against his wife and punches Shyam (the young drug addict) to death. Yohannan too behaves in diametrically opposite ways at home and at workplace. The traumatic past totally changes their mind and identity.

For Harishankar and Yohannan, the traumatic events in their lives are absent in normal consciousness but they are hidden deep inside their psyche, causing them unbearable pain. Caruth argues that trauma may not be found in the original event in the person's life but it "returns to haunt the survivor later on." (Caruth 17, 4) This is a significant point to understand, in the lives of the officers. The respective traumatic events in their lives

"haunt" them long after the actual events, rendering them helpless victims of their past.

Balaev explains that certain events trigger the memory of the traumatic event and the person suddenly gets into the negative influence of that event. (Balaev 361) The events of a drunken father beating up his son and an insane father hiding a crying child inside a barrel trigger the memories of his lost child in Yohannan. Similarly, the sight of a woman who had hanged herself triggers the memories of his daughter's hanging in Harishankar. Dinanath feels terrified looking inside a deep well while his co officer had gone in search of the insane man causing terror in his house. Some past memories well up in his mind; maybe something connected to his father's death and he quickly moves away from the well. This behavior can be explained with the help of Herman's principles:

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as

traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (Herman 27)

The conflicts caused by trauma create traumatic neurosis, which is “a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli” (Freud 35). The mind as an organism, according to Freud, contains outer and inner layers, with the outer layer having a “protective shield” against harmful external stimuli (Freud 35). However, when “fright” occurs, that is “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it, the lack of anxiety coupled with the external stimuli cause neurosis” (Freud 11, 32, 36). All through the movie, Dinanath is portrayed as one who never wanted to take up the job of a cop. Within one night of patrolling a series of incidents traumatize him- this includes the false accusation that he and Yohannan are responsible for the death of a Dalit boy. The police come to arrest Dinanath when he was with his ailing daughter at the hospital. Herman remarks, “When a person is overwhelmed by terror and helplessness, *“the whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated and purposeful activity is smashed.* The perceptions become inaccurate and pervaded with terror, the coordinative functions of judgment and discrimination fail . . . the sense organs may even cease to function”. (Herman 26) In this case, Dinanath loses his ability to think and act logically; his mind is filled with terror and he is unable to judge rightly and take clear decisions. In a muddled state of mind, he takes on the next alternative that is 'flight' and is hit by a lorry, causing his death.

There are instances of occupational trauma that these officers face. Policemen have a great responsibility towards the society but sometimes they have to risk their own lives or the lives of their dear ones. In *Officer on Duty* we can find that other policemen like Thomas and Joseph Chembola had to give up their lives only because they had to meddle with youngsters belonging to a drug trafficking racket. The drug peddlers targeted to take revenge against the officers by abusing their daughters and taking away their ornaments. In addition to this, many times they find themselves being hunted down by powerful and influential people in the society, thus causing unending misery to their personal and professional lives. Dinanath and Yohannan are falsely accused for the death of a Dalit boy. There is nobody to save them from the false accusation because the real culprits are highly influential people. Both the officers are arrested and going to be interrogated. Their own colleague gives the information that both of them were drinking alcohol during their duty time. This further intensifies their breach of duty.

National Library of Medicine had published a research paper on the stress levels of Kerala police officials based on the survey conducted by a team of researchers. The

survey was conducted among police officers working in random police stations in Thiruvananthapuram. The result of the survey was that 75.5% of participants experienced high operational stress and 65.6% experienced high organizational stress. Another important finding was that continuous exposure to occupational stress can negatively influence their health as well. As a result of prolonged stress, some of them were suffering from gastrointestinal diseases, hypertension, obesity and cardiovascular diseases. The study showed that the police officers were unable to meet the ever increasing demands of their profession. They did not get enough time to socialize with their friends or spend quality time with their family; they were unable to maintain a healthy diet and could not squeeze in much time for physical activities. Negative feedback from the public also caused them stress. (Mini et.al)

The public relies much on the law enforcement portrayals depicted in the mass media to build up their attitude towards the law enforcement officers. A negative portrayal often results in forming a negative attitude towards these individuals in real life as well. This enhances the importance of movies like *Ronth* and *Officer on Duty* as they portray policemen in a realistic light. Not only that, the directors have taken pains to showcase the personal trauma of the officers which in turn affect their normal conduct of duty. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it tries to analyze the lives of cops in an empathetic light. Trauma theory helps to understand how certain incidents in their lives leave indelible marks on their personality as well. The second part of the study focusses on how police officers are caught up in the corrupt machinery of law enforcement and how they had to face betrayals from their own colleagues. The article also studies the occupational trauma faced by policemen, having to deal with criminals, drug addicts and abnormal people as well as bear witness to horrifying murders and suicides.

In this context, it will be significant to note a review by Vignesh Madhu about *Officer on Duty* “Malayalam cinema, which once celebrated its foul-mouthed, macho police heroes, is gradually slanting towards more realistic portrayals. And Shahi, a cop himself, has been at the forefront of this remarkable evolution. Through cops of different characteristics and shades, he has often shown a special interest in exploring their mental health.”(Madhu 2025)The reviewer throws light upon the unique approach taken by directors today to look into the mental make-up of policemen through their films rather than just showcasing their heroic deeds. Being a policeman, Shahi or his colleagues must have had close encounters of the kind voiced in the movies. No wonder he could articulate the emotional and psychological nuances of a policeman's life so effectively! The lives of Harishankar, Yohannan and Dinanath leave a lump in our throats making the audience feel deeply for them, just as we feel for a neighbour next door.

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Ocular Normativism and the Limits of Lacan's Mirror Stage

Abstract

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage is widely considered as an important stage in the psychological development of a child. It is generally understood that Lacan's idea of mirror image is metaphorical rather than a literal description of the child's reflection in the mirror. This article aims to explore Lacan's perspective on the significance of visual perception in the psychological development of human beings, as articulated in his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." This concept will be analysed from the viewpoint of a visually challenged individual, examining how the absence of visual perception might impact the formation of the "I" and the subsequent psychological development process. The paper also argues for the need to have a more inclusive framework for understanding subject formation.

Keywords: Jaques Lacan, Mirror stage, Ocular Normativism, Ideal I and Inclusivity.

Jacques Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage has long been considered as a foundational account of subject formation within psychoanalysis. He repeatedly connects ego formation with acts of seeing and being seen. Such a framework not only reinforces the Enlightenment assumption that vision is central to human experience, but also marginalizes alternative sensory modes of knowing. This paper examines the visual bias embedded in Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and analyses the implications of this ocular-centric model for understanding subjectivity beyond the normative field of sight.

Although the mirror stage is often interpreted metaphorically, Lacan's formulations remain grounded in an ocular normativism that privileges sight as the primary source of psychic development. To assess Lacan's own position on this issue, it is important to note that his initial observations on the mirror stage, as a decisive moment in early infancy, were later elaborated to explain its broader function in psychological development. Lacan first delivered his ideas on the mirror stage in 1937 at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress, the published version of which is not available. The version most commonly available is the lecture he delivered in 1949 at the Sixteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress. This version appears in Alan Sheridan's translation, *Ecrits: A Selection* under the title, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". The essay opens with Lacan's reminder that "the conception of the mirror stage I introduced at our last congress thirteen years ago, having since been more or less adopted by the French group, seems worth bringing to your attention once again—especially today, given the light it sheds on

the I function in the experience psychoanalysis provides us of it” (Lacan 75). But the text translated is not the “original form,” but rather what Sheridan himself calls “a much-revised later version” (Gallop 118). Since the original 1937 presentation is unavailable, the only authoritative source for Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage is the extensively revised version found in his 1949 lecture.

In this published version Lacan reconsiders his concept of the mirror stage in light of its function in psychoanalytic experience, positioning it in sharp contrast to any philosophies stemming from the cogito. The human child’s recognition of its own image as such in a mirror explains the role the image plays in the development of the human psyche as a model for the relationship between the subject and its image. This activity has a meaning up to eighteen months and it reveals both a libidinal dynamism and an ontological structure of the human world. The mirror stage, in this context, is a moment of identification and transformation—transformation that takes place in the subject when s/he assumes an image that is predestined to have an effect on the subject. Although the child experiences a fragmented reality, trapped in his/her motor impotence and nursing dependence, the image reflected in the mirror is complete, whole and ideal. This ‘Ideal I’ is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other and before language restores to it its function as the subject. This form of I situates the agency known as the Ego prior to its social determination. The ideal I formed by the subject’s primary identification with the image is fictional and will never fully conform to the subject’s actual experience of existence. Thus, the ideal I, though untainted, is unreal; but, will act as the rootstock of further secondary identifications.

Lacan states that, “the human child, at an age when he is for a short while, but for a while nevertheless, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can recognize his own image as such in mirror” (Lacan 75). Here, he makes literal use of the mirror image to differentiate the human child’s ability for self-recognition from the chimpanzee’s inability to do that. However, he also states that “this recognition is indicated by the illuminative mimicry of the Aha-Erlebnis, which Kohler considers to express situational apperception, an essential moment in the act of intelligence” (75). In the field of developmental psychology, one’s awareness of one’s own position within the physical world and the ability to imagine that position in relation to other physical objects is called situational apperception. It is the way an individual perceives and mentally processes their immediate circumstances, which influences their emotions, behaviours, and even their ability to adapt to new situations. Wolfgang Kohler, the German psychologist considers situational apperception as an essential moment in the act of intelligence. This awareness can also happen through other formative experiences, such as the mother’s attention to the child, which may generate a sense of self as a distinct entity. This is the one point in the essay where Lacan explicitly acknowledges the

possibility that identification in the mirror need not be understood in a strictly literal sense. Here, the “mirror” functions less as a physical object and more as a metaphorical framework, suggesting that the processes of identification and ego formation need not depend on an actual reflective surface. However, Lacan subsequently reinforces the literal dimension of the mirror by taking clues from the visual dynamics of reflection, thereby limiting it to the possibilities of visual perception: “This act... immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates” (75).

Moreover, Lacan employs biological examples, such as the female pigeon and the migratory locust to illustrate how external images or representations can induce fundamental changes in identity through a process of visual recognition and imitation. For the maturation of female pigeon's gonad, it has to see another member of its species regardless of its sex. Lacan uses this homoeomorphic identification as an example to illustrate the effect of visual image on the subject, noting that the same effect can be produced in the pigeon by simply placing a mirror's reflective field near the individual. In his essay published in 1939, Leonard Harrison Matthews substantiates this observation by drawing on experiments conducted with pigeons to investigate whether the reproductive stimulus is visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile or a combination of two or more of these alternatives. He observes that:

The results obtained show that the stimulus which causes ovulation in the pigeon is a visual one. The ovulation of birds separated from the male by a sheet of glass, or confined alone with a mirror, shows that the stimulus is not tactile. The absence of ovulation in the control, which was denied sight of another bird but was in the same room with the others, shows that the stimulus is not olfactory or auditory. Were it either, or both, she would have laid. Her subsequent ovulation when confined with a male showed her to have been a normal bird which lacked only the visual stimulus for ovulation. (558-559)

This experiment clearly demonstrates that visuality alone triggers the maturation of the gonads. Hence, this further reinforces the idea that Lacan was emphasizing the significance of visual perception itself. Considering that Lacan's initial formulation of the mirror stage and Matthews's findings happened around the same period, it is possible that Lacan was aware of such biological observations.

The migratory locust (tropical grasshopper) exists in two main phenotypes in response to population density – the solitary phase and the gregarious phase. These locusts usually exist in the solitary phase and seek isolation. Conditions such as scarcity of food bring them together, and this crowded condition induces gregarisation. Lacan points out that this phase shift can be brought about by “exposing an individual, at a certain age of its

development, to the exclusively visual action of an image akin to its own, provided the movements of this image sufficiently resemble those characteristics of its species” (Lacan 77). Unlike the sexual maturation of the female pigeon, “locust gregarisation may be induced by visual, olfactory, or tactile cues” (Topaz). Yet, Lacan notes that this phase shift can be triggered through the visual action of an image, thus reinforcing the centrality of visual perception.

Lacan further explains how heteromorphic identification offers insights into the role of visual identification in development. He gives psychological account of such physical transformation by taking cues from Roger Caillois' concept of legendary psychasthenia. It refers to the ability of some animals like chameleon to alter their appearance in response to their physical environment. Caillois compares this biological phenomenon to psychological experiences of the subject who absorbs into the physical space surrounding them. Here Lacan explains how psychic events such as identification are connected to physical reality- the body and the physical environment. These biological examples highlight how external images or representations can induce fundamental changes in behaviour through a process of visual recognition and imitation. From the infant's jubilant identification with its reflected image to the biological analogies of pigeons and locusts whose behaviours are shaped by visual stimuli, Lacan's images and the framework of his theory emphasise the centrality of visual recognition in the formation of the *I* and personal identity. The process of self-constitution relies heavily on the individual's capacity for visual identification with their mirror image, which provides a symbolic and Imaginary foundation for coherence and unity of self. In such a context, for individuals who are visually challenged the typical process of mirror recognition is either altered or absent, which could influence the development of their ego as understood within the theory.

Lacan's theory clearly states the significance of visual perception in psychological development with an emphasis on the role of mirror image in the development of a coherent self-image. According to him, images and identifications play a central role in shaping the personality through a series of formative processes rooted in the Imaginary register. He posits that the function of the mirror image is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality, acting as a symbolic matrix that influences subsequent identifications. But, the reliance on visual perception in Lacan's theory seems to overlook the psychological development of visually challenged individuals. Raymond Tallis, who is highly critical of French literary theories influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, problematises the absence of focus on visually challenged individuals within the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In his book, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (1988) he argues that post-Saussurean theories, particularly those of Jacques Lacan, lead to a linguistic idealism that disconnects language from reality and often employs flawed reasoning.

One measure of the value, truth or explanatory power of a theory is its ability to predict novel facts or at least to accommodate facts that were not taken into account when the theory was originally formulated. If epistemological maturation and the formation of a world picture were dependent upon catching sight of oneself in a mirror, then the theory would predict that congenitally blind individuals would lack selfhood and be unable to enter language, society or the world at large. There is no evidence whatsoever that this implausible consequence of the theory is borne out in practice. (Tallis 153)

In a social context in which visual culture is paramount, blindness is rarely understood either as a form of agency or as a mode of political engagement. Any attempt to privilege sight as an unquestioned feature of human existence gives rise to an ocular-centric epistemology. This framework assumes a set of assumptions: that an external world exists to be apprehended, that vision is the primary apparatus for accessing that world, and that those without sight possess only limited knowledge and must depend on sighted others for whatever understanding they acquire. Within such a paradigm, blindness derives its meaning from a visualist conception not only of knowledge but also of what it means to function normally in the world. Consequently, the lack of vision becomes equated with an incomplete form of being human.

Moreover, according to Lacan, the function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality- between *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* (78). Unlike animals that are born with a more stable connection to their bodies and surroundings, human infants enter the world in a state of prematurity, marked by an internal mismatch that makes them feel uncoordinated and unsettled. He notes that “the objective notions of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal tracts and of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism in the newborn confirm my view that we find in man a veritable *specific prematurity of birth*” (78). Hence, it is the infant's reflected image that offers a means of overcoming its sensations of bodily fragmentation and powerlessness, mediating between its *Innenwelt* (inner world) and *Umwelt* (external world). Which means that the fictional *I* serves at once as a kind of orthopaedic brace that holds the unruly, fragmenting organic drives into a coherent whole and as a defence against the impulses arising from these drives. Within this framework, the formation of the *ideal I* is inseparable from visual perception. Consequently, in the absence of visual perception the child would be confined within its fragmented bodily experiences, unable to achieve the psychic integration that Lacan posits as necessary for entering the social dialectic.

The claim that mirror image functions like a brace that seeks to hold the subject into a stable position is as erroneous as John Howard Griffin's statement that “blindness inevitably renders its vessels away from externals and back to what seems like a

somewhat childlike state” (154). In his book, *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*, Griffin documents his experience of becoming blind in 1945 as a result of a World War II injury. He describes the discriminatory social belief that blindness makes a person childlike, isolated, dependent and unable to develop the full complexity or refinement of adult life, an assumption that he himself had internalised earlier in life. Similarly, the mirror stage's reliance on visual self-recognition assumes that visually challenged people cannot attain the psychological maturity required to mediate between the Id and the Ego. It is the *I* formed in the mirror stage that acts as an internal fortification against the forces of Id and as the defensive suit of armour in which the subject ventures into the world. It is this armour that enables Ego to experience the world as a hostile environment and remain static in the midst of the dynamic and potentially destructive events of the daily life of the mind.

Lacan further states that the “moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's semblance and the drama of primordial jealousy, the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations” (79). This further problematises the entry of a visually challenged child to the social order. If at the end of the mirror stage the relationship between the visually challenged infant and his/her ideal *I* has to act as the foundation for the child's social relationship and for the child's self-image as a social being, then the absence of visual access to the specular image appears to disrupt this developmental trajectory for visually challenged infants.

A critical examination of Lacan's mirror stage through the lens of ocular normativism, thus illustrates how visual perception is positioned as the foundational mechanism of ego formation, psychological integration and entry into the social order. Lacan's reliance on the infant's specular image, his biological analogies drawn from visually triggered behaviours in animals and his insistence that identification with the *ideal I* inaugurates the dialectic of social life collectively reinforce the assumption that subjectivity is fundamentally dependent on sight. Such a framework marginalises visually challenged individuals by presuming that the absence of visual self-recognition disrupts the formation of a coherent ego and mature social agency. It is evident that these assumptions arise not from inherent limitations in blindness but from deeprooted cultural and epistemic biases that equate sight with normalcy, completeness and adult competence. The need for a more inclusive theoretical model of subject formation in psychoanalysis necessitates the importance of redefining psychological development without confining it to the primacy of vision. Only by expanding beyond ocular-centric norms can psychoanalytic theory more accurately reflect the diversity of human experience.

In *How to Read Lacan*, Slavoj Žižek observes that in today's world of hedonistic permissiveness, where cognitivist-neurobiologist model of the mind appears to replace the Freudian model and where psychiatric treatment rapidly yields to pills and

behavioural therapy, Freudian psychoanalysis appears outdated. As he puts it, “In the light of today's brain sciences, psychoanalysis itself, far from being subversive, seems rather to belong to the traditional humanist field threatened by the latest humiliations” (2). Yet he argues that the time of psychoanalysis, understood in its true dimension, has arrived when approached through Lacan. However, Lacan's theoretical framework, that draws from Saussurean linguistics, Lévi-Straussian structural anthropology and the philosophies of Plato, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, begins to show its limitations when viewed through the critical frameworks emerging from disability studies. Seen through this contemporary lens, the universality claimed for Lacan's model becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly given its reliance on ocular-centric assumptions that do not account for diverse modes of being, sensing and becoming a subject.

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From Despotism to Occupation : Navigating Cultural Crossroads and the Genesis of Terrorism in Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*

Abstract

*This article employs postcolonial textual analysis of Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad* anchoring its imperative framework on Edward Said's Orientalism, Frantz Fanon's decolonisation and cleansing violence theory, and Caruth's trauma studies. Addressing a gap in scholarship on Khadra and post-9/11 Arab literature—which often overlooks the insider-outsider dialectic of insurgency—this article argues that the novel constitutes an antipodal narrative to dominant representations of war-torn Iraq. By exposing the psychosocial disintegration wrought by Saddam's tyranny and U.S. imperial occupation, Khadra reveals how entrenched strategic oppression breeds extremism and radicalisation, while disavowing terrorism. Foregrounding subaltern resistance and the traumatic trajectory from peaceful Bedouin student to would-be biological terrorist who ultimately renounces violence, the text dismantles Islam-West binaries and post-9/11 Islamophobia.*

Keywords: American Imperialism, Tyranny, Islamophobia, Racial Profiling, Terrorism

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a paradigmatic reconfiguration in the epistemic constellations and imaginative geographies of war, occupation, and witnessing in the Middle East. Moving beyond earlier modes of archetypal fictionalisation, post-2003 Iraqi narratives evolved into historiographical interrogations of Saddam Hussein's authoritarianism and the necropolitical regimes instantiated by the U.S. invasion. Articulated through domestic, diasporic, and foreign perspectives, post-millennial representations of Iraq foreground lived experiences of imperial violence and collective trauma. Across this shifting landscape, contemporary Iraqi culture reasserted its civilisational sovereignty and contested American encroachments on its political autonomy, cultural memory, and resource infrastructures, thereby generating new modalities of self-definition and postcolonial critique.

Before analysing the dominant rhetoric of contemporary Iraqi literary narratives, it is essential to address the dehumanising discourse in Western, particularly American, literature produced in the post-9/11 era. The 9/11 catastrophe reconfigured global perceptions of Islam and the Middle East, casting nations such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria as incubators of terrorism and subjecting their populations to stigmatisation and surveillance. Western media and cultural representations reinforced these racialised

imaginaries, depicting Middle Eastern countries as archetypes of civilisational volatility and global violence. For decades, narratives of war and trauma in colonised regions were mediated largely through Western soldiers and colonisers, relegating the subaltern subjectivities of indigenous people to the margins of their own histories.

In the post-9/11 context, Anglophone scholarship has tended to interpret Iraqi insurgency through three dominant frameworks, as exemplified—among many possible specimens—by a cluster of representative texts. First, Orientalist readings reinscribe the Muslim-terrorist stereotype (e.g., Stephen Morton, *States of Emergency: Colonialism, Literature and Law*). Second, trauma-centred analyses privilege the epistemic authority of the Western soldier-witness (e.g., Roy Scranton, “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*”). Third, ethnographic approaches often treat Arab fiction, including Khadra's work, as transparent documentary evidence of radicalisation (e.g., Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature*). Yet none of these interpretive formations systematically mobilises a Said–Fanon–Caruth framework capable of interrogating the endogenous–exogenous dialectic that structures insurgency narratives.

Although recent scholarship on twenty-first-century Iraqi fiction—offered here as illustrative rather than exhaustive—foregrounds subaltern resistance and reconsiders the aporias of Fanon's theory of cleansing violence under neo-colonial occupation (e.g., Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*), it remains largely centred on Arabic-language texts and consequently sidelines Khadra's Francophone corpus. This article intervenes in that critical lacuna by demonstrating how *The Sirens of Baghdad* simultaneously mobilises and interrogates Fanon's notion of liberatory violence, revealing its disintegration under the compounded despotisms of Saddam Hussein's regime and U.S. neo-imperial militarism. In doing so, it destabilises both entrenched Orientalist imaginaries and the persistent myth of redemptive insurgent violence.

David A. Buchanan, former U.S. Air Force pilot and author of *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture*, designates this as the “fetishization of experience,” a process through which narratives by foreign soldiers or colonial agents efface indigenous subjectivities and relegate them to the fringes of representational agency. In the article “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*,” Roy Scranton argues that Americanophile narratives paradoxically recast perpetrator soldiers as victim-heroes, thereby glorifying agents of war while dehumanising its actual victims. Stef Craps, in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, contends that Western literary canons have long tended to marginalise and stigmatise the traumatic experiences of non-Western and Third World subjects. Amid the global rise of Islamophobia, even liberal Muslims were subjected to persistent racial profiling.

Mahmood Mamdani, in “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on

Culture and Terrorism,” elucidates how President George W. Bush dichotomised Muslim identity into “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” categories (766). Aligned with that perspective, “bad Muslims” are construed as those complicit in terrorism, whereas “good Muslims” dissociate from extremist activities and often align with America's strategic war on terror to affirm their political loyalty and moral fraternity. However, Mamdani arguably deconstructs Bush's ploy that a good Muslim can hardly prove his integrity in front of the Americans since they are all inveterately stigmatised under the surveillance of the suspects.

Against the backdrop of the persistent othering of Eastern narratives, contemporary Iraqi literature presents a panoramic yet unsettling depiction of war-torn Iraq, capturing its political turmoil, religious strife, sanctions, violence, and displacements inscribed in the nation's cultural memory. Following prolonged torture and oppression under successive despotic regimes, post-Saddam Iraqi fiction articulates an uncompromising dissent against authoritarianism, giving powerful voice to the subaltern anguish of its people. Although Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, argues that language can scarcely rearticulate the immediacy of lived trauma, postmillennial Iraqi war narratives nonetheless emerge as testimonial archives that mediate and refract the unarticulated, visceral torment of a traumatised populace.

Within the hegemonic discourse of Islamic terrorism in Western literature, Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad* constitutes a contrapuntal narrative in the postmillennial landscape of Iraqi fiction. The novel, originally written in French, was subsequently translated into English by John Cullen. Writing prolifically in French, Khadra channels insights from his thirty-six years of military service across Iraq, Algeria, Kabul, Palestine, and Beirut to interrogate Muslim conflicts, the radicalisation of Islam, and the enduring cultural and political legacies of colonisation.

Employing an evocative mode of anamnesis, the novel constructs a critical discursive space in which the anonymous narrator articulates the collective suffering and resistance of the victimised Iraqi populace, challenging both predisposed Western readers and entrenched sympathisers of terrorism. By juxtaposing American militarism with Fedayeen insurgency, Khadra interrogates the entangled dynamics of occupation and resistance, thereby problematising postcolonial binaries such as the protectable versus the destructible, the self versus the other, and the mournable versus the unmournable. The narrative further exposes how U.S. strategic interventions, alongside covert support for Israel, concertedly undermined Iraq's historical and cultural sovereignty, as the novel indicates that the occupation sought to incapacitate Iraq—the region's only counterweight to Israel—to facilitate uncontested Israeli dominance. Through this lens, the narrator's trajectory from a pacific youth to militant actor culminates in a cathartic embrace of stoic, redemptive humanism.

The novel renegotiates the convergent forces of dysfunctional education, unemployment, religious indoctrination, political unrest, entrenched orthodoxies, and

Western intervention that collectively propel Iraqis toward terrorism. In the midst of occupation, insurgent groups furnish aggrieved individuals with emotional validation and economic sustenance, constructing an illusory sense of communal belonging through performative morality and egalitarianism that repairs fragmented identities. Radicalisation frequently crystallises in catalytic moments, as when recruits are exhorted to translate rhetoric into violent action against American forces. By tracing the narrator's trajectory from Kafr Karam through Baghdad to Beirut, Khadra charts the evolving forms of insurgency and their profound psychological imprints across diverse geographies and subjectivities.

Extending the novel's spatial continuum, Khadra demonstrates how the Green Berets' separation walls and checkpoints institute a neo-colonial apparatus of spatial domination, casting American GIs as agents of strategic violence and embodiments of moral corruption and military dehumanisation. The Falcon, head of Kafr Karam, condemns the U.S. soldiers as savage forces whose presence has transformed Iraq into an earthly inferno. Malik intensifies this indictment, describing how U.S. troops violate sacred spaces, assault religious figures, and suppress communal life across Fallujah, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra. A taxi driver recounts U.S. GIs indiscriminately killing civilians—including children and the elderly—epitomising necropolitical violence and systemic dehumanisation under colonial and neo-imperial occupation, where human life is rendered expendable and subordinated to militarised objectives.

As Said and Chomsky observe, Western discourses consistently depict Middle Eastern peoples as barbaric and predisposed to violence. This view is reinforced by Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), which frames post–World War II nuclear pursuits by weaker nations as defensive responses to external aggression. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western discourse racialises Arabs as indulgent epicureans, lascivious warmongers, and an intellectually inferior populace, exemplified by stereotypes of “camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization” (110).

Refracting Said's critique of Western representational bias, Chomsky in *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* argues that, in the post-9/11 climate, the United States orchestrated a propaganda campaign portraying Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden as imminent threats to global security. By conflating Saddam and bin Laden with the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. instrumentalised fear to legitimise its neocolonial agenda under the guise of defending democracy, a manoeuvre that, as Chomsky contends, masked its deeper objective of securing control over Iraq's oil resources. Sayed, a ringleader of the guerrilla resistance, denounces the American invasion: “They're bonanza seekers, looters, spoilers, mercenaries ... Predators—that is what they are, formidable predators. They are just infuriated retards, smashing valuable things, like buffalo let loose in a porcelain shop (175).

Dr. Jalal—a former Muslim scholar involved in cross-cultural debates on religious terrorism and later a sympathiser of the Middle Eastern cause—reinforces Said's critique of Orientalist misrepresentation, highlighting how Western discourse reduces Arabs to cultural caricatures and refuses to acknowledge evidence that contradicts these stereotypes (9–10). Contrastingly, Omar affirms the enduring pride Iraqis take in their millennia-old civilisational heritage, invoking a deep cultural memory that asserts Iraq's intellectual and imaginative legacy (161), countering Western attempts to erode its epistemic authority. Against this backdrop, the novel positions America's post-9/11 intervention not as a genuine war on terrorism but as a premediated neo-imperial enterprise designed at controlling Iraq's oil resources. As Jalal observes, the U.S. orchestrated the campaign to neutralise perceived threats while minimising its own risk, using the pretext of weapons of mass destruction to manipulate global perception and justify the invasion (251).

Through the narrator's transformative trajectory, Khadra foregrounds how cumulative social, political, and military traumas convert a naive youth into a resolute suicide bomber, propelled by the intertwined imperatives of avenging American aggression and reclaiming familial honour. Initially aspiring to higher education in Baghdad as a space for personal and intellectual advancement, the narrator's ambitions are violently disrupted when an American air raid devastates the university, forcing his “wild-eyed and distraught” return to Kafr Karam (19). This destruction exemplifies the necropolitical logic of occupation, where civilian spaces are rendered instrumentalised and life becomes disposable.

Further radicalising him, the narrator witnesses a missile strike on Khaled's home during his daughter's wedding, mistaken for a terrorist gathering, which massacres innocents across generations: “Lots of people buried under the rubble... Some mutilated, charred bodies were lined up along the edge of a path... Then there was the howling, drawn out, interminable; the air was full of pleas and cries and wails”(91). Khadra thus illustrates how structural violence, systemic dehumanisation, and prolonged trauma produce subaltern subjects whose insurgent violence emerges as a Fanonian resistance to occupation and dispossession.

Khadra argues that Iraqi resistance to the West does not derive from primordial religious or ethnic antagonism but in the structural injustice of U.S. occupation and the wider architectures of neo-imperial governance. Through the Falcon's indictment, the invasion is unmasked as a market-driven project in which humanitarian discourses camouflage extractive geopolitical interests, rendering Iraqis expendable within global circuits of power. This critique of commodification and racialised devaluation is amplified in *The Attack*, where Khadra demonstrates how sustained subjugation and the systematic erosion of dignity configure the affective and institutional infrastructures that precipitate retaliatory militancy: as one character laments, “the children of a ravaged, despised people, fighting with whatever means we can to recover our homeland and our

dignity” (158). Insurgent violence thus materialises not as an inherent cultural pathology but as a historically conditioned symptomatic manifestation of cumulative dispossession, sustained necropolitical domination, and the ongoing negation of Iraqi life as grievable, valuable, or worthy of protection.

The narrator's encounter with successive atrocities further crystallises the structural conditions propelling radicalisation. Sulayman—a cognitively impaired boy who neither spoke nor exhibited aggression, living entirely within his own inner world—is nonetheless summarily executed by U.S. soldiers who insist he “might” be concealing explosives. This lethal conjecture exposes a regime of militarised paranoia in which speculative threat outweighs empirical innocence. Through such scenes, Khadra dramatises what Agamben theorises as *homo sacer*: Iraqi civilians are stripped to bare life, deprived of political protection, and rendered killable without consequence. These events illuminate a necropolitical order in which trauma, occupation, and systemic dehumanisation converge to forge subaltern subjectivities, tracing the fraught passage from violated victimhood to insurgent resistance.

The protagonist's radicalisation is catalysed when U.S. soldiers, enacting what Mbembe diagnoses as necropolitical sovereignty, storm his home and reduce both his body and his family to violable colonial matter. Their violent handling of him and their herding of his half-dressed sisters enact the everyday choreography of occupation, but the decisive psychic fracture occurs when his disabled father is beaten, stripped, and exposed before the women of the household—a scene that Fanon would identify as colonial unmasking, where domination works through the symbolic annihilation of paternal authority, masculine honour, and the cultural prohibitions that sustain Bedouin kinship. The father's forced nakedness, recast as an involuntary display of a body rendered abject and defenceless, becomes the index of imperial desecration and collapses the narrator's moral universe. In this moment, structural violence becomes an embodied trauma that constitutes insurgency not as a chosen ideology but as the inevitable response to a world in which sovereignty precludes dignity, autonomy, and life itself.

Following the brutal violation of his family honour, the narrator enters a state of ethnic abjection, experiencing the psychic rupture that Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, conceptualises as the collapse of symbolic structures sustaining identity and belonging. His parents' public humiliation precipitates a wound that exceeds individual injury, inscribing his body as a semioticsite of colonial dishonour and subjugation. Compelled to restore desecrated Bedouin honour, he flees to Baghdad, enmeshed in a cycle of structural violence and necropolitical oppression, perceiving retaliatory action as the sole avenue to expunge the enduring stain of familial and cultural trauma imposed by imperial occupation. He conceives vengeance as a cathartic deluge, wherein rivers and oceans metaphorically run red with his sister's injury, his mother's agonised gaze, and the incendiary fury within him. This inner conflagration channels his trajectory toward sanctioned violence, enacting both individual and collective retribution

and exemplifying trauma-mediated insurgent subjectivity.

During his desolate sojourn in Baghdad, the narrator encounters villagers aligned with a clandestine militant faction waging guerrilla resistance against U.S. forces—a convergence that catalyses his transformation into a ritualised agent of retribution. His embodied experience becomes saturated with the residues of violence, fire, and death, rendering his corporeality a conduit of rage. Entrusted with transporting a highly virulent pathogen, he is transformed into a living vector capable of mass destruction, an embodiment of what Fanon theorises as the colonised subject weaponising the body against structural oppression. He perceives the mission as an imperative measure of insurgent agency and epochal defiance, acknowledging that while he cannot fully grasp its magnitude, it is conceived as a vengeful operation designed to assert power and visibility in a world indifferent to Iraqi suffering.

Khadra eschews idealising the Fedayeen, presenting them not as humane or disciplined actors but as agents whose savagery mirrors the broader moral decay permeating Iraq under occupation. Like the GIs, they perpetrate violence against their own people, revealing internalised brutality and the corrosive effects of systemic oppression. Salah and his cohorts execute a frail man on mere suspicion of betrayal, while the narrator's cousin Omar and his roommates are slain in their sleep, disregarding kinship or appeals to mercy. Witnessing the aftermath—the bodies strewn across the ground, the abandoned shoes of panicked civilians, and the lifeless children—Omar recognises the horror of intra-Iraqi violence and disassociates from the conflict entirely, affirming that this war, inflicted by Iraqis upon Iraqis, is fundamentally alien to him.

Khadra reveals the insurgents' lethal tactics, such as hiding explosives in everyday objects to target Western civilians, exposing their soteriological delusions that martyrdom guarantees paradise. Marwan's suicide, celebrated by comrades as a sacred reunion in the afterlife, exemplifies the fatal fanaticism saturating their militant ethos. The narrator likewise positions himself as effectively dead, awaiting ceremonial interment, reflecting the nihilistic self-annihilation underpinning radicalisation. These acts demonstrate how structural and symbolic violence produces insurgent bodies that internalise despair and transform it into ritualised aggression, illustrating the necropolitical logic of postcolonial occupation, where death becomes both instrument and assertion of agency against a world that renders their lives expendable.

Ellis Shuman, in “What Makes Suicide Bombers Tick?”, contends that terrorists are socialised to perceive suicide attacks on so-called infidels not as sinful transgressions but as sanctified missions, with self-detonation among civilians construed as a pathway to martyrdom and eternal transcendence. Similarly, Jessica Stern, in *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, argues that such actors often emerge from politically and culturally oppressive contexts in which their fundamental rights are systematically denied. These conditions cultivate a sense of dispossession and humiliation, prompting individuals to envisage only a bleak, distorted future and to adopt extreme measures as a

form of reasserting agency.

Khadra dismantles the idealised myth of the Fedayeen as heroic martyrs, revealing their thanatological obsession in which value is determined not by virtuous living but by the manner of one's death, rendering life itself a perilous wager. Shakir's disclosure that the insurgents would execute the narrator upon hesitation underscores their moral duplicity and instrumentalisation of sacrifice. Drawing on Fanon's insight that violence functions as a cathartic force, liberating the colonised from despair and restoring self-respect, Khadra critiques the internalisation of structural and colonial violence, demonstrating how this perverse logic of martyrdom corrodes human dignity and reproduces the very dehumanisation it purports to overcome.

Khadra neither justifies nor glorifies Saddam Hussein; instead, he depicts him as a megalomaniacal and ruthless despot whose tyranny engenders widespread suffering. Issam, a villager of Kafr Karam, observes, "Saddam made it [Iraq] a mass grave" (33), highlighting the human cost of his rule. The Falcon further critiques the populace's complicity, noting, "If Saddam tyrannized us, it was because of our cowardice, large and small. People have the kings they deserve" (32).

Countering cycles of retributive violence, Omar asserts that American aggression cannot be effectively opposed through retaliatory acts, as such violence primarily rebounds upon Iraqis themselves, cautioning, "You're already on the wrong track. The world isn't our enemy... We got more support from them than we got from the other Arab countries... If you think your honour must be saved, don't dishonour your people" (182). In the days preceding his mission, the narrator's psyche unravels under hallucinatory unrest and insomnia, reflecting Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma as the repetitive return of unassimilated experience; repressed memories surface as spectral apparitions of family, comrades, and victims, externalising his psychic transformation from indoctrinated jihadi to reflective humanist. At Beirut airport, the encounter with heterogeneous humanity precipitates a moral epiphany: he abandons his mission, recognising the sanctity of life and affirming that others deserve to live freely, while he holds no entitlement to obstruct their dreams, joys, or aspirations.

In its culmination, *The Sirens of Baghdad* affirms that terrorism is neither intrinsic to Islam nor sanctioned by the Prophet's teachings. Through the narrator's deliberate renunciation of his mission to unleash a deadly pathogen, Khadra underscores Islam's categorical prohibition of suicide and murder, rejecting any notion of self-annihilation as a sanctified jihad. The narrator articulates his moral and psychological reconciliation: "I don't hold it against them. In fact, I don't hold anything against anybody anymore" (307). In its denouement, the novel advances an ethical vision in which forgiveness, compassion, and the renunciation of vengeance constitute the foundation for justice and enduring peace, positioning love and mercy as the essential antidotes to cycles of violence and radicalisation.

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(Be)longing and Becoming : Spatial Negotiations of Queer Desire in Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sancharram (The Journey)*

Abstract

In the hyper-heteronormative world of cinema, the stories of lesbians rarely find visibility. This erasure is spatial: lesbian subjectivities are denied both narrative space within stories and visual space on the screen, often confined to secrecy, shadows, or peripheral roles. The proposed paper examines how Sancharram (2004), directed by Ligy J. Pullappally, constructs and contests spaces of intimacy, secrecy, and resistance through its portrayal of lesbian desire. Situating the film within the larger socio-cultural context of Kerala, the analysis foregrounds how private and public spaces operate as both enabling and constraining terrains for queer subjectivities. The paper highlights the spatial negotiations between these domains and how intimate counter-spaces or heterotopic possibilities are created to challenge patriarchal and heteronormative structures. It also contributes to scholarship on regional queer cinema by offering a spatial reading of lesbian desire that moves beyond visibility to show how spatial agency itself becomes a narrative strategy of resistance. Sancharram, as a female directed movie, moves away from the male-directed gaze by employing a new cinematic language to explore the queer desire.

Keywords: Queer Desire, Repression, Heterotopic spaces, Regional Cinema, Spatial Agency.

Introduction

In the hyper-heteronormative world of cinema, the stories of lesbians rarely found visibility. And when they are shown on the screen, they are often marginalised, silenced, or distorted into narratives that deny them authenticity. Mainstream cinema consistently privileges heterosexual romance as the ultimate form of desire, leaving same-sex intimacies stigmatised or pushed to the margins. This erasure is spatial: lesbian subjectivities are denied both narrative space within stories and visual space on the screen, often confined to secrecy, shadows, or peripheral roles. The scarcity of lesbian-centred narratives reveals how cinema functions as a cultural apparatus that polices boundaries of acceptable sexuality, often presenting queer women as anomalies rather than as subjects with agency. *Sancharram* or *The Journey* (2004), directed by Ligy J. Pullappally, is an important intervention in reclaiming the denied space for lesbians. Apart from the earlier Malayalam movies like *Randu Penkuttikal* (*Two Girls*, 1978) directed by Mohan and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (*The Migratory Bird Never Cries*,

1986) by Padmarajan that ended the stories either with confirming to heterosexual marriage or suicide, *Sancharram* puts forth the tale of two women in a different way.

By situating its narrative within the socio-cultural regional landscape of Kerala, *Sancharram* highlights the tension between individual desire and cultural expectations. Labade and Ajgaonkar write, “the regional register is apparent not only in the conscious choice of making the film in Malayalam but also in positioning the narrative in the seemingly matrilineal but dominantly patriarchal rural spaces of Kerala.”(76) Their article also explains how the usage of the culturally rooted image of the *Kakathi* (fortune teller) establishes “a subversion of dominant hetero-patriarchal claims of same-sex desire's foreignness.” (76) The invocation of such regional symbols allows the film to locate queer desire within the cultural and spiritual fabric of Kerala rather than as a Western import, thereby reclaiming its indigeneity. The film carefully negotiates the cultural space of tradition, religion, and family, where heterosexuality is seen as the only legitimate path for women by reimagining Kerala's cultural landscape as one that can accommodate queer subjectivities. Also, by situating lesbian desire within familiar cultural and spatial contexts, Pullappally disrupts the dominant cinematic grammar that often denies lesbians both screen space and cultural legitimacy.

In feminist and queer cinema, spatial analysis becomes particularly significant, as it reveals how physical and metaphorical spaces regulate or liberate marginalised identities. Scholars like Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974) argue that space is socially produced and embedded with power relations. Michel Foucault expands on this by discussing heterotopias, spaces that exist between the real and the imagined, often functioning as sites of resistance or exclusion. Similarly, feminist geographers like Doreen Massey emphasise how space is gendered, reinforcing or challenging patriarchal structures. In patriarchal societies, women's bodies and desires are policed through spatial constraints, limiting their access to certain freedoms. Space theory in film studies examines how physical and psychological spaces influence narrative, character development, and ideological structures within the film. This article attempts to analyse both the physical and psychological landscapes in the *Sancharram*. The film's spatial design plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and political dimensions of queer desire. The domestic interiors, public spaces, and natural landscapes function not merely as backdrops but as expressive sites that reflect the characters' inner conflicts and societal constraints.

Domestic, Religious and Educational Spaces

When the film begins, Kiran's ancestral home is shown in a high-angle shot. By presenting the family as small and the home as expansive, the film immediately highlights the individual's confinement within the orthodox Tharavad system. When the housekeeper hands the keys to the mother, who, in turn, hands the family's traditional ornaments to the daughter, it implies that women are the guardians of tradition. Yet even

within a matrilineal culture, women remain confined, with their authority limited to preserving customs rather than making autonomous decisions. The daughter is reminded of her duty to perpetuate the lineage as she is told that the family's heritage will be carried on through her once her children are born and raised. The duty of procreation of the coming generation and the maintenance of the tradition is imposed on a girl child who has not yet reached maturity. A female body is valued for its ability to bear a child. Vineetha M, in her article "Lesbian Subjectivity In Kerala Public Space: Representation Of Media", states, "In the development discourse, the female body appeared as the relatively healthy maternal body devoid of sexuality. The body is treated as if devoid of agency, a mere vehicle of the mind, a shell that holds a mind with the capacity for rationality, predisposed towards the domestic domain." (4) Thus, the space of the ancestral home becomes a site where patriarchal expectations are inscribed under the guise of matrilineal heritage. Delilah's family home, with its extensive yet restrictive interiors, embodies the conservative Catholic values that dictate her future. Her bedroom, often associated with personal freedom, is still under the gaze of familial and religious expectations. The home becomes a space where she is trained to conform to societal norms, primarily through her mother's insistence on marriage and traditional femininity. Kiran, from a Hindu background, occupies a different but still restrictive domestic space. Her home represents a more liberal environment compared to Delilah's, but is still bound by cultural expectations regarding marriage and propriety.

Religion and education play crucial roles in reinforcing societal norms in the film. Churches, schools, and community spaces act as sites where patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies are imposed on the protagonists. Delilah's Catholic upbringing places her within a rigid framework of morality, where same-sex desire is viewed as sinful. The church, as a physical and ideological space, serves to discipline her desires, instilling guilt and fear. The frequent presence of religious figures, such as priests and nuns, reinforces the idea that heterosexual marriage is the only acceptable path. This regulation of desire is not only spiritual but also spatial, as the church becomes a site where her inner conflict is magnified through ritual, surveillance, and authority.

Similarly, the school system operates as a microcosm of societal control. Although it provides an initial setting for Kiran and Delilah's bond to develop, the school also serves as an institution that repeatedly emphasises conformity to normative gender and sexual roles. Through classroom discussions and peer interactions, girls are subtly prepared to accept marriage and motherhood as their ultimate destiny. In this sense, education does not remain a neutral process of learning but becomes a disciplinary practice that aligns women's lives with patriarchal family structures. These spaces leave no room for lesbian existence, reinforcing compulsory heterosexuality. The other female characters, including the two mothers and the teacher, act as agents of heteronormativity, considering lesbianism as a serious threat. Foucault's idea of panopticism also applies here. In

Sancharram, the rural community acts as a panopticon, where gossip and moral policing ensure that queer desire remains hidden. Delilah, in particular, is subject to the metaphorical surveillance of family, religion, and community, and this internalised gaze of societal expectations leads her to repress her identity and emotions. Labade and Ajgaonkar write, “The film offers a peculiar signification by positioning the queer sexualities of the main characters within the larger discourse of shame and familial (dis)honour.” (76) Power and surveillance operate intertwined to maintain the heteronormative order, ensuring that any deviation from prescribed gender and sexual norms is immediately disciplined. Navaneetha Mokkil states,

Social form of desiring is multiple and dynamic. But power works through a process of reifying certain desires, and bodies come to matter and others become unseen, illegible, and unrecognisable. Even within the site of gay, lesbian, and feminist discourse, this process of reification operates in such a way that hegemonic forms of desiring and acting emerge. (392)

Heterotopic Spaces

Since public and domestic spaces are restrictive, Kiran and Delilah's relationship finds refuge in nature. Unlike the rigid constraints of domestic and religious spaces, nature functions as a counter-space where the protagonists can explore their emotions away from societal scrutiny. The frequent use of water imagery, particularly rivers and streams, symbolises fluidity and the free expression of desire. Water, which holds cultural and spiritual significance in Kerala, contrasts with the rigidity of institutional norms, offering a space where Kiran and Delilah can momentarily exist outside societal expectations. Open fields and dense forests serve as liminal spaces where the girls find solace and companionship. These settings provide moments of escape, mirroring their emotional and psychological journey. Nature, here, functions as a heterotopia, as defined by Michel Foucault (*Of Other Spaces*, 1967): a place that disrupts norms, a site of resistance, and a challenge to dominant ideologies. These outdoor scenes resist surveillance, allowing the girls to express affection, create memories, and articulate identity. However, this freedom is not absolute, and this space is not entirely free; their love remains under the invisible gaze of social norms. The very landscape that shelters them is also embedded within a deeply traditional society, meaning that their escape into nature is only temporary. The bedroom of Delilah, where they enact a shadow play of a farmer and his wife, also works as a heterotopia because both girls showcase their identity and sexuality there. Performing within the private sphere allows them to explore roles and desires forbidden in the public domain, transforming the bedroom into a liminal zone of freedom and imagination. The lesbian closet, therefore, is not merely a space of repression but also a site of complex negotiation. In the closet, identity is simultaneously formed, performed, and protected. In this sense, *Sancharram* transforms the closet into a heterotopic space

that challenges dominant spatial and sexual norms, reimagining secrecy as a form of resistance rather than a source of shame. Yet, these spaces are fleeting and fragile, always at risk of interruption, colonisation, or closure, mirroring Foucault's idea that heterotopias are spaces with entry and exit rules. Foucault's ideas show how lesbian identities are not just socially silenced but spatially regulated, forced into secrecy by institutional and community surveillance.

Mindscales

Snehalatha and Muraleedharan write that the emotional turmoil the lesbians go through in a non-accepting society is unfathomable since a homosexual life is impossible here. (71) Kiran's early mental world is filled with curiosity and an intuitive understanding of her attraction to Delilah. Unlike traditional portrayals of queer female characters as confused or reluctant, Kiran embraces her emotions early on. This self-awareness is reflected in the film's natural imagery. When she is in open fields or by the river, her gaze lingers on Delilah, revealing her emotional clarity. Kiran, the more assertive and self-aware of the two, possesses a mindscape that resists societal constraints. Unlike Delilah, whose conflict is internalized, Kiran is conscious of her desires and increasingly vocal about them. As the story unfolds, Kiran's mental landscape becomes one of resistance. She does not question her love for Delilah but struggles with how to exist in a world that rejects it. Her psychological journey is marked by a refusal to conform. It is symbolised through her body language, her direct confrontations with Delilah about their relationship, and her increasing frustration with societal expectations. Kiran exhibits more mobility, both physically (moving through open landscapes) and mentally (in her acceptance of her queerness). However, her freedom is not absolute. Kiran, too, must navigate a society that does not recognise her love. Despite her strength, Kiran's mindscape is also one of sorrow. She understands that Delilah is not as free as she is, and this realisation leads to moments of deep emotional pain. Her internal world is one of both love and loss, as she gradually comes to terms with the reality that Delilah may not be able to choose her over tradition. Delilah's mindscape is far more turbulent than Kiran's, as she is caught between personal desire and religious morality. Her moments of happiness with Kiran are shadowed by the anxiety of being discovered. Her internal world is shaped by guilt, duty, and fear, making her psychological journey more conflicted.

Even as Delilah moves toward marriage, her mind remains attached to Kiran through memories. The film's use of flashbacks and moments of silence suggests that her love for Kiran never truly disappears. It is simply buried under layers of societal pressure. Her eventual acceptance of an arranged marriage is not just an external action but a reflection of her mindscape. She convinces herself that conforming is the only path to peace. This internalisation of oppression is a crucial theme in *Sancharram*, showing how deeply ingrained societal norms can dictate personal choices. Their internal worlds are

profoundly shaped by social conditioning, religious beliefs, and individual aspirations, creating a layered narrative in which space and psyche intersect. For Ligy, the primary reason to make a lesbian movie was the increasing suicides of lesbian women in Kerala. Vineetha writes, “It led to a social situation where some bodies' desires are 'illegible'; in this situation, death is a political act. When a monogamous society does not accommodate the diverse desires and bodies, these bodies are pushed out of these spaces.” (6) Even in *Sanchaaram*, Kiran chooses to end her life for a moment on the day of Delilah's wedding, but she refuses to do it at the end. By cutting her hair short and preparing herself to live in a world where her identity and sexuality were not at all welcomed, Kiran reclaims the space naturally. In an interview with Cheerath-Rajagopalan (2005) Ligy says, “I hope my films help young gay people to consider the option of moving ahead with their lives, instead of taking the devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities, suicide.” (qtd. in Mokkal 393) Ligy has shown the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly in the climax to signify Kiran's embracing of her life.

Conclusion

Released during a period when homosexuality was still heavily stigmatized in Kerala, *Sancharram* intervened in a landscape where queer identities were invisibilized or dismissed. Many women who embraced non-heteronormative sexualities faced intense social backlash, including slut-shaming, harassment, physical abuse, and even fatal violence. The significance of *Sancharram* lies in the fact that the movie did not conceal its protagonists' sexuality as mere friendship or obsession like the previous movies did. Though the film ends with the separation of its protagonists, it feels realistic when one of them chooses to embrace her sexuality. With its cinematic landscape that deviate from the dominant heteronormative narrative, the film opens up alternative ways of imagining and locating queer desire. As a powerful example of female directed counter-cinema, *Sancharram* starts a conversation on how queer sensibilities can be portrayed on screen without diluting its authenticity. The aesthetics of the counter-gaze or the female gaze it brings on to the screen is nothing short of a new discourse on the portrayal of lesbians in regional cinema. The current paper was an attempt to discuss how spatial politics shape the lived experiences and representational possibilities of queer individuals on screen. Future research can compare how other regional Indian films portray queer desire and examine whether recent Malayalam cinema offers more open and supportive spaces for queer women. Because *Sancharram* proves to be a reminder that cinema has the power to reflect the world and to demand a change in the world by reconfiguring the spatial and emotional possibilities.

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Translating Intersectionality and Islamic Feminism : Mobilising Kimberlé Crenshaw in Shahina E. K.'s *Neelatheevandy* and the Reconfiguration of Muslim Women Narratives in Post-Millennial Malabar

Abstract

This article studies how post-millennial socio-cultural change in Malabar is reshaping Muslim women's negotiations with intersecting powers of religion, gender, class, colourism, and regional marriage practices, through Shahina E. K.'s novellas 'Saira' and 'Neelatheevandy' embedded in the collection titled Neelatheevandy. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, along with the theory of Islamic feminism, it argues that the novellas depict "multiply-burdened" positions produced by dowry, colourist hierarchies, educational markets, and patriarchal readings of Islam, which together define ideals of the "proper" post-millennial Muslim woman. At the same time, these texts are part of a new post-millennial wave of Malabar Muslim women's writing in which heroines shift from quiet endurance to openly resisting, voice-raising subjects who challenge family, religious, and community norms. Placed alongside recent research on Muslim women's education, work, and status in Kerala, the article shows that such fiction not only mirrors but also intensifies an on-going shift in young women's consciousness, and concludes that intersectional and feminist readings of these post-millennial texts illuminate how global theory travels into vernacular Islamic feminist contexts, deepening insight into gendered change in contemporary Malabar.

Keywords: Intersectionality, post-millennial socio-cultural transition, Malabar Muslim women, Islamic feminism, dowry, colourism, marriage market, education.

Introduction

In post-millennial Malabar, Muslim women inhabit a rapidly changing social landscape in which expanding access to higher education, salaried employment, and digital publicspace coexists with the persistent force of patriarchal expectations in domestic, religious, and communal life. Even as they step into universities and workplaces in unprecedented numbers, many still confront layered obstacles in leadership, marriage, and everyday autonomy shaped by gendered norms, colourist prejudice, and religiously inflected respectability politics. The younger generation, acutely aware of the constraints faced by their mothers and grandmothers, increasingly experiments with non-conventional paths, openly questioning long-standing scripts of obedience and sacrifice and seeking new ways of being daughters, wives, professionals, and believers.

While there has been significant progress and development in the field of higher education, intellectual growth and women empowerment, there is a simultaneous and notable impact occurring at the alternative side as well. Observations indicate that female youth post millennium; especially Muslim girls of Malabar are eventually concocting undaunted decisions regarding their future life leading to a paradigm shift in traditional concepts practiced in Malabar society. These decisions include choosing to remain unmarried, an apparent increase in divorce rates initiated by Muslim women themselves, migration to foreign countries for jobs and permanent settlement, opting for childfree married life, remaining 'hyper-independent', emergence of influential and bold personal narratives, autonomy on one's religious perspective and existence and so on. This shift among the Muslim female youth notably post millennium, has questioned the very foundations of a system, confronting age-old patriarchal customs and traditions thereby arousing challenges in and around the community. As they acquire cultural capital, empowered women develop the ability to question and resist gender norms, leading to a redefinition of their roles within both the family and the broader community. This shift in power dynamics unsettles established structures, often provoking resistance from those invested in maintaining traditional hierarchies. The empowerment of women through knowledge also triggers backlash, manifesting as social pressure, restrictive norms, or even violence, as conservative forces attempt to reinforce gendered boundaries. Despite these challenges, these women emerge as agents of change, serving as role models who inspire others to pursue education and professional success. Their experiences highlight the complex intersection of gender, religion, and cultural identity, positioning them within broader discourses of intersectionality and Islamic feminism, which advocates for gender justice through both religious and social reform.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides a crucial framework for understanding this post-millennial socio-cultural transition because it insists that women's experiences cannot be grasped through a single axis such as "gender" or "religion" alone. Theory of Intersectionality reveals how law, custom, economic structures, media, and religious discourse converge so that women are "multiply burdened" along intersecting axes of gender, class, race or colour, age, and marital status, rather than simply facing additive forms of discrimination. Read together with Islamic feminist hermeneutics, which argue that Qur'anic ethics are fundamentally oriented toward justice and gender reciprocity and that many patriarchal practices stem from male-centred exegesis rather than divine command, this framework becomes especially potent for analysing Muslim women's lives. Transposed into the Malabar setting, these twin lenses of intersectionality and Islamic feminism make visible how a Muslim woman's educational choices, mobility, and marriage prospects are simultaneously mediated by dowry economies, sectarian norms, kinship expectations, and shifting ideas of modesty and modernity, and how women draw on faith-based claims to equality to question and renegotiate these norms in a post-millennial moment marked by both accelerated aspiration and intensified moral policing.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship has traced changes in Muslim women's education and employment in Kerala, documenting both the positive impact of schooling and the structural impediments that persist. Studies by Sahala P. M. (2018), Shabna P. (2023), Soumyya (2024), Irshada Bashir (2018), Shajila Beevi (2021), Ramla K. (2017), Gafarkhan T. (2019), Jibin V. K. and C. Naseema (2017), Preeti S. Rawat (2014), Ramsheena (2018), P.J. Jumanath (2024) and Jafar K (2015) highlight how state policies, women-centred institutions, family attitudes, early marriage, and labour-market dynamics shape women's trajectories, while also noting that higher educational status does not automatically translate into empowerment. Yet much of this work remain focused on statistics and institutional access, and does not fully capture how post-millennial Muslim women writers themselves narrate, interpret, and resist intersecting forms of subordination in their intimate and communal worlds. Recent postcolonial feminist literary criticism explicitly turns to intersectionality to address precisely this kind of gap. Namdeo and Sharma argue that an intersectional approach “provides a framework for thinking about how gender, race, and class interact in tales from all over the globe,” showing how women's oppression, marginalisation, and agency emerge from the multiplicative effects of these axes rather than from gender alone (864). Their study of global narratives insists that postcolonial feminist criticism must move beyond Eurocentric, single-axis models and attend to how local histories of colonialism, racism, class hierarchy, and neoliberal development shape women's experiences in the Global South (864). Situating this article alongside such work, Shahina E. K.'s fiction *Neelathee vandy* is read as South Indian Muslim narratives in which religion, dowry economies, colourism, class, and regional marriage practices function as key intersectional coordinates that structure, and are contested by, post-millennial Malabar Muslim women.

It is within this gap that contemporary Malabar Muslim women's writing becomes especially significant as a cultural archive of post-millennial socio-cultural transition. Authors such as Kadeeja Mumtaz, B. M. Zuhra, Saheera Thangal, Sheeba E. K., Shahina E. K., Soniya Rafeeq, Faseela Mehar, Shabna Mariyam, and Shahina K. Rafeeq create narrative spaces in which women move from being primarily objects of reformist discourse to subjects who speak back to gender roles, suppression, patriarchal challenges, morality, religious ideology, and polygamy. Their texts register the emergence of a “new” woman who, while rooted in Islamic ethical frameworks, articulates bolder refusals of dowry, asserts claims over education and labour, and frames marriage as a negotiable contract rather than a fixed destiny, making these works key sites where the contours of post-millennial Muslim womanhood are being redrawn. This trajectory resonates with Islamic feminist hermeneutics such as Asma Barlas's argument that the Qur'an, rightly read, contains a stubbornly egalitarian voice that rejects male superiority and authorises

women to contest patriarchal readings from within belief. It also echoes Amina Wadud's insistence that Qur'anic ethics are fundamentally oriented toward gender justice and reciprocity, and that patriarchal practices like unequal marriage contracts and control over women's mobility reflect male exegesis and social custom rather than divine will.

Methodology

This article employs an intersectional feminist and Islamic feminist close reading of two novellas, “Saira” and “Neelatheevandy,” embedded in Shahina E. K.'s collection titled *Neelatheevandy*, treating them as a small, purposefully selected corpus that maps post-millennial socio-cultural transitions in Malabar Muslim women's lives. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the analysis traces how religion, gender, class, colourism, education, and regional marriage practices converge in specific scenes, spaces, and narrative choices, producing “multiply burdened” positions rather than single-axis oppression, while Islamic feminist hermeneutics, especially Amina Wadud's and Asma Barlas's rereading of the Qur'an for gender justice, inform the discussion of how faith, piety, and scriptural authority are mobilised both to legitimise and to contest these structures. The two novellas are chosen because, taken together, they span crucial life stages which are pre-marriage pressure and life within marriage, and thereby illuminate a continuum of control and resistance that is central to contemporary debates on Muslim women's education, dowry, marital autonomy, and the ethical re-interpretation of Islamic norms in Malabar. Close textual analysis of key episodes from the fiction (wedding functions, brokerage conversations, staff-room interactions, and domestic negotiations) is read alongside scholarship on Muslim women's education and work in Kerala, postcolonial intersectional criticism, and Islamic feminist critiques of patriarchy, in order to show how Shahina's fiction both reflects and reworks broader structures of power at the junction of law, custom, economy, and religion.

Methodologically, this approach aligns with recent intersectional feminist literary readings that use close analysis to trace how gendered violence, silencing, and embodiment register at the intersection of multiple axes of power, as well as with Islamic feminist projects that foreground believing women's voices as sites of ethical and exegetical resistance. Amjad Ali's reading of Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*, for instance, combines Butler, hooks, Crenshaw, and Spivak to show how class, ethnicity, language, and sex layer different forms of violence on women's bodies and voices, and how silence can operate both as oppression and as a paradoxical mode of resistance; in a similar vein, this article brings intersectional and Islamic feminist lenses together to examine how Shahina's spare dialogues, recurrent metaphors, and everyday scenes of speech, silence, prayer, and protest inscribe and unsettle intersecting forms of control on Muslim women's bodies, faith-lives, and movements, while also opening spaces for resistant, theologically grounded subjectivities. The linked novellas thus form a sustained, intersectional critique of how women in post-millennial Malabar negotiate

their lives at the crossroads of religion, gender, class, colourism, and regional marriage practices: rather than offering isolated snapshots of victimhood, they map how ordinary spaces like wedding halls, kitchens, staff rooms, and police stations become intersections where structural power and post-millennial aspirations collide, enacting what intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw and extended by Carbado et al. and others, describes as tracking interlocking regimes of domination while also illuminating new practices of resistance and voice-raising among young Muslim women.

Textual Analysis

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is useful here because it insists that one cannot understand women's experiences by looking at "gender" alone; instead, one must attend to how gender constantly interacts with other axes such as race or colour, class, religion, law, and social norms. In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw argues that discrimination frameworks which treat race and gender as separate, "single-axis" categories erase those who are "multiply-burdened," and she explicitly notes that Black women's experiences cannot be captured by adding "racism and sexism" as two separate harms. (139-140). These novellas do precisely what Crenshaw calls for; they dramatize how a dark-skinned, unmarried, highly educated Muslim woman like Saira, and a middle-aged schoolteacher-wife of Narayanan- Shyamala, are caught in very different but structurally connected webs of control, in line with Crenshaw's point that intersectionality reveals both "double-discrimination" and forms of subordination that are specific to a position like "Black women" rather than to race or gender alone (Crenshaw- 149).

Saira

In Saira's story, the wedding function becomes a microcosm of the community's intersectional disciplining of women. Her mother's insistence on scarf or hijab is not simply a religious request; it is loaded with anxiety about honour, marriageability, and comparison with other girls, just as Crenshaw shows that appeals to "culture" or "tradition" often operate as vehicles for enforcing race-gender hierarchies rather than neutral norms (Crenshaw 139-40). At the same time, Islamic feminist readings such as Amina Wadud's and Asma Barlas's emphasise that modesty in the Qur'an is framed as a mutual ethical principle rather than a unilateral tool for controlling women's bodies, and that using veiling to police women's desirability and obedience reflects patriarchal custom and male exegesis rather than divine command (Wadud, 31-36; Barlas, 183-89). Saira's gender is policed through dress codes, but this pressure is intensified because she is considered "past" the ideal marriageable age and because she is dark-skinned, echoing Crenshaw's argument that women at the intersection are judged against prototypes (here, the fair, young, "modest" bride) that do not fit them (Crenshaw 140). Here intersectionality reveals how age, colour, and marital status amplify gender policing: a teenager in the same scarf might be praised as modest; Saira is framed as deviant and

defiant. Her relatives' warning that she must control her tongue "as she is still unmarried" shows how marriage functions as an entitlement to speak and move, while unmarried women are treated as perpetual minors, always under surveillance, which parallels Crenshaw's description of how law and politics protect "otherwise-privileged" group members while leaving the multiply-burdened stuck in the "basement" of the metaphorical building (E.K. 27; Crenshaw 152). Religion, in this scene, is not a neutral spiritual framework; it is selectively mobilized by women and men to justify why Saira must cover, lower her gaze, and silence her voice, demonstrating how, in Carbado et al.'s terms, intersectionality is not fixed to any one structure but moves wherever power is being justified and naturalised, even when that justification borrows the language of piety (Carbado et al. 303–05).

At the same time, Saira's own responses mark her as a "destructive reader" of social norms, in the positive sense of dismantling oppressive scripts. Her quiet assertion that breeze, wind, and sunlight also belong to her reclaims the natural world from being filtered through rules of modesty, showing what Carbado et al. call intersectionality's status as "a method and a disposition" that can be mobilised to imagine "other kinds of work" and other futures (E.K. 21; Carbado et al. 312). This refusal also resonates with Islamic feminist claims that believing women have the authority to re-interpret Qur'anic concepts such as *sakinah* (tranquillity) and *rahmah* (mercy) as guaranteeing women's access to well-being and space, not their seclusion, and that they may therefore contest readings that confine them to domestic or invisible roles (Wadud, 67–72; Barlas 191–96). The theory of intersectionality helps here to show how she is not only resisting a dress code but also challenging the idea that her access to public space, to nature, and even to her own body should be mediated through marriage, colour, and community expectations, which aligns with Crenshaw's insistence that intersectional analysis must interrogate both institutional discourses (law, policy) and "discourses of resistance" (communal morality, feminism, antiracism) when they themselves become sites of marginalisation (Carbado et al. 304). Her disgust at the bride's father's patronizing assurance, "study until your time for marriage comes," exposes how education, which might appear as a separate, liberating sphere, is folded back into the marriage market, similar to Crenshaw's critique of how antidiscrimination law appears neutral yet uses "prototypical" figures (white women, Black men) to define the very terms of opportunity (E.K. 23; Carbado et al. 304). Her M.Phil in Sociology is devalued because the community views education as a tool to produce better wives and mothers, not independent citizens; thus, the axis of "education" intersects with gender and marriage norms to circumscribe, rather than expand, her horizons, which resonates with the way Carbado et al. describe intersectionality moving "within and across disciplines" to repurpose seemingly neutral domains like social science or law (E.K. 27; Carbado et al. 307). Islamic feminist thinkers similarly argue that knowledge in an Islamic framework should be a means of spiritual and social empowerment for women, and that treating

women's education as mere capital for marriage markets contradicts the Qur'an's egalitarian epistemic ethic (Wadud, 15–18; Barlas 201–06).

Ruyya's life story, embedded within Saira's narrative, gives historical depth to these dynamics. As a young woman, Ruyya had academic potential, but her prospects were cut short because her father did not value girls' education and because she was dark in complexion; another intersection of gender and colour determining access to opportunity, much like Crenshaw's discussion of employment cases where Black women's exclusion is invisible when courts look only at “women” (meaning white women) or “Blacks” (meaning men) (E.K. 41; Crenshaw 140). Her husband Ishaq later imposes a new religious dress code on both himself and her, shifting to *Jubba* and insisting she wear *purdah* and *niqab*, which can be read through Crenshaw's idea of intersectional “compound discrimination,” where marital power, religious authority, and racialized bodily norms converge on the woman's body (E.K. 25; Crenshaw 149). Intersectionality and Islamic feminist critique overlap here: Ishaq's power is not only marital but also religiously coded, as he appropriates interpretive authority and decides unilaterally what “piety” looks like on his wife's body, echoing Crenshaw's critique of how male-dominated law arrogates the right to define what counts as “real” discrimination or harm, and mirroring Islamic feminist arguments that male monopolies over *tafsir* have turned historically contingent rulings on marriage, veiling, and obedience into allegedly timeless divine mandates (Wadud, 31–36; Barlas, 183–89). His later decision to marry a second time while his wife Ruyya is bedridden is justified through selective reference to a man's right to four wives; intersectionality shows that Ruyya's vulnerability arises from being a woman, a wife, a dark-skinned daughter whose education was cut short, and a sick, economically dependent person whose religious rights are interpreted for her by others, similar to the way Crenshaw describes Black women plaintiffs whose claims disappear because courts will not see them as a distinct class (Crenshaw 140). A purely gender-based analysis would miss how sickness, economic dependence, racialised beauty norms, and religious authority intensify her marginalization, which is precisely why Crenshaw insists that analyses that do not take intersectionality into account “cannot sufficiently address the particular manner” in which such women are subordinated (140), and why Islamic feminists call for re-centring women as Qur'anic readers capable of challenging patriarchal uses of scripture in family law and everyday marital practice (Wadud 67–72; Barlas 191–96).

The institution of dowry and the market language of marriage brokers add another layer. When Saira's relatives and brokers speak of “unsold” girls, “good ones” being “snatched” early, and the need to offer higher dowry for dark-skinned or older women, they reveal how capitalism, patriarchy, and colourism intertwine, mirroring Crenshaw's broader claim that intersectionality must account for class and economic structures, not just identity categories (E.K. 33, 165–166). Girls' bodies become commodities whose

“defects” (darkness, age, and education beyond a certain point) must be compensated with gold and cash; this echoes the way Crenshaw reads the U.S. labour market and welfare system as structurally disadvantaging Black women through ostensibly neutral economic logics. Practices like Mysore marriages, where poor families push daughters across the border to avoid dowry, show how class and geography intersect with gender and religion, resembling the “international travels” of intersectionality that Carbado et al. trace when they discuss how European and Caribbean feminists use the lens to understand postcolonial marriage and citizenship regimes (305). Here intersectionality helps explain why these girls are especially vulnerable: they are poor, often from rural border areas, sometimes less educated, and moved far from their natal support networks; these marriages may be religiously and socially sanctioned, but they encode systemic disposability of certain female lives in the name of family survival, which recalls Crenshaw's discussion of how social policies around “female-headed households” and the “Black family” render Black women's lives expendable at the intersection of race, gender, and poverty (E.K. 31-32, 165-166).

Neelatheevandy

In the novella Neelatheevandy, Shahina shifts focus from an unmarried woman to a married schoolteacher, but the underlying structure of intersecting oppressions remains. Narayanan's beliefs about his wife Shyamala that she has no mind of her own, that she can only teach basic letters, that she cannot handle money, are not simple personal quirks but reflect broader cultural scripts equating masculinity with rational control and femininity with emotional, childlike dependence, comparable to the “separate spheres” ideology Crenshaw criticizes for being built around white middle-class women's experiences yet still shaping how “good” women are imagined (E.K. 60; Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality helps us see that Shyamala is constrained not just by being a woman, but by being a married woman in a lower-middle-class setting, whose job and salary are mediated through her husband's economic authority, paralleling Crenshaw's point that Black women's labour-market positions are shaped by the interaction of race, gender, and class (E.K. 61; Crenshaw 165–66). As Namdeo and Sharma note in their discussion of postcolonial narratives, intersectional analysis reveals how women's oppression, marginalisation, and agency emerge from the multiplicative effects of gender, class, and other axes rather than from gender alone; Shyamala's status as a salaried, married, lower-middle-class woman exemplifies precisely such a configuration, where class location and economic dependence intensify gendered subordination rather than mitigating it (Namdeo and Sharma 864).

He controls her ATM card and PIN, decides how much she can spend on books, saree, or exhibitions, and frames this control as responsible husbandly care, enacting what Crenshaw elsewhere calls a “top-down” vision of protection that leaves those at the bottom (or in the “basement”) dependent on the goodwill of more privileged actors (E.K.

61; Crenshaw 167). What looks like concern is actually a combination of economic, emotional, and symbolic violence; her occasional protest that this is her hard-earned salary is neutralized by his reminder that he paid the donation to secure her job, which recalls Crenshaw's critique of welfare and employment debates that erase women's own labour by attributing family survival to male breadwinners or state benevolence (E.K. 61; Crenshaw 165–66). Read through Namdeo and Sharma's claim that postcolonial feminist criticism must move beyond Eurocentric, single-axis models and attend to how local histories of class hierarchy and gendered labour regimes shape women's lives in the Global South, Shyamala's predicament shows how a seemingly modest teaching job, secured through a donation and controlled through a husband's "care," encodes a specifically Malabar configuration of gendered and classed power within the broader global pattern they describe (Namdeo and Sharma 864–65).

Domestic space is another domain where intersectionality operates. Narayanan's refusal to do dishes or share household tasks and his expectation that Shyamala will always manage food, cleaning, and emotional labour reflect a gendered division of labour that cuts across class and region in India, much as Crenshaw notes that Black women's paid work has historically never freed them from unpaid domestic burdens (E.K. 62; Crenshaw 156). In line with Namdeo and Sharma's observation that women's oppression and agency in postcolonial contexts emerge from the multiplicative interaction of gender, class, and other structures rather than gender alone, the domestic sphere here is not simply "private" but a key site where classed and gendered expectations about women's work converge to discipline women's time, energy, and aspirations (Namdeo and Sharma 864–65). But in context, this division intersects with his control of her mobility: he does not outright forbid a two-wheeler, but uses anxiety and emotional manipulation to prevent her from acquiring it, effectively limiting her movement between school and home, thereby echoing Crenshaw's observations that gendered and racialized discourses of "safety" often restrict women's movement while claiming to protect them (E.K. 62; Crenshaw 156, 166). Gender, marital status, economic position, age, and normative ideas of safety converge to keep her physically and psychologically bound to the domestic sphere; her rare trip away from home with friends becomes, like Saira's moment of claiming sunlight and wind, a first real taste of autonomy, resonating with Carbado et al.'s view of intersectionality as a "work-in-progress" that can illuminate emergent practices of resistance and coalition (Carbado et al. 305). When she says her mind and heart felt like a kite during the journey she set out for on her own will, she echoes the preface's longing to be unthreaded, extending the kite metaphor, beyond Saira's unmarried experience to a married women's inner worlds, and this metaphor itself can be read as an intersectional image of precarious freedom: movement only within the length of a socially controlled string.

Narayanan's panic when his wife is momentarily missing is telling. He cannot

conceive of her absence as a self-directed act, illustrating what Crenshaw calls “discourses that normalize” gender and race hierarchies by assuming women's lives revolve around men's needs unless disrupted by catastrophe (Carbado et al. 311). For him, a married woman is an extension of his identity; her movement without his knowledge signifies loss of control, not her exploration of selfhood, a dynamic comparable to the Black political rhetoric Crenshaw critiques, where women who speak out are cast as race traitors for troubling male-centred narratives (Crenshaw 163). Namdeo and Sharma argue that intersectional postcolonial criticism must track precisely such normalising discourses in everyday life, where local histories of patriarchy and class hierarchy naturalise women's subordination in family and community while masking it as care or protection (865). Yet this same crisis opens a possibility of change: waiting, imagining catastrophes, and realising how much he has taken her presence for granted, Narayanan is forced into an uncomfortable introspection, similar to the moments of “reimagining” Black politics that Crenshaw calls for when she cites Anna Julia Cooper's claim that “only the Black woman can say, when and where I enter...” (Crenshaw 160). When Shyamala returns, *Neelatheevandy* suggests, he has been softened by fear and reflection, potentially more willing to grant her some of the freedoms she has long been denied; intersectionality helps us see that this moment of change is not just about one man learning to be kinder but about beginning to crack the intersecting structures such as economic control, gender roles, and religiously infused respectability that have long defined their marriage.

Blending the two novellas shows how Shahina E.K. constructs an interlinked map of women's oppression and resistance across life stages. Saira stands at the threshold of marriage, being evaluated and priced in a market shaped by age, colour, education, and dowry, occupying a position analogous to the young women at the centre of Crenshaw's discussion of marriage and welfare policy whose lives are read through racialised and gendered stereotypes. Narayanan's wife Shyamala has already crossed that threshold and is now negotiating freedom within marriage, under a husband who presents himself as rational and caring while denying her autonomy, much as Crenshaw describes how Black women in families and movements are asked to sacrifice their specific grievances “for the race.” Intersectionality ties their experiences together: both are constrained by marriage as an institution, but in different ways and at different points; Saira faces pressure to enter a marriage on unfair terms, Narayanan's wife faces pressure to remain in one where her freedom is curtailed, reflecting Crenshaw's traffic-intersection metaphor in which harm can come from different directions at different times. Both are also embedded in wider systems; mosque norms on marriage age, local practices like Mysore marriages, community gossip, and religious discourses on modesty and polygamy—that shape their options, just as Crenshaw and Carbado et al. insist that intersectionality must track how law, policy, media, and cultural institutions together produce “structural power”. Read this way, Shahina's novellas exemplify what Namdeo and Sharma describe as global postcolonial narratives in which women's identities are constituted at the crossroads of

gender, class, and other structures, and where literary form becomes a means of exposing and challenging those power systems. By foregrounding Malabar Muslim women's negotiations with marriage markets, religious authority, and educational capital, *Neelatheevandy* extends intersectional postcolonial feminist criticism into a specific South Asian Muslim context that has often been marginal to global feminist theory

These narratives are particularly relevant in contemporary Malabar, where many of the described practices continue, though often more subtly. Joint family structures, marriage brokers, and community networks still carry enormous influence over how girls and women are perceived and treated, paralleling Crenshaw's account of how community institutions mediate both racism and sexism in the U.S. context. At the same time, post-millennial Muslim women are far more educated and connected to global feminist and Islamic feminist thought, and thus more equipped to critically read and challenge the norms around them, embodying what Carbado et al. call intersectionality's "social movement dimensions" (305). Saira's final monologue to a prospective groom, where she spells out her stance on dowry, religious compulsion, shared domestic labour, and child-rearing-is emblematic of this new subjectivity; she deploys her education, faith, and lived experience to redraw the terms of marriage, refusing to be silently slotted into a pre-written role, just as Crenshaw urges Black women to "recenter" theory and policy by speaking from their own position (E.K. 42-43, 167). Ali's analysis of *Mountain Language* similarly shows how silenced, surveilled women's bodies and voices in a militarised context can be read intersectionally as sites where multiple structures of domination such as state power, patriarchy, class, and ethnicity; all these converge, and where even constrained speech and strategic silence acquire resistant force. Saira's assertive monologue and Shyamala's quiet refusals resonate with this emphasis on "muted voices and oppressed bodies," suggesting that Malabar Muslim women's literary speech acts likewise compel readers to confront their own complicity in everyday systems that normalise women's erasure. Shyamala's fleeting freedom and her husband, Narayanan's shaken certainty signal a parallel shift within existing marriages, where women's quiet refusals and men's forced self-reflections may gradually alter household dynamics; intersectionality here is not only an analytic but, in Crenshaw's critical race tradition, a project oriented toward "social change."

Importantly, that these stories are written by a Malabar Muslim woman is itself an intersectional fact. Shahina E. K. writes from within the religious, cultural, and linguistic context she depicts: and her position parallels what Islamic feminist theorists describe as "believing women" who speak as insiders to both Islam and feminism, refusing the binary between secular critique and pious submission much as Crenshaw writes as a Black feminist legal scholar whose own position shapes her critique of law and politics. Her perspective is not that of an external critic but of an insider who understands both the tenderness and the violence within these worlds, allowing her to avoid what Crenshaw calls the "top-down" abstraction that ignores those at the bottom of the hierarchy (167).

This positionality allows Shahina to critique the misuse of religion without dismissing faith, to portray men like Narayanan and Ishaq as products of their context rather than one-dimensional villains, and to capture women's ambivalence, the love they may feel for their families alongside their frustration and desire for change, echoing Crenshaw's nuanced treatment of Black men and Black communities in debates around *The Color Purple* and welfare policy (163-164). It is precisely this layered, insider intersectional perspective that makes her novellas increasingly popular and powerful in Malabar, in the same way that Carbado et al. argue that intersectionality's "travelogue" gains energy when local actors adapt it to their own contexts (304). Recent work reads Islamic feminism itself as a postcolonial, Global South contribution to global feminist theory, arguing that Muslim women's activist and interpretive projects constitute a "transition toward a global feminism" that does not abandon religious commitments but mobilises them in the service of gender justice. Shahina's fiction can thus be seen as one vernacular expression of this ethical-political turn, embedding intersectional critique in narrative rather than solely in exegetical or activist discourse.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the combined force of these novellas demonstrates how various domains of society interrupt and shape women's married lives and their sense of self. Religion, as interpreted and enforced by male and older female figures, regulates dress, mobility, and marital choices, much like the religious and cultural discourses Crenshaw and later intersectional scholars show to be central in shaping women-of-colour's vulnerabilities. The marriage market, framed by dowry, colourism, and age norms, reduces women to negotiable objects; economic structures deprive even salaried women of control over their earnings; domestic ideologies assign them endless unpaid labour while romanticizing sacrifice, all of which can be read through the intersectional framework Crenshaw uses to critique employment law, welfare debates, and separate-spheres ideology. Yet, through Saira's assertive speech and Shyamala's kite-like moments of release, Shahina E. K shows that women are not passive victims but readers and rewriters of their social scripts, using both intersectional awareness and Islamic ethical principles of justice and equality; of the kind articulated in Islamic feminist rereading of the Qur'an as affirming gender-egalitarian divine justice, to question, resist, and gradually transform their circumstances, thereby enacting what Carbado et al. describe as intersectionality's role in "forging alliances" and opening up new forms of political work (306). In a region where these issues remain intensely alive, such narratives are not only literature; they are interventions in an ongoing struggle for more just, dignified, and humane ways of being wives, daughters, believers, and selves.

At the same time, the narratives underline that intersectionality in Malabar today is not simply an imported academic framework but a lived, evolving practice embedded in the consciousness of a rising generation of Muslim women. Saira's outspoken rejection of

dowry, insistence on shared domestic labour, and re-interpretation of religious obligation, alongside Shyamala's kite-like experience of temporary freedom and her subtle assertions of financial and spatial autonomy, signal the emergence of a "new" voice-raising subjectivity that remains grounded in faith yet refuses inherited inequities post millennium. These acts of speech and movement do not fully dismantle the structures around them, but they mark crucial cracks in dowry systems, marital hierarchies, and gendered respectability, suggesting that post-millennial women's everyday negotiations may cumulatively reconfigure what can be thought of and lived of within Malabar Muslim communities.

The future prospects opened by this corpus of post-millennial writing are therefore both literary and socio-political. Comparative work can trace how other contemporary Malabar Muslim women writers similarly or differently figure resistance, piety, and aspiration across class locations, sectarian lines, and urban-rural divides, thereby mapping the diversity within the "new woman" emerging in the region. Reader-response studies especially among young Muslim women and men could investigate whether texts like *Neelatheevandy* influence attitudes toward dowry, polygamy, women's paid work, and domestic labour, clarifying how fiction participates in ongoing debates over reform and tradition. Finally, situating Shahina's novellas within broader discussions of intersectionality's "travels", it can show how theories forged in Black feminist and critical race contexts are being reworked in South Asian Muslim settings, with post-millennial Malabar women's narratives contributing fresh conceptual and ethical insights to global conversations on gender, religion, and social change. In this sense, the article participates in what recent postcolonial feminist and intersectional criticism identifies as a broader Global South project of using literature to theorise "intersectional gender" beyond Western frames, by foregrounding how class, religion, geography, and colourism co-produce women's lives in non-Western contexts.

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Beyond the Walls and Beneath the Wounds : Institutional Trauma in Naomi Wallace's *And I and Silence*

Abstract

Naomi Wallace's prison drama *And I and Silence* is a play that portrays the traumatic lived reality of two marginalised interracial women and their struggle to survive in 1950s America. It examines the traumatic consequences of systemic oppression in a society structured by race and class inequalities. This paper explores how institutional trauma leads to loss of identity and denial of agency for the characters of Jamie and Dee. Through an emotionally charged depiction of her characters and her experimental dramatic structure, Wallace exposes how societal institutions, particularly the prison system in the play, become a microcosm of larger social ideologies and function as a mechanism of control and confinement. Moving beyond a physical space of confinement, the prison reflects the invisible structures of ideologies that sustain inequality in the world outside its walls. By merging political consciousness and poetic expression, Wallace unveils the predominant ways through which individuals are oppressed in and through systems while also illuminating the potential and hope for resistance, albeit fleeting, within such oppressive frameworks.

Keywords : Institutional trauma, prison, violence, ideology, gaze

Naomi Wallace is a distinguished playwright who has contributed significantly towards American theatre since the 1990s through her gripping and poignant dramas. She is the only American playwright to be added to the French National Theatre La Comedie's repertoire after Tennessee Williams. Her 2013 play titled *And I and Silence* is no exception. The title is taken from Emily Dickinson's poem "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain" which evokes the motifs of symbolic death and psychological fragmentation, thus reflecting one among the many prominent thematic concerns explored in the play. By intertwining her political activism with her dramatic writings, Wallace compels us to look at the sociopolitical realities and injustices that exist within American society. Through a seamless blending of her political vision, poetic language and distinctive dramatic style, Wallace critiques the prevailing power relations and challenges the existing status quo. Her work weaves together the intersection of race, class and incarceration, thereby exposing how inequality is institutionalised and perpetuated.

The play portrays the poignant relationship between two interracial women who form an inspiring and enduring connection stemming from their shared experience of

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incarceration and inequality. America in the 1950s was plagued by racial segregation, gender inequality and class-based exclusion. Set against the backdrop of this period, the play traces the lives of the two characters who have to navigate the perilous literal as well as metaphorical prisons imposed upon them by society. Jamie is a twenty-six year old African-American and Dee is a twenty-five year old white woman who encounter each other within prison. This setting becomes a site of confinement and also a space for connection. Over the course of their sentence of nine years, their friendship evolves into an alliance built upon their mutual care for each other, their shared suffering and their yearning for freedom in a society that systematically denies them a life of dignity.

The analysis undertaken in this paper employs the theoretical framework of trauma studies. The etymological journey of the word 'trauma' can be traced from its Greek origin, meaning a physical wound, to its current usage as an emotional or psychological injury due to the experience of a catastrophic or distressing event that undermines an individual's sense of Self and causes a rupture in their psyche. Within current scholarship, trauma has come to denote not only a personal psychological injury but also a collective condition experienced by a broader societal or cultural body. Institutional trauma, a subfield of trauma studies, has become well-known due to its interdisciplinary application in the fields of psychology, sociology, literary studies etc. It describes the psychological harm and emotional distress caused by institutions such as schools, hospitals, religious organisations or the State itself, through their practices and policies and even their failures and systemic neglect. The trauma inflicted by such spaces operates visibly through notions of control and punishment and invisibly leads to the internalisation of ideologies that sustain the perpetuation of inequality and dependence.

In the context of Wallace's play, the carceral setting becomes emblematic of the societal mechanisms of surveillance and domination which define the master-worker dynamic outside the prison. When seen through this lens, the prison becomes not merely a physically confining space but a microcosm of societal oppression, where the trauma of incarceration mirrors and reflects the psychological trauma inflicted by systemic marginalisation based on race and class.

The prison system, in theory, is seen as a setting that is designed to function as a site of moral and social reform. But in reality, it becomes a mechanism for surveillance and subjugation. In the play, Jamie reproaches Dee for remaining illiterate despite her nine years of incarceration, which underscores the institution's failure in offering true corrective measures or opportunities for personal change.

Drawing from Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon, Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, extends panopticism as a metaphor for the pervasive structures of societal surveillance and disciplinary power. In the play, the two instances of interaction with figures of authority, transform the guards into an embodiment of the systemic violence that Foucault associates with disciplinary

institutions. They personify structural and symbolic violence through their reinforcement of the hierarchies of power that deprive the prisoners such as Jamie and Dee of their dignity and agency.

The notion of the gaze operating as a disciplinary mechanism is a motif repeated throughout the play. Bullock in her article "The Masculine Gaze as Disciplinary Mechanism", explores the idea of the "gaze" in selected Japanese fiction with reference to women's bodies. The gaze operates as a disciplinary mechanism of surveillance that dictates and regulates their every action and movement, thus reinforcing Foucault's concept of panoptic control. The warning that Young Jamie gives to Young Dee, "But you got to use it right. Because whoever's gonna hire you, they gonna watch you. They watch to see if you love your work" (27) illuminates the internalisation of surveillance as a form of self-discipline. The dynamics of the relationship of employer-servant parallels the relationship of a prison guard-prisoner, in that, both are unequal power relations which are sustained through fear, punishment and silence. Belgin Bağlılar says "This is the reason why Dee and Jamie are seen as two 'docile bodies' who are ready to take every request of their boss and even be punished for their mistakes." (315) They are moulded into subjects who are conditioned to obey and who even accept punishment as an extension of their duty. Jamie and Dee embody this condition wherein their identities are moulded by institutional ideologies coupled with their economic precarity.

The first episode occurs in Scene Two, which involves the guard referred to as Old Mister Crackle repeatedly knocking down a bowl of hot chili from Young Jamie's hands. He repeats this action all the eight times that she picks up the bowl. The mechanical repetition of this act becomes indicative of Foucault's disciplinary process, wherein punishment becomes a form of training that conditions prisoners into internalising compliance. Through such acts of humiliation, the inmates are transformed into what Foucault terms as "docile bodies", referring to individuals who are conditioned to not resist authority, regardless of how arbitrary and degrading the latter's actions may be. We see this translated later into workplace abuse that Jamie and Dee suffer but are quite helpless to retaliate against.

Another such instance is in Scene Six of the play with the guard Monkfish, so called because of his foul odor, who perpetuates the cycle of dehumanisation in the prison through acts of violence and intimidation. Every morning Monkfish approaches Young Dee's table and drinks the juice allotted to her. Dee's act of urinating in the juice cup which she hands over to him is one of the isolated acts of retaliation in a world conditioning the inmates to servility.

Young Jamie's reflection, "I never been in the hole. Yet. But I been hit. Me and some girls once we sat up front at dinner time, at your table. Guards hit us on the back 'til we moved. We got worms in our bowls so fat we name 'em. You and your table get porridge thats clean." (Wallace 17) reveals the systemic inequalities embedded in the carceral

setting. The use of “the hole” as a threat functions as a disciplinary tool to ingrain and cultivate fear and helplessness as well as to ensure compliance and submission to the existing power hierarchies.

Through repetitive acts of domination and the constant presence of the threat of punishment, the prisoners internalise unquestioned and faithful obedience as a strategy of survival. The internalised warning that they “got to act right” (26) reflects the psychological conditioning that exists and extends beyond the physical space of the prison. Caruth discusses the repression and repetition associated with the incomprehensibility and belatedness of trauma, wherein trauma ceases to function merely as a consequential reaction. It simultaneously becomes a mode of survival and as she writes, “...trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience.”(58) The temporal intermingling of the past and the present in the play shows the convergence of carceral trauma and social violence with the struggle to survive and the necessity of endurance in an oppressive society. This paradox of traumatic survival is exemplified in the dialogues that become testimonies of the unspeakable. Dee telling Jamie, “We were happy when we were inside. Sometimes...We found a way to meet.”(32)demonstrates how their confinement becomes a space that provides intimacy and resilience. The prison space becomes a dual site of destruction and survival, a space where both women experience genuine connection, however ephemeral.

This paradox similarly echoes LaCapra's distinction between the 'acting out' and the 'working through' of trauma. The play's dramatic structure of blending the before-after and internal-external binary embodies the former notion of acting out, where trauma is not contained and returns to the forefront. Jamie and Dee are stuck in a repetitive loop of their traumatic wounds which resist confrontation and closure. However, Wallace also includes moments where a working through of trauma is seen and the psychological wound transforms into a site of recognition and resistance. Their recollection of happiness inside the prison in the aforementioned scene shows how trauma is transformed through a mutual understanding. Though the characters do not transcend their trauma completely, they do share brief moments of grace and solidarity that point towards a potential for healing and reconciliation with their loss of agency and individuality.

Wallace's narrative style portrays a seamless blending of political and poetic language, thus blurring the distance between rhetoric and affect. The text possesses profound moments of rupture where prose breaks into poetry, for instance, this particular episode in Scene Four, “YOUNG JAMIE: Get leftovers! YOUNG DEE: Get hand-me-downs! YOUNG JAMIE: Get anything they throw away! (She chants.) Ma'am... If you don't want

that thing no more, I'll take it home, 'cause I so poor. I'll take those socks, I can mend that hole, on that broke chair, I'll rest my bones. YOUNG DEE: (She chants.) I'll have that broken birthday toy. That rug with burns, it'll bring me joy. A piece of glass, Ma'am, I can use that too. A dress that's stained to me is new." (20). These moments of rupture embody the traditional interpretation of the inherent unrepresentability of trauma. Wallace frequently employs repetition as a narrative and stylistic strategy to mirror the psychological repetition inherent in traumatic experiences. For instance, the exchange, "JAMIE: I run and run and run and run. But I don't forget— DEE: —my bucket and brush. JAMIE: You never forget your bucket and brush." (15) represents the compulsive return of trauma. It suggests the degree and depth to which Jamie and Dee are stuck in a loop of verbal and psychological repetition of trauma. Trauma resists representation, especially through direct and conventional language. It evades conventional expression, thus revealing the failure of language to completely articulate traumatic experiences.

The structural and stylistic techniques that Wallace employs in the text, in a similar fashion, function as narrative strategies for the depiction of the fragmentation that characterises trauma. The temporal shifts between the past and the present of Jamie and Dee mirror the non-linear temporality of trauma. Thus, the form of the play itself embodies the psychological rupture it seeks to represent and underscores the narrative disruption that accompanies trauma.

Jamie and Dee's self-perception is shaped by their internalised social hierarchies, which leads them to perceive themselves as capable of being only servants and workers. They hold rehearsals, conduct mock-demonstrations and practise performances of servitude which are enactments that reinforce their oppression and subjugation. Young Jamie's declaration that "A good servant is always graceful." (29) and Young Dee's utterance that "We could be servants. We could be like Betty." (19), referencing her mother who was a parlourmaid, illustrates and reveals the limits of their aspiration that is a result of their traumatic self-imposition and the limited opportunities available to them. Their future is bound by their utter servility of the slave to the higher authority of the master and the only foreseeable future is that of continued subordination in this master/slave dialectic with no means of escaping the cycle.

The two characters transmit their traumatic lived experiences through performative gestures and rhythmic repetitions, thus embodying Taylor's notion of the 'repertoire' that "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing..." (20). Jamie and Dee's synchronised routines of practising servitude become re-enactments of their carceral trauma. These repetitive motions become constitutive of a living archive of learned submission and oppression that is remembered and performed through the body, thereby betraying the psychological and ideological conditioning that they have been subjected to.

Dee's unsettling dream where she confesses, "I fucked my mother" and proceeds to

describe it as, “In the dream I was sixteen again. I lay so close to her. It had nothin' to do with fuckin'. My mother, she was. Radiant. Her hands weren't broken. More than I did then, I miss her now.” (31) is a revelation of a longing for the absent maternal tenderness and safety in her life more than a transgression. Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, expands upon the idea of the return of the repressed, wherein the unconscious mind refashions trauma through displaced desire. Her yearning to see her radiant and unbroken mother points to her need for care and dignity that has been denied to her by both familial violence and systemic oppression. The recollection of her mother's violence which culminated in her act of murder in self-defence, exposes the nature of violence within patriarchal and economically marginalised spaces.

Similarly, Jamie's dream of her brother Marcel's death continues the pattern of mourning and longing. Both of their dreams of lost familial members foreground a collective trauma stemming from institutional neglect. It is only within the space offered by dreams and memories that their loss and desire can exist without surveillance and judgment. It provides a momentary reimagination of intimacy and kinship. Trauma must be looked at both individually and institutionally, particularly in this play, where it arises from the carceral and social systems that perpetuate and sustain such trauma.

Upon re-entering society after their prison sentence of nine years, the racial discrimination that was reflected within the institutional walls reasserts itself in full force. Their bond becomes socially unacceptable and even deviant in the public gaze, with the assumption being that the only relation they could have is that of a white master and black servant. The danger that Dee evokes through her sentence, “The four of us can't go out on the town. Too dangerous.” (25) echoes the grounded threat of racialised violence that colours their lived reality. Dee's whiteness grants her the white privilege of moving in the public space unmarked until and unless she is accompanied by Jamie. The latter's blackness transforms both women into violators and transgressors of the unofficially sanctioned social order.

Racial discrimination does not remain only as a superficial threat. The violence of the street scene of hostility, physical assault and bodily harm, “An orange crush bottle flying through the air. Then another 'cross my back. Guts from the butcher in your hair. Doors slamming behind us- (33) is filled with visceral and corporeal imagery. Jamie's endurance in her reply, “Quit your whinin'. Guts in my hair is nothing. Bottle 'cross my back is nothing. I walk the street alone to work I never know what's flying through the air. Piss pot from the second floor. Dog shit. People cursin' me, white people, your people, stick out a leg and trip me.” (33) points to how normalised this racial discrimination has become for people like them and has been accepted as a condition of existence. For Jamie, it is a triple oppression. Besides her class and gender, her race also becomes a factor of marginalisation within which her blackness itself becomes an indicator of criminality.

Trauma discourse, particularly within the dominant Western framework, has been

critiqued for overlooking racial and cultural differences of trauma and positioning white subjectivity as a universal and normative experience. Such privileging of trauma entails the risk of ignoring the intersectional dimensions of victimisation and its relationship to the ideological nexus of racism, colonialism and gender. Andermahr observes that, “rather than forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others, a narrowly Western canon of trauma literature has in effect emerged, one which privileges the suffering of white Europeans, and neglects the specificity of non-Western and minority cultural traumas.” (qtd. in Ahmed xvi)

Within this context, it becomes important to examine the theatrical works of playwrights such as Wallace and their exploration of trauma and whether their works unintentionally enable the continuation of the production and circulation of Western epistemic privilege by indirectly reproducing it through a literary erasure of institutional racism.

YOUNG JAMIE: I never been in the hole. Yet. But I been hit. Me and some girls once we sat up front at dinner time, at your table. Guards hit us on the back 'til we moved. We got worms in our bowls so fat we name 'em. You and your table get porridge thats clean. YOUNG DEE: Not my fault. YOUNG JAMIE: Maybe it is. (17). An analysis of this exchange highlights the necessity of tracing Jamie's condition back to the historical structures of slavery and colonialism. The hostile and volatile mechanisms of these systems are still active within ideologies and institutions that produce and perpetuate racism and trauma, and also reinscribe the subject as the architect of their own subjugation while ignoring the translation of trauma across histories and cultures as lived reality. The additional racial discrimination that Jamie has to suffer is rooted within the framework of racist hierarchies that are veiled under broad institutional failure.

Such a conceptualisation of institutional failure highlights Davis' notion of the prison as a racial institution. Davis argues that far from being a corrective facility for reformation of the inmates, the penal setup functions as an extension of the outside world. It does not exist in isolation and mirrors the racial and economic hierarchies in society. Her assertion that, “the prison functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn” (16) is exemplified through Jamie and Dee's inability to reintegrate into society post their release and their internalised reproduction of the social subjugation.

The trauma that they have had to suffer and endure is not random and episodic but systemic. Such a form of institutional trauma is embedded within the very social order within which they live. Their continuous state of fear and distress makes their moments of intimacy and vulnerability all the more raw and poignant

But all is not as dark as it seems. Wallace does not desert her characters as completely hopeless and helpless individuals. There are moments of resistance interspersed with

servility such as when Jamie declares, “No! That's the line. That's the line. You say 'No!' You say no.” (14) which becomes a powerful assertion of agency and identity. This refusal is a disruption in the normalcy of submission that has come to define their existence. This is their attempt to reclaim their fragmented sense of Self within an unequal and oppressive system that denies them their individuality.

Jamie and Dee's collective aspiration is simple, modest and rooted in the immediate necessities of survival and sustenance. Their shared fantasy of owning a “acabin with a porch”(4) is an imagined retreat and refuge from the deprivation and exploitation of the harsh world. This fantasy provides a brief momentary escape from the trauma that defines their reality. The simplicity of this fantasy underscores the limits imposed upon them by their social and economic conditions which make it difficult and nearly impossible to desire anything beyond matters of survival.

Both women try their utmost to protect and strive to shield each other from the harsh reality of the external world. Their relationship is grounded in mutual care and concern, offering comfort and consolation amidst their shared suffering. The complexity of their interracial relationship between a black and a white woman in 1950s America is not without its trials and tribulations.

Their theft of an “elegant knife” (52) is of rich symbolic significance. Beautiful and deadly, it becomes an instrument of death and escape. There is an intimacy in desire and an intimacy in death that bleeds forth from the pages during their suicide scene, with desire and destruction converging together. The paradox of the play is encapsulated in this scene, that is, true liberation and freedom are ultimately achieved not through the struggle for survival within oppressive structures but through the embrace of death. The Dickinsonian motif of symbolic death culminates in the physical death of the characters. As Cummings observes in *Embodied Theatre*, “By virtue of the murder/suicide that will end the play, Young Dee and Young Jamie are always already ghost girls, whether they know it or not.” (14). The characters inhabit a liminal space where trauma is embodied as a psychological as well as a performative state.

These profound moments exemplify Dolan's concept of the 'utopian performative' in theatre studies. They “describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.” (5) Wallace's prison drama, while firmly grounded in the harsh sociohistorical reality of 1950s America, simultaneously portrays emotional moments of transcendence that rupture the continuance of trauma, especially within an institutional framework designed to dehumanise them. Wallace dramatises Dolan's theorisation through such momentary suspensions of trauma that open up alternate modes of possibilities.

More than a representation of personal suffering, the play is also a reflection on the

historical and structural conditions that aid in the production of such suffering. The play makes visible the continuity of carceral confinement and the social death of docile subjects. This form of insidious trauma manifests itself as an oppressive force through discrimination and exclusion. Even after release, Jamie and Dee are bound by the logic of the prison, with their social exclusion and economic condition ensuring that it remains so. Thus, the narrative portrays the reinforcement and regeneration of trauma and its intrusion into memory and history, thereby giving rise to re-victimisation and a continuation of the cycle through which it sustains itself.

In conclusion, Wallace's play *And I and Silence* can be read as a gripping work on the traumatic relationship between individuals and institutions. The prison, as a physical place and a symbolic state, functions as a site of systemic trauma that manifests and reproduces the power structures and oppressive ideologies that exist beyond its walls. The play interrogates how institutional trauma inscribes itself into an individual's identity and consciousness and comes to shape their dreams, desires and fears. Jamie and Dee's tragic end calls for a restructuring of the institutions and ideologies that perpetuate and sustain trauma and suffering.

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Feminist Geographies and Nomadic Spaces : Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Gender and Space in *All We Imagine as Light*

Abstract

The conceptualization of space and its intrinsic link to the dynamics of gender has always been a subject of much speculation in cinema as well as in literature. The discourse of cinema being a “spatial system”, Shiel and Fitzmaurice argues that “it is spatiality what gives the medium a special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban societies.” (quoted in Mazumdar xxxv) The paper titled “Feminist Geographies and Nomadic Spaces: Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Gender and Space in All We Imagine as Light” attempts to study Payal Kapadia's movie, All We Imagine as Light in conjunction with Henri Lefebvre's notions of space, Rosi Braidotti's conception of nomadic subjectivities, mobility, interconnectedness and 'becomings' which further elaborates its investigations to Deleuzian and Guattarian formulations of smooth space and deterritorialization. The study seeks to analyse the ontologies of space with respect to the three major characters in the film, Prabha, Parvati and Anu. It also reads into the nomadic metaphysics of the film whereby the geographical spaces represented in it metamorphose into a smooth space characterized by flow, flux and dynamism. It further engages in active deliberations concerning the significance of fluid subjectivities in subverting the repressive, dominant regimes of patriarchal agencies represented in the film and provide nuanced insights into the changing dynamics of space and social relations occupying them. The paper, in addition draws on insights from various technicalities used in the film in augmenting and setting the mood for the creative transformation of its characters.

Keywords: Feminist geography, Flaneuse, Multiplicity, Deterritorialization, Smooth space/nomad space, Becomings, Nomadic subjectivities, Payal Kapadia, Cinematic Space, Mumbai.

The concept of fluid subjectivities proposed by theorists like Giles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Rosi Braidotti plays a pivotal role in feminist theory and praxis. The conceptualization of subjectivities in process, mediated by social relations and its vital relationship with the formulations of space has further been instrumental in causing a paradigm shift from the essentializing and totalizing tendencies of fixed identities/identities of 'being' to a process ontology of 'becoming'. The totalizing tendencies of earlier waves of feminisms has led to the formulation of feminist figurations like Helen Cixous' 'medusa', Luce Irigaray's 'goddess', Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' and so on. The figuration of the 'nomad', proposed by Rosi Braidotti, similarly is a remarkable example

of the “situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular” (Nomadic Subjects 4) which resists conforming to social codes and behaviours.

Influenced by the Deleuzian and Guattarian notions of the 'nomad', Braidotti's conceptualization of the nomad designate a subject in the process of becoming, one who has “relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity” (*Nomadic Subjects* 22). She further extends her theoretical formulation into Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'rhizome', a non-hegemonic conception of thought and behaviour, one that has immense possibilities for interconnectedness. Equally important in Braidotti's nomadic political project is the idea of nomadic space. Deleuze and Guattari in their work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, uses the notion of space to reconceptualize one's understanding of their position in the society. They differentiate between the nomadic order and the sedentary order. The sedentary order is characterized by clearly divided and demarcated spaces. The movement of people (migrants) across this order is defined by borders and boundaries. On the other hand, the nomadic order has no borders or spaces of exclusive ownership. The nomad who moves across the nomadic order does not associate or ascribe to particular identities. It is a subjectivity that is perpetually in the process of evolving, or, of becoming. Deleuze's conception of the 'becoming woman', says Braidotti, is “a way of moving beyond the dialectical antagonism between majority and minority, so as to arrive at a redefinition of human consciousness” (*Patterns* 108) into a “non-hegemonic form of consciousness” (*Patterns* 109) In the feminist praxis, the question of nomadism is also connected to the issues of mobility. Mobility in hegemonic discourses is a notion primarily attributed to men. On the other hand, the conception of the home, characterized by fixity, order, and patriarchal surveillance, is associated with women. In her conceptualization of the theory of nomadic feminism, Braidotti deliberately subverts this traditional order and appropriates the category of woman to that of the nomad.

Spatiality and its intrinsic relation to gender is a much-explored concept in literature, cinema as well as in the academia. Gendered spaces are usually oppressed spaces where women are often victimized to the repressive structures of patriarchy. Feminist Spatial studies in the field of literature and cinema have traced how spaces like kitchen and interiors of home becomes gendered and how women negotiate in these spaces. Despite the increasing presence of working women in public spaces, gendered spaces like kitchen, continues to be represented in cinema as women occupied spaces. Feminist scholarship around these “naturalized gender spaces” (Swami 163) represented in cinema, have addressed how patriarchy and its internalized forms stubbornly relegate women to indoors, to the roles of “mother goddess and as a sacrificing, desexualized care giver” (Viswamohan 4), how woman in public without any particular purpose is often seen as a transgressive woman, a “women of bazaar” (quoted in Mazumdar 81) and so on. Rather than locating and studying the formation of identities of women navigating these spaces, the scope of the paper lies in its understanding of space in terms of nomad space, and in its engagement with representations of women as subjectivities in process of

continual becoming.

Set in the busy streets of Mumbai and in the serene beaches of Ratnagiri, Payal Kapadia's movie *All We Imagine as Light* encapsulates how fluid subjectivities in nomadic mode characterized by its rhizomatic tendency to form multiple interconnections and assimilations, has helped women to overcome the dominant, repressive structures of patriarchal thought. The plot revolves around three women, two migrant nurses from Kerala, Prabha (played by Kani Kusruthi), Anu (Divya Prabha), and Parvati (Chaya Kadam) who had migrated to Mumbai from her native village Ratnagiri. The film skilfully blends together the vicissitudes of life, particularly of the lower middleclass people, the histories of people's migrations from many areas like Ratnagiri to Mumbai, the politics of eviction, dispossession of land and property, the growing capitalism and its burden on the poor hinting the cotton mills strike and union militancy that occurred in Mumbai around the 1980s and so on. Beginning with what probably seems like an early morning view of the deserted city market with street vendors bringing in goods and getting ready for the day and slowly shifting to visuals of a busy city life, its dockyards, traffic, railway station and vegetable markets where people are working and sleeping, it captures a vivid picture of the din and bustle of Mumbai city blending into a cacophony of sounds.

Kapadia's ingenious use of extradiegetic voices in the introductory scenes, evocative of documentary films, a strategy achieved by filmmakers by the deliberate decentralization of the notion of 'I' and "refusing individual identity" (Kaplan E 16), in addition to giving a realistic touch to the film, greatly augment in accentuating the significance of micronarratives in voicing a collective, shared history. Further, other cinematic techniques like mobile framing, fast-track shots of the cityscapes, the strikingly visible low-key lighting and chiaroscuro of blue colour coupled with charm of Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou's *The Homeless Wanderer* and the unsettling and overlapping sound effects of moving vehicles, trains, processions, celebrations and people, serves as an appropriate thematic setting for most of the city sequences in the film.

Though the film gives a great deal of importance to representation of spaces and how they are closely knit with the people who inhabit them, the plot revolves around three women Prabha, Anu and Parvati and their struggles in life. As made clear through Prabha's narration, she was married to a total stranger who left for Germany a few days after their marriage. Parvati lives under the constant fear of being evicted from her home she has been living for twenty-two years. The lived space of Mumbai for them is quite evidently constituted by what Doreen Massey calls 'social interactions', that has a pivotal role in transforming the lived space into sites of power, resistance and meaning. She remarks, "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." (Massey 154) Prabha, Parvati and Anu came to

112 Mumbai as migrant workers in search of work and money. Unlike Prabha and Parvati for

whom Mumbai becomes a means of survival, Anu's relation to Mumbai is that of a newfound land of freedom. As Kapadia remarks in one of her interviews, "Mumbai has that quality of allowing some kind of anonymity and freedom that a lot of women in India do not enjoy" (Asia Society 00:01:54-00:02:06) For the character of Anu, she continues, "it is a place of liberation" where she "have this sense of delight for everyday things about Mumbai like going to Mohammed Ali Road to eat kababs and things like that." (Asia Society 00:01:37-00:01:55)

Prabha and Parvati's intervention with public spaces are limited to systems of public transport which they use for commutation. As Gardner remarks, "for women, public spaces are transit ways to other regions, not of loci of interest in themselves" (quoted in Raju and Paul 128). Other than the hospital they work, the lawyer's office and the Girangaon workers meeting they attended, the only public spaces where the spectators find Parvati and Prabha are suburban railway stations, local trains and other public transport systems like buses. The only instance where we find Prabha in a public space in Mumbai is the park, where she is accompanied by a male companion. Their self-imposed inaccessibility to public spaces is further evident in the scene where Prabha and Parvati dine at a public restaurant. Parvati says, "All these years I walked past this place, but I've never eaten here. Today I've done it. (*All We Imagine* 00:59:44- 00:59:51) Both of them seem to condone to Paul Ranade's interpretation that "women can access public spaces legitimately only when they can manufacture a sense of purpose for being there and adhere to appropriate behaviour" (quoted in Raju and Paul 128)

However, unlike them, Anu mostly takes detours from her way home after work to meet her lover Shiaz. Not much bothered about other's opinions about her, she loves exploring the streets of Mumbai with Shiaz. Coming from a conventional household with her parents' constant compulsion to get married, Mumbai becomes a free space for Anu. Both Shiaz and Anu finds the streets of Mumbai exhilarating. As Shiaz says, "Evening is my favourite time of day. In my village, this was the time to stop playing football and go home. But here, it feels like the day has just begun." (*All We Imagine* 00:40:24- 00:40:40) For Anu, parking lots, parks and public transport systems becomes spaces that cater to Hannah Arendt's conception of public space as places of "freedom, motion, relationships, plurality and unpredictability." (Teerds 771) However, contrary to the city spaces of Mumbai, Parvati's village becomes a space where all of them experience a greater sense of freedom and mobility. Anu, Prabha and Parvati are frequently seen hanging out in a diner by the beachside conversing deeply about the concerns regarding their individual lives.

The difference in perception of these two spaces may be primarily due to the difference in the level of freedom and accessibility they seem to offer. As Raju and Paul has noted, "City has been primarily perceived as a male space in which women and other underprivileged social groups and minorities have survived in its interstices in their own particular way. (128) As narrated in the very beginning of the film by an extradiegetic

narrator, “I’ve lived here maybe 23 years. But I feel afraid to call it home. There is always the feeling I’ll have to leave” (*All We Imagine* 00:02:46-00:02:56), there is a looming sense of non-belongingness Prabha and Parvati feels about the city. The impending threat of eviction from her home due to lack of proper documents makes Parvati feel “like this place isn’t real... You could just vanish into thin air, and no one would even know” (*All We Imagine* 01:00:05- 01:00:20) Prabha’s conception of the city space is constituted by Henry Lefebvre’s notion of lived space, a space materialized out of social relations. She cares deeply for Parvati and Anu and helps Parvati in her efforts to reclaim her home. Both Prabha and Anu accompany her when she shifts to her village later. The sense of friendship and bonding existing between them helps them to survive in an unknown place. The “geography of social relations” (Massey 155) Kapadia paints here contribute to Massey’s conceptualization of place as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ not restricted by boundaries but positively linked to a consciousness of the wider world” (154). Hence, adds Massey,

If places can be conceptualised in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes. ...places are processes, too.... clearly places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts (Massey 155)

The ephemerality/non fixity of everything is further asserted in another extradiegetic voice in the narration “The city takes time away from you. That’s life. You better get used to impermanence.” (*All We Imagine* 00:05:23- 00:05:39) Thus, space construed as a process or as a process of continual transformation, becomes profoundly interconnected to the fluid subjectivities inhabiting them. The perceived space/city of Mumbai thus becomes a lived space constituted with meanings, fluid relations, multiplicity and interconnectedness.

Kapadia’s portrayal of the interconnectedness and bonding between women is remarkably shot in the scene inside the ladies’ compartment of the train where women from different backgrounds and social circles intermingle and chat, eagerly listen to one another, do their household chores, listen to music, sleep and so on. This ‘elysian’ microcosm where women are enjoying their leisure time seems to be a reality that is only possible in a place dedicated to them alone. These transient spaces are spaces of ‘becomings’ where multiple subjectivities coexist together in an “emphatic proximity” (*Nomadic Subjects* 4) of nomadic becoming, unperturbed and away from the capillary structures of power. These spaces, which Deleuze and Guattari identifies as nomad space/smooth space is a space where subjectivities coexist as “a rhizome” which is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification.” (1) To elaborate, in a smooth space the subjectivities exist in a constant process of becoming, as a nomadic subject who Braidotti characterizes as one who resist settling into the sedentary, hegemonic metaphysics of patriarchal thought. The

shared lived experiences of the three women are itself sources of knowledge which plays an indispensable role in helping them transcend the static domesticity and fixed identities attributed to them.

Though Anu and Parvati could be conceived as nomadic subjects, Prabha's character is caught up in the moral constraints of the society and deeply adhered to its traditional values. As a married woman, she remains 'faithful' to her long-gone husband and restrain herself from advancing any relationship with Dr. Manoj. She also finds it very difficult to put up with Anu's relationship with Shiaz. Even though it is obvious from the scene where she hugs the rice cooker sent by her husband that she yearns for some sort of physical intimacy, she hesitates to move on from her lonely present. However, the character of Prabha undergoes a creative transformation towards the end of the movie. In her skilful employment of magical realist techniques, Kapadia envisages the perfect mise-en-scene for Prabha's transformation. The film interweaves elements of fantasy and illusion in the particular scene where Prabha rescues an unknown man who has apparently drowned in the sea. As apparent from their initial conversations that Prabha has never met the man she rescued, as the plot unfolds lines between reality and illusion are blurred and the man emerges as Prabha's presumably 'gone husband'. In the conversations that follows, he explains the reasons for his absence which has striking resemblances with the conversation Prabha had with Anu earlier about her assumptions regarding the same. In other words, the presumed 'husband's' reasons for his absence are only Prabha's speculations and the spectator has enough evidences to substantiate the illusory nature of the scene. In addition, the long pause between them after Prabha's remark, "You don't remember?" (*All We Imagine* 01:40:44-01:40:45) gives her ample time to deterritorialize into the character of his wife and confront her own suppressed emotions: "You've changed so much in all these years" (*All We Imagine* 01:41:44-01:41:46). The stranger's response "Have I?" (*All We Imagine* 01:41:52) followed by his gradual shifting to the husband's character marks the film's digression into a magical realist framework. In the scene that follows, Prabha breaks herself free from her past life by rejecting him when he asked if she would go with him. These nomadic shifts, where identities become fluid and superimpose, according to Braidotti, depicts a "creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (*Nomadic Subjects* 6) which ultimately bring about the creative transformation of the subject. This renewed sense of Prabha's subjectivity, one that is "reclaimed from a history of multiple assimilations" (de Lauretis 9) acts as a "living map, a transformative account of the self." (*Nomadic Theory* 14) The close-up shot of Prabha looking at the sea, smiling and asking Anu to bring Shiaz along with her signify the nomadic consciousness unfolding in her. When Prabha remarks at the end of the film "It's very beautiful here too" (*All We Imagine* 01:50:32-01:50:34), the spectators once again find Prabha looking towards the sea and smiling, appropriating that space and its surroundings as a nomadic smooth space characterized by multitudinous potential for transformations. As Caren Kaplan in her essay "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of

Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse” posits, “Her new view of her past and her life has to contain all of these ages and kinds of knowledge. They become materials... to discover and use, stories to listen to again, photographs to review, landscape to rewrite.” (196) She adds, “What we gain is a reterritorialization; we reinhabit a world of our making (here “our” is expanded to a coalition of identities - neither universal nor particular).” (195). In her careful “mapping (of) emergent subjects” (Blaagaard and Tuin 151), Kapadia herself becomes what Baudelaire calls a “perfect flâneur” or “the passionate spectator” whose element is the crowd, setting her story “in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement” (quoted in Gangopadhyay 91)

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(In)fidelities in Film Adaptations : The Case of Intertextuality

Abstract

This paper will argue that the failure of fidelity in adaptations will result in intertextuality and thus adaptation will result in the production of a novel cultural text which eschews all fidelity concerns by not delimiting the borders of the texts involved. Fidelity criticism holds a romantic notion on the meaning arrived in the adaptation of films. Intertextuality within the framework of adaptation studies appears as an alternative to the argument that a work should remain completely faithful to its source work. Adaptations can be read as a practice of intertextuality, contributing to an interpretative and reciprocal exchange in which the texts involved get transformed. The intertextuality involved in adaptation includes all the source materials, the dynamic, cultural, and discursive forces at play, the multiple literary influences, production factors, cultural milieu and the reception of the audience. The failure of fidelity opens a rich intertextual space for the adapted text and consequently in adaptation, intertextuality is presented as an alternative to fidelity criticism. By tracing the intellectual legacy of intertextuality and the major concerns of adaptation studies, the paper will position intertextuality within the circuit of adaptation by examining the first novel and film in the Harry Potter series (Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone) and will problematize the dialogic possibilities of the two perspectives when juxtaposed together.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Adaptation, Fidelity, Text

The paper argues that every text is an intertextual site that offers scope for numerous readings and this rejects claims of fidelities in the adaptation of texts into other forms. Fidelity criticism appraises adaptations by privileging the source text or the original as the superior work in the adaptation process by limiting the adapted work. The degree of faithfulness of adaptations is analyzed on the basis of elements like narrative, characters and themes which primarily assumes the source text as a fixed category incapable of other possibilities. Adapted works can be considered as self-contained works which can be appreciated only in an intertextual perspective that broadens the textual and cultural engagements of the source text.

The notion of the text has always been a point of discussion in the humanities where the recent theoretical speculations envisage text and textuality as sites of conflicts, contestations and intersectionality. The emergence of post structuralism eschewed the notions of the text as an autonomous, self-contained artefact and dismissed all practices

that failed to consider history, biography, politics and other extra textual features ancillary to a text or reading a text. Prior to poststructuralism, the text had an existence separable from the author and various other cultural factors and consequently the post structuralist theories challenged the autonomous nature of the text. The text was proved to be in a labyrinth of various social, cultural, historical and textual forces and this shift from an autonomous text to one that contains multiple intersecting points to other texts, culture, history etc. is mirrored by a critical shift from mere influence in the process of creation to the legitimate practice and theory of intertextuality.

The work of Ferdinand de Saussure in twentieth century linguistics is seen as the inception point of intertextuality. The traditional views on language emphasized on the arbitrary nature of communication using language. Saussure emphasized the relationality of meanings which greatly depended on the numerous combinations and associations within the differential system of language itself. The linguistic sign after Saussure's theoretical advancement is non-stable, non-unitary and relational. It leads the reader to a complex web of potential relations, of resemblances and contrasts and this is very much true in the context of the literary language too. Thus, the writers of literature choose words from a wide variety of language system, they select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating etc. from various cultural texts including literary works. Such recognitions demand a reconsideration of the nature of literary works themselves. The literary work is no longer seen as the creation of the author's genius or superior capacities. It is seen as a space in which numerous potential relations intersect and produce meanings.

The Russian theoretician, Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories become a significant phase in the development of the concept Intertextuality. Unlike the formalists and theories of Saussure, Bakhtin posits that language prevails in specific socially situated contexts. Language or utterances in a social dimension mirrors the class, national, institutional and even interests of specific groups. Words are relational for Bakhtin for its social situatedness. Bakhtin eschewed the monologic nature of the language and introduced his concept of 'dialogism' (Nayar 21-23).

Dialogism, as conceived by Bakhtin is the fundamental aspect of language. The other concepts introduced by Bakhtin like 'polyphony', 'heteroglossia', 'doublevoiced discourse' and 'hybridization' contribute to the understanding of the term dialogism. Polyphony which literally means the juxtaposition and combination of varied parts or elements, or voices was used by Bakhtin in his analysis of Dostoevsky's novels. The polyphonic novel presents the world within the fluidity of discourses as no individual discourse can completely replace another discourse though all discourses are interpretations and responses to different discourses. His concept of the 'double voiced discourse' states that all voices are double voices. In all of these voices there is a contest and conflict for ideological, class and literary positions. Bakhtin's concept of

'heteroglossia' elucidates the point that there is a confrontation of ideologies within individual utterances and even the same word in the case of polyphonic novels. Bakhtin argues thus: it serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously, two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourses there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions (qtd. in Allen 29).

Bakhtin's works question any singular, authoritarian and hierarchical conceptualization of all artistic expressions and living. This perspective of society and appreciation of art forms the basis of the term 'Intertextuality' which Kristeva formalizes as part of her studies of Bakhtin.

Julia Kristeva who is credited with coining the term intertextuality and conceptualizing the theory of Intertextuality grew into prominence in the 1960's, a time when Post structuralism emerged into the literary scenario, focusing on the theory of the text and textuality. In her writings, Kristeva focused on the mode in which a text is constructed from a myriad set of discourses and from texts of the past. Kristeva explains a text is: "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (qtd. in Allen 36). Each text presents society's confrontations and negotiations for the meaning of words. Kristeva incorporates Bakhtin's dialogism and the polyphonic nature of words and language into her academic pursuits.

Heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva later remodeled many of the concepts of Lacan. According to Kristeva the concept of the symbolic and the semiotic, in every text follow the same kind of movement between the symbolic and semantic fields. Kristeva in order to articulate the fragmented nature of texts introduces two new terms: 'phenotext' and 'geno text'. Kristeva explains that the 'phenotext' is the part of language bound up with communication and 'geno text' the part of the text which originates from the driving energy from the unconscious and which is recognizable in terms of 'phonematic devices' such as rhythm and intonation, melody, repetition and even kinds of narrative arrangement (Allen 50).

In the writings of Kristeva, Intertextuality is conceived as the pathway from one sign system to a different sign system. Kristeva in order to dismantle the notion of intertextuality getting equated to the traditional notions of influence and origin, coined a new term 'transposition'. Transposition, according to Kristeva is concerned with pre-existent signifying practices (Allen 54). Throughout her works, Kristeva merges and places Bakhtin's concepts in her primary interest-Psychoanalysis. All these events in theory set the stage for Roland Barthes and his conceptualizations.

Roland Barthes is widely recognized as the most articulate of all writers on the fluidity and openness of texts and hence, the theory of Intertextuality. Barthes describes this

theory about the text and intertextuality thus:

woven entirely with citations references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is no?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through is a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation: the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas. (qtd. in Allen 69)

Barthes theory of the text also contains a conceptualization of Intertextuality. Graham Allen comments on Barthes thus:

The theory of the text involves a theory of intertextuality, since the text not only sets going a plurality of meanings but is also woven out of numerous discourses and spun from an already existent meaning. The texts plurality is neither wholly an 'inside' nor an 'outside', since the text in itself is not a unified, isolated object upon which an 'inside' and 'outside' can be fixed (Allen 67).

Barthes theory of 'the death of the author', is one of the most widely known features of Intertextuality. Barthes argues that the beginning of texts is not in a singular and unified source but in an entity that is plural and that comprises of utterances and words which are essentially diverse and homogenous.

The author does not produce a single theological meaning, but rather assembles and compiles the always already spoken, written and read into a polyphonic space in which writings of varied nature combine and contest (Abrams 15). The text for Barthes is a tissue of quotations drawn from numerous points of culture. A text is an outcome of multiple writings borrowed from heterogeneous cultures; it involves a space of parodying and contestations. It's important to discuss the concepts of denotation and connotation here. Connotation includes 'secondary meaning' which are the intertextual connections of the text. Connotation is a way of recording a text's intertextual meaning. Each connotation is the beginning point of a code and the codes should be decoded to reach the interwoven meanings in the text (Abrams 46-47).

In Barthes, Intertextuality is an important term for describing the plurality of texts and is an important term for describing the works of those writers who eschew the notions of a work which is unified. Intertextuality in Barthes is a way of resisting and challenging the beliefs and forms of that culture, emphasizing the 'doxa' over the 'paradoxa' (Allen 90). Barthes articulates the theory of textuality and intertextuality and his works constantly seeks new ways of countering the 'doxa' and unleashing the plurality of texts.

Post structuralist's interpretations of intertextuality of the 1960's was later explored by

theorists with a structuralist orientation. The structuralist project developed by Gerard Genette focused on the ways in which texts operate within a system. Genette also considers how meanings are generated by cultural practices, rituals and codes. The structuralist's too deny the presence of the existence of singular meanings and emphasizes on their relationality. Genette proposed his concept of transtextuality at this juncture (Nayar 30).

The rise of Postmodernism questioned and subverted the hitherto prevalent assumptions of the real/reality. It can be argued that intertextual codes dominate because of a loss of the real. The postmodern phase of intertextuality extends its discussions to other cultural productions too and is evident in discussions of painting, cinema, music, photography, architecture and all other cultural productions. For example, modernist painting in its parody of various styles and models is rich in intertextual expressions.

Victor Taylor and Charles E. Winquist in the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* defines intertextuality thus: "The term intertextuality refers to both a method of reading that juxtaposes texts in order to discover points of similarities and differences as well as the belief all texts and ideas are part and parcel of a fabric of historical, social, ideological, and textual relations" (190). Many theorists who explored the relationship between intertextuality and postmodernism argued that postmodern literature is essentially double coded. For Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern theorist, parody the postmodern device is a mode of Intertextuality. Linda Hutcheon in her analysis of postmodern literature has coined the term 'Historiographic Metafiction' to refer to the category of novel that combine references, forms and codes to historically diverse textual traditions and texts. In these kinds of novels, history is used as an intertextual source and it becomes an important part in fiction's ambiguous questioning of the available forms of representation. Works of historiographic metafiction of authors such as Salman Rushdie and John Fowles incorporate events and ideas from history, theoretical ideas of the times and even explain the various aspects of the society in which the novel is set (Allen 190-191).

The emergence of the computer and the internet brought out further changes in the theory of intertextuality. One feature of the computer technologies is its greater capacity for connectivity than the print sources. The new computer-generated technologies seem to significantly demonstrate the critiques of the text as an autonomous entity. Theorists like Ladow have stated that the new computer systems generate a textuality that is an intertextual phenomenon and can be referred to as hypertextuality (Allen 201). The use of AI tools in adaptation with the augmented analytical and generative powers allows scope for a wide range of sources from where adaptation can be created by embedding multiple and complex layers of references and roots.

In cinema, discussions of intertextuality have explored into other artistic boundaries like literature. From its outset, cinema has always depended on literary texts to give it cultural value. Cinema can be direct intertextual expressions as in the case of adaptations

of literary works and many discussions on cinema reflect the manner in which literary cultures are transposed in the medium of cinema and it becomes significant to analyze intertextuality in the context of adaptation studies.

Adaptation is a process that involves transition from a genre to another genre: novel into films, drama into musical films or videogames and dramatization of prose narratives and prose fiction. Film adaptations from literary texts have a long tradition. Cinematic adaptations of the Bible were the earliest in Literary adaptations. A literary adaptation is a new story with strong affinities to the original. Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation* defines Adaptation thus:

Adaptation can be a transposition practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of revision itself. It can parallel editorial practice in some respects, indulging in the exercise of trimming and pruning; yet it can also be an amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion and interpolation (18).

All literatures mainly English, German, Russian, American, French and even Japanese were adapted into different forms and the work of classic novelists are adapted into films more than once. The works of EM Forster, Henry James, William Makepeace Thackeray, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and Henry Fielding were the most adapted ones in the Pre Modern period. Among the writers of the modern age, Graham Greene's works are the most adapted. Novels of DH Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Christopher Hampton and Somerset Maugham were the most adapted in the modern era. In the genre of children's literature, *The Lord of the Rings* series is a popular adaptation. The earliest adaptations were from the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Emile Zola and Pushkin. The sheer length of the works of these writers made a complete adaptation impossible and as a result scenes were adapted, than squeezing the whole plot into the movie. The emergence of novel and sophisticated technology replaced the fixed camera by the 1910's and gave the film maker more confidence and freedom and as a result, adaptations grew into popularity.

Susan Hayward in her seminal work *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* comments on the unique contribution of Adaptations into Film. According to her: "Literary adaptations gave cinema the respectable cachet of entertainment as art" (12). Generally, adaptations are done with works that can easily be tempered. Works which are also underdeveloped and independent in the original form can be easily adapted. Mostly adaptations are common in literary genres such as gangster fiction, thrillers or science fiction and the reason may be their marginality in the canon and most importantly their casual attitude towards even serious infidelities.

The various types of Adaptation as illustrated by Susan Hayward suggests three types of adaptations:

first the more traditionally connoted notion of adaptation, the literary classic; second, adaptations of plays to screen and finally the adaptation of contemporary texts not yet determined as classics and possibly bound to remain within the canon of popular fiction. Of these three, arguably it is the second that remains the most faithful to the original. (12)

Fidelity is a major issue in adaptation. Though dismantled as a romantic view, fidelity is undermined or ignored by economic or other concerns. It is also the most important tool in evaluating adaptations. Graham Petrie in *The Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film Studies* suggests the following areas to be probed while dealing with fidelity:

To what extent can a film be faithful to its original source.? Which aspects of literary or theatrical techniques are compatible to the film medium and which cannot be successfully transferred? Does it matter if the filmmaker changes the original almost completely and yet comes up with a cinematic masterpiece in its own right? Should a film adaptation always have to justify itself in terms of its closeness to literary original or can the two be accepted and judged independently. (37)

There are many problems involved in adaptation. Every novel or short story cannot be filmed or remade according to literary conventions. If this has to be done, many subtractions and additions have to be made. In the normal case there is an elimination of dialogues, subplots and even minor characters (Petrie 39).

To illustrate the above arguments, the paper shall discuss the first novel in the Harry Potter Series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The title of the novel was altered into 'sorcerer's stone' instead of 'philosophers stone'. Commenting on this Deborah Carmell and Imelda Wheele in their article *Harry Potter and the Fidelity Debate* have argued that: "Undoubtedly the announcement of the Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone- controversially philosopher was changed to sorcerer in order to accommodate the American audience –boosted the sales of the book" (38). Here one can deduce, the compromise the film crew has employed in the process of adaptation which was chiefly done to boost the spectatorship of the film.

The first chapter in the novel 'The Boy who lived' is omitted in the film. The film commences with Dumbeldore, Macgonalland also Hagrid who brings little Harry to Private Drive. The other minor characters like Piers Polkiss are also omitted in the adaptation. Many dialogues are added and omitted in the film. After the shopping at Diagon Alley, Harry as narrated in the film is having a tough time with the Dursleys at home. The film bears no similarity with the novel here. On the day of departure to Hogwarts, it is narrated that Harry woke up at 5 in the morning and is dumped at Kings Cross by 10 by uncle Vernon. As narrated in the novel, the film doesn't show the passenger filled carriages or Neville, the round-faced boy who was running after a toad. Instead, the

film directly takes the viewer into the train, where Harry is joined by Neville and later by Hermione.

The sorting hat ceremony is altered in the process of adaptation. The song that the sorting hat sings, as narrated in the novel is omitted in the film (Rowling 88). Immediately after the midnight duel, the novel in the next chapters details the arrival of Nimbus 2000. But the film gets altered here and takes the viewer to the meeting between Harry and Wood, where Wood explains to Harry about the game, Quidditch. The book narrates that it was Parvathy Patel's conversation with Lavender that informed Harry and Ron that their friend was in danger. The film shows Neville as the informant. As against the narrative of the novel, the Quidditch game is altered from a traditional stadium to an open field surrounded by spectator towers.

Unlike the narrative of the novel, the film depicts the scene in which Harry receives the broom, only after the encounter with the troll. The film omits the letter which depicts McGonall as the sender of the broom. Instead, the film focuses on the scene in which McGonall nods her head. The film also omits a scene in which Harry is insulted by Malfoy. Malfoy explains in the novel: "I do feel so sorry....for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they are not wanted at home" (143). Instead, the film focuses on the Christmas holidays where both Harry and Ron explore the restricted section. Harry, Neville and Hermione get detention along with Malfoy. But the narrative of the film depicts Ron with the other three in detention and the chapter 'Forbidden Forest' is also altered in the film. The characters of Ronan, the centaur and Peeves the poltergeist are omitted in the film. The last scene omits and alters many incidents from the novel of which the prominent being the conversation between Hagrid and Harry.

In contrast to the narrative of the novel, the film ends with Hagrid waving goodbye to Harry at the railway station, and Hagrid moving in the opposite direction. In this context, Graham Petrie has argued that:

The most difficult task for the film maker is probably to take a classic or currently popular work and present it in a way that avoids alienating those who have a commitment to their own interpretation of the original while simultaneously producing something that works as a film in its own right. (36)

To sum up it can be argued that the film has failed to stay committed in fidelity. Intertextuality operates throughout the film, though an adapted text is something not to be reproduced but rather something to be interpreted and recreated in a new medium through borrowing, intersecting and transforming from the source texts. The commitment towards the source text is a primary expectation of the audience and alterations are considered to be aberrations for the audience which may even erupt in an aggressive mode in some quarters. So, it is the choice of the filmmaker to maintain the different types of

narrative, character, thematic and aesthetic fidelity, though an absolute replica or faithfulness of the source text remains as an impossibility.

Adaptations can be read as an intertextual practice, contributing to an interpretative and dynamic exchange in which both the texts get impacted upon. Intertextuality in adaptation involves all the source materials, the dynamic, cultural, and discursive forces at play, the multiple literary influences, production factors, cultural milieu and the reception of the audience. Thus, infidelity opens a rich intertextual space for the adapted text increasing the discursive possibilities of adaptation.

In the contemporary scenario of posthuman authorship, where the categories author and authorship remain contested categories, romantic and traditional notions of creativity and originality as emphasized by fidelity theories become extraneous citing human and machine collaborations which is devoid of any fixed or stable anchorages of meaning. In the age of artificial intelligence, fidelity concerns cannot be fully addressed but can find near solutions owing to the augmented analytical and generative powers that AI delivers. AI tools can enhance visual and stylistic fidelity and stay close to the aesthetics of the original but it raises concerns over author and authorship as both human and machine involvement can produce hybrid films which can essentially validate the pervasive presence of intertextuality. Thus, infidelity becomes the catalyst of intertextuality in adaptation which recognizes adaptations as complex processes that are shaped by contesting and conflicting artistic, social and technological forces.

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Reframing Motherhood : Contemporary Shifts in Power, Identity and Care

Abstract

*Contemporary texts by women writers attempt to deconstruct the archetypal images of womanhood and motherhood by bringing into the realms of discourses those aspects associated with the lives of women which are considered taboo in a conventional patriarchal society. These texts pinnacle the stereotypical norms that carve out an elevated position for the menfolk by subduing the viability of women who are conditioned to serve the patriarchal institutions. Accordingly, this paper examines how contemporary women writers deconstruct dominant patriarchal constructions of womanhood and motherhood by foregrounding experiences traditionally deemed inappropriate for public discourse. The study addresses how the literary representations of motherhood critique and challenge the socio-political ideologies that dictate gender norms. Drawing on feminist and social-constructionist perspectives, the paper undertakes a critical textual analysis of texts such as *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2008) by the British writer Rachel Cusk and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) by the Indian writer Kavita Kaneto uncover the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalent attitudes women express toward motherhood. By highlighting these nuanced experiences, the paper demonstrates the significance of contemporary women's writing in challenging conventional norms and reclaiming maternal subjectivity from patriarchal frameworks.*

Keywords: motherhood, ideologies, patriarchy, conventions

The concept of motherhood, which has evolved alongside the development of human society, has continually been shaped by shifting social, cultural, and political forces. These forces, informed by dominant ideologies at different historical moments, have repeatedly redefined the meanings and expectations associated with maternal roles. As a distinct interdisciplinary field, motherhood studies that emerged in the late twentieth century presents the varied experiences, representations, and implications of motherhood. Its evolution has been influenced by multiple theoretical frameworks, including feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial studies, each interrogating and destabilizing traditional doctrines of motherhood. Key scholars such as Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Andrea O'Reilly have significantly contributed to reconceptualising motherhood as an institution that is moulded and often constrained by patriarchal power structures. Their interventions have foregrounded the role of intersectionality in shaping how maternal responsibilities are accepted, negotiated, and enacted. Within this context, the present study examines how

contemporary women writers deconstruct archetypal images of womanhood and motherhood in order to illuminate the complexities, contradictions, and socio-political pressures that structure maternal experience.

Building on these theoretical foundations, contemporary fictional and nonfictional texts critically engage with and dismantle conventional images of maternal identity. These works expose gendered socio-political ideologies that enforce behavioural norms and uphold male privilege while restricting women's autonomy. In contrast to traditional depictions that idealise women while simultaneously confining them to their biological functions, contemporary women writers present diverse and multifaceted maternal experiences, thereby asserting identities that resist patriarchal definitions of womanhood and motherhood.

American writer and feminist, Adrienne Cecile Rich's landmark text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) boldly investigates the practice and experience of motherhood based on conversance, historical texts, and research. Rich examines motherhood as embedded in the politics of patriarchy which promotes the activities of motherhood as a conventional practice that is too old to be debated. This notion of motherhood that is imposed on women by religion and culture, expects women to bear the cross sans confrontations and revelations that may expose an alternate attitude to the approach to motherhood. The institutionalised notion that intensifies the belief that women's sole gratification lies in the process of conceiving, bearing, birthing and nurturing children is accosted by women who dare to reconsider and deconstruct the institutionalised aspects of womanhood. However, moving against the currents leads to blasphemy and judgements in a society that glorifies mothers as goddesses with super-human potential to predict and satisfy the physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional needs of children. The writer and historian Sarah Knott in her book *Mother: An Unconventional History* (2019) dives into the multifaceted representations and experiences of motherhood by illustrating the changing contours of motherhood through history. She states, "Mothering an infant is not a fixed state. Physical, yes. Visceral, yes, enormously so. Biological, universal, unchanging, merely natural: not so much. If so, grasping what mothering has been means getting plural and specific, exploring its immense variety" (xiv). Manon Garcia in the text *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* (2021) projects the expectations and attitude of society towards women as wives and mothers:

To be a woman is therefore to be in a certain economic, social, and political situation. This situation implies a set of norms according to which women are conditioned to behave and on the basis of which they are judged. To be a woman, a 'real' woman, implies conforming to these norms. And in the same way, one questions the nature of a tool when it stops working, a woman's femininity starts being questioned when a gap

appears between her behaviour and the behaviour that is socially prescribed to her. (67)

Historical evidence based on written texts reveals the co-existence of those practices that are based on the institutionalised internalisation of motherhood and the experiences of the same that invoke a sense of ambivalence in women. The British psychotherapist, art historian and writer Roziska Parker in her book *Mother Love/ Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (1995) defines it as the “experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side” (1). While several works glorify womanhood and motherhood, some texts unmask the predetermined constructs of these identities by giving vent to the marginalised and silenced attributes of motherhood. *The Mother Knot* (1976) by Jane Lazarre is one of the earlier writings on motherhood which exposes the maternal ambivalence of the narrator who struggles to reclaim her individuality that is lost in the transition from a woman to a mother. On recognizing the unalterable transition that she undergoes on becoming a mother, Lazzare pronounces aloud, “I am a different person” (7) which indicates her detachment from her earlier life and her struggle to reconnect to her earlier identity of an independent woman. Prior to this text, Edith Wharton published *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) in which she pictures a woman who appears to be a misfit in her identity as a mother as she jilts her young daughter to accompany her lover to Europe. Jacqueline Rose in her critical work, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2019) states that the protagonist of *The Mother's Recompense* forsakes her maternal life to be free of the demands of “so-called normal family” (99) which binds her to domesticity. The predicament of women, especially mothers in a conventional patriarchal society that refuses to acknowledge the subjectivity of women as depicted in the earlier works continues even in the twenty-first century despite the remarkable contributions made by discourses and feminist studies to liberate women from the limiting factors that bind them to objectification. In defiance of the conditioned representations in which women as mothers are portrayed as selfless, enduring and all-sacrificing, some texts divulge into the manifoldness of a single woman and the heterogeneous natures that exist among women. A conspicuous work of this nature is Colm's *The Testament of Mary* (2012), an unorthodox narrative that discloses the deviant attitude of Mary who calls into question the reverent perceptions of motherhood foisted on her by the male-dominated society that is eager to label women as per their understanding of womanhood which is irrespective of a woman's reality of experience. The character of Mary in this text reveals that she was unaware of how others had framed her image and placed her on a pedestal as an embodiment of a perfect mother, and to those who praise her for having performed a major role in redeeming the world she says, “It was not worth it” (8) and examining this interpretation, Rose remarks that the ancient dogma of representing Mother Mary as an altruistic figure is “a complete lie” (14).

In accordance with the contemporary perspectives on motherhood, this article attempts to elaborate the representation, attitudes and the level of acceptance of motherhood experiences through a perusal of two present-time texts, namely, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2008) by the British writer Rachel Cusk and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) by the Indian writer Kavita Kane. *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* is a thought-provoking autobiographical narrative that presents a polemic account of the vicissitudes that a woman encounters on becoming a mother. In line with the argument put forward by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), Cusk states that maternal instincts are not inherent in women; rather such notions are instilled through culture that promotes the social structure imposed by a male dominant society. The text, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, which is divided into twelve chapters, "Forty Weeks", "Lily Bart's Baby", "Colic and Other Stories", "Loving Leaving", "Motherbaby", "Extra Fox", "Hell's Kitchen", "Help", "Don't Forget to Scream", "A Valediction to Sleep", "Breathe" and "Heart Burn" based on specific experiences follows a non-linear fragmented structure that reflects the shards of maternity. Commencing with the indescribable fear of the mystery of childbirth accompanied by the magnitude of the pain of labour, Cusk pictures the transition that takes place in a woman on becoming a mother. Cusk marvels at the existence of anomalous passions, emotions, anxiety and compassion in a mother that is deviant from the ideological concepts which focuses on unconditional love, patience, sacrifice and understanding. To indicate the intensity of the metamorphosis that she has undergone on becoming a mother, she states: "I am surprised to discover how easily I have split in two. I worry; I console. Like a divided stream, the person and the mother pay each other no heed, although moments earlier they were indistinguishable: they tumble forwards, each with its separate life, driven by the same source but seeking no longer to correspond" (62). This narrative juxtaposes the pre-maternal and maternal roles of women and states that once a woman becomes a mother, she can never return to her earlier life as all her thoughts and activities are in accordance with the demands of the infant: "To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger, or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other" (63). Cusk further elaborates the trauma and ambivalence experienced by mothers while they are with children and when they are away from them. She reveals that the expected norm of maternal practices binds the mother to the infant in such a way that the mother can never be separated from the child. She calls this phase of inseparable existence as one of a "composite creature best referred to as mother - and - baby or perhaps motherbaby" (100). Her endeavours to liberate herself from this conditional state of bonding makes her insane and she states:

. . . it is a madness that has its genesis in pregnancy; it is the whole reproductive act, not just its postscript in breastfeeding, that has shaken my sanity. But I steeled myself to endure its strangeness, as one would

endure pain, believing that on the day of her birth, it would end. Like a dreamer who retains the knowledge that they are dreaming, and hence knows that they will not dream forever, I remained certain that the same physical process that had taken me away would return me to myself. I would cross back over the border, back into the country of myself, and I would know that I had done it as surely as the dreamer knows that they have woken up. What has now begun to alarm me is the fact that the dream is going on and on, is each day gathering to itself more of the appearance of reality. (112-13)

The traumatic experiences of motherhood and her inability to tackle its concerns make her lose the track of time and she feels “like a house to which an extension has been added: where once there was a wall, now there is a new room. I feel my heat and light flowing vertiginously into it” (100). Hence, it can be surmised that this text examines the identity shift, ambivalence, and the emotional turmoil that take form in a woman as she adheres to fit into the frame of societal expectations. With the depiction of her personal experiences on becoming a mother, Cusk subverts the romanticised notions of motherhood and refers to it as a phase that creates identity crisis. Though this text is critiqued by those who glorify motherhood, it remains a significant contribution to the discourses on the diverse perspectives on motherhood.

In the word-scape of Indian literary scenario too there are texts that challenge the idealised concepts of motherhood experiences as subtly as they exist in the Indian society. However, the muffled voices that confront the archetypal notions of motherhood which were earlier forcefully silenced by social and cultural practices are now on the rise. Accordingly, most Indian writers of the current period make attempts to unmask the stereotypical constructs of motherhood to challenge and raise the need to deconstruct the existing dogmas to empower women through self-realisation based on genuinely felt experiences. Reflections of such deviant experiences of motherhood can be seen in the works of contemporary writers like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Kavita Kane and Zehra Naqvi. *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) by Kavita Kane presents an alternate representation of the mythological character of Ahalya by giving voice to the profound emotions and thoughts that reveal her predicament as a mother and caretaker of Rishi Gautham's *ashram* (abode). In contrast with the representation of Ahalya in Valmiki's Ramayana as a family-bound docile woman who is depraved by lord Indra, imprecated by *Rishi* Gautham and redeemed by lord Rama, Kane presents her as a bold enthusiast who desired to be a *rishika* (scholar) by giving up her royal status as a princess. Kane explores the life journey of Ahalya through her royal childhood and adolescence to a complex character who dares to explore her emotions and passions against the will of her family. When her mother compels her to get married at an early age, she refuses and decides to pursue her studies at the ashram of rishi Gautham. During a conversation with him, she states her passion for knowledge as:

I want to study. I want to learn more; I want to enter the bottomless realm of wisdom and knowledge. I want to be a scholar. I want to not just be good, but excel at something! Even a fool can marry. A woman is like a slave . . . We are nothing but the legal property of our fathers or husbands or brothers, and are forced to obey them. And when a woman has to marry against her wishes, it is slavery. She is not free to choose. She has to submit. (86)

Despite her understanding of liberation and her desire to seek knowledge to the brim, she is fascinated by the wisdom attained by rishi Gautham and accordingly, when he seeks her hand in marriage she consents, hoping to pursue her dream of becoming a scholar. However, the familial responsibilities to which she succumbs after her marriage wean her away from her pursuits and consequently, she repents of being reduced to performing domestic roles and becomes grouchy: “. . . she was upset with herself too. For not waking up on time, for not having finished her studies the previous night, for the grogginess in her head right now, and the sinking feeling that she would miss her class yet again. This was the third time in a week, and it had been happening for over a month” (243). Though she complains to Gautham of her pathetic reality, he fails to console her or resolve her maladies; and comments in a way that indicates his cynical attitude towards women, “. . . You are trailing behind. But that was to be expected. You require the rest now that there are four children to look after . . . I'm doing what is best for you and for me. Let there be no argument about this” (246). Gautham's attitude fills her with resentment and gradually the gulf between them widens with lack of compassion, understanding and ignorance. Ultimately, in this narrative Ahalya refuses to be objectified and she reawakens her consciousness to express her individuality, passions and emotions amidst the stifling expectations of a male-dominant society; and projects the social attitude to women who oppose the socially accepted gender roles as:

A woman has so many roles, but each has a perimeter. You have to step out and away and yet move forward. But the world won't allow you that: it defines you as someone who has been born a daughter, to live as a wife and die as a mother. Who sees the woman behind that daughter, that wife, that mother? Women are not told that they also belong to a bigger world – of freedom, of knowledge . . . of passion, of ambition. (340)

Through this narrative, Kane attempts a retelling of the mythological character of Ahalya from a feminist perspective and depicts a transformation that takes place in the life of Ahalya from a victim to an empowered woman as her life becomes one of self-discovery. Kane's Ahalya does not regret her actions and explores her desires, agency and autonomy by occupying a subjective position unlike the mythological figure who succumbs to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. By subverting the traditional narrative, Kane gives autonomy to Ahalya and depicts the complexity of this character

who is often marginalised in popular narratives. Consequently, Kane critiques the gendered roles along with the restrictions and societal expectations imposed on women.

The texts that are elucidated in this article bear testimony to the existence of alternate and deviant attitudes to motherhood that can be considered as counter-narratives that confront the archetypal constructs of motherhood that disempower women. These texts reveal that the attributes of motherhood as promoted by patriarchy are an ideology that is manufactured, reinforced and promoted through all art forms and institutions like religion, culture and education to prevent women from playing significant roles in societal activities. The Indian writer and critic Maithreyi Krishnaraj in his book *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?* substantiates this notion and explores the consequences of the conditioning of the human mind that weighs women down in society. He states, “It is not the mere fact of motherhood and/or mothering that makes women vulnerable, but their social construction, the implications for women flowing from the meaning attached to the idea of motherhood and the terms and conditions under which it is allowed to express itself” (22). It can be surmised that patriarchal thoughts have limited women's potential to its narrow specifications with faux glorifications that hamper the essential unity between the mother, child and society through an imposed family structure that is sustained by the politics of power relations.

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Workshops, Community, and Performance : Nireeksha and the Making of Feminist Theatre in Kerala

Abstract

Established in Thiruvananthapuram, Nireeksha Women's Theatre Group is the only functioning feminist theatre group in Kerala. With a stated mission to negotiate gender within theatre through aesthetic and political practice, Nireeksha occupies a significant presence in the history of Malayalam theatre since its founding in 1999. The relative absence of Nireeksha's contributions from the dominant theatre historiographies is not incidental but mirrors the broader invisibilisation of women's advances in Malayalam theatre. This paper foregrounds Nireeksha's attempts at fostering a community of women in theatre through an exploration of its three main initiatives- Anubhaava, Bhaava and Rangashree. By engaging with debates around the definition of feminist theatre and the distinction between 'women's theatre' and 'feminist theatre,' this paper highlights Nireeksha's pivotal role in attempting to establish a theatre tradition for women in Kerala. Through a detailed account of Nireeksha's workshops and community-based initiatives, the paper emphasizes that the very act of documentation functions as a means of reclaiming the marginalized history of women in Malayalam theatre. Shifting the focus away from Nireeksha's major theatre productions, this paper analyses its broader efforts in shaping and cultivating a theatre community for women in Kerala and evaluates its role as a pivotal feminist theatre group in Kerala.

Keywords : Nireeksha, Feminist theatre, Women's theatre, Gender and Performance, Kerala, Theatre historiography, Theatre Community

Women's engagement with theatre has been marked by tension and uneasiness since the early history of theatre practice. Historically, women were systematically barred from theatrical spaces and those who defied these restrictions were frequently marginalised and rendered invisible in mainstream theatre historiography. The feminist reclaiming of women's contributions was not readily achieved in theatre. Feminist theatre scholars have long grappled with the difficulty of tracing a female tradition within theatre history. In her introduction to the American anthology of contemporary plays by women (1977) , playwright Honor Moore argues that “the way that men had prevented women from participating in theatre was responsible for the lack of a female tradition in playwriting similar to that which exists in both fiction and poetry” (qtd. in Aston 12). It was not the lack of a female tradition, rather the difficulty of finding one compared to the feminist

recovery of other literary genres by women. This paper explores Nireeksha women's theatre group's attempts at forging a women's theatre community and reclaiming the women's tradition in Malayalam theatre. Based at Choozhattukotta, Thiruvananthapuram, Nireeksha women's theatre group is formed by Sudhi Devayani (Sudhi C V) alumni of School of Drama, Thrissur and Rajarajeswari E, Mathematics Teacher turned theatre person. Nireeksha aims to aesthetically overcome gender in theatre. The initial plays of Nireeksha experimented in creating avant-garde visuals and innovating the body language of the women actors and the later plays discussed contemporary political issues. Apart from the aesthetic experiments in feminist theatre, Nireeksha engages in applied theatre by working with different women's communities. Nireeksha believes in the concept called education through theatre and organizes theatre workshops and seminars for women and children from all socio-economic backgrounds, aiming to foster a sense of community. Rather than ensuring the increased presence of women on stage Nireeksha aims at creating a separate visual culture for women by foregrounding the many facets of feminist theatre. The founders of the group emphasize that there was/is little space for women in theatre and women are not taking the narrative forward. Nireeksha plans to focus on plays written and directed by women to give a new direction to the traditional mainstream Malayalam theatre.

In the paper, Nireeksha's pursuit in fostering a theatre community for women in Kerala is examined through its community based workshops and three main initiatives- Bhaava, Anubhaava and Rangashree. Through discussions on the definition of feminist theatre and an exploration of the terms “women's theatre” versus “feminist theatre,” it underscores the significance of Nireeksha as a feminist theatre in Kerala. The paper contends that apart from its major productions, Nireeksha's central contribution to the making of feminist theatre in Kerala has been the successful forging of a women-centred theatre community in Malayalam, facilitated through its workshops and other diverse theatre initiatives.

“One of the most important aspects of feminist theatre is the ambiguity of the very term 'feminist theatre.' It seems to mean something different to nearly every practitioner, critic, academic and spectator (or audience member)” (2) argues Elizabeth Goodman in the introduction to *Contemporary Feminist Theatres* (1993). It can mean different things when examined from the perspective of women whose experiences are shaped by differences in caste, class and economic positions. What is necessary in defining it is the “recognition of the contributions of different schools of feminism, and indeed of different women to the larger feminist (theatre) movement” (Goodman 22). It is also important to note that the differences between women as well as between feminisms and theatres inform rather than impede the making and studying of feminist theatres. According to Goodman, a feminist theatre is “that theatre which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change, and which is informed in this project by

broadly feminist ideas” (34). Essentially, a feminist theatre can be defined as a genre and approach within theatre that seeks to challenge and critique traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. It aims to highlight and address issues of gender inequality, represent women's experiences, and offer alternative narratives and perspectives. Feminist theatre often seeks to deconstruct stereotypes, provide a platform for marginalized voices, and explore themes related to power, identity, and social justice through performance.

In *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (2015), feminist theatre scholar A Mangai compiles the visible attempts to define feminist theatre in India in the latter part of the 20th century. Mangai finds theatre scholar Anuradha Kapur's description of feminist theatre the most enabling. Kapur states: “I use the term, feminist theatre, as a tentative designation for dealing with that sort of experience that may not have found visibility until now; which is also to say that the manner of saying and the specifics of that experience are in the process of being voiced” (qtd. in Mangai 26). The experiences feminist theatre ventures to visualize are the sexual division of labour, especially in domestic work and childcare, mothering, prescriptive roles and gender stereotypes, female friendship, female sexuality, and the political importance of identity (Mangai *ibid.*). The effect of multilingualism was quite apparent in the formation of feminist theatres in India as most of them had considerable regional differences. Sajitha Madathil writes in her work *Women's History of Malayalam Theatre (Malayala Nadaka Sthree Charithram, 2010)* “The objective of women's theatre is not a feminist reading of staged scenes. Rather, it is something that influences the construction of the theatre itself. Women's theatre is a stream of thought that shapes the way the theatre works, chooses, and presents the subject” (161).

Scholarly deliberations on feminist theatre also centered on the question of whether it should be called feminist theatre or women's theatre. The distinct yet interconnected definitions of these terms sparked considerable debate in the early phase of feminist theatre studies in the second half of the twentieth century. The difference between the two terms fundamentally arises from the question 'are all women's writings feminist writings?' The term 'feminist' is typically reserved for discussion of texts which clearly appeal to the alignment of women in a political movement with particular aims and objectives. Susan Bassnet, in her article *Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre* (1984) contends that although the two terms are used (problematically) interchangeably by critics, there is a distinction to be made. She places the bases of feminist theatre, as opposed to women's theatre, on the established concerns of the organized women's movements. Bassnet adds that the tendency of feminist theatre “therefore is not so much towards a re-evaluation of the role of women within society as we know it, but towards the creation of a totally new set of social structures in which the traditional male-female roles will be redefined” (447). Goodman takes it from Bassnet's argument to propose “the use of 'women's theatre' as a general term and 'feminist theatre' as a political one” (28).

According to Goodman, Bassnet's perspectives concur that feminist theatre is written and directed by women and is influenced by common political demands (*ibid.*). This argument, evolved from the feminist critical study in the West, can be limiting and is not inclusive of the feminist theatre advances from the South Asian countries. In the Indian context, some women consider the term 'women's theatre' as discriminatory and confining. For others, the term 'feminist' might be contentious. Scholars like Mangai validate her interchangeable use of the terms women's/feminist theatre in her study of gender and Indian theatre. She recognizes the engagements of women in theatre as "gendered practices" (37) as all their experiences in theatre are shaped by gender. The labels do not matter or, "in other words women's/feminist theatre is in. Not to name it is wilful indifference. To acknowledge it is to turn a new leaf in the history of modern Indian theatre" (Mangai 38). It is necessary to consider not all women theatre practitioners consent to the malleability of the terms. To counter the Western narrative of general/political binary, for instance, Nireeksha in Kerala, has been working with an unambiguous feminist agenda since its inception and is registered as Nireeksha Women's Theatre Group (not as Nireeksha Feminist Group) in 1999. The designation is a conscious decision, according to Rajarajeswari, the co-founder of Nireeksha. She posits that Malayalam theatre in the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a usurping of feminist theatres by men. When discussions on feminist theatre rose to the forefront in Kerala, many mainstream groups ventured to "make feminist plays. Nireeksha asserted itself as a women's theatre to become a space that invites women to be a part of theatre making. The label 'feminist' was too mainstream and unwelcoming at the time" (Rajarajeswari). Nireeksha contradicts Bassnet's and Goodman's categorization of the women's/feminist theatre binary by being a politically aligned women's theatre. It remains as one of the key contributions the group has made to the ongoing discussions on feminist theatre in Malayalam. The choice of nomenclature simultaneously resists Western elitist theories and asserts a space of visibility and legitimacy for regional women's theatres. The paper, however, follows the term 'feminist theatre,' as an all-encompassing term, to denote Nireeksha's advances in theatre in Kerala.

Building on this definitional framework, it can be deduced that the evolution and growth of feminist theatres have been deeply intertwined with the trajectories of women's liberation movements. The concept of women's theatre began to develop in the 1970s with the formation of independent women's organizations in various cities across India. This phenomenon was part of a broader global movement in which women mobilized for their rights and engaged in diverse forms of self-expression. Following the 1970s, there was a notable increase in the formation of small, independent women's organizations across India. Women engaged in feminist organizations with a vested interest in the arts and cultural discourse played a foundational role in establishing women-only theatre groups and theatrical initiatives. Initially, street theatre emerged as their primary mode of expression. The street theatre performances under the leadership of women activists

served as a critical catalyst in bringing women's specific issues, experiences, and discourses to the forefront of India's political and cultural mainstream. The theatricalised protests led to the eventual forming of feminist theatre groups in the last decades of the twentieth century in India.

Foreseeably, the growth of women's liberation organizations in Kerala during the 1980s was instrumental in the conceptualization of women's theatre, the establishment of women's theatre groups, and the increased staging of women-centric plays. The first feminist play in Malayalam is considered to be *Thozhilkendraithilekk* (To the Workplace) by Anthargana Samajam. The play written, directed and staged by an all women crew talked about the importance of financial independence and agency in one's own life as early as 1948. Feminist theatre in Kerala witnessed a gradual decay after the period which was revived only in the beginning of the 1970s. The formation of feminist theatre in Kerala after the 1980s could be zeroed on into two main reasons; first, the work of women educated from institutions like the School of Drama who were well acquainted with feminist ideologies and the second, if not the most important, the Women's Theatre Camp organized by Mini Sukumar in 1992 at Kudamalur Sthree Padana Kendram with a clear vision and direction to accentuate all the definitions and goals of feminist theatre. The success of the first theatre workshop led to the formation of the first feminist theatre group in Kerala called Abhinetri (1994) and then Medha. Inspired from the workshop among other things, pioneering feminist organizations like Manushi (1986) and Samatha (1987) chose to engage more extensively in theatre centering women. Despite their initial momentum, many of these groups gradually ceased to function due to multiple reasons. Nireeksha is the only functioning women's theatre group in Kerala since its foundation in 1999.

Nireeksha had its inception in relatively constrained circumstances. Sudhi Devayani and Rajarajeswari, the founders, who frequented the public protests on various gender-related injustices happened across Kerala in the last decades of the 20th century, soon found their common interest in feminism and theatre based activism. When the first play was in production, Nireeksha only had a small room as a performance space. Against all odds, Nireeksha has brought out more than 10 major plays including *Pravachaka* (Prophetess 2007), *Aanungal illatha Pennungal* (Women without Men 2010), *Nizhalukalude Manam* (The Scent of Shadows 2012), *Punar- Jani* (Reborn Woman 2013), *Avatar* (Embodiment 2016), *Varthamanakam* (Life in the Present Tense 2018), *Gatheeyatha* (State of Being 2021), *Andhika* (The Blind One 2022), *Ethirola* (Echoes 2023) and *Beyond the Shadows* (2024). The first major production of Nireeksha, *Pravachaka*, reached the final round of competition at the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi. The play also got selected for the Bharat Rang Mahotsav, equipping Nireeksha to perform outside Kerala. The next play, *Anungal Illatha Pennungal or Men Without Women*, based on an Iranian novel by Shahrnush Parsipur, won Sudhi the best director award from the Akademi. Nireeksha's ventures in Malayalam theatre comprise of

experiments in theme, body language, set designs and properties of the play along with incorporating innovative language and narrative techniques. As mentioned earlier, this paper does not intend to focus on the analysis of Nireeksha's performances. The subsequent sections examine the group's attempts to successfully foster a theatre community for women through a range of initiatives, ultimately highlighting Nireeksha's significance as a foundational theatre group in Kerala.

In her attempt to document the initiatives of Nireeksha in the article *Negotiating spaces and voicing resistance: Nireeksha and women's theatre in India*, Dr.Swapna Gopinath says:

Nireeksha has been surviving since 1999; its survival is a long history of struggles amidst successes and failures, recognitions and rejections. Nireeksha operates at multidimensional levels – as a feminist theatre incessantly experimenting with forms and representation, as a community theatre that trains and equips women groups to produce plays and perform, as a training group that is a harbinger of change in the lives of young impoverished children and also as active participants in critical and academic discourses on theatre and performance. (21)

The grass roots community-based projects of Nireeksha are mainly focused on three levels: Anubhaava, Bhaava and Rangasree. Anubhaava, the children's theatre Nireeksha has formed among the children in the neighborhood meets at weekends from 2012 onwards. Anubhaava has its own repertoire of plays performed at regular intervals. Bhaava is their theatre initiative for adolescent girls. Kudumbashree, a community network of women in Kerala in tandem with local governments, associates with Nireeksha in forming the drama troupe, Rangashree. When these three dimensions meet at one place, Nireeksha becomes a space not just for creative expression but for a community that disseminates knowledge and engages with pressing social and environmental issues through a distinctively feminist lens. Nireeksha organizes theatre workshops across educational and community-based institutions foregrounding gender-based injustices through seminars, street performances, and other public interventions. Additionally, their practice intersects with the academic sphere, contributing to feminist discourse through debates, lectures, and scholarly engagements.

The children's theatre was often considered as an abridged version of adult plays made for children. It was developed in Kerala in the 1970s through the pioneering efforts of the visionary theatre practitioner G Sankarapilla. It is in this context Nireeksha's contribution to children's theatre through Anubhaava and Bhaava becomes especially relevant. Anubhaava children's theatre was formed in April 2013 with a group of children from the neighborhood of Nireeksha. On being asked why children's theatre, Sudhi reveals that it was not a voluntary choice for Nireeksha, but a timely necessity. Nireeksha situates in a rural area called Pamamcode near Choozhattukotta, Thiruvananthapuram. The suburban

area has a significantly high rate of suicide coupled with widespread familial instability and alcoholism. The children coming from the broken families of the area suffered from extreme insecurities and addiction issues. This prompted Nireeksha to focus on the children and introduce summer workshops for them. “We decided to concentrate on the children from these families, who could be prone to addiction or suicide. That's how we began Anubhaava children's theatre. The idea is not to find talented children, but to reach out to such unfortunate kids living in difficult circumstances and introduce them to the arts as a means of building social awareness” says her (Sudhi).

The founders also maintain that Anubhaava cannot be considered as a professional children theatre. Shibu S Kottaram (former HOD, School of Drama, Thrissur) and Sudhi curated a syllabus tailored to the needs of Anubhaava's children. The syllabus consisted of theatrical activities and de-addiction games zeroing in on gender sensitization and personality development. Additionally, it was designed to integrate plays on elementary education to focus on the children who could not afford formal education. Anubhaava has staged more than 10 plays so far. All of the plays are written from a child's perspective by Rajarajeswari, and are directed by Sudhi. The properties and costumes were developed by the children in Anubhaava's summer camps. Anubhaava resists conventional norms of children's theatre by foregrounding the individual experience of children catering to their personal needs. This invites skepticism from prominent theatre critics in Kerala leading to the continued exclusion of Nireeksha's initiatives.

Bhaava, a team of adolescent girls from Nirbhaya shelter homes, is a distinct theatre group formed from Anubhaava. Nirbhaya homes were launched in the state by the Social Justice Department under the Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society to provide shelter to the victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking. The Nirbhaya Home at Poojapura, Thiruvananthapuram was inaugurated in 2013. Bhaava makes theatre accessible to the inmates of Nirbhaya. By encouraging them to actively participate in theatre, Bhaava explores the possibilities of theatre therapy. Rajarajeswari mentions that “interacting with other children and engaging in group theatre activities help them to find a way to overcome their past” (Rajarajeswari).

The production of a play is not the end for both Anubhaava and Bhaava. For them, performance is agitation. Although the performances of Bhaava are in abeyance right now, Nireeksha frequently conducts theatre workshops for adolescent girls at various institutions. The therapeutic potential of theatre is put to optimal use by these workshops. The children of Pamamcode, on the other hand, were able to identify and pursue their artistic skills through Anubhaava. The weekly Sunday workshops provided lessons in theatre, dance, music and art which is demonstrated in the costumes and properties Anubhaava devised in each play. Theatre was a tool for them to find themselves. Sudhi and Rajarajeswari firmly uphold the concept of education through theatre and emphasize that the plays of Anubhaava are meant for every child. As an example of theatre's potential to influence children, they refer to the repertoire of Nireeksha's children's theatre.

Nireeksha also facilitates the concept of community theatre by administering a series of theatre workshops for Kudumbashree, the largest women collective in Asia. Nireeksha recognized the urgent need to make theatre accessible to women who had historically been distanced from it, and who had seldom been given the opportunity to observe a theatrical performance. It is in this spirit that Rangashree community theatre was conceived. What began with training programs in five districts has now expanded to all fourteen districts of Kerala. M V Premarajan, the mission's district coordinator at the time says in an interview with the *Times of India*: “Kudumbashree is an organization with a collective partnership of over forty-one lakh women, and the idea of a theatre group, Rangashree, was evolved from the feeling that they should not be mere spectators or objects but also creators of what we see”. The focus of this all-women theatre group is to intertwine gendered narratives with regional folklore and performance traditions. Through intensive training in various facets of theatre, Nireeksha enables participants of Rangashree to engage in every stage of production. They are taught to handle technical roles such as set design, lighting as well as creative components like directing, scripting, acting, music and costume design. These workshops are spaces of encouragement where the participants are mentored to explore and articulate their lived realities. As Rajarajeswari describes, the process is comprehensive and immersive, guiding the members of the group to take charge of every component of the performance..

Nireeksha consistently conducts theatre workshops for women across different age groups, professions and communities. These workshops are designed to introduce them to the field of theatre, especially to the technicalities of theatre, “or to hone their acting skill, or to develop their skills in designing theatre” (Nireeksha). The workshops which go on about two to four days typically culminate with a performance devised by the members. The initiative was conceived as weekly workshops titled the Saturday workshops for women and was hindered by a range of issues thus left incomplete. This did not dissuade Nireeksha from attempting to mobilize more women towards active participation in theatre. The women's technical theatre workshop (2007) led by veteran light designer Sri Ramamurthy, the acting workshop (2007) led by acclaimed theatre director Anamika Haskar and the playwriting workshop (2013) led by visionary playwright Kavalam Narayana Panicker were a few among many the memorable workshops.

Nireeksha endeavors to extend the interactive theatre training sessions to women from tribal and coastal areas of the state. The experience of co-ordinating workshops for the coastal women community in Valiyathura and Pulluvila “has always been an enriching experience both ways” (Nireeksha). The inauguration ceremony of both Nireeksha's national women's theatre festivals featured street theatre performances from Valiyathura Matysathozhilali Sthreekalude Koottayma (Association of Fisherwomen Community in Valiyathura). To further elaborate the vision, Nireeksha regularly conducts applied theatre workshops with student communities ranging from highschool to universities.

The workshops conducted across almost all universities in Kerala stand out for their effort towards a more expansive goal of gender sensitization in the generation to come. Following 2021, the author was involved in Nireeksha's workshops both as a participant and as part of the organizing team. The recurring workshops Nireeksha held at Sree Narayana College, Chempazhanthy, Thiruvananthapuram paved the way for incorporating gender and performance studies into the syllabus of their UG and PG courses.

The women's theatre festivals organized by Nireeksha strive to highlight innovative theatre productions helmed by women directors. The festivals offer a unique platform where artistic and applied theatre converges, a space which is shared by both professional theatre makers and community theatre activists alike. Launched in 2020 as an online performance initiative in response to the pandemic, the Nireeksha women's theatre Festival has since transitioned to offline editions held in 2022 and 2023.

Nireeksha, as a feminist theatre, remains committed to its creative vision even today. Apart from the major play productions and community-based workshops, Nireeksha offers rental facilities, including a theatre, meeting rooms, a library, and basic equipment for sound and lighting, all in one place, at an affordable fee. They aim to support people and groups who need help to afford larger commercial spaces. Helene Cixous observed that 'going to theatre is a political gesture' (qtd in Gopinath 25). Here, Nireeksha brings theatre to communities across the state as a political commitment.

In Kerala, the theatre group documents the transition from a time when women were stigmatized for attending theatre to a present where women are organizing their own theatre groups and festivals. Each shift Nireeksha brought through consistent interventions and efforts is significant not only to any particular community but for women in general. This paper underscores that Nireeksha serves as a compelling illustration of the definition proposed by Gopinath as a theatre group, as a collective which holds immense potential to “initiate social transformation, challenge existing paradigms and become the harbinger of social revolutions. The creative and performative potential of theatre groups enables the conversion of these groups into cultural ambassadors for introspection” (25). By operating outside the established theatre traditions through its rich repertoire of applied theatre workshops that unapologetically represents marginalized communities Nireeksha reclaims the long lost tradition for women in Malayalam theatre, emphasizing its pivotal role as a feminist theatre in Kerala's cultural context. Through a detailed examination of Nireeksha's diverse and sustained practices, the paper also wishes to highlight the imperative of safeguarding the presence and continuity of such theatre groups for women.

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India's Hallyu Embrace : Unpacking the Expanding Cultural Footprint and Soft Power Projection of Korean Dramas

Abstract

Korean dramas, popularly known as K-dramas, have taken the world by storm with their captivating storylines, memorable characters, and high production quality. The global phenomenon of the K-wave began with PSY's viral hit "Gangnam Style," which dominated music charts and YouTube. Today, K-dramas serve as a soft-power mechanism for the South Korean government, promoting cultural exchange and understanding, the same job Hollywood did to the American government for decades.

In India, K-dramas have gained immense popularity, often ranking among the top 10 shows on Netflix India as evident in the homepage. Regional channels have begun dubbing K-dramas in Hindi, while social media platforms are filled with engagement reels featuring popular scenes set to Bollywood and regional music. The influence of K-dramas extends beyond entertainment, and it's a manifestation of the soft power of South Korea, with abundant elements of product placement. The coveted "glass skin" of Korean beauty standards has also captured the attention of Indian audiences with celebrities like Kareena Kapoor Khan launching skincare lines promising to deliver Korean-like skin. The popularity of K-dramas drives market trends, with brands partnering with shows to promote their products. This paper explores the significant impact of K-dramas on Indian audiences' perceptions of romance, products, and market trends. By examining the cultural exchange and influence of K-dramas, we can gain a deeper understanding of the shifting values and preferences of Indian consumers.

Keywords: K-dramas, Indian market trends, Hallyu, soft power, South Korea

Introduction

The world is no longer defined by geographical boundaries, we live in a digital generation where popular social media platforms shape the interests, identities, and cultural trends of entire generations. The Korean entertainment industry has made waves across the globe with their content curated to cater to the people around the world including K-dramas, movies and music. *Hallyu* or Korean wave is the term for the proliferation of Korean content across the world, and the term was coined by Beijing journalists in 1990. The Chinese government banned the telecast of South Korean dramas between 7-10 p.m., in 2012 as they wanted to protect the regional industry from being

overtaken by Korean content. In Japan during the Athens Olympics, they broadcasted more South-Korean content than that of the ongoing Olympics. Such is the popularity of Korean content, and India is no exception to the charms of it. Korean dramas are more popular than movies in many regions, in contrast to the Indian landscape where movies dominate. The influence of k-dramas extend beyond entertainment, and they are a marketing tool for advertisers. This paper argues that this proliferation of embedded marketing cannot be fully understood through a unilateral cultural import model. This article therefore employs Soft Power theory by Joseph S. Nye to examine South Korea's cultural diplomacy that's intentional.

Literature Review

Soft Power and Transcultural Flow

In *The Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph S. Nye differentiates between Hard power and Soft power. While hard power is 'the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies' by coercing through coercion ("sticks") and inducements ("carrots"). Au contraire, soft power is 'the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion', for others to want the same outcome you want. Today K-dramas along with K-pop and movies serve as a soft-power mechanism for the South Korean government, promoting cultural exchange and understanding, the same job Hollywood, rock bands, and jazz did to the American government for decades by spreading American values and lifestyle as aspirational, and what manga and anime did to the attractive image building of Japan. A prime example is the 2019 blockbuster drama *Crash Landing on You* (CLOY), about a South-Korean heiress and North-Korean soldier falling in love, boosting tourism to South Korea, drawing global attention to countries' culture and landmarks like Namsan tower, Hallasan National Park in Jeju island. The fact that the drama boosted tourism is an effect of attraction as a result of soft power. Interestingly the drama often trends constantly on Netflix even in 2025. The 2009 Lee Min-ho starrer *Boys Over Flowers* opened up Korean dramas to Japanese, Chinese and Indian markets and remains a touchstone drama, demonstrating the early scalability of Hallyu.

Joseph Nye's seminal theory posits that soft power is derived from three intangible sources; culture, where it's attractive to others; through political values like democracy and human rights, when it is lived up to both at home and abroad; and through foreign policies that are seen as legitimate and inclusive (Nye 2004). K-dramas are a manifestation of Korea's culture as a soft power resource. The 2019 drama *Crash Landing on You*, for example, promoted South-Korea's national image as modern, romantic and sophisticated. *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), a drama revolving around the love story of a Korean Soldier and a Doctor, and the drama helped in rehabilitating the image of the South Korean institutions like the military worldwide, demonstrating soft power's potential in geo-political image building. This type of positive geo-political image

building is particularly crucial given the highly militarized and volatile situation on the Korean peninsula. This effective deployment of soft power ultimately contributes to the economic stability (through cultural exports, tourism) and geopolitical stability of the country by fostering a positive and attractive national image.

Methodology

This research employs a Conceptual-Analytical Study combined with a Discourse Analysis of secondary materials to examine the cultural footprint of K-dramas in India. The study is qualitative in nature and is based on a synthesis of two distinct data sources: textual analysis of select popular K-dramas like *Crash Landing on You* and *Hometown Cha Cha Chach* chosen for their high viewership on Indian OTT platforms to analyze embedded marketing (PPL) and the representation of cultural tropes (e.g., gender roles). Then a media discourse corpus were a collection of popular media narratives from online news outlets, blogs, and OTT platform descriptions, primarily used to establish and contextualize the dominant popular discourse surrounding K-dramas in the Indian market. The analysis focuses on interpreting these data sources through the theoretical lens of Soft Power to move beyond descriptive claims and provide a conceptual grounding for the phenomena observed.

The Indian Context: Audience, Fandom and Consumerism

K-dramas had its entryway to India through Manipur in 2000 as people resorted to it when the separatist groups banned Bollywood movies. With the pandemic and availability of time aplenty, the Indian public started consuming Korean content that was available on popular OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, as evident in the boosted viewership on Netflix. Internet was abuzz with ways to cope up with the quarantine – such as whipping up Dalgona coffee which also interestingly originated in South Korea, the #SafeHands challenge where celebrities posted videos of themselves washing their hands for a full 20 seconds as a preventative measure against COVID-19, the Online Bingo challenge, people were also suggesting content to watch and K-dramas came into the radar of so many people this way. Once they got a segue into the vast world of Korean dramas, people started watching more based on their interests.

One popular misconception about K-dramas is that it's only concerned with the romance genre, but K-dramas are as varied as they come. For instance dramas such as *The Glory* (2022), *Little Women* (2022) and *Perfect Marriage Revenge* (2023) deals with revenge primarily, fantasy ones like *Guardian- The Lonely And Great God* (2016), *My Love From the Star* (2013), *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* (2016) belongs to the historical genre while dramas like *Vincenzo* (2021) and *Healer* (2014) belong to action genres primarily. Romance dramas often have an in-depth female perspective unlike Bollywood romance movies centered around the male gaze. This is to say that the Indian audience could watch Korean content according to the genre they preferred. The popularity of K-dramas can be assuaged by the propensity of discussions and the reels and

shorts on Instagram and Youtube filled with engagement reel featuring popular dramas scenes set to Bollywood and regional music. There is even a popular podcast dedicated to discussing Korean dramas in India hosted by Paroma Chakravarthy named 'Drama over Flowers', the name is a play on the popular 2009 drama *Boys Over Flowers* and she calls K-dramas as 'a novel with 16 episodes'. K-dramas significantly influence Indian audiences especially the Youth as they resonate with the content and it even shapes the consumer habits, with people resorting to Korean skincare to achieve the coveted Korean glass skin - smooth, clear complexion with a glow resembling glass. The global success of K-dramas demonstrates South Korea's soft power to co-opt foreign audiences, shaping their preferences for Korean goods like skincare, cosmetics and packaged foods, to language, and travel without the use of coercive measures.

In February 2011, during the Vesoul International Film Festival of Asian Cinema, 36 films received more than 300 visitors each showing during the 'Week of Korea', surprising the festival organisers. This growing interest in Korean content was further highlighted in March 2011, when a Belgium production company purchased broadcasting rights of three Korean dramas *Iris*, *Chuno* and *Jeonwoo* to satisfy the growing demand for Korean content. This trend continued to escalate and by 2020 the global appetite for Korean content was palpable cemented by the Oscar win of *Parasite*. Besides winning several awards, *Parasite* went on to win the Oscar for Best Picture, becoming the first non-english movie to do so, while fans celebrated the win, it also was upsetting to so many people including President Donald Trump who called the 92nd academy awards 'bad' and called for a return to recognising traditional American movies like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). The movie directed by Bong Joon-ho, is about the wealth disparity and class inequality in South Korea, and its themes resonated worldwide. The success of *Parasite* emphasises the increasing global demand for Korean content, reflecting the worldwide embrace of Korean storytelling across genres.

The Indian television scene is starkly different from the Korean one. While Indian dramas run for years, sometimes even decades with the typical familiar plot like saas-bahu dynamics (mother in law-daughter in law), with heavy insistence on traditional gender roles, women being docile homemakers playing to the whims and fancies of men, and idiotic scenes like the infamous Gopi Bahu in *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* cleaning a laptop with water as if it's an item of clothing, inviting ridicule from across the globe. There's even a running joke about a woman being pregnant for over three years in Indian dramas, and this instance provides us with the gap the dramas have with the growing youth of the country. The young people growing up on a steady diet of Internet and cultural content from around the world over, don't resonate with the absurd outdated content and over-the-top theatrics of Indian daily soaps. In the age of short-form content and 'brain rot' being the buzz word of the year, the youth has no patience for Indian serials that drag on for years, often testing even the most forgiving viewer's endurance.

The Indian media landscape is also evolving with OTT platforms coupled with cheap internet opening up the audience to diverse content. It's interesting to note that Korean dramas, both ongoing and completed ones, consistently rank in the Top 10 in India category on platforms like Netflix. OTT services like Amazon, JioHotstar and Netflix have a flurry of Korean dramas, signaling the growing demand from Indian audiences . There are even exclusive Netflix dramas such as the 12 episode long *D.P* (2021) and the exceptionally popular *Squid Game* (2021-2025), meaning dramas produced and broadcast only on Netflix. This marks the shift from the traditional model of Netflix buying the OTT rights from the channels like SBS TV, ARIRANG TV, tvN and KBS World, which have been producing and airing shows for decades. There are several Indian channels and OTT platforms like MX player and Aha Video that air dubbed K-dramas to cater to the multilingual population. Aha OTT and Arha have Telugu and Tamil dubbed content close to 300 hours including the popular *Descendents of the Sun* (2016) and *Fight for My Way* (2017). This move helps the Indian audience enjoy the shows in their preferred language . A 2019 study showed 24.4% Indian audience watched K-dramas, and the numbers have only grown staggeringly since. The rise of exclusive Netflix content, shows the changing dynamics of international content reaching the Indian audience, reshaping viewing habits and preferences.

While K-dramas differ from Indian dramas, there are some themes they share in common. Parental hold in Asia is a powerful shared cultural dynamic, whether in India or South-Korea, exemplified in the 2018 drama *Something in the Rain*, the heroine's mothers displeasure with the age gap, preventing their union for a long time. Furthermore, as Supriya Nair, editor of the weekly publication *Fifty Two*, notes that while both popular Hindi and Korean movies are made for men, Korean and Indian dramas are made for women. Nair further continues that the deepest similarity between them are the social and familial dynamics, alongside the prevalence of genre-mixing in both countries' popular dramas. The positive representation of the 'green flag male lead' who swoons over the heroine in K-dramas, often leads women to idealise this and expect the same from their romantic counterparts. While K-dramas are often praised by Indian audiences for their portrayal of sensitive male leads and idealized romance, the narratives often heavily rely on traditional gender roles and may project unrealistic relationship expectations. Scholarly studies have found that K-drama viewership is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and increased body image dissatisfaction among Indian female college students, suggesting a tension between the fictional ideals and viewer reality (Rawat). This tension highlights a significant gap between the idealized textual representation and the sociological realities of gender roles in South-Korea (Cariappa, n.d.). For instance, the ground reality in South Korea is vastly different, with movements like 4B are gaining traction among young women. The 4B or "Four Nos" is a radical feminist movement that asks women to refrain from dating, marrying, having sex and having children with men (Service95). Given that the country has repeatedly elected

presidents who have uttered misogynistic statements and where date-rape is prevalent, it's important to note that Korea is not the Utopia they project via their cultural content.

Joseph S. Nye Jr's analysis of public diplomacy is central to the concept of soft power. Public diplomacy is the tool governments use to further their soft power and national interests. Nye makes it a point to distinguish between public diplomacy and the traditional diplomacy that happens between government-to-government interaction. It is achieved through communication tools like broadcasting, educational exchange programmes, by leveraging the attractive cultural practices of the country. And Nye emphasises credibility as the 'scarcest resource' and that the best propaganda is no propaganda, and that soft-power would be undermined if the government is perceived as manipulative. K-dramas are cultural products that embody this attraction. Product placement is the economic reality of this attraction where a global audience is used to leverage and monetise the cultural appeal developed through soft power. A regular Korean drama viewer knows the abundance of embedded marketing in it, product marketing is integral to them, from Samsung mobiles to Kopiko. As per the Korea Times article "Why Are So Many Actors Eating Kopiko in K-Dramas?", the Indonesian candy Kopiko was not available in Korean markets while the drama *Vincenzo* aired in 2021, according to industry sources the company used kdrama's popularity to advertise to a global market using "reverse-export advertising strategy".



Fig.1. Kopiko featured in Korean drama *Vincenzo*



Fig.2. Kopiko featured in Korean drama *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*

Psychoanalyst Eric Fromm in his 1955 classic *The Sane Society* talks about the 'marketing orientation' of the modern personality, where individuals experience themselves and others purely as commodities—as objects to be consistently marketed or transacted with. Their value is not intrinsic but tied to the marketability at any given moment.

Marketing has moved beyond the subliminal messaging to more direct and in-your-face tactics, making it an integral part of the viewing experience, internalising the views of Fromm. A prime example is the coveted Korean “Glass skin” which is a clear case of emulation, glass skin is skin that is flawless and radiant, resembling glass has caught the attention of Indian women, as the protagonists in dramas have perfect skin and they are often seen advertising Korean skin care both in dramas and in real life as well. The growing market of Korean Skin care in India with India's premier beauty, wellness and fashion e-commerce website having dedicated sections for Korean products. Korean skincare line Beauty of Joseon enjoys high sales in India, despite being towards the pricey side. There are various online forums and subreddits extolling the virtues of Korean skincare on Indian skin. Even celebrities have caught up on the favourable winds, and have launched skincare lines promising Korean skin. One example is Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor Khan launching Quench, which goes by the tagline 'the best of Korean beauty', with various products including sunscreen. In fact there is an entire e-commerce website called Maccaron, hosting India's biggest K-beauty platform. Such is the market, even people not into skincare spend money on sunscreen, and even generic ones don't come cheap, let alone Korean ones. One reason for the popularity of Korean skincare products is the country's strict regulations and robust R&D for its products, unlike the lax standards in India, making the Korean products trustworthy and effective. The popularity of Korean skincare and fashion can be assuaged by looking at the growing presence of Korean celebrities endorsing International brands like Dior and Gucci, further cementing South Korea's cultural and economic influence. The successful selling of Korean beauty standards and products is a clear case of emulation, that leads to economic gains for the country.



Fig. 3. Instagram post from Quench botanics featuring Kareena Kapoor Khan

The influence of Korean cultural texts like drama extends far beyond skincare. For example, Indian supermarkets stock various Korean Ramen noodles, a staple both in Korean dramas and Korean diet. Another staple is Kimchi, a cabbage brine pickle, and in India we have a lot of Kimchi sellers catering to the growing appetite of this Korean delicacy. Even during the fear surrounding the boycott of Chinese products, Indians resorted to Korean company Samsung for their mobile phones and laptops, as they offer affordable and reliable alternatives to Chinese products. In fact a modern day Korean drama audience would be familiar with Bixby, Samsung's voice assistant, as most dramas incorporate Bixby in one way or another, solidifying the connection between Korean products and culture in the quotidian life of people. In *Daily Dose of Sunshine* (2023), the female protagonist finds her phone that fell into a waterbody by activating Bixby, and this advertisement goes on to show that the phone works despite being submerged in water and that Bixby and Samsung are reliable. Korean phrases have gained currency among drama watchers such as Annyong(hello), Saranghae(I love you), Aigoo(Korean equivalent of Ayyo). Korean dramas usually present Korean food as very tempting, and this has made a market for Korean food, there are restaurants exclusively for Korean food, businesses selling packaged kimchi across the nation etc. Markets are influenced by trends, and k-dramas have a sizable influence among the youth of the country, who spend their money more liberally than the rest.

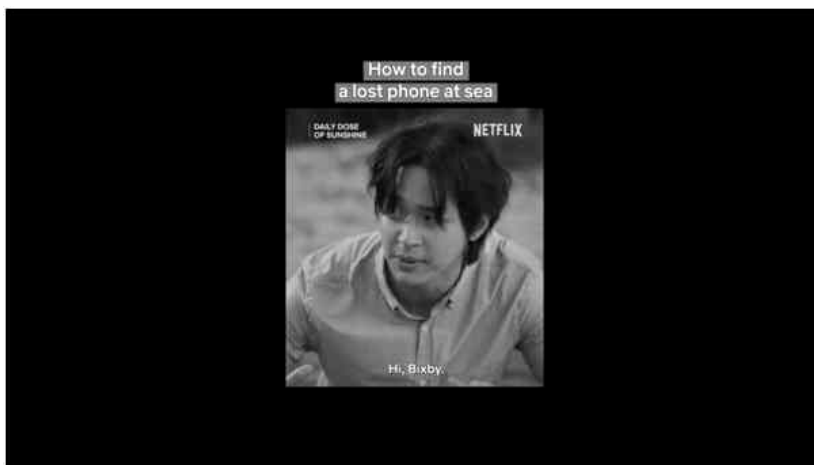


Fig. 4. A scene from the Korean drama *Daily Dose of Sunshine*

Conclusion

The proliferation of Korean content in South-Asia is significant academically to learn the transcultural flow, fandom and identity, emphasizing the soft power of South-Korea. Korean dramas are cultural exports from South Korea, with considerable thought put into their creation to appeal to people across the globe. The dramas do more than influence people's leisure time, but also have a significant hold in shaping shopping habits and even romantic habits, as evident in the Korean ideals of romance and availability of Korean

products in India. Indian audiences are demanding higher-quality content from their own country, highlighting the broader implications for media and cultural studies. We have already seen how Hollywood boosted the image of the United States of America worldwide. Now, with global audiences more open to diverse entertainment, and South Korea claiming a commendable share, the country stands to reap the benefits of its soft power—gaining market share and enhancing its global image. In the long term, soft power serves the function of creating goodwill among foreign audiences and thereby a receptive environment for trade, future policy and cultural exchange.

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Communal Consciousness And The Politics of Gaze In The Malayalam Film *Iyer In Arabia*

Abstract

This paper explores the Malayalam film Iyer in Arabia (2024) as a cultural text that reflects the middle-class communal consciousness in contemporary India. The protagonist Iyer is treated as a symbol of upper-caste morality, illuminating how domestic life and ritual practices reinforce communal norms. Employing gaze theory, the study analyzes key cinematic scenes in the film to demonstrate how middle-class norms regulate social behavior and create communal boundaries in society. By juxtaposing Iyer's patriarchal male gaze with his wife's oppositional gaze, the film reveals how looking becomes a contested site where visual authority and resistance collide within India's communalized culture. This paper argues that Iyer in Arabia reconfigures the male gaze as a communal male gaze, revealing how Hindutva consciousness is reproduced through everyday domestic practices rather than overt political rhetoric.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Oppositional Gaze, Caste System, Patriarchy, Communal Consciousness, WhatsApp Nationalism, Cinema.

Introduction

Communalism in India is most often analyzed through the lens of electoral politics and religious movements. The subtle way in which patriarchal households reproduce communal norms in everyday life is still a less explored area. People, especially men of these households, regulate behavior through moral policing, ritualized practices, and domestic surveillance, which serve to maintain social and caste hierarchies. Cinema plays a crucial role in shaping public imaginaries, especially within a politically polarized nation like India. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze critiques how mainstream cinema privileges a masculine perspective that objectifies women as passive recipients of vision. However, in the context of Indian society, gaze must also be examined through caste, religion, and class. *Iyer in Arabia* presents the protagonist, Iyer, as an upper-caste middle-class man whose deep religious devotion actively affects both family and community behavior. The portrayal of Iyer provides fertile ground for analyzing the male gaze and communal consciousness within domestic spaces. This study applies gaze theory to explore how Iyer's perspective reflects the relationship between social norms and communal morality and how it reproduces caste/religion-based hierarchies.

Iyer in Arabia is a Malayalam movie released in 2024. The film, directed by M.A. Nishad, has a runtime of 2 hours and 20 minutes. The main characters are *Srinivas Iyer* (Mukesh), *Jhansi Rani* (Urvashi), *Rahul* (Dhyan Srinivasan), *Subair Haji* (Alencier),

Sara (Durga Krishna) and *Rashid (Maniyanpilla Raju)*. The story revolves around the orthodox Brahmin man named Srinivas Iyer and his family. One day, he learns that his son Rahul, who has secured a job in the Middle East, is in love with a Muslim girl. Unsettled by the news, he decides to travel to the Middle East to put an end to their relationship. This leads to a series of events which challenge his beliefs, leading him to rethink his values. This paper argues that *Iyer in Arabia* extends classical gaze theory by revealing how the male gaze in contemporary Indian Cinema functions not merely as a mechanism of patriarchal visual pleasure, but as communal gaze that regulates religious identity, caste hierarchy and moral belonging through everyday domestic practices.

Iyer's Worldview and Communal Consciousness

The character of Iyer in *Iyer in Arabia* represents the upper-caste middle-class man whose perception of the world is mediated not by lived experience but by digital and religious discourses. For example, Iyer reads global politics and local events alike through the filter of religion, producing a worldview that is extremely communal. At the beginning of the film, he is shown engrossed in his phone, giving the audience a glimpse of a WhatsApp group titled "*Charitra Bharat*". He is at a hospital and when the nurse calls out "*Srinivas*", he does not respond. When she approaches, he clarifies, "My name is *Srinivas Iyer*" revealing his disappointment at the erasure of his caste name in the first call (Iyer in Arabia 00:08:35- 00:08:42). The protagonist, Iyer, functions as the moral anchor of the household, embodying the Brahminical values of discipline, control, and propriety. His gaze is not neutral; instead, it functions as a form of cultural policing. Mukesh's gaze in *Iyer in Arabia* can be read through the structural insights offered by Laura Mulvey, not necessarily in terms of erotic pleasure, but in terms of how cinema organizes patriarchal visual authority. His gaze functions as a disciplining mechanism that situates the woman's body within a regime of surveillance, judgement, and social control. While the patriarchal gaze, as theorized by Mulvey operates primarily through gendered visual pleasure and control over the female body, the communal male gaze extends this mechanism into the terrain of religious and caste identity. The communal male gaze does not simply objectify women; it reads bodies as signs of cultural purity, religious allegiance, and caste morality, thereby transforming looking into an act of ideological surveillance. In *Iyer in Arabia*, Iyer's gaze functions less as erotic mastery and more as a regulatory force that polices communal boundaries within domestic space.

The man controls the film fantasy and emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra diegetic tendencies represented by women as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. (Mulvey 20)

Mulvey's theorization of gaze is relevant here because it emphasizes the asymmetrical

power dynamics embedded in the look of the male protagonist. Here, the male character embodies the contemporary patriarchal Hindu subject shaped by social media-circulated propaganda and communalized ideologies. In the Indian context, such a gaze is further intensified by communal anxieties that determine how female bodies are interpreted as bearers of cultural purity. Iyer's manner of looking is thus not merely patriarchal but deeply communalized: it encodes assumptions about religious identity, cultural belonging, and the policing of women who are perceived to transgress normative expectations. By framing his gaze as part of a communal male gaze, the scene reveals how visibility becomes a tool for reinforcing collective hierarchies, where the act of looking itself becomes an extension of communal authority rather than an expression of individual desire.

Iyer's perception of society is largely structured by digitally mediated knowledge rather than living reality. His persistent attention to WhatsApp groups and television news constructs an imagined world in which the Hindu upper-caste identity is perpetually threatened by minorities. His gaze transforms everyday experiences, including domestic relationships into sites of constant judgment, control, and exclusion. It reinforces the idea that social superiority is maintained through who is allowed to be seen and whose existence must be controlled or erased. The camera often reinforces this by showing him glued to his phone, nodding or reacting with great enthusiasm to news related to his community. In these moments, Iyer embodies what can be called the middle-class communal male gaze. This way of seeing reaffirms upper-caste moral superiority while projecting anxieties onto minorities and outsiders. Although he is educated, his sources of knowledge are WhatsApp groups, mainstream television news, and hearsay within his community. This curated information diet creates a paranoid and moralizing gaze, transforming everyday life into a space of suspicion, surveillance, and policing. Donald Lowe further substantiates this claim in "*The Bourgeois Perception*" where he asserts that electronic media reorganizes social reality by transforming mediated information into events that are experienced as immediate and significant. In contemporary political culture, public life is increasingly encountered through images rather than direct experience, allowing media narratives to define what is perceived as real. Such mediated perception produces a controlled and moralized understanding of society, where reality itself is filtered through publicity and repetition rather than lived interaction (Lowe 139).

The film *Iyer in Arabia* critiques the male gaze in Indian society. The gaze is mocked, exaggerated, and ultimately shown as inadequate in dealing with modern realities. This creates a counter gaze, where viewers laugh at him rather than at the women or minorities he mistreats. The notion of male gaze here does not operate as a cinematic gaze directed at women for pleasure as Mulvey described. Instead, it functions as Iyer's communal and patriarchal vision that seeks to police relationships and identities. This movie, as a satire, exposes and ridicules the male gaze, turning it into a critical reflection rather than visual

pleasure. There is an instance in the movie when Srinivas Iyer's friend Rashid visits, Iyer mentions that he has become a vegetarian and then declares "I am a Brahmin who upholds Indian culture" (*Iyer in Arabia* 00:41:00-00:41:07). According to Berger, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger 8). This part of the movie reveals that it is the surroundings and media that shaped him into a communal patriarch.

In contrast, Iyer's wife represents an oppositional gaze, a way of looking that resists and reinterprets dominant narratives. Bell hooks' theorization of the oppositional gaze provides a critical lens through which one can understand acts of looking that resist dominant structures of representation. In extending Bell Hooks's idea of the oppositional gaze to an Indian patriarchal setting, Iyer's wife represents the female spectators who look back at the male gaze that seeks to confine her. Her assertive resistance within the domestic and social context inspires the female audience and demonstrates that the oppositional gaze can operate wherever patriarchal authority seeks to control and silence women. In the introductory scene, Jhansi Rani is presented as the daughter of a history professor who named her after the legendary queen Jhansi Rani, known for defending her land. She is shown signing autographs and is talking to interviewers. The camera closes in on a book resting on the table beside her, bringing it into sharp focus. The book title highlights her identity as an atheist, creating a clear contrast with her devout husband and establishing her as an independent, rational and self-assured woman (*Iyer in Arabia* 00:10:31-00:10:33). Her perception destabilizes the authority of Iyer's gaze and carves out an alternative vision of the world that refuses to narrow itself down into communal paranoia. In one scene, Srinivas Iyer buys a cow due to his *Gomata* obsession and Jhansi Rani strongly objects to this. Her protest ultimately convinces Iyer to get rid of the cow, highlighting her assertive opinions and agency.

Given the context of class exploitation, and racist and sexist domination, it has only been through resistance, struggle, reading, and looking "against the grain," that black women have been able to value our process of looking enough to publicly name it.

...

Identifying with neither the phallogentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as lack, critical black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation. (Hooks 126)

While Hooks develops this concept in the context of Black women whose gaze disrupts white patriarchal spectatorship, her framework is equally generative for analyzing resistant forms of looking within other hierarchical visual cultures. In *Iyer in Arabia*, Urvashi's gaze functions as a subversive interruption to the communalized male

gaze that marks the Indian visual field, where women are not only gendered but also culturally and communally coded through the politics of looking. By refusing to submit to that stereotype, Urvashi performs a mode of seeing that parallels Hooks' insistence on a gaze that is assertive, knowing, and critically positioned. Thus, her look becomes an oppositional act, not merely against patriarchal authority but also against the communal hegemonies embedded in Indian spectatorship. It is within this expanded framework of resistance that Hooks' insight on the politics of looking becomes crucial.

While Iyer absorbs and reproduces the ideology of WhatsApp nationalism, his wife questions its validity, through practical reasoning. Her gaze is not passive, instead it actively disrupts Iyer's worldview. When Iyer buys products such as cow urine from "*Hridanjali*" (a brand that satirizes *Patanjali*), he reaches for his purse to tip the delivery boy. However, when the delivery boy introduces himself as *Sharafuddin*, revealing his Muslim identity, he retracts the tip and puts the money back in the purse. Although Jhansi Rani initially appears pleased at his intention to tip, the camera captures her disappointment at his prejudiced reaction (*Iyer in Arabia*, 00:17:40-00:17:46). Jhansi Rani embodies Hooks' oppositional gaze as she continuously challenges the patriarchal-cultural authority of her husband. Her atheistic stance, academic background, and humor destabilize the "sanctity" of the Brahminical household. In moments such as the cow-buying scene and the delivery-boy incident, the camera positions her as the spectator who unmasks hypocrisy in Iyer's performance of religiosity. Furthermore, Bell Hooks' idea of the Oppositional Gaze demonstrates how marginalized subjects actively resist dominant visual regimes imposed upon them. This resistant mode of seeing dismantles normalized power structures within the household and society.

The tension between Iyer's male gaze and Jhansi Rani's oppositional gaze is especially visible in the scene where Jhansi Rani appears in an *Abaya* and Iyer is visibly shocked (01:51:00-01:51:09). His reaction is not merely personal discomfort but an assertion of the patriarchal, communal male gaze that polices how a woman should appear, behave and belong. In contrast, Jhansi Rani's unapologetic attitude functions as a counter gaze: she momentarily disrupts his entitlement to define her identity and challenges the cultural boundaries he believes he controls. Yet despite these moments of resistance, the narrative keeps her within his domestic structure, revealing the fact that despite how powerful her oppositional gaze is, it is still not fully liberatory. M.A Nishad employs Jhansi Rani as a tool to critique the patriarchy embedded in the communal consciousness of the Indian middle-class man embodied by Srinivas Iyer. In the climax, Jhansi Rani speaks to her son about how her husband regarded her solely as a caretaker, reducing her role to that of a servant for his child. Although Jhansi Rani is shown as a strong-willed woman with a bold presence, she remains confined within the household ruled by the communal patriarch. She herself admits that she is not treated as an equal partner. This reveals that her apparent strength does not free her; she is still trapped inside the very structure she cannot leave.

The film also highlights tensions within the Hindu community. When Iyer's friend Jaganraj visits his sister's house, she serves tea in different glasses: a brass glass for Srinivas Iyer and a steel glass for Jaganraj who belongs to Nair community. And Jaganraj remarks, "I hope I get reborn as a Brahmin in my next life" expressing his own internalization of caste hierarchies (*Iyer in Arabia* 00:25:48-00:26:00). In another scene, Jaganraj refuses to let Sahadevan, the security guard, sit with them because he belongs to a lower caste community. Thus, gaze in *Iyer in Arabia* extends beyond gender and is rooted in communal morality, caste anxiety, and mediated nationalism. The caste hierarchy within Hindu communities is never merely ideological, because it materializes through objects and everyday gestures. Serving tea in different glasses or refusing to allow a lower-caste man to sit within the same space exemplifies what Isabel Wilkerson said in her book titled "*Caste: The Lies that Divide us*". According to her, caste operates as an ancient system of social ranking that precedes modern racial categories and embeds itself deeply within everyday life (Wilkerson 67). Rather than functioning only as an abstract ideology, caste is sustained through routine practices, gestures and modes of interaction that normalize hierarchy and make inequality appear natural and inevitable.

M.A Nishad balances the film's critique by incorporating elements of Muslim and Christian communal perspectives. For instance, when Iyer visits the middle east, the audience encounters Koya, who is shown encouraging conversions to Islam alongside Thomas Kutty, depicted as a devout adherent of the church. The audience is also introduced to Sara's (Rahul's love interest) father Subair Haji, who initially appears progressive. However, by the end of the film, it becomes clear that he is less liberal than he claims, revealing himself instead as a devout Muslim. The film concludes with both Subair Haji and Srinivas Iyer recognizing their mistakes and prejudices, ultimately giving consent to Rahul and Sara's marriage.

Conclusion

Iyer in Arabia reveals that communal consciousness is produced and maintained by the upper-caste middle class men through domestic rituals, moral authority, and hierarchical power. While the director's intention to appeal to multiple religious groups softens the film's satirical edge, the representation of upper-caste middle-class morality and gaze remains central. The film demonstrates that communalism today is reproduced less through overt religious violence but more through middle class domesticity and shows us that communalism extends beyond politics, embedding itself in everyday domestic and cultural practices. Urvashi and Mukesh, in their respective roles, did justice to their characters, and the oppositional dynamics between their characters is central to the film's humor and critique. While Iyer attempts to stabilize his identity through borrowed communal narratives, his wife's perception insists on the instability of those narratives, reminding the audience that alternative, critical ways of seeing remain possible even within the same domestic and class framework. By reconfiguring the male gaze as a communal-caste gaze, the film invites viewers to reflect on how banal bigotry

sustains structural inequality. *Iyer in Arabia* thus contributes to contemporary political cinema by exposing the hidden mechanisms through which Hindutva consciousness circulates within "respectable" middle-class spaces.

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Becoming Otherwise : Decolonial Memory, and the Reconfiguration of Identity

Abstract

This paper examines a central problem in identity theory: the persistence of Eurocentric models that conceptualise identity as fixed, stable, and regulatory. Such frameworks shape academic and political discourse through anthropocentric assumptions that categorise subjects within rigid cultural and epistemic boundaries. In response, the paper proposes a generative, decolonial approach to identity formation by bringing memory studies into dialogue with poststructuralist thought and non-Western philosophical traditions.

The study argues that identity does not exist as an inherent property or predetermined cultural attribute but emerges as an ongoing process shaped by memory, affect, embodiment, and relational becoming. Memory—understood as a dynamic practice of encoding, narrating, and continually reworking experience—offers a critical site for tracing how subjectivities are produced, constrained, and potentially transformed.

Using queer identity as a focal example, the paper shows how non-normative subjectivities expose the limitations of Western categorical thought and instead foreground identity as fluid, multiple, and continuously in formation. Queer becoming highlights the roles of agency, affective intensities, and embodied mobility in the generative production of selfhood.

To move beyond Western ontological limits, the paper turns to Indian philosophical traditions—including Buddhist, Vedāntic, Sāṃkhyan, and Jain perspectives—which emphasise relationality, non-duality, and processual understandings of being. When read alongside subaltern epistemologies, these frameworks offer a decolonial orientation in which identity is understood as emergent rather than fixed. Ultimately, the paper calls for shifting from identity as recognition to identity as formation.

Keywords: Decolonial Memory Studies, Generative Identity, Nomadic Subjectivity, Affective Becoming, Postcolonial Ontology, Assemblage and Multiplicity

Memory studies, when situated within a decolonial framework, constitute a critical methodological and ethical intervention into the formation of historical consciousness and identity. By foregrounding the silenced experiences and epistemologies of communities marginalized under Eurocentric regimes of knowledge and power, such approaches expose the erasures, distortions, and structural violences that underpin official histories (Trouillot; Hartman). Decolonial memory work thus challenges

dominant historiographical narratives by illuminating how colonial systems produced and sustained hierarchical identity categories designed to regulate, classify, and control populations (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern*).

Within this terrain, identity cannot be understood as a stable or essential property. Instead, it must be approached as a generative and continually emergent construct shaped through dynamic interactions among memory, affect, embodiment, and socio-historical conditions (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*; Braidotti). This processual understanding necessitates a re-evaluation of normative frameworks that have historically grounded identity in rationalized, anthropocentric conceptions of the subject.

This article intervenes in these debates by proposing a de-conceptualization of identity through the lens of queer subjectivity—an exemplary site where the inadequacies of fixed Western identity schemas become most visible. Engaging with post structuralist critiques of subject formation (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Butler), the paper argues that queer becoming exposes the limits of Eurocentric taxonomies and opens toward a more expansive, decolonial, and generative account of selfhood.

Conceptualizing Identity

Identity constitutes a multidimensional construct encompassing the internalised perceptions, evaluative beliefs, personality dispositions, autobiographical experiences, and social memberships through which individuals negotiate their place in the world (Erikson, *Childhood and Society*; Tajfel & Turner). These components operate dynamically, shaped by cultural, historical, and interpersonal forces that continually reconfigure how subjects understand themselves.

Classical theories often imagine identity as coherent, unified, and grounded in rational self-awareness. The self, to them, denotes the reflexive and phenomenologically accessible awareness of one's own existence as a coherent, thinking, and experiencing subject (Descartes; Hobbes). Philosophical traditions have long interrogated this reflexivity: Sartre's existentialism positions the self as a project defined through freely chosen actions, whereas Heidegger situates selfhood within the ontological structures of Being-in-the-world, emphasising authenticity, situatedness, and the temporal unfolding of existence. However, models that anchor identity in stable personality traits or enduring group memberships fail to capture the multiplicity and instability that characterize lived experience.

These philosophical insights find resonance and elaboration within psychological discourse. Freudian psychoanalysis conceptualises the self as an intrapsychic configuration shaped by unconscious drives and internal conflicts (*The Ego and the Id*). Developmental theorists such as Erikson (Identity) foreground identity formation as a psychosocial process negotiated across life stages, marked by crises that enable the integration of past experiences with emerging aspirations. Contemporary social identity

theory further clarifies how collective affiliations, group dynamics, and intergroup relations contribute to the construction and negotiation of identity boundaries (Tajfel & Turner). Advances in cognitive neuroscience have expanded this discourse by examining the neural correlates of self-referential processing and emotional appraisal, illustrating how the brain constructs and maintains a sense of personal continuity across time (LeDoux). Taken together, these perspectives illuminate selfhood as a complex, evolving synthesis of subjective awareness, sociocultural embeddedness, and neurocognitive processes. Recasting identity in this way highlights the limitations of normative Western frameworks that privilege autonomy and coherence, and it opens space for alternative ways of being that exceed fixed cultural or epistemic categories. A generative approach understands identity as continually reconstituted through interpretive and relational processes, opening space for alternative ways of being that exceed fixed cultural, social, or epistemic boundaries. This conceptual ground sets the stage for examining how memory, narrative, and affective life participate in producing selfhood as a dynamic, emergent phenomenon.

Memory, Narrative, and Selfhood

The relationship between memory and selfhood raises a central problem: if memory is not a stable record of the past but a dynamic, reconstructive activity, then the self cannot be understood as a coherent, continuous entity. Classical accounts often locate selfhood in continuity—an assumption rooted in Cartesian rationalism, which posits the self as a coherent, thinking substance (Descartes). In contrast, contemporary theorists argue that memory does not simply preserve a stable self but actively participates in producing it. This shift begins with Paul Ricoeur's influential claim that narrative functions as the mediating structure through which temporal experience is configured into coherent identity. According to Ricoeur (*Oneself*), “narrative identity” emerges from the ongoing process of emplotment¹, through which the subject interprets and reinterprets its lived past. Selfhood, therefore, is not an essence but an interpretive project.

Narrative offers one means of producing this coherence. By linking past experiences into structured accounts, narrative provides a provisional continuity that allows subjects to imagine themselves as consistent across time. Psychological and neuroscientific insights unsettle the idea of memory as a fixed repository of past events. Yet psychological and neuroscientific research shows that remembering is never a simple retrieval of what “really happened.” Freud demonstrates that memory is always inflected with desire, repression, and revision, making it fundamentally reconstructive rather than archival (*The Interpretation of Dreams*). Contemporary research in neuroscience similarly argues that memory undergoes continual reconsolidation, generating new affective and cognitive associations each time it is recalled (Dudai). Selective memory shapes coherence and agency, while memory reconsolidation allows identity to adapt and evolve (LeDoux). Lacan's mirror stage further under scores the relational construction of

selfhood (Lacan). Memory functions as both retrospective and anticipatory, embedding affective and experiential dimensions of identity (Massumi, *Parables*). Such findings reinforce the idea that the self is a dynamic outcome of mnemonic processes² rather than a pre-given entity.

This instability challenges the assumption that the self can be grounded in linear storytelling alone. For poststructuralist thinkers namely Deleuze and Guattari, identity arises not from linear narratives but from “assemblages”³ of affect, perception, and relational intensities (*A Thousand Plateaus*). Rosi Braidotti extends this view through her notion of the “nomadic subject”⁴, a figure whose identity is constituted through movement, difference, and affective becoming rather than stable categories (*Nomadic Subjects*). Memory, within this frame work, is not a stabilizing force but a field of generative potential that continually reconfigures the subject. The self emerges in moments of connection, rupture, and reconfiguration rather than in adherence to a singular life-narrative.

Non-Western philosophical traditions accentuate this fluidity by decentering the very notion of a permanent self. Buddhist conceptions of *smṛti* emphasise mindful awareness as a mode of attending to the flux of experience, thereby decentering any notion of a permanent self. Vedāntic and Sāṃkhyan traditions likewise differentiate between the transient contents of memory and the deeper ontological ground of consciousness (*ātman*, *puruṣa*), challenging the conflation of selfhood with narrative continuity. These perspectives foreground a generative core of being that precedes narrative articulation, offering a decolonial counterpoint to Western epistemologies. Instead of equating identity with remembered continuity, they distinguish between transient mental events and deeper forms of awareness, suggesting that selfhood may arise from processes that precede or exceed narrative organization. Such views offer a critical counterpoint to Western narrative-centric models and open space for alternative understandings of how selfhood is constituted.

Together, these traditions indicate that the self is best understood as an emergent, generative process shaped by memory, affect, and relationality. Memory does not reproduce a coherent identity but participates in its continual creation, making selfhood a dynamic field of becoming rather than a fixed narrative artifact.

Deleuzian and Poststructuralist Perspectives

Poststructuralist theory marks a decisive departure from classical models of identity that rely on coherence, interiority, and representation. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida unsettle the very grounds upon which the modern subject is constructed, arguing that identity is not an originary essence but an effect of discursive, affective, and material processes. This reconceptualisation directly challenges the Eurocentric assumption that identity expresses a stable inner core and

instead frames it as something continually produced through the forces that act upon and traverse the subject.

Foucault's analysis of subject formation demonstrates that the self emerges through historically contingent regimes of power and knowledge rather than through innate or transcendental structures. His concept of "subjectivation" designates the processes through which individuals come to recognise themselves as subjects within disciplinary and biopolitical formations (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*). Thus, identity is always implicated in systems of regulation and normalisation.

Deleuze and Guattari extend this critique by rejecting the idea of the subject as a unified, interiorised entity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they propose "assemblage" (agencement) as a non-hierarchical, relational framework wherein identity is constituted through heterogeneous connections among bodies, affects, expressions, and socio-material forces. An assemblage is not a structure but a provisional convergence of intensities—always mobile, always in transformation. Within this ontology, identity becomes a "multiplicity," a concept Deleuze defines as an open, variable field that resists being reduced to a single organising principle.

This shift in thinking gives rise to the Deleuzian notion of "becoming," which describes processes of change that are not directed toward fixed endpoints or archetypes. Becoming situates identity as emergent and relational—as something continuously produced through encounters rather than something possessed. Central to this process is their redefinition of desire, which they describe not as a lack, following the psychoanalytic tradition, but as a productive and generative force that creates connections and drives transformation. Desire "assembles" rather than compensates; it produces reality by forging new relations and new ways of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 26). Likewise, the concept of deterritorialization refers to the processes through which fixed identities, social norms, and representational structures lose their rigidity. Deterritorialization disrupts established "territories" of meaning, enabling components of the assemblage to break away and reconfigure in novel formations (Deleuze and Guattari 508–10). Through continuous movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, identity becomes an open-ended, dynamic process of becoming, not a predetermined category.

Rosi Braidotti extends this framework into feminist theory through the "nomadic subject," a figure who resists the stability of identity categories by embracing transversality⁵, affect, and embodied mobility (*Nomadic Subjects*). She foregrounds multiplicity as a constitutive dimension of subjectivity, arguing that the self must be understood not as a unified or essential entity but as a *constellation of heterogeneous, intersecting positions* that shift across time and context (Braidotti) affirming fragmentation and discontinuity as productive rather than pathological. Identity, in this perspective, is an event: a practice of continual differentiation. She opines that identity is

shaped through the body's relational encounters with socio-political, technological, and environmental forces (Braidotti) reinforcing the material and embodied dimensions of subject formation. Rather than merely acknowledging fluidity, she conceptualizes becoming-other as a *continuous ethical project*, one that resists assimilation into fixed identity categories and instead embraces movement, transition, and the generative potential of difference (Braidotti). In this respect, nomadic subjectivity extends Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of becoming into a politically engaged model of subject formation.

Derrida's theory of *différance*⁷ further destabilises the coherence of the subject by arguing that meaning—and by extension identity—is generated through endless deferral and relational difference (*Of Grammatology*). The “self” is thus a trace, constituted through what it is not, and never fully present to itself. Post structuralism therefore decentres subjectivity by revealing its dependence on unstable systems of signification, discursive fields, and power structures.

Together, Deleuzian and poststructuralist approaches offer a radical reimagining of identity. By foregrounding multiplicity, affect, relationality, and the instability of signification, they position identity not as a stable category but as a dynamic, generative process that resists closure. Such thinking provides a foundation for understanding identity as a continual event rather than an ontological given. It exposes the limits of Western humanist models that rely on coherence and hierarchical categorisation, and instead positions identity as an emergent field shaped through encounters and intensities. This orientation aligns with the paper's broader argument for a generative, decolonial model of selfhood—one that resists fixity and embraces the fluid, affective, and relational nature of becoming.

Decolonial Reorientation and Eastern Philosophical Insights

Decolonial inquiry challenges the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and questions how colonial modernity has shaped prevailing assumptions about identity, agency, and selfhood. Rather than treating Western frameworks as universal, a decolonial orientation calls for renewed engagement with intellectual traditions that offer different ontological and epistemic starting points. Their emphasis on relationality, interdependence, and the non-unitary nature of the self, challenges Western metaphysical commitments to individualism, interiority, and substance-based identity (Radhakrishnan ; Coomaraswamy).

These traditions converge in challenging the Western premise that identity is anchored in an autonomous, self-transparent subject. Within Advaita Vedānta, the assertion that the self (ātman) is fundamentally non-dual and continuous with the universal (brahman) destabilizes the Cartesian legacy of selfhood as autonomous, bounded, and self-transparent (Śaṅkara 112–18). Buddhist philosophies further radicalize this critique

through the doctrine of *anātman*, which posits the self as a never-shifting aggregate of processes rather than an inherent essence, aligning closely with contemporary post structuralist theories of subject formation (Rahula 57–62). *Sāṃkhya* philosophy conceptualizes *puruṣa* as the pure witness-consciousness that remains distinct from *prakṛti*, the domain of material and psychological processes reframing consciousness as passive witnesshood rather than active domination, offering a counterpoint to Western will-centered models of agency (Larson 123–30). This sharply diverges from Western notions of selfhood in which consciousness is typically linked to cognitive, narrative, or psychological structures. Similarly, Jain philosophy posits *jīva* as a sentient, eternal substance endowed with consciousness and agency. Although karmic matter obscures its purity, the *jīva* is understood as inherently capable of liberation through ethical discipline and self-realization (Sharma 131–48).

These perspectives do more than critique Western concepts; they offer generative resources for rethinking identity as emergent, relational, and grounded in experiential processes that precede representation. In this sense, Indian philosophical frameworks align with the broader argument of this paper: that decolonial thought is not merely oppositional but creatively reorienting, enabling models of identity that exceed Eurocentric categories. By foregrounding interdependence, non-duality, and processual being, these traditions provide conceptual tools for understanding identity as a dynamic and generative field rather than a fixed or self-identical entity.

Memory Studies as a Decolonial Tool

Memory studies, when approached from a decolonial perspective, offer a crucial method for challenging the epistemic structures through which Eurocentric modernity has defined and regulated identity. It operates as a critical instrument to recover, foreground, and valorize the experiences and voices of communities historically silenced or marginalized by colonial and Eurocentric hegemonies (Trouillot 26–30; Hartman 6–8). By interrogating dominant historical narratives, this field exposes the mechanisms through which identity categories were constructed, instrumentalized, and hierarchized to maintain systems of control (Spivak, 271–72). Such analyses reveal that memory is not merely a repository of the past but an active, dynamic process through which communities can assert agency, reclaim subjectivity, and reconstruct cultural and historical continuity (Connerton 1–18). It functions as a mechanism for acknowledgment, resistance, and healing (Hartman, 2008).

Decolonial memory studies emphasize the relational and performative dimensions of remembering. They challenge the objectivity and universality claimed by colonial historiographies, demonstrating that historical knowledge is often partial, selective, and embedded within power structures (Goswami 45–49). By engaging with counter-narratives, mnemonic practices enable communities to articulate experiences of trauma,

resistance, and resilience, providing epistemic and ethical redress to the silenced and subaltern (Hinton 73–75).

Furthermore, memory studies intersect with identity formation by revealing the complex interplay between personal, social, and collective recollections. The act of remembering becomes both a process of self-reflexivity and a site of political intervention, disrupting hegemonic epistemologies and fostering intercultural dialogue (Ricoeur, *Memory*, 112–15; Assmann 53–56). Through this lens, memory emerges not merely as recollection but as a generative tool: a means of cultivating consciousness, challenging dominant paradigms, and facilitating the ongoing decolonization of knowledge and subjectivity.

Queer Identity as Generative Paradigm

Queer identity provides a compelling theoretical framework for understanding identity as a generative, processual phenomenon rather than a fixed or essential category. It disrupts classificatory systems that depend on rigid distinctions, revealing instead how selfhood is shaped through negotiations with cultural norms, interpersonal environments, and affective experience. Rather than an essence to be discovered, identity becomes something enacted and continually revised. In this sense, queer subjectivity exposes the contingency of all identity categories and highlights the productive tensions that arise when individuals inhabit non normative or shifting positionalities through ongoing negotiations shaped by cultural, interpersonal, and affective contexts (Braidotti 5–7). In this sense, queer identity foregrounds relationality, movement, and the transformative possibilities inherent in the processes of becoming.

The notion of queer becoming, drawn from poststructuralist and Deleuzian theories of subjectivity, further illuminates the generativity of identity formation. Within this paradigm, queerness is understood not as a pre-given ontological state but as an enactment of desire, affective intensities, and embodied relational practices. Selfhood emerges dynamically through encounters with others, with institutions, and with the discursive fields that organize social life (Massumi, *A Users Guide*, 35–37). Such a perspective shifts attention away from identity as a stable signifier and toward identity as an unfolding assemblage of forces, affects, and situated practices. Queer becoming, therefore, foregrounds agency not as autonomous self-determination but as a responsive, affectively charged engagement with the world.

Rosi Braidotti's formulation of nomadic subjectivity amplifies this generative dimension by conceptualizing identity as open-ended, non-unitary, and continually reconstituted through processes of transformation (Braidotti 3–6). The nomadic subject is not anchored to a single coherent identity but traverses multiple positionalities, inhabiting difference without resolving it into stable categories. When applied to queer identity, this model underscores how queer lives are actively produced through practices of self-fashioning, affective attunement, and communal world-making. Queerness becomes an

active mode of relational production, one that contests normative modes of belonging while cultivating new ethical and political possibilities for living otherwise.

This generative model challenges ontological assumptions that treat identity as stable, essential, or singular. Instead, queer identity functions as a site of continuous creation, interpretive openness, and ethical engagement (Jagose 11–13; Ricoeur 112). It reveals how subjectivity is always in flux, shaped by power yet capable of resisting and reconfiguring the terms of its own intelligibility. By centering queer subjectivity, the framework of generative identity illuminates the transformative capacities of selfhood itself. Queerness is thus not merely a marginalized or oppositional identity category; it serves as a critical lens for theorizing the dynamic, creative, and decolonial potential of all forms of human subjectivity (Butler 2; Assmann 53–56).

When situated within a generative decolonial framework, Queerness offers a productive vantage point from which to rethink the grounds of subject formation. Rather than functioning as a stable classificatory label, queer subjectivity operates as a fluid and relational modality that unsettles the hierarchical structures produced through Eurocentric epistemologies (Lugones 742; Mignolo 124). Its emphasis on multiplicity, affect, and embodied agency aligns with poststructuralist critiques of fixed identity categories, foregrounding selfhood as an emergent process shaped through ongoing encounters and negotiations (Butler 25; Deleuze and Guattari 160). Within decolonial thought, queer becoming further exposes the creative potential of non-normative experiences to reclaim subjugated histories, disrupt normative ontologies, and expand the conceptual terrain through which lived realities may be articulated (Puar 206; Muñoz 97). In this sense, queer identity functions not merely as a site of resistance but as a generative locus of epistemic renewal, modelling subjectivity as a continuous practice of becoming rather than a predetermined essence.

Placed in dialogue with Indian philosophical traditions, this generative paradigm aligns with longstanding non-essentialist understandings of selfhood. Buddhist thought, particularly the doctrines of *anātman* (non-self) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), challenges substance-based metaphysics by framing identity as contingent, composite, and continually emergent—an understanding that resonates with queer conceptions of becoming as an open-ended, non-teleological process (Waldron 68–75). Jain philosophy likewise offers a non-binary epistemic model through *anekāntavāda*, its doctrine of multi-dimensional reality, which affirms plurality and perspectival truth; such a framework parallels queer epistemologies that resist singular narratives and normative closures (Sharma 137–43). Sanskritic systems further contribute to this generative view of identity as discussed previously. Collectively, these traditions reveal longstanding Indian articulations of selfhood grounded in fluidity, interdependence, and transformation. When placed in dialogue with queer theory, they serve as decolonial counter-epistemologies that predate and unsettle Eurocentric assumptions,

demonstrating that queerness operates not merely as an oppositional critique but as an inheritor of generative ontologies embedded in Eastern intellectual histories.

In this expanded understanding, queer identity operates as both critique and method. It interrupts the epistemological certainties of Western identity paradigms while offering alternative modes of becoming rooted in fluidity, multiplicity, and imaginative transformation. As a result, queerness emerges as a generative paradigm that redefines identity as an active, ongoing process—one that is relationally constituted, politically charged, and open to continual reinvention.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that the dominant Western frameworks for understanding identity—whether grounded in humanist coherence, poststructuralist critique, or psychodynamic interiority—remain limited by their reliance on representational categories and their tendency to treat identity as the effect of discourse, memory, or narrative. While poststructuralist becoming and nomadic subjectivity have significantly expanded the conceptual vocabulary for thinking fluidity and transformation, they stop short of offering a fully decolonial account of subject formation, one that attends equally to consciousness, relationality, embodiment, and the lived experience of historically marginalized communities. The original contribution of this article lies in proposing generative identity as a distinct conceptual model that moves beyond both Western essentialisms and Western anti-essentialisms. Generative identity designates the processes through which subjectivity arises not only through discursive or affective encounters but also through pre-conceptual, embodied, and relational modes of becoming that exceed representation. Unlike post structuralist becoming—which foregrounds instability—and unlike nomadic subjectivity—which emphasizes movement across differential positions—generative identity highlights the *productive* and *emergent* forces through which identity is continually created, revised, and reoriented. It frames identity not merely as fluid but as creatively self-organizing, capable of generating new ethical and epistemic possibilities that cannot be reduced to either historical determination or discursive construction.

The integration of Eastern philosophical traditions makes this intervention possible. Indian accounts of non-self, interdependence, multidimensional reality, and witness-consciousness supply ontological resources that allow identity to be theorized as emergent without relying on Western binaries of essence versus construction. These traditions contribute a view of subjectivity as relationally constituted yet irreducible to discourse; affectively mediated yet not confined to narrative; continuous yet non-substantialist. When placed in dialogue with queer theory, these insights shift queerness from an oppositional category to a method of world-making—a framework for understanding how identities come into being through creativity, relational attunement, and decolonial epistemic renewal.

Taken together, these moves position generative identity as more than a theoretical refinement: it offers a methodological pivot for humanities research. It encourages scholars to approach identity not as an object to be classified or deconstructed but as a process to be traced, nurtured, and interpreted. It foregrounds the *productive* aspects of subject formation—how identities invent, revise, and sustain worlds of meaning—and thus opens pathways for analyzing marginalized histories, mnemonic practices, aesthetic forms, and collective movements as sites of generative transformation rather than as mere residues of oppression. This provides a new lens for reading archives, interpreting cultural texts, and understanding community practices outside the constraints of Eurocentric schemas.

Future scholarship can extend this framework in several directions. Empirically, it invites investigations into how generative identity manifests in queer, diasporic, indigenous, and subaltern memory practices. Conceptually, it calls for further elaboration of how pre-discursive and embodied forms of knowing contribute to identity formation across cultural contexts. Methodologically, it challenges the humanities to develop analytical tools that can capture emergence, relationality, and transformation rather than static categories or representational taxonomies. And ethically, it opens a space for envisioning identities not defined by lack or deviance but by their generative capacity to reimagine subjectivity, history, and community.

By articulating identity as generative, this article offers a decolonial reorientation that does not merely critique Western paradigms but expands the conceptual terrain through which subjectivity can be understood. Generative identity thus stands as a framework for interpreting how selves are continually made—and remade—in ways that are imaginative, relational, and politically transformative.

Endnote:

1. Emplotment- The term is most prominently theorized by Paul Ricoeur, who describes emplotment as the act of “grasping together” heterogeneous elements into a meaningful whole, thereby producing narrative identity
2. Mnemonic processes-It refer to the cognitive, cultural, and social mechanisms through which memories are formed, stored, retrieved, and transmitted. In psychological discourse, the term encompasses encoding, consolidation, and reconsolidation— dynamic operations that continually reshape memory rather than preserve it as a fixed trace.
3. Assemblage: It describes the dynamic configurations of heterogeneous elements— material, affective, discursive, and social—that come together temporarily to produce modes of being, identity, and action. Deleuze and Guattari develop the concept to challenge organismic or hierarchical models of subject formation.

4. Nomadic Subjectivity: It is a conceptual figure developed by Rosi Braidotti to describe a form of subjectivity that resists fixed identities, linear histories, and territorially bounded modes of selfhood.
5. Transversality: Originating in the work of Félix Guattari, transversality describes the connective flows that cut across institutions, identities, and psychic fields, enabling new forms of collective and subjective transformation
6. Embodied mobility: It refers to the ways in which movement— physical, affective, and experiential— is lived and expressed through the body, emphasizing that mobility is not merely spatial but also relational and phenomenological. It foregrounds the interdependence of movement, subjectivity, and affect, revealing how identities— particularly non-normative ones—are formed and transformed through the body's dynamic interactions with its environment.
7. Différance: It is a term coined by Jacques Derrida, denotes the dual process through which meaning in language is produced not by stable reference but through continual deferral and differentiation.

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Bittersweet Roots : The Dialectic of Loss in Kanafani's *Sad Oranges* and Hope in Katouh's *Lemon Trees*

Abstract

Building on the symbolic tradition of natural imagery in Arab literature, this paper examines the role of citrus trees in two modern Arab narratives: Ghassan Kanafani's "The Land of Sad Oranges" and Zoulfak Katouh's As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow. Through a comparative close reading, the study explores how oranges and lemons function as ecological metaphors for exile, memory, and identity. Drawing on insights from Edward Said's reflections on exile, Michael Marder's conception of plants as witnesses of history, and selective postcolonial ecological perspectives, the paper analyzes how citrus imagery becomes a site where emotional and political loss converge. By tracing how oranges in Kanafani's text evoke the bitterness of uprooting, while lemons in Katouh's novel embody fragile hope and endurance, this study demonstrates how the natural world serves as both witness and participant in the narrative of displacement in the Arab world.

Keywords: Displacement, Middle East Literature, Ghassan Kanafani, Zoulfak Katouh, Citrus Imagery, Orange

Introduction

"Every lemon will bring forth a child, and the lemons will never die out." With this image, Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani transforms the lemon tree into a symbol of continuity and stubborn resilience. In his verse, the lemon becomes a quiet guarantee that life, belonging, and cultural memory will persist despite turmoil. For Qabbani and many other Arab writers shaped by political upheaval, natural elements such as lemon trees, olive branches, and pomegranates become emotional anchors and symbols that hold the weight of identity when history becomes too violent, fragmented, or uncertain for ordinary language to carry.

Writers who have lived through exile, occupation, or the loss of homeland often turn instinctively to the natural world to express longing in a form that feels both intimate and universal. Landscape becomes a language of its own. In the Palestinian tradition especially, trees and fruits are not merely decorative images but repositories of memory. Mahmoud Darwish's work best illustrates this: the olive tree that "remembers" his ancestors, the pomegranate that stains the horizon, and the fig leaf that shelters memory.

His famous line: “*If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears*” captures the profound emotional entanglement between land and loss. Here, the olive tree becomes a witness to suffering; its very oil imagined as grief. These vegetal images in Darwish's poetry are charged with emotional depth because they speak both to what has endured and to what has been violently taken away.

Edward Said provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this attachment. In *Reflections on Exile*, he describes exile as “the unhealable rift between the self and its true home,” (Said 180) a rupture that transforms even the smallest features of the landscape into potent symbols of belonging. For displaced communities, land is not only a geographical space but a structure of feeling—something carried internally through memory, scent, texture, and taste. Said's reflections capture why natural symbols recur with such intensity in Arab writing: the land is both wound and inheritance, a place that persists in the imagination even when access to it is lost.

Methodology

This paper situates itself within this symbolic tradition by examining the role of citrus trees in two modern Arab narratives: Ghassan Kanafani's “*The Land of Sad Oranges*” and Zoufka Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*. Through a comparative close reading, the study explores how oranges and lemons function as ecological metaphors for exile, memory, and identity. Drawing on insights from Edward Said's reflections on exile, Michael Marder's conception of plants as witnesses of history, and selective postcolonial ecological perspectives, the paper analyzes how citrus imagery becomes a site where emotional and political loss converge. By tracing how oranges in Kanafani's text evoke the bitterness of uprooting, while lemons in Katouh's novel embody fragile hope and endurance, this study demonstrates how the natural world serves as both witness and participant in the narrative of displacement in the Arab world.

Literature Review

The symbolic resonance of the Palestinian and Syrian landscapes has been extensively documented in Arab literary studies, yet this research seeks to move beyond traditional thematic readings of land as mere national territory. Historically, academic discourse on Ghassan Kanafani has prioritized the sociopolitical and nationalistic dimensions of his prose, with works such as Yousef Alhomouz's “*Diaspora in the Land of Sad Oranges*” examining how Kanafani's narratives register the trauma of the 1948 Palestinian exodus and the resulting state of permanent exile. Similarly, contemporary scholarship has begun to re-examine the political history of these symbols, as seen in Aziz Yafi's “*The Land of Rebellious Oranges*,” which details how the Jaffa orange evolved from an agricultural pride into a weaponized symbol of resistance and a tool for reclaiming stolen history. While these existing works have talked about the land as a setting for struggle or a repository of national identity, they often treat the botanical world as a passive backdrop to human conflict.

This study differentiates itself and fills a critical gap by shifting the analytical focus from a purely human-centric historical view to a vegetal-philosophical lens. By applying Michael Marder's theories on plant memory and historical witnessing, this paper repositions the orange and the lemon as active, material participants in the narrative of displacement. Unlike previous research, this study places Kanafani in a direct, comparative dialogue with Zoufka Katouh's contemporary Syrian narrative. In doing so, it traces the specific evolution of citrus imagery: from the shriveled, passive 'Archive of Trauma' found in Kanafani's oranges to the proactive, scent-driven 'Mnemonic Bridge' of Katouh's lemon trees, which embody an unyielding commitment to a future-oriented resistance.

Theoretical Framework: Citrus as the 'Silent Witness' and Mnemonic Anchor

Michael Marder's work in plant philosophy provides a compelling foundation for understanding trees as narrative carriers of memory. In *Plant-Thinking*, Marder argues that plants are not passive background objects but “vegetal beings who possess memory,” bearing a past within their extended, rooted being. Because plants remain fixed within a specific geography, they become embedded in the social, political, and ecological histories of that place. Their longevity and immobility allow them to “outlast” human generations, accumulating traces of what communities endure whereas human beings are forced to flee or reinvent themselves under external pressures. This contrast endows trees with immense symbolic weight, representing continuity and belonging in a world marked by rupture. In the Levant, citrus trees function not only as agricultural entities but as stable repositories of collective memory, standing as implicit reminders of the life-worlds lost through displacement.

If Marder offers a phenomenological understanding of plants as witnesses, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o provides the postcolonial counterpart: land as the foundation of cultural identity. Ngũgĩ argues that colonialism aims fundamentally at severing people from their land, the archive of their culture and history, resulting in “the loss of the basis of one's being”. When land is seized, the symbolic world of trees and landscapes that structure a people's sense of belonging is also disrupted. Within this framework, trees become embodiments of resistance. Their continued growth in occupied soil serves as a political emblem of cultural persistence and defiance against erasure. In the Palestinian context especially, citrus groves represent a life-world that colonization attempted to uproot but could not fully extinguish.

The emotional force of citrus imagery in narratives of displacement is further illuminated by Aleida Assmann's concept of mnemonic triggers; sensory cues that activate deep, embodied recollections of place. Assmann argues that specific sensory impressions, such as smells, tastes, and textures, function as “condensed memory sites” that instantaneously unlock vast emotional and historical associations. In the Levant, citrus fruits occupy this role with remarkable potency. The sharp scent of an orange or the

bitterness of a lemon leaf can summon entire pre-displacement landscapes, acting as “embodied archives of home”. These portable fragments of land survive in memory even when the physical geography is lost, which serves as powerful mnemonic anchors that recall a land which characters can visualize and taste, yet cannot return to.

The Orange as the Repository of Rupture in Kanafani

“Long before the watermelon became a symbol of Palestinian defiance, another fruit bore the weight of struggle — the orange.” (Yafi) Ghassan Kanafani's “The Land of Sad Oranges” uses the citrus fruit not merely as a detail of the setting but as the central affective symbol that registers the trauma of the 1948 Palestinian exodus, or Nakba. The narrative strategically traces a devastating symbolic arc, moving the orange from an emblem of rooted prosperity to a bearer of unbearable grief and, finally, a shriveled sign of complete loss. This aligns perfectly with Michael Marder's concept of the plant as an “silent witness” absorbing the historical and psychological pain of the displaced community.

Kanafani begins by establishing the inherent, natural wealth of the homeland, where the orange is one of simple abundance and stability before the full reality of exile hits. “Once, Palestinians imagined their future nation with a flag tinged with the color of Jaffa's oranges, a symbol that reflects Palestinians' deep connection to their land.” (Yafi) The initial setting of the story—where the family flees Jaffa for Acre, believing the trip is merely temporary—is underscored by the environment of the coastal region. The narrator notes that “The groves of orange trees followed each other in succession along the side of the road.” (Kanafani 75) This image of ordered, endless abundance reinforces the pre-exile life as a harmonious, stable existence. This ordered succession of fertile land sets the stage for the narrative, creating the “familiar landscape” whose rupture will define the subsequent psychological trauma. This stable, rooted environment is the essential benchmark against which the later devastation is measured.

The orange's transition into an emotionally charged object occurs abruptly at the border post of Ras Naqoura, signaling the definitive severance from the homeland. The sound of the women's weeping as they hold the oranges “I thought then that oranges were something dear and these big, clean fruits were beloved objects in our eyes” (Kanafani 76) immediately imbues the fruit with sentimental, almost sacred value. This sensory moment acts as a powerful mnemonic trigger, instantly unlocking deep emotion.

The trauma is fully internalized when the father, having climbed down from the lorry, gazes at the fruit and “burst into tears like a despairing child.” (Kanafani 76) The text clarifies that the single orange holds the weight of his entire abandoned past, as “all the orange trees that your father had abandoned to the Jews shone in his eyes, all the well-tended orange trees that he had bought one by one were printed on his face.” (Kanafani 76) The fruit, therefore, becomes a portable archive of his identity, professional pride, and

stability, rendering his grief uncontrollable and public—a stark realization of the “unbearable emotional weight” of carrying the lost homeland.

As the family sinks into the refugee reality in Sidon, the orange is inextricably linked to the disintegration of the family's unity and the destruction of the father's role as protector. The mother's desperate plea to “return to the orange trees” (Kanafani 78) equates the groves with home, unity, and a recoverable life, a hope the father violently rejects. This struggle over the symbol is reinforced by the peasant's fatalistic prophecy: “the oranges that, according to a peasant who used to cultivate them until he left, would shrivel up if a change occurred and they were watered by a strange hand.” (Kanafani 80) This statement is a poetic affirmation of the land-identity nexus central to postcolonial thought. The plant, the silent witness, refuses to yield its life to the strange hand, symbolizing the cultural and spiritual death of the community severed from its native environment. The orange's shriveling is thus predetermined not by neglect, but by the very fact of displacement.

The story culminates in the devastating image that fuses the father's psychological collapse with the plant's symbolic death. The father's desperate attempt to end his family's suffering, culminating in his nervous breakdown and the vision of the revolver, sets the stage for the final symbolic statement. When the narrator returns, he sees the “black revolver lying on the low table, and beside it an orange. The orange was dried up and shriveled.” (Kanafani 80) The orange here is interpreted not as a chance object, but as a cherished, preserved relic, the last connection brought from the homeland. Its shriveled state confirms the peasant's prophecy and perfectly mirrors the father's own state of impotent fury and the spiritual desiccation of the community in exile. The image of the shriveled fruit next to the instrument of final violence solidifies the orange as the perfect, physical manifestation of the Nakba's unhealable rift, demonstrating that without the soil and climate of its home, even the most beloved memory must eventually die.

The Lemon Tree as an Emblem of Futurity and Unwavering Commitment in Katouh

The symbolic weight of citrus in Zoulfah Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* transports the tradition of plant symbolism to the Syrian conflict, reframing the lemon not as an archive of what is lost, but as a commitment to what must endure. The central symbol—the lemon tree—functions as an emblem of futurity and unwavering commitment, deeply rooted in the land and actively involved in the protagonist Salama's struggle for survival and resistance. This connection is most fiercely articulated as an act of political defiance: “We held our heads high and planted lemon trees in acts of defiance.” (Katouh 83) This statement immediately aligns the act of cultivation with political agency, establishing the lemon as a defiant standard against systemic erasure, where the survival of the land and the cultural memory of its people are inextricably linked, confirming Ngũgĩ's concept of landscape as an arena for resistance.

The lemon tree further serves as a fixed, reliable silent witness to the family's embedded history, a concept that is tragically poignant for Salama, whose family has been killed. The tree stands as a living repository of the past, resisting the efforts of chaos to erase personal history. Salama tenderly recollects: "That lemon tree's been here forever. I used to climb it all the time when I was younger. I think there's a picture Baba took of me sitting atop it, with Yusuf hanging to my side." (Katouh 182) This memory establishes the tree as the enduring archive of her happy, personal history, a tangible link to her deceased loved ones, proving that even as the community fractures, the cultural memory remains embedded in the soil. Furthermore, the tree's longevity forms the basis of the national claim, asserting: "This is my land, and just like the lemon trees that have been growing here for centuries, spilled blood won't stop us." (Katouh 220) The persistent growth of the lemon tree is not passive; it is a visible, defiant monument to the claim of belonging.

The lemon's power extends beyond its rootedness to its profound sensory and functional impact, confirming its duality as a symbol of bitterness and healing. As a former pharmacy student forced into a doctor's role, Salama's existence is defined by trauma, but the lemon continually intervenes with restorative power. This extends even to moments of flight and survival, demonstrating the lemon's practical aid: "It's Layla's idea to use lemons to fight sea sickness when we're on the boat." (Katouh 202) Here, the lemon moves beyond symbolism to practical, life-saving aid, emphasizing its essential role in survival, even when seeking safety away from the land. This healing function is deeply connected to Kenan, the figure representing a hopeful future. The sensory bond is unmistakable: "I have no idea how, but he smells like the freshest of lemons and it's a comfort against the panic raging through me." (Katouh 153) The lemon scent—clean, sharp, and associated with affection—operates as a potent mnemonic trigger, offering Salama a sensory oasis and anchoring her against the internal "panic raging" within her, thus linking the plant's essence to her emotional survival.

Ultimately, the lemon tree serves as a covenant of futurity. Salama and Kenan frame their entire commitment to the future around the lemon, asserting that change requires the same persistence as cultivation: "Lemons take time, Kenan. We're growing a tree. They need patience, just like change does." (Katouh 354) This perspective reframes the Syrian struggle not as a single historical tragedy, but as a long process requiring enduring commitment. The tree becomes the central symbol of a future promised: "Insh'Allah, we will come back home. We will plant new lemon trees. We'll rebuild our cities, and we will be free." (Katouh 213) This promise transforms the lemon from a mere survivor into a core element of the national rebuilding project, a tangible goal that legitimizes their current hardship.

The overarching principle of hope is encapsulated in the central, defiant refrain: "It reminds me that as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die." (Katouh 355) The lemon tree thus stands, not shriveled like Kanafani's orange, but green and bearing

fruit—a proactive, defiant, and living symbol of a future that is still being fiercely claimed.

Comparative Analysis: Citrus as a Dialectic of Memory and Futurity

The symbolic use of citrus in Ghassan Kanafani's "The Land of Sad Oranges" and Zoulfah Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* establishes a powerful dialectic of memory, identity, and resistance within Middle Eastern displacement literature. While both authors employ the citrus tree as a vital "silent witness" to historical trauma, their works diverge significantly in *when* and *how* the fruit anchors the protagonist's consciousness, reflecting the distinct nature of the ruptures they address—the historical finality of the Nakba versus the enduring, yet unresolved, nature of the Syrian conflict.

The Temporal Axis: Loss, Rupture, and Persistence:

The most fundamental difference lies in the temporal orientation of the citrus symbol. Kanafani's orange is a symbol tethered exclusively to the past—to the moment of irrevocable loss (rupture). Its function is primarily retrospective, acting as an archive of a life violently ended; the fruit moves from sweet, living abundance to a shriveled, decaying relic, embodying the unhealable wound of exile. The narrative closure is despair, reflected by the orange's death.

Conversely, Katouh's lemon tree is a symbol of futurity and ongoing commitment. Its function is prospective, acting as a covenant for survival and return. The text emphasizes the conditionality of "As Long as... Grow," making the plant's persistence a defiant standard for hope. It asserts that despite the trauma, the possibility of a rooted future is still alive, maintained by the tenacious anger of unyielding hope.

The Sensory and Psychological Function: Archive of Trauma vs. Mnemonic Bridge:

The sensory and functional roles of the citrus fruits highlight their divergent psychological purposes. Kanafani uses the sight of the orange to burden the father, transforming the physical object into an emotional weight that is too heavy to carry. The fruit, as a sight, overwhelms the father, confirming his loss and leading to psychological collapse, ultimately functioning as an Archive of Trauma that records the death of an identity.

In sharp contrast, Katouh utilizes the lemon's full spectrum of utility. The scent of the lemon—an invisible but potent sensory force often tied to Kenan—acts as a mnemonic bridge, linking Salama's defiance to the possibility of love and a renewed existence. Furthermore, the lemon's sourness and its practical medicinal use (e.g., against seasickness) frame it not just as a static symbol, but as an active agent of healing and aid, offering material comfort and a grounding presence against internal and external crisis.

Resistance: Passive Decay and Grief vs. Active Planting and Healing

Both texts engage with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of land as resistance, but their

expression of this defiance differs significantly based on the plant's condition. In Kanafani, the resistance is implicit, embodied in the peasant's prophecy—the orange *refusing* to thrive under a “strange hand.” The orange achieves resistance through its death and decay, passively rejecting the colonial act by shriveling. The family's act of resistance is ultimately their committed grief and tenacious memory of the lost land.

Conversely, in Katouh, the resistance is explicit, embodied in the deliberate act of “planting lemon trees in acts of defiance.” The lemon's survival and its active, resilient growth despite the destruction is a loud, defiant statement against the forces of erasure. The tree's use in healing and its symbolic representation of rebuilding legitimizes Salama's choice to stay, heal, and fight for the land's futurity, making the lemon an emblem of conscious political and emotional endurance.

Conclusion: The Enduring Cultural Resonance of Citrus

The analysis of Ghassan Kanafani's and Zoulfah Katouh's texts confirms the profound theoretical resonance of Michael Marder's philosophy of plants within postcolonial ecocriticism. The citrus tree, in both its orange and lemon forms, transcends the role of mere setting, emerging as a dynamic, active “silent witness” and an essential cultural repository for documenting the trauma and tenacity of displacement in the Middle East.

This paper has demonstrated that the citrus symbol operates across a crucial dialectic: Kanafani's sad oranges anchor the narrative in the past, serving as the archive of rupture by recording the death of a rooted identity and the immediate, overwhelming grief of the Nakba. The shriveled fruit is the ultimate material testament to an unhealable rift. In contrast, Katouh's growing lemon trees shift the symbolic focus to the future, acting as a covenant of enduring hope and a blueprint for resistance. The lemon, in its resilience, its practical aid, and its association with the act of planting in defiance, proves that cultural survival is measured by a continuous, active commitment to the land and to rebuilding.

Ultimately, the divergent fates of the orange and the lemon offer a comprehensive commentary on the experience of displacement. The orange documents the terrible cost of loss, while the lemon asserts the necessity of persistence. These two literary uses solidify the citrus tree as an irreplaceable cultural emblem. It is a living, breathing symbol that simultaneously holds the bitter memory of past trauma and the fierce, sweet promise of a future yet to be fully realized. The enduring resonance of citrus in this literature confirms that the struggle for identity and memory remains powerfully, fundamentally, and defiantly rooted in the soil.

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Geopoetic Cartography of Colonial Orissa : Reading Place and Ideology in Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third*

Abstract

*This paper examines Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* through geopoetic framework to show how colonial Orissa is mapped, recounted, and critiqued through the spatial existence of Gobindapur village. While existing studies have examined the novel's realism, satire, narrative voice, and critique of colonial modernity, it has primarily regarded space and environment as descriptive backdrops rather than active narrative elements. There has been little sustained focus to how land, water, architecture, and ordinary geographies act as agents that create social relationships and ethical meaning inside the text. To address this important gap, this study focuses on how Senapati transforms the village space into a dynamic geopoetic cartography through which caste hierarchies, moral economies and the disruptions of colonial rule are produced and contested. Drawing on Kenneth White's concepts of geopoetics and intellectual nomadism this paper examines key locations such as the divided village pond, the gendered Saanta Ghat, the weavers' quarter, the Nazarkhana lockup, and the mythic Asura Pond as spatial forms that narrate social conflict and ethical tension. The study shows that geopoetic mapping challenges orientalist conceptions of the timeless Indian village while emphasizing the intellectual, ethical, and political force of local Oriya place making. By locating *Six Acres and a Third* within geopoetic debates, this study provides a unique methodological contribution that broadens the scope of Indian geopoetic scholarship.*

Keywords: Geopoetics, Colonial Orissa, Cartography, Intellectual Nomadism, Colonial Modernity

Six Acres and a Third by Fakir Mohan Senapati, which was first serialized in the late 19th century and published as a book in 1901, is hailed as a great accomplishment and the pinnacle of the literary realism in the nineteenth century Indian literature. The novel, which was written during a turbulent colonial era, criticizes the new social and economic structure that the British imposed, focusing on the landholding class's exploitative behaviours and the colonial legal system's manipulation.

The main plot centres on Ramachandra Mangaraj, an evil landlord and moneylender who exploits poor peasants due to his insatiable greed. This culminates in his scheme to take the small, symbolic plot of land from the good peasant couple, Bhagia and Saria. But

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the novel's importance goes beyond a simple story of personal villainy. Senapati suggests that property acquired through deceit and exploitation rather than social labour is essentially “stealing”, using Mangaraj's conduct to provide a broader critique of the concept of property itself under colonial modernity.

The most notable aspect of Senapati's brilliance is his intricate and introspective storytelling style, which distinguishes *Six Acres and a Third* in the annals of contemporary Indian literature. Because the book is told from the viewpoint of the oppressed-“the horse, the ordinary villager, and the foot soldier-in other words, the labouring poor of the world”- it's critical vision is directed not only at British colonial rule but also at all forms of oppressive social and political authority.

A unique literary device, the narrator mediates the story for the reader and is frequently characterized as witty, talkative, and self-parody. In addition to encouraging the reader to question moral and social authority, this narrative technique offers a crucial framework for comprehending Mangaraj's evil deeds as one of many tales that reveal the injustice and hypocrisy of the time. The novel is a critique of exploitation and greed while also setting a significant standard for literary and critical thought in contemporary Indian literature by fusing this sophisticated, self-aware narrative style with a thorough, naturalist compilation of social facts.

How does Senapati use place and environment as narrative agents to critique colonial modernity and uncover the ethical and social cracks of rural Orissa? To address this question, the study employs Kenneth White's concept of geopoetics, which reads landscape, location, and geography as expressive narrative forms. The approach also incorporates insights from Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre allowing for a spatial reading in which ponds, ghats, home spaces, and village quarters serve as active locations of meaning. This study analyses landscapes as dynamic archive of power, memory and social critique rather than a passive backgrounds.

An Interdisciplinary concept, geopoetics links geography, the environment, culture, literature and human experience. Kenneth White, a Scottish poet and philosopher, was the primary developer of the word. Geopoetics is the poetic, creative and intellectual method of thinking about the environment and how we fit into it. According to Kenneth White, Geopoetics is a way of thinking and writing that connects humans and earth in a deep meaningful way. It values the way tribal and indigenous people understand and live with the earth. In his book *Wanderer and his charts* White narrates Geopoetics as, “A new way of being in the world and a new way of writing the world” (White, 645). White rejects narrow national or cultural identities. He also introduced the concept of Intellectual nomadism. Intellectual nomadism is a philosophical and mental trip that transcends boundaries and defies conventional wisdom rather than just physical travel. It rejects dogmatic thinking, challenges traditional academic systems and embraces ecological and cultural diversity.

To support this geopoetic interpretation, Edward Soja's idea of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace offers a helpful conceptual framework. Soja's spatial triad describes how physical space, imagined meanings and lived experience interact to create social realities, whereas geopoetics emphasizes the expressive and storytelling potential of landscape. In *Six Acres and a Third*, the villagers' lived experiences of labour, exclusion and control (Thirdspace) are shaped by the colonial and caste based concepts of property and hierarchy (Secondspace) superimposed over the material geography of Gobindapur (Firstspace). This study strengthens the novel's critique of colonial modernity by elucidating how Senapati's portrayal of place functions concurrently at the physical, ideological, and experiential levels through the integration of Soja's spatial theory.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of space creation offers a useful theoretical link to geopoetics. Geopoetics emphasizes how these created spaces acquire expressive, ethical, and narrative meaning, whereas Lefebvre focuses on how space is socially formed through daily activities, ideological representations, and lived experience. Lefebvre's concept of space as a social product is reflected in *Six Acres and a Third*, where the village landscape is shaped by labour, caste regulation, and colonial law. Senapati's narrative enables this space to “speak” through ponds, ghats, and domestic sites, in line with a geopoetic mode of reading. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints allow one to see Gobindapur as a socially constructed but culturally expressive environment with material inscriptions of power, memory and moral significance. The current study is based on geopoetic mode of analysis with special focus on the novel's spatial imagination and expressive capacity of place. Other spatial theories are used carefully to support not supplant the basic geopoetic framework.

In *Six Acres and a Third* Senapati's description of the village pond appears that the narrator is merely describing the nature, different birds and how they behave. But it is gradually understood that the birds, particularly the “English kingfishers,” represent the British colonisers. They come, eat, take what they want, and then fly away, and leaving the local birds and inhabitants with the dirty pond. So the pond becomes a miniature representation of colonial India. It is more than just landscape; it teaches us about power. The narration goes as follows,

A pair of kingfishers suddenly arrive out of nowhere, dive into the water a couple of times, stuff themselves with food, and swiftly fly away. Sitting on the bank, a lone kingfisher suns itself, wings spread like the gown of a memsahib. Oh, stupid Hindu cranes, look at these English kingfishers, who arrive out of nowhere with empty pockets, fill themselves with all manner of fish from the pond, and then fly away. You nest in the banyan tree near the pond, but after churning the mud and water all day long, all you get are a few miserable small fish. You are

living in critical times now; more and more kingfishers will swoop down on the pond and carry off the best fish. You have no hope, no future, unless you go abroad and learn how to swim in the ocean. (Senapati, 110-111)

Geopoetics means reading the land (the landscape, nature, space) as a kind of text that carries meaning. Instead of talking about colonialism directly in political terms, the narrator here lets the landscape speak. The land itself becomes a witness to history and a record of oppression, colonial brutality can be understood not only through events but also through places that commemorate them. So, this is one clear instance in the novel where a geopoetic way of reading becomes possible because the landscape acts as a narrative voice, communicating what happened without overtly stating it. Geopoetic portrayal transforms natural space into a narrative agency, revealing colonial capitalism's reliance on spatial control.

The narrator's references to "English-educated babus" and "English kingfishers" employ birds as a metaphor for power and society. By comparing people to birds, White demonstrates that the landscape is more than simply something to look at; it indicates how power operates. The pond and its birds become a metaphor for colonial power and local elites: both groups dwell on the same land, but some move freely (such as the kingfisher), while others remain stuck in the mud. So the environment is more than just lovely; it teaches us who controls resources and who suffers. This is another instance of geopoetics since the land itself serves as a language for exposing societal injustices. Geopoetic technique allows the natural environment to actively critique colonial modernity by demonstrating how control over space influences access, mobility and survival.

Senapati depicts the Indian village as a real, complex location impacted by history particularly by colonial authority, landlords who do not live there and avaricious local elites as opposed to the typical orientalist notion of a tranquil, unchanging place. The village is full of strife, change and everyday life; it is hardly a lovely setting. This backdrop becomes a geopoetic realm because the novel uses the village landscape to actively show the social and historical factors that shape rural life. Instead of depicting the village as a timeless, exotic picture (as some colonial portrayals did), the text demonstrates how colonial administration, absentee landowners and local exploitation have shaped the area. In other words, the physical environment, the fields, ponds and settlements become a tool for comprehending power, inequality and change. The landscape thus speaks to colonial effect and social conflict, transforming nature into a significant commentary rather than a mere description. The village thus becomes a readable "text" in which geography encodes history, implying that geopoetic reading not only suitable but also required to understand how space mediates colonial power and everyday life.

Geopoetics frequently examines the ethical and meaningful ways that previous

communities interacted with the land. The novel recalls a period in the past when the Khandayats regarded land as something they held in trust for the community, something related to common wellbeing and dharma. However, Mangaraj only views land as something to plunder and profit from in the story's current period. Thus, the story depicts a significant change: land was once associated with moral obligation, but it is now a weapon for self-interest. Geopoetics examines how ideas, values and histories are etched into the land. Here, the landscape serves as a record of how the previous tribal communities used to treat the land as a divine place rather than a place to make profit. The landscape acts as an archive, recording the deterioration of communal ideals and the rise of exploitative land connections. Senapati empowers the land to critique the moral repercussions of colonial capitalism by imprinting ethical change on the landscape.

The lockup (Nazarkhana) is not just a building where Mangaraj is kept, it represents how lonely, abandoned, and powerless he has become. Once he was respected, now he is shut away in a dark corner, forgotten by everyone. The place itself shows his fall and his suffering. Senapati narrates: "In one corner of the lockup of the Nazarkhana, enclosed by wooden railings on all sides, the accused sat leaning against a wall, his eyes closed. Alas, there was no one there to say a word to him" (178). Geopoetics looks at places and spaces as meaningful locations. Here, the physical space of the lockup expresses a social truth that anyone who has committed a sin should undergo the legal consequences of their actions. The lockup is not just a room where people are kept; it becomes a symbolic space that represents punishments, discipline and control. In this sense, the space conveys the authority of the law and the moral judgement placed on the individual.

The novel depicts trees and terrain as more than just natural elements. When characters sit under specific trees, they either plan in secret or seek advice. As a result, the tree becomes a place for making decisions and experiencing spiritual force. It appears that the soil itself has power. Senapati's narration goes like this, "The two women sitting near the banyan and aswatha trees were well known in the village... When such diVerent, but equally well-known women confer in secret, it is hard to wait to find out what they discussed" (120). Geopoetics studies how land, trees, rivers, and locations hold cultural and symbolic meaning. Here, the tree becomes a space for plotting, authority, and even hallowed power. Thus, the physical setting influences the action and meaning of the story. The terrain becomes active, preserving secrets, power, and tradition. Therefore, a geopoetic reading is not merely appropriate but necessary because the terrain is not a passive backdrop, but rather a significant element that shapes the narrative. Senapati transforms the landscape into a key agency, challenging the notion of space as a passive backdrop, by allowing natural locations to arrange social interaction and narrative meaning.

The Saanta Ghat is a site exclusively for men use, primarily for agricultural activities. Women are not permitted there, therefore the space itself separates men and women, limiting what they can accomplish in daily life.

The Saanta ghat lay three hundred steps away from the weavers' ghat. No women went there in the morning; it was used only by men... The farmers, who had gone out to plough the fields in the small hours of the night, had now unyoked their bullocks. Some had come to the ghat after leaning their ploughs against the walls... A few pairs of bullocks grazed nearby after drinking all the water they wanted from the pond. (115)

Geopoetic interpretation demonstrates how the Saanta Ghat's physical layout mirrors social norms; in this case, geography determines who is allowed entry and who is not. The land itself becomes a symbol of gender power because it is associated with male labour and excludes women. In this way, the topography of Saanta Ghat enforces and normalises patriarchal gender standards revealing how space can function as an active agent in the formation social hierarchy.

The village of Gobindapur is a dynamic and contested landscape that reflects and dictates the social order, economic realities and moral deterioration represented in the tale. Senapati employs geography as a crucial instrument for satire, social critique and thematic development meticulously mapping areas ranging from the sacred corners of a home to the gendered boundaries of the public pond. The most obvious geopoetic finding is the systematic spatial separation that defines village life. The village's partition into distinct Saanta, Weavers', and Brahmin sections creates a geographical hierarchy. The Saanta quarter emerges as the administrative and economic epicentre with late-night activity around Mangaraj's kacheri and the village shop indicating its importance in power and commerce, while the other quarters fade into the calm of domestic life. This spatial arrangement is a tangible embodiment of class distinction and control with geographical proximity intimately linked to economic and political power.

Furthermore, the village pond, a vital resource for survival, is divided into three specialized and frequently fought areas: the Washerman's ghat, the Weavers' ghat, and the Saanta ghat. This division demonstrates how caste, work and gender influence resource access. The Saanta ghat, designated for men and connected with the crucial job of agriculture contrasts with the boisterous, news sharing Weavers' ghat, which serves as a proto market for social intelligence. Even the accumulation of debris such as the heap of abandoned tooth sticks by the men's ghat demonstrates how everyday human practices literally modify and define these distinct and localized geographic locations.

The geopoetic framework also reveals how labour imprints itself on the domestic and local community surroundings. The Weavers' quarter is architecturally defined by the cleanliness demanded by their trade with verandahs functioning as workplaces for rattling spindles. In contrast, other parts of the community accommodate the chaos of animal farming. This contrast demonstrates that Gobindapur's spatial organization is the result of economic activity with houses and surrounding areas serving as functional extensions of residents' livelihoods. Even within the home, architecture reflects political

action. The act of stealing in the story such as Champa burying money in three different locations in the Saant's bedroom transforms intimate personal space into a site of hidden and contested geography. The geography of the crime becomes vital to the dispute over ownership, connecting physical concealment to the struggle for property.

The invocation of the Asura Pond, with its mythological history involving demons and subsequent debasement where even the holy Ganga waters stop to flow due to residents' sin is a geopoetic tool. The physical landscape serves as the basis for the novel's moral argument. The narrator uses the geography and history of the village to combat colonial and Anglicized intellectual arrogance, rehabilitating the local historian and dismissing the criticism of "English-educated babus." The terrain thus serves as a moral and cultural touchstone, defending indigenous knowledge from foreign and critical inspection.

This paper argues that *Six Acres and a Third* can be effectively read through geopoetic lens that emphasizes space and environment as active narrative agents rather than inert settings. The study examines ponds, fields, trees, ghats, and carceral areas to show how Senapati imprints colonial power, local elite supremacy and ethical change directly on village topography. This reading shifts critical focus away from character centered realism into the spatial logic that materially organizes power, inequality and resistance in the novel. While previous readings have focused on satire, social realism and anti-colonial critique, the geopoetic approach demonstrates how these concerns are fundamentally spatial and demonstrates that colonial modernity in the text operates through land relations, movement and access. This study revises traditional theories by viewing landscape as a venue where history, ethics and power converge, establishing space as a crucial critical category.

This study contributes broader discussions about spatial justice and postcolonial cartography by demonstrating how literary landscapes reflect uneven development, dispossession and moral rupture under colonial control. *Six Acres and a Third* depicts the village as a conflict ridden cartographic landscape in which colonial administration and indigenous life intersect rather than as a stable or neutral environment. Geopoetic reading reframes the novel as a crucial site for analysing colonial spatial power by emphasising the production, regulation and narration of space. Ultimately this approach not only enhances readers' understanding of Senapati's storytelling technique but also affirms the significance of Indian literary texts in the context of modern spatial humanities, where literature serves as a crucial tool for mapping social change and historical injustice.

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The Politics of Memory : Cognitive Distortion and Strategic Forgetting in Gandhi and Bhutto's Autobiographies

Abstract

This research applies Daniel Schacter's "seven sins of memory" framework to analyze Indira Gandhi's and Benazir Bhutto's autobiographies, demonstrating that memory distortions function as strategic narrative resources in women's political life writing. Using an interdisciplinary methodology integrating cognitive memory science with feminist autobiography theory, this study reveals how universal memory processes—transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence—operate distinctively under gendered political constraints. Both leaders employ selective forgetting of personal ambition, absent-minded erasure of domestic life, and persistence of traumatic memories structuring their narratives. These patterns enable Gandhi and Bhutto to construct politically viable identities whilst navigating contradictions: claiming inherited legitimacy whilst proving personal competence and maintaining cultural authenticity whilst challenging gender norms. This research illuminates the cognitive architecture underlying political autobiography and demonstrates how female political leaders in South Asian patriarchal systems deploy memory strategically to reconcile systemic demands with their claims to authority.

Keywords: political autobiography, memory studies, feminist theory, South Asian politics, cognitive psychology

Memory is not a video camera but a storyteller, and like all storytellers, it takes liberties with the truth. When political leaders write their autobiographies, they rely on this unreliable narrator, reconstructing their pasts through cognitive processes that systematically distort, select, and reshape experience. This paper argues that these cognitive distortions are not obstacles to understanding women's political life writing but rather the mechanisms through which female political leaders construct viable identities within patriarchal systems. Examining Indira Gandhi's *My Truth* and Benazir Bhutto's *Daughter of Destiny* through Daniel Schacter's framework of memory's "seven sins" reveals that forgetting, misremembering, and selective recall serve crucial strategic purposes. These memory processes allow Gandhi and Bhutto to reconcile impossible contradictions like they must claim inherited political legitimacy whilst proving personal competence, maintain cultural authenticity whilst challenging gender norms, and honour family legacies whilst establishing independent authority.

This research integrates cognitive memory science with feminist literary theory, revealing patterns invisible to either approach alone. It demonstrates how universal memory processes operate differently under gendered political constraints and shows that memory distortions are not deception but the cognitive architecture through which people construct coherent narratives from fragmented experiences. As Smith and Watson argue, autobiographical identity is always "constructed" rather than simply revealed. By combining their framework with Schacter's cognitive research, this study illuminates both what these authors consciously shape and what unconscious processes structure their remembering. Consider how Bhutto describes learning of her father's execution: "I suddenly sat bolt upright in bed at 2 AM. 'No!' the scream burst through the knots in my throat" (Bhutto 5). The memory feels precise, yet cognitive research shows our minds reconstruct rather than record the past. Schacter identified seven systematic patterns in this reconstruction: transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence, which he calls the "seven sins of memory" because they produce distortions yet emerge from adaptive cognitive systems (Schacter 182).

This study sits at the intersection of research on political autobiography in South Asian contexts, feminist theories of women's life writing, and cognitive approaches to memory and narrative. Political autobiography occupies a distinctive place in South Asian literary culture, functioning as what Ruchira Gupta terms "legitimation texts" that establish dynastic authority through narratives of inheritance (Gupta 412). Joya Chatterji demonstrates how postcolonial leaders create "authorized versions" of contested historical moments (Chatterji 89), whilst Siobhan Lambert-Hurley identifies "strategic self-fashioning" where South Asian women leaders emphasize familial legitimacy whilst downplaying personal ambition (Hurley 34). However, this scholarship rarely engages with the cognitive science of memory. Feminist scholars have established essential frameworks for understanding women's political life writing. Smith and Watson emphasize the relational and constructed nature of autobiographical identity, while Gillian Whitlock identifies "double voicing," where women autobiographers simultaneously speak to multiple audiences with competing expectations (Whitlock 78). Leigh Gilmore examines how women's testimony about political violence must navigate "jurisdictions of witness", overlapping systems determining whose testimony counts as credible (Gilmore 12). Malashri Lal identifies "strategic absences" around domestic life in South Asian women leaders' memoirs that prevent readers from using domesticity to diminish political authority (Lal 145). Yet this feminist scholarship has not been integrated with cognitive memory research.

Schacter's framework argues that memory distortions are byproducts of adaptive systems operating through reconstruction rather than reproduction (Schacter 89). Elizabeth Loftus demonstrates that memories are highly susceptible to post-event information, particularly during memoir composition involving extensive discussion with family and advisors. Bessel van der Kolk shows that traumatic memory operates

differently, persisting as sensory fragments rather than coherent stories (Kolk 178), whilst Cathy Caruth emphasizes trauma's belatedness and repetitive return. Despite rich scholarship in each area, significant gaps remain as cognitive memory research has rarely been applied to South Asian texts, feminist autobiography theory has not engaged with memory science, and trauma studies has not sufficiently addressed how gendered political constraints interact with traumatic memory in women leaders' writing. This study addresses these gaps through interdisciplinary integration.

Transience means memories fade over time, but forgetting is not random. We remember what matters now and forget what does not. Schacter notes that information not used regularly becomes weaker, arguing this fading serves adaptive purposes by preventing cognitive overload (Schacter 184). Both Gandhi and Bhutto demonstrate selective forgetting around political ambition. Gandhi writes, "Neither then nor later did I want to be in the Government. Even now I feel it is a form of imprisonment" (Gandhi 114). This claim, made whilst serving as Prime Minister, sounds defensive. Throughout her memoir, Gandhi provides no childhood memories of political desire, framing her career as reluctant duty responding to her father's legacy rather than pursuing personal goals. This pattern appears too convenient to be accidental. Memories of naked ambition would complicate her narrative of selfless service, so they fade whilst memories supporting her preferred story remain vivid.

Bhutto shows similar patterns. Her memoir contains detailed memories of her father's imprisonment and death but sparse memories of her own political education. She writes, "For all that I held degrees in government from Harvard and Oxford, I was not a politician" (Bhutto 7). Like Gandhi, she presents political identity as inheritance rather than choice. This selective forgetting serves clear purposes. Both women faced intense scrutiny about their qualifications. In patriarchal societies, women who seek power for themselves violate cultural norms, but women who accept power to honour fathers or serve nations remain within acceptable boundaries. The transience that erases memories of ambition makes politically necessary narratives possible. Schacter argues transience is adaptive. For example, if we remembered every phone number or face, our minds would overflow with useless information. He notes, "It is often useful and even necessary to forget information that is no longer current" (Schacter 196). For female politicians, this process allows forgetting details that would undermine legitimacy whilst preserving those that support it.

Absent-mindedness happens when we fail to pay attention whilst encoding memories. Schacter explains that "absent minded encoding failures occur when actions are carried out automatically and attention is focused elsewhere" (Schacter 186). Both memoirs show curious gaps around domestic life. Gandhi provides vivid details about political negotiations and international relations, recalling exact dates of crises and specific conversations with world leaders. Yet her children barely appear in the narrative, and her

husband merits a single paragraph. This pattern suggests that during these experiences, Gandhi's attention focused almost entirely on politics whilst domestic life proceeded automatically. Research shows that dividing attention at encoding results in poor subsequent memory (Schacter 186). If Gandhi was physically present at family dinners but mentally absorbed in policy problems, those moments received shallow encoding and left few retrievable traces.

Bhutto demonstrates similar patterns, with detailed memories of political meetings and party activities whilst personal relationships appear mainly in political terms. She writes about marriage: "I wanted to marry someone who would understand the political realities of my position" (Bhutto 296). The focus remains on political function rather than personal emotion. The exception proves instructive as both women provide rich, detailed memories of their fathers, complete with sensory information and emotional nuance. Bhutto recalls, "I remember distinctly the sight of his grey shalwar kameez and the scent of Shalimar. It was the last time I ever saw him free" (Bhutto 93). These memories demonstrate capacity for deep personal encoding when sufficient attention is devoted. The contrast suggests selective attention that prioritized politically significant relationships. This absent-mindedness regarding domestic life may reflect structural demands rather than personal choice. As Smith and Watson note, women's autobiographical subjects must negotiate multiple, intersecting identity categories. To succeed in male-dominated politics, these women may have needed such intense focus on political performance that personal life could only be processed peripherally.

Blocking occurs when information exists in memory but remains temporarily inaccessible. Schacter notes that blocking appears especially pronounced in old age and that tip-of-the-tongue states increase with aging (Schacter 187). In autobiography, blocking manifests as systematic gaps where certain information never becomes accessible despite apparent relevance. Bhutto's memoir demonstrates blocking in her treatment of her brother's militant activities, writing extensively about his death but providing little detail about his political work during preceding years. The text contains vague references to "activities" without elaboration, suggesting not absence of information but retrieval blocking where accessing these memories would require also accessing politically problematic associated material.

Gandhi shows different blocking patterns. Her memoir discusses political decisions she made as Prime Minister but blocks on the political maneuvering required to achieve and maintain power, presenting authority as emerging naturally from competence rather than from coalition building or factional management. Both memoirs block almost completely on relationships with other women political leaders. Gandhi provides minimal discussion of women colleagues or feminist organizing, and Bhutto similarly blocks on women's political networks beyond immediate family. Both women had extensive contact with women activists, yet these relationships remain largely

inaccessible in the narratives. Retrieving these memories would require acknowledging political identities that sit uncomfortably with narratives of individual achievement within masculine structures. Blocking also appears around traumatic moments. Bhutto writes about her father's execution with extraordinary detail for certain moments but blocks almost completely on the actual news of his death, describing waking and screaming but jumping over the crucial moment between sleeping and knowing.

Misattribution means remembering information correctly but incorrectly attributing where, when, or how you learned it. Schacter explains that misattribution involves "attributing a recollection or idea to the wrong source" (Schacter 183). Gandhi demonstrates misattribution in accounts of childhood political awareness, writing: "I wanted to join the Congress Party and be a regular soldier of India, as my father said. But I was told I was too young to join, so what was known as Vanar Sena was formed" (Gandhi 19-20). This memory attributes sophisticated political understanding to her childhood self, yet the articulate political framing likely reflects adult consciousness misattributed backwards. The child probably wanted to join her father's activities without fully understanding their political meaning.

Bhutto shows similar patterns, writing: "I believed in justice. I believed in laws and codes of ethics, sworn testimonies, and judicial process. But there were none during the farce of my father's trial." (Bhutto 112). This passage attributes sophisticated legal philosophy to her younger self, yet this analytical framework likely reflects later education misattributed to the moment of trauma. The most striking misattributions involve prophetic memories. Gandhi recalls, "In a letter sent to your father on that occasion, Sarojini Naidu wrote: 'this child will be the new soul of India'" (Gandhi 10). She presents this prediction as something remembered from childhood, yet she almost certainly learned of this letter much later as an adult. The misattribution allows her to construct a narrative where political destiny was evident from birth. Bhutto makes similar moves, describing childhood nationalist activities with vivid sensory detail: "I can still feel the excitement of the day and see the large terrace covered with piles of clothes—what rich materials, what lovely colours!" (Bhutto 11). Yet research shows such vividness often indicates later reconstruction (Schacter 189). She probably participated in these events, but her memory has been elaborated through family stories and photographs, with material from these sources misattributed to direct experience. These misattributions are not deliberate lies. Memory naturally integrates information from multiple sources without distinguishing among them. After decades of hearing family stories, seeing photographs, and reading historical accounts, distinguishing personal experience from other sources becomes impossible.

Suggestibility means memories are shaped by information encountered after the original event. Schacter defines suggestibility as "the tendency to incorporate information provided by others, such as misleading questions, into one's own

recollections" (Schacter 183). Gandhi's memoir shows suggestibility in discussions of her mother's political role, presenting her mother as significant whilst working "in the background" through "courageous and persistent support" rather than direct leadership (Gandhi 11). This framing likely reflects feminist interpretation suggested during composition rather than Gandhi's original childhood understanding. As a child, she probably did not conceptualize her mother through frameworks of gendered exclusion. Adult conversations with feminist intellectuals and editors suggested interpretive frames that reshaped childhood memory.

The memoir composition process typically involves extensive discussion with others who shared the experiences being narrated. Each conversation potentially introduces suggestions that shape subsequent recall. As Loftus and Pickrell demonstrate in their "lost in the mall" study, 25% of people remembered fake events with details after repeated suggestions (Loftus, Pickrell 720). Bhutto's memoir shows suggestibility in accounts of her father's political philosophy, writing: "My father's imprint on me, however, keeps me going. Endurance. Honour. Principle." (Bhutto 54) These characterizations likely reflect hagiographic discourse that developed after her father's execution rather than original childhood understanding. As a child, she experienced her father's stories but probably did not extract abstract political principles. The reconstruction incorporates suggestions from the party that canonized her father as martyr. Both memoirs claim sophisticated political consciousness at remarkably young ages. Bhutto describes burning her doll in nationalist protest: "For days on end—or was it weeks? it doesn't matter, it seemed an eternity—I was overwhelmed by the burden of decision" (Bhutto 12). Whilst children absorb political atmospheres, the sophisticated understanding attributed to these childhood selves likely reflects suggestions about what those experiences meant. Social pressure to conform to cultural narratives also introduces suggestibility. Both women faced expectations that they should embody their fathers' political visions, suggesting ways of remembering.

Bias denotes current knowledge, beliefs, and emotions distort how we remember the past. We remember our past selves as more like our current selves than they were. Gandhi demonstrates consistency bias, presenting her political commitments as lifelong and unwavering when she said she wanted to join the Congress Party and be a regular soldier of India as a child. The narrative constructs childhood consciousness as essentially identical to adult identity, yet people's political views typically evolve considerably. Gandhi probably experienced changing views that the memoir minimizes to create consistency.

Research shows people systematically misremember past attitudes to match current ones. In Marcus's study, participants' recollections of their 1973 attitudes were more closely related to their 1982 attitudes than to what they had actually indicated in 1973 (Marcus 21). Both memoirs also display hindsight bias, retrospectively claiming to have foreseen developments that were not predictable. Gandhi writes about political crises

with the benefit of hindsight, presenting her responses as flowing from clear foresight. Bhutto demonstrates this when discussing her father's imprisonment: "I always knew that Bhutto in jail was even more powerful than Bhutto on the campaign trail" (Bhutto 60). This claim attributes to her past self-knowledge she could not have possessed. She could not have known how imprisonment would affect his political standing until events unfolded. Gandhi wrote whilst serving as Prime Minister amidst political conflict and Bhutto composed her memoir whilst in detention and exile. These traumatic contexts powerfully shaped their narratives. Research shows that when people are in negative emotional states, they selectively remember negative experiences whilst positive experiences become less accessible (Schacter 193-94). The contexts in which both women wrote likely made memories of suffering and resistance highly accessible whilst memories of success and happiness became relatively inaccessible, producing narratives emphasizing trauma.

Persistence is the opposite of the other sins. Instead of forgetting, we remember what we desperately want to forget. Schacter defines persistence as "pathological remembrances: information or events that we cannot forget, even though we wish we could" (Schacter 183). Bhutto's memoir demonstrates persistence most dramatically in account of her father's execution. The memory dominates the text, appearing repeatedly in different forms, intruding into narratives of other events. The visceral specificity indicates persistent traumatic memory that has been replayed countless times. Research shows that emotionally intense events receive special processing. As Schacter explains, the amygdala tags frightening or traumatic experiences as critically important, making such memories particularly resistant to forgetting and prone to intrusive recall (Schacter 195).

The text returns to this traumatic core repeatedly, revisiting the execution from different angles. The memory appears in fragments the final visit, the scent of Shalimar, the grey clothes, the farewell words. This fragmentation itself indicates traumatic processing. As research on post-traumatic stress disorder demonstrates, traumatic memories often fail to achieve coherent narrative structure, instead persisting as sensory fragments that intrude without contextualizing framework (Schacter 195). Gandhi demonstrates different forms of persistence, revealing persistent preoccupation with themes of political betrayal and institutional failure. Memories of political crises recur throughout the narrative, suggesting these experiences created ongoing anxiety patterns. Both women attempt strategies to manage persistent memories. Gandhi uses what psychologists call "overgeneral memory," recalling traumatic experiences in vague, abstract terms rather than specific detail. Bhutto employs different strategies, narrativizing trauma extensively and embedding it in political analysis. The execution becomes not simply personal tragedy but national injustice, political martyrdom, and democratic breakdown. This reframing channels intrusive memory into politically productive forms, transforming personal grief into public outrage. Yet these strategies

only partially succeed. Both memoirs reveal moments where traumatic material breaks through narrative control, indicating the limits of intentional memory management.

This analysis demonstrates that memory's "seven sins" are not simply cognitive failures but strategic narrative resources in women's political autobiography. Examining Gandhi and Bhutto's memoirs through Schacter's framework reveals systematic patterns: transience erases memories of personal ambition, absent-mindedness produces gaps where domestic life cannot be reconciled with political identity, blocking prevents access to politically dangerous material, misattribution creates composite memories from multiple sources, suggestibility incorporates collective narratives into personal memory, bias imposes retrospective consistency, and persistence ensures traumatic experiences structure entire narratives. These processes operate largely outside conscious control yet serve crucial functions, enabling these women to construct politically viable identities whilst navigating patriarchal constraints.

The findings contribute to three scholarly conversations. For autobiography studies, this research demonstrates that integrating cognitive science with literary analysis reveals dimensions of life writing invisible to either approach alone. Memory distortions are not obstacles to reading political memoirs accurately but rather evidence of the reconstructive processes through which all autobiographical identity is formed. For feminist scholarship, this study illuminates how gendered political constraints interact with universal cognitive processes to produce distinctive patterns in women's political writing. The strategic transience regarding ambition, the absent-mindedness regarding domestic life, and the persistent traumatic memory of political violence against family members may characterize women's political autobiography across diverse contexts beyond Gandhi and Bhutto. For political psychology, this work shows how female leaders in patriarchal systems must deploy memory strategically, reconciling impossible demands through cognitive processes that select, reshape, and suppress experience in politically functional ways. This approach could be applied to political memoirs from other postcolonial contexts to examine whether the intersection of inherited political legitimacy, traumatic state violence, and gender constraints produces similar memory patterns across cultures.

Ultimately, this study reveals that Gandhi and Bhutto's memoirs are valuable not despite their memory distortions but partly because of them. These texts preserve crucial testimony about female political leadership under patriarchal constraints, about political trauma and resistance, and about democratic struggle in postcolonial contexts. That they also reveal systematic memory distortions illuminates the fundamentally reconstructive nature of all autobiographical remembering. Understanding these cognitive processes enhances rather than undermines appreciation of what these remarkable women achieved and endured, demonstrating that we construct ourselves not simply through what happened to us but through how we remember, interpret, and narrate our pasts.

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Fragile Memories and Identities : A Study of Malayalam Films *Bougainvillea* and *Kishkindha Kaandam*

Abstract

*Memory is fundamentally connected to identity, and it serves as the foundation upon which individuals build their selfhood. The Malayalam films *Bougainvillea* (2024), directed by Dinjith Ayyathan, and *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), directed by Amal Neerad, center their narrative on memory loss and its consequences. Through depictions of amnesia, signs of dementia, and trauma, these films portray how memory loss destabilises selfhood, distorts reality, and complicates one's relationship with the past.*

*In *Bougainvillea*, the protagonist Reethu experiences amnesia after a car accident, and *Kishkindha Kaandam* portrays the gradual memory deterioration of Appu Pillai, a retired soldier whose fractured recollections disrupt his perception of time and reality. These films portray memory not merely as an individual phenomenon but as a social construct that shapes family and community relations. Both of these films try to position memory as a fragile concept, but at the same time, it is foundational to human existence. This paper explores the following questions in the light of memory studies developed by Paul Ricoeur and Sigmund Freud.*

1. How does the film portray the connection between identity and memory?
2. How do amnesiac individuals become precarious?
3. How do the films try to create awareness of memory loss and the role of carers?

Keywords: amnesia, *Bougainvillea*, dementia, identity, *Kishkindha Kaandam*, memory .

Introduction

According to Paul Ricoeur, memory provides individuals with a cognitive map, a map that helps orient them with regard to who they are, why they are here and where they are going. Memory, in other words, is central to an individual's sense of self and collective identity (Ricoeur 24).

Memory helps individuals and societies define their pasts, navigate through their presents, and plan their futures. However, memories are fragile, fluid, and often unreliable. It can be manipulated and erased, often affecting an individual's sense of self, identity formation, and even leading to collective amnesia about a particular incident or event.

Memory-related diseases, such as dementia and amnesia, also affect an individual's cognitive capacity, identity, and personality. A significant decline in cognitive function that affects a person's ability to carry out daily tasks is referred to as dementia. The most common kind of dementia, affecting at least two-thirds of people above the age of sixty-five, is Alzheimer's disease (AD). Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a neurological disorder that gradually impairs cognitive and behavioural abilities. Memory, comprehension, language, focus, logic, and judgement are some of these abilities. Although AD does not directly cause mortality, it significantly increases a person's susceptibility to other problems that may ultimately result in death (National Library of Medicine). It is a condition that results from about 15 various kinds of brain-related illnesses and injuries, including traumatic lesions, vascular problems, neurological and neurodegenerative diseases, and more (qtd in Markowitsch&Staniloiu, 2012). According to Wells (1979), it is frequently the first and most enduring sign of dementia. Amnesia significantly impacts a patient's day-to-day life, making it a highly significant clinical condition. (National Library of Medicine). Alzheimer's is one of the most prevalent forms of dementia, a progressive and irreversible disease which worsens over time and becomes fatal. Amnesia, unlike dementia, can be a temporary state and often results from brain injuries, strokes and psychological trauma. The most common distinction is between anterograde amnesia, in which events following the causative trauma are forgotten, and retrograde amnesia, in which events preceding the causative event are forgotten. In rare instances, an individual may experience both anterograde and retrograde amnesia at the same time (Britannica 2024). Individuals with these kinds of neurocognitive diseases become vulnerable to manipulation because of their fragile memories.

Malayalam cinema has always played an important role in exploring illness narratives and physical ailments, mental illness and neurocognitive diseases have been central plots of many films. Malayalam cinema's exploration of mental illness has been so significant that in 2025, Valsaraj Menon and Ranjith published an article stating that Malayalam cinema can be used to teach various aspects of psychiatry by analysing films like *Ulladakam*(1991), *Thalavattam*(1986), *Aham*(1992),*Manichitrathazhu*(1993), and *Vadakumnadhan*(2006). The article “Psychiatric Disorders in Malayalam Cinema” also adds to this discourse by examining Malayalam films released between 1968 and 2015, categorising and discussing portrayals of conditions such as organic mental disorders, substance use disorders, psychotic disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, dissociative disorders, mental retardation, and personality disorders. The article opines that these films often compromise scientific accuracy while depicting these diseases. The article concludes by discussing the potential of using films with more credibility to sensitise audiences and future practitioners.

Similarly, Malayalam cinema has a rich tradition of exploring themes of memory loss and trauma. *Adikurippu*(1989), one of the first films to explore maritime mystery, employs memory loss as a core theme and shows the vulnerability of a person associated

with it. Another poignant example of this is Blessy's *Thanmatra* (2005), which depicts Alzheimer's disease as a gradual erasure of one's selfhood and transforms a person's identity completely, leading to his death at the end. The film also addresses the relevance of proper caregiving and the plight of caregivers. Jeethu Joseph's *Memories* (2013) foregrounds repressed trauma and PTSD, dramatising Freud's idea of the "return of the repressed". The film *Mumbai Police* (2013) narrates the story of a police officer who loses his memory after an accident and must solve a case he had resolved before his memory loss. The film explores the fragility of identity, as it is dependent on memory to a large extent.

Recent films such as Dinjith Ayyathan's *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024) and Amal Neerad's *Bougainvillea* (2024) extend this discourse by situating amnesia at the core of the narratives. Unlike similar Malayalam films, which explored this theme, these films investigate the scientific aspect of the disease and portray it believably rather than dramatically. The films try to explore the fragile thread of memory connecting with identity as well as broaden the discourse of caregiving.

Although distinct in theme and style, both films highlight how fractured memory destabilises identity. These films foreground memory and how the act of remembering and memory loss define a character. In this way, Malayalam cinema broadens the understanding of memory theory, situating memory as a site of vulnerability and raising awareness about the implications of memory loss and caregiving. This paper examines how memory loss creates an identity crisis and how the film depicts the precariousness of characters affected with memory loss, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Paul Ricoeur and Sigmund Freud.

Fragile Identities and Memories

According to John Locke's famous definition of personal identity in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", "Consciousness makes personal identity" (319). That is, individual remains the same person over time only when they can claim prior experiences as their own through present consciousness and memory. This definition emphasizes the significance of memory in maintaining a person's identity. And in the light of this definition it's clear that a person's conscious mind and ability to remember past is the basis of identity. Both Appu Pillai and Reethu in the film suffers from signs of dementia and amnesia respectively and they struggle to remember things that constitute their very identity and purpose of existence.

Every day, Appu Pillai wakes up and begins a fresh investigation into Chachu's disappearance. He discovers evidences he himself hid the previous day, treats them as new and makes notes on them. Then, he destroys the very evidence he has just gathered and repeats this cycle. At each of these cycles, the conscious subject who discovered the evidence cannot "retrace his consciousness backwards" to the conscious subject who concealed it. Here, Appu Pillai, who hides the body, and Appu Pillai, who later searches

for the same body of his grandchild, are not the same person psychologically. Though it's the same person living in the same house and possessing the gun, the person is not able to connect to his past consciousness.

The census scene (44:50 - 2:03:39) also indicates the same conundrum. The inability of Appu Pillai to name his sons is a result of his inability to recognise his children as his own extended consciousness. From a Lockean viewpoint, Appu Pillai, father of Ajayan and Anil, has ceased to exist at that moment, even though he is physically present there. The film also suggests that Appu Pillai is capable of deliberately withholding the memory of where the rifle is, proving that his consciousness returns at times just enough to mislead the investigation.

In Amal Neerad's film *Bogainvillae* (2024), the character Reethu has amnesia. The film focuses on Reethu, whose memory is compromised by a vehicle accident resulting in both anterograde and retrograde amnesia. The film illustrates the interaction of this dual memory loss. At times, Reethu experiences difficulties in recalling past memories and in forming new ones, occasionally encountering both issues simultaneously. This circumstance places her in a perplexing world in which she perceives herself as Royce's (a psychopathic killer) wife and the mother of his two children. Royce, meanwhile, exploits her circumstances and uses her as bait for trapping his victims. Reethu occasionally experiences frustration due to her inability to remember.

Ricoeur differentiates between “blocked memory”, which refers to the spontaneous defensive mechanism identified by Freud as repression, and “manipulated memory”, which involves the enforcement of forgetting or false recollection (Ricoeur 68-92). Reethu/Esther experiences both simultaneously. Royce manipulating Reethu's memory by erasing the photos of her painting from the phone gallery, hiding the notes, and drowning her in the bathtub since drowning would lead to forgetting and inflicting violence on her aligns with Ricoeur's concept “Abuses of Memory” (Ricoeur 80-81). Individuals, especially those in control or power, tend to block or manipulate memories to shape them and distort them to create a certain narrative. Royce's actions of manipulating (by hiding or deleting) the external factors such as notes and photos Reethu has kept for remembering and navigating through her daily life can be termed as “abuse of memory” (Ricoeur 80-81) in Ricoeur's terms because, here, memory is deliberately manipulated by someone who is capable of exerting narrative dominance over a precarious individual. This leaves Reethu in a delusional world, holding onto false memories and judgements about external reality. By manipulating her memory, he alters her identity to such an extent that she is unable to remember her own real name, Esther. The red bougainvillea paintings which are often painted by Reethu, can be seen as “the return of the repressed in action”, which in Freud's terms is a “repetition compulsion” where a traumatised individual repeats the painful scenarios rather than remembering them (Freud 151). Royce is clearly disturbed by her paintings and tries to block the memories of her traumatic experience by making it inaccessible to her, and it is evident when he deletes the

photos of bougainvillea paintings from Reethu's phone and buys those paintings himself from the shop she sells them at. Royce exploits Reethu's vulnerability or dependence by selectively choosing what she should remember and what she should forget.

Appu Pillai's reluctance to acknowledge his deteriorating memory, manifesting as signs of dementia and his efforts to conceal may reflect his apprehension about becoming susceptible to exploitation. This mirrors documentation of his doubts about his physician, who was masquerading as a former military officer in order to become acquainted with him. This reflects Ricoeur's insight into memory's inherent unreliability and fragility. Dementia erodes Appu Pillai's ability to remember, creating a crisis in personal identity, as Ricoeur posits disruptions in memory impair the narrative coherence essential to selfhood (494-506).

Towards the end of the film, it is evident that Appu Pillai exploits the police officers by pretending inability to remember the location of his rifle, only to later confront the authorities that the firearm in question is the one captured in the possession of monkeys by a wildlife photographer. Appu Pillai's behaviour exemplifies what Ricoeur identifies as the manipulation of memory since it is a distortion enabled by the unreliability of internal recollection (Ricoeur 85). It is inferred that Appu Pillai exploits his illness, as no one can ascertain what he remembers or forgets. In these films, memory transcends a mere cognitive function and serves as the fundamental framework of identity. When the structure collapses or is intentionally disassembled, the characters experience a significant identity crisis. Theoretical frameworks from John Locke, Paul Ricoeur, Sigmund Freud, and modern trauma studies elucidate the extent to which identity is dependent upon autobiographical memory and how its distortion results in a fractured, alienated, or artificially reconstructed self.

Precarious Beings and Vulnerable Existence

In *Kishkindha Kaandam*, Appu Pillai's family and the police treat him as an unreliable personality since he is suffering from memory loss. As Miranda Fricker describes in *Epistemic Injustice*, a person whose identity is questionable experiences a form of testimonial injustice, since their testimony is consistently devalued (9-21); however, Appu Pillai subverts this injustice, transforming it into a shield.

In *Bougainvillea*, Reethu is the ultimate precarious character since she has no independent access to her own history. Here, Royce continuously manipulates narrative and her living space. She is physically assaulted; a fictional identity is created for her and used as bait to trap the victims. Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity is directly relevant here, since, according to him, identity is not only something we tell ourselves; it is also something others must recognise and sustain. When memory fails, it is easy to manipulate one's identity for them. Royce, masking in the role of loving caretaker and clinically manipulating Reethu's amnesiac condition, aligns with Lindemann Nelson's concept of "damaged identities" (45), wherein he talks about how identities are narrative

constructions to a large extent, and when someone of power imposes a false or controlling narrative on a vulnerable person, that person's identity can be damaged.

Also, people suffering from dementia or amnesia are unable to learn from their past experiences. Reethu, subjected to frequent violent acts and used as bait to trap Royce's victims, repeatedly faces exposure to crime and develops severe trust issues. Reethu's inability to lead a social life, along with her complete dependence on Royce and the house help for daily functioning, renders her vulnerable and helpless. Similarly, Appu Pillai repeatedly investigates Chachu's case, which he has already solved; his inability to remember the route to the house he has lived in for years and his view of everyone with suspicion due to his fear of having his memory manipulated render his existence precarious. Alongside their identity crises, both characters live in constant fear and insecurity.

The role of Caregivers

Caring for someone with memory-related issues is different from other forms of caregiving. It is not primarily about physical frailty, mobility, or even communication. There is an “inevitable dependency” (Kittay 241) that those affected with memory loss embody. According to Kittay, “each person ought to have access to care from someone who really cares or who has a particular responsibility for us when we are needy because of “inevitable dependencies.” She also broadens the concept of caring, adding that it should include not only what an individual requires to survive but also to thrive. And thriving requires more than bare necessities, such as dignity, social participation and opportunities to flourish. She is of the opinion caring for a needy individual should be considered as a social responsibility rather than a private concern (241).

The films also show the potential danger of living with people with memory loss. Appu Pillai's inability to safeguard his rifle (a potentially dangerous weapon) actually resulted in Chachu's death, an ever-looming trauma every character in the film goes through.

In the light of Kittay's argument of “social caring of burdens” (241), responsible structures should have prevented Appu Pillai, a dementia-affected person, from keeping a potentially dangerous weapon like a rifle to avoid Chachu's death. The family is also unable to access proper institutional support to take care of the patient because of the mystery regarding the disappearance of Chachu's body. There are also scenes in the film where both Appu Pillai and Reethu attack people because of their fear and trust issues.

Among these two characters, Appu Pillai is loved by his family members and is given proper treatment, whereas Reethu is tortured and lives in a narrative created by Royce which takes her far away from her real self, making her even more vulnerable to manipulation. The films thereby stress the importance of a healthy relationship between the caregiver and the patient, as well as an awareness regarding how a memory-affected

person can be manipulated. The film transcends the role of caregivers in the film to keepers of another person's selfhood. Together, the films demand recognition of the dependency of people affected with memory loss and a healthy environment to support their well-being.

Conclusion

The exploration of memory loss in *Bougainvillea* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* reveals how profoundly identity is anchored to the act of remembering. Drawing on Locke's conception of personal identity as continuity of consciousness, both films illustrate how the deterioration of memory undermines the fundamental basis of selfhood. Appu Pillai's cyclical investigations and Reethu's fragmented attempts to reconstruct her past show how the inability to access one's autobiographical memory fractures narrative identity, producing a self that is dislocated from its own past. Ricoeur's differentiation between blocked and manipulated memories further elucidates how trauma and external influences can distort the process of recollection, while Freud's concept of repetition compulsion explains why traumatic experiences manifest through behaviour rather than conscious remembrance.

These disruptions transcend beyond the individual, producing relational crises that reshape familial bonds and social and ethical responsibilities. The films portray how memory-affected individuals become precarious beings, lacking their own agency, which is dispersed in the hands of carers and social structures. Appu Pillai's family is a comparatively secure and supportive family contrasts sharply with Reethu's exploitation under Royce. In both narratives, carers emerge as custodians of truth and personhood, with the power either to safeguard or to distort the identities of those who rely on them. Ultimately, the film broadens the discourse of memory loss and implicitly raises awareness of ethical caregiving, structural support, and narrative justice. The films never fail to stress the fragility of memory and how a malfunctioning neurocognitive system can alter one's relation with themselves as well as with the world they inhabit.

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Stalled Time : Palestinian Immobility and the Phenomenology of Waiting in Nathan Thrall's *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*

Abstract

Nathan Thrall's A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy narrates a single fatal incident to expose the everyday mechanisms through which occupation is lived and endured. This article examines the text through the lens of phenomenology to argue that Thrall foregrounds waiting as a central mode of experience shaped by stalled time, enforced immobility, and bureaucratic delay. Rather than treating the 2012 school bus accident as an isolated tragedy, the narrative situates it within a broader temporal regime in which urgency is repeatedly deferred and care is unevenly distributed. Drawing on phenomenological concepts of lived time and experience, alongside scholarship on precarity and structural violence, the article demonstrates how political power operates through temporal disruption rather than overt spectacle. By closely reading Thrall's narrative strategies and its representation of everyday uncertainty, the study shows how precarity becomes normalized and how waiting is absorbed into the texture of daily life under occupation. The article ultimately argues that *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* offers an ethical and experiential critique of occupation by rendering time itself as a site of domination and vulnerability.

Keywords : Phenomenology, Occupation, Waiting, Precarity, Lived Time, Structural Violence, Palestinian Experience, Narrative Nonfiction, Temporality and Power

Political violence is often narrated through statistics, treaties, and territorial maps. While such representations are necessary, they frequently obscure how power is experienced at the level of everyday life. Nathan Thrall's *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy* offers a compelling alternative by grounding political violence in lived experience. By focusing on a single day in the life of a Palestinian father searching for his missing son after a school bus accident, Thrall shows that occupation operates not only through spatial domination but also through the manipulation of time. *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* presents a phenomenology of waiting, an account of how waiting is lived, felt, and endured in everyday experience, through which Palestinian life is shaped by stalled time, forced immobility, and chronic bureaucratic obstruction. The occupying power asserts control not only by restricting movement but by producing prolonged, uncertain waiting, turning delay itself into an instrument of domination. Waiting becomes the primary medium through which power is imposed: an embodied, psychological, and ethical condition rather than a passive interval between events.

At the centre of *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* lies a devastating yet seemingly ordinary event: a kindergarten bus carrying Palestinian children from Anata collides with a truck near the Jaba checkpoint in February 2012. The bus catches fire, resulting in the deaths of several children, including five-year-old Milad Salama. While the incident itself lasts only moments, its consequences unfold over hours marked by confusion, delay, and institutional paralysis. Thrall does not treat the crash as an isolated accident but as the focal point through which an entire political system becomes visible. The significance of the incident lies not only in the violence of the crash but in the failure of response that follows. Emergency services are delayed, authority is fragmented, and responsibility is diffused across Israeli military control, Palestinian administrative bodies, and humanitarian responders. As Thrall records, the accident scene is defined less by action than by absence: “There were no children, no teachers, no ambulances” (Thrall 12). This absence becomes emblematic of the broader condition under occupation, where care is unevenly distributed and urgency is filtered through bureaucratic hierarchies. This breakdown in response does not end with the physical event of the crash; it reshapes how time is experienced by those involved. The absence of immediate care and reliable information forces individuals into prolonged waiting, where urgency turns into uncertainty. It is this lived experience of delayed time that makes a phenomenological approach essential to understanding the incident.

Phenomenology, originating with Edmund Husserl, seeks to understand phenomena as they are experienced in consciousness rather than as objective facts (Husserl 52). Time, within this framework, is not linear clock time but lived duration. Henri Bergson conceptualizes this as *durée*, emphasizing that time stretches and contracts according to affective intensity (Bergson 100). Thrall's narrative structure reflects this lived temporality. Though the events unfold over a few hours, Abed Salama experiences them as interminable. Time ceases to move forward toward resolution and instead suspends him in uncertainty. As Thrall notes, “Rumours swirled around him, passing from one bystander to another” (13). Each rumour fractures temporal continuity, preventing closure and intensifying waiting.

This interpretation of waiting as a form of domination is reinforced by existing scholarship on temporality under occupation. These experiences of waiting can be further understood through scholarship that conceptualizes time itself as a site of political control. Julie Peteet argues that for Palestinians, time itself becomes “weaponized” as a method of colonial control, with mobility and autonomy systematically curtailed through prolonged delay and uncertainty (Peteet 43). Similarly, Mikko Joronendemonstrates how Israeli state apparatuses employ “slowness, delay, and waiting” as deliberate governing techniques that sustain vulnerability and precarity rather than exceptional moments of crisis (Joronon994). Expanding on Peteet and Joronon, Ashutosh Singh observes that “Time is the central arena where the phenomena of life take place. It is the boundary of

our life. It is so apparent that we never even think of it as a philosophical as well as a psychological concept.” (Singh 317) He further notes that prolonged waiting has been absorbed into Palestinian social and cultural life, disrupting linear perceptions of time and transforming delay into a normalized condition of existence under occupation. Read alongside these analyses, Thrall's narrative does not merely depict waiting as an incidental experience but reveals it as a structurally produced temporal regime that shapes everyday Palestinian life. Waiting in Thrall's text is not accidental or voluntary, it is systematically imposed. Palestinian mobility is regulated through administrative classification, transforming movement into a conditional privilege. Thrall explains that “the ability to pass through them depended on the color of your ID, what part of the occupied territories you were born in, how old you were, your gender, and whether you had ever been detained or arrested” (33).

This article contributes to existing scholarship by shifting the focus from broad analyses of Palestinian temporality to a close phenomenological reading of a single-day narrative. While scholars such as Peteet, Joronen, and Baraitser conceptualize waiting as a structural condition under occupation, this paper demonstrates how these temporal mechanisms manifest at the micro-level of Thrall's narrative form. The argument introduces a narratological insight. Thrall's minute-by-minute reconstruction of the accident acts as a temporal microcosm, capturing decades of bureaucratic control within the events of a single day. In doing so, the article expands phenomenological discussions by demonstrating that waiting functions not only as an emotional experience but also as a narrative technique and a political tool of settler-colonial rule.

This aligns with Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence, where harm is produced not through direct force but through institutional arrangements that limit access to basic needs (Galtung 171). Waiting becomes a technique of governance, exercised invisibly yet persistently. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is the primary site through which space is experienced; spatial restriction therefore directly affects subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 203). Thrall's narrative illustrates how Palestinian bodies are repeatedly halted, redirected, and immobilized. Despite proximity to hospitals, Abed cannot reach them: “With his green ID from the West Bank, he would not be allowed to enter Jerusalem and check at Hadassah” (13). Here, space becomes phenomenologically distorted—what appears near becomes unreachable, transforming urgency into paralysis. One of the most understated yet powerful moments in the narrative occurs when Thrall writes, “Abed had to decide where to go” (Thrall 13). This moment encapsulates stalled time—an instant where urgency collides with uncertainty. Martin Heidegger describes such moments as characteristic of *Angst*, where ordinary meanings collapse and the future becomes inaccessible (Heidegger 231).

This structural framework of time and power is not abstract; it infiltrates the most personal dimensions of Abed Salama's life. His freedom of movement is restricted by ID

card classifications, limiting access to Jerusalem and other areas, even in emergencies. The loss of ancestral land and economic marginalization forces him to work under Israeli contractors, often in settlements built on Palestinian land. His educational aspirations are crushed when universities are closed and his father, under the pressure of occupation-era conservatism, refuses to support studies abroad. His love life is also disrupted—Abed's long relationship with Ghazl is severed by family politics exacerbated by occupation-era divisions, and his hasty marriage to Asmahan stems from emotional turmoil linked to those constraints. His activism leads to arrest and torture, further affecting his reputation and future prospects. Ultimately, the occupation creates a backdrop of instability, loss, and repression that infiltrates Abed's intimate relationships, ambitions, and sense of identity.

Structural violence manifests here through delay and institutional silence rather than overt force. Structural violence becomes phenomenologically visible through emotional and bodily distress. Abed's struggle is rendered with precision: “Abed tried to quell his rising terror. But his mind would not comply” (Thrall 13). This interior breakdown illustrates how political systems colonize consciousness itself. As Galtung notes, structural violence is often normalized and therefore invisible (169). Thrall's narrative counters this invisibility by translating policy into lived suffering. Thrall situates the tragedy within broader spatial injustice. Even nature is unequally accessible: “The town's natural pool and spring was turned into an Israeli nature reserve, which was free to settlers but charged admission to the people of Anata” (Thrall 16). Such examples demonstrate how domination is embedded into everyday routines.

This normalization creates collective confinement. As Thrall observes, “Every Palestinian was a sort of prisoner, from the youngest child to the PA president” (Thrall 34). Imprisonment here is temporal, psychological, and structural. Emmanuel Levinas argues that ethical responsibility emerges through exposure to the vulnerability of the Other (Levinas 199). Although framed as a step toward peace, the Oslo Accords ultimately reinforced Israel's objective of retaining maximum land with minimal Palestinian presence. As Thrall describes, the agreements “had fractured the West Bank into 165 islands of limited self-government, each one surrounded by a sea of Israeli control” (45). Within these fragmented enclaves, Palestinians found themselves isolated and surveilled, while their own Palestinian Authority, heavily dependent on Israeli cooperation, appeared powerless. Reflecting this disillusionment, many referred to their governing body not as *sulta* (authority) but mockingly as *salata* (salad). Thrall's narrative enacts this ethical encounter by immersing readers in Abed's waiting. Rather than presenting occupation abstractly, the text forces readers to experience its temporal violence. Waiting thus becomes an ethical site where injustice is felt rather than merely understood.

An illustrative example from Nathan Thrall's *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* underscores how the Israeli occupation transforms time into a tool of control. The Jaba

road—once built to ensure settler convenience—became, for Palestinians, a perilous and congested artery of daily life. With no centre divider, uneven lane access, and erratic checkpoint enforcement, the road forces over 200,000 Palestinians to endure long delays, dangerous overtaking manoeuvres, and chronic uncertainty. Soldiers are deployed during peak hours not for security, but to restrict Palestinian flow on a road shared with settlers. As Thrall notes, this pattern of obstruction and neglect has led to so many crashes that the road is grimly known as “the death road.” This example reveals how time itself is stalled by infrastructure designed to constrain Palestinian lives turning the ordinary act of movement into a slow, hazardous struggle shaped by political power

Thrall's choice to structure the narrative around a single day intensifies the ethical weight of waiting. The compressed timeframe mirrors the psychological suspension experienced by Abed, while interwoven historical digressions expose how a single event reflects decades of systemic dispossession. By refusing to isolate tragedy as exceptional, Thrall reveals its structural roots. *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* thus becomes not only a chronicle of one incident, but an incisive portrait of occupation as a temporal regime that governs through delay, fragmentation, and deferred care.

As the book recounts, "The threat to Abed and the other employees with green IDs was part of a larger process of cutting Palestinians off from greater Jerusalem." Under the guise of the Oslo Accords, which were intended to lead to final-status negotiations, Israel implemented measures that "weakened the Palestinians' claims to the city to diminish their presence, increase Jewish settlement, and make East Jerusalem's absorption into Israel an irrefutable fact." These policies included the withholding of building permits, home demolitions, evictions of green ID holders, increased checkpoints, and severe restrictions on entrance permits. Moreover, "thousands of Palestinians... had their residency revoked," further eroding their connection to Jerusalem.

Thrall structures the narrative with shifting timelines that reflect the unstable and disrupted temporality of Palestinian life. Instead of telling the story in a straight, chronological order, he moves back and forth between the accident, past events, and explanations of the bureaucracy. This multi-perspective structure breaks the sense of linear time and creates a reading experience that mirrors Abed's own state of temporal suspension. Thrall also uses journalistic pacing, short sentences, sudden scene changes, and contrasting voices, to heighten the feeling of fragmentation. For instance, the narrative shifts between Abed's desperate search and technical descriptions of the permit system, creating a jarring effect that shows how political systems interrupt personal suffering.

Mobility in Thrall's narrative is repeatedly shown as a privilege selectively granted, withdrawn, and weaponized through bureaucratic control. Movement is never straightforward; it is constantly interrupted by checkpoints, delays, and arbitrary decisions by soldiers. As a result, mobility becomes a form of regulated time. The ability

to move or the enforced inability structures the lived experience of the characters and transforms their physical environment into a network of temporal traps. Thrall illustrates how a simple journey becomes elongated into an ordeal, where seconds stretch into hours and minor distances acquire the weight of emotional and political significance. The stop-start movement at checkpoints, the slow crawl of traffic, and the unpredictable waiting times map out a geography where movement is inseparable from restriction. Thus, mobility itself becomes a political condition: it determines who can reach which places, under what circumstances, and at what emotional cost. Through this, Thrall reveals how the occupation functions not only through spatial barriers but also through the manipulation of time embedded within movement. At multiple moments, checkpoints turn seconds into hours. Thrall describes the scene: “Cars moved a few feet and then stopped again. People left their vehicles to argue with soldiers, only to return defeated” (Thrall 15). The repetitive, stop-start rhythm structures a phenomenology of frustration.

The temporal regime of waiting extends beyond moments of crisis into Abed's intimate life. Abed Salama's life unfolds in a reality where time and movement are not his own but are regulated through a colonial matrix of permits, checkpoints, and ID regimes. His personal choices like whom to marry, where to live or how to father are shaped not by free will but by the spatial and temporal restrictions imposed by Israeli authority. Abed's decision to marry Jameela was initially motivated by the hope of obtaining a blue ID, a document that would allow him to move more freely across the fragmented geography of occupied Palestine. Ironically, the very restrictions he sought to escape became the reason the relationship could not be sustained. As travel to Kufr Kanna became more difficult, and the emotional burden of concealment grew, Abed withdrew. “Abed could not see how to stay in the relationship. Telling the truth seemed out of the question, but so did continuing the lie. He kept putting off his visits to Kufr Kanna, which had become more difficult, in any case.” (51) Thus, the proposal was both initiated and undone by the same architecture of control, a regime in which geography dictates intimacy and distance fractures even the most personal bonds. Baraitser focuses on ordinary experiences of stalled and uneventful times such as waiting, loss, or poverty to show how staying with what does not change can itself become a quiet form of care and endurance. (Baraitser 13)

Yet, this strategy led to a prolonged emotional limbo, where waiting supplanted intimacy, and deception replaced genuine companionship. Even the most intimate event like witnessing the birth of his child required negotiating passage at checkpoints, pleading with soldiers, or offering cigarettes as informal bribes. In this context, time is not linear or liberating; it is suspended, punctuated by delays, denials, and indefinite waiting. The occupation does not merely restrict Abed's movement—it colonizes his future by transforming every life decision into a negotiation with a regime of control.

Thrall shows how grief itself becomes another form of confinement. After Milad's death, Abed feels oppressed not only by loss but by the social rituals surrounding it—by mourners pulling him from his son's grave, by relatives crowding his pain, and by a

culture that demands stoicism from men even in unimaginable sorrow. Denied solitude, Abed suppresses his grief, a repression that manifests physically in heart failure and hospitalization. Time no longer moves forward for him; instead, it circles endlessly around what has been lost. Unable to accept Milad's absence, Abed deletes videos and photographs, then regrets the erasure, realizing that pain is the only way to keep his son close. His mourning contrasts with Haifa's silence, deepening his isolation. The moment Abed crawls into his son's tomb to sit beside Milad's body encapsulates stalled time at its most intimate: past, present, and future collapse into a single space of grief, where living feels like waiting to join the dead.

A Day in the Life of Abed Salama reveals that the Israeli occupation is not merely a system of spatial control, but one that operates fundamentally through the manipulation of time. Nathan Thrall's narrative makes visible how delayed responses, immobility, and enforced waiting are not incidental but deliberately structured mechanisms of domination. By centring the experience of one grieving father across a single day, Thrall compresses decades of occupation into hours of suspended action, disorientation, and loss. This experience of stalled timewhere each movement is contested and emotional expression constrained reveals occupation as a deeply personal and lived reality. Unlike traditional accounts grounded in legal frameworks or cartographic representations, Thrall offers an ethical intervention rooted in Palestinian experience. Through his meticulous portrayal of waiting as both a structural and affective condition, the narrative insists that justice must be measured not only by political outcomes or territorial settlements, but by how time itself is endured. In this framing, *waiting* becomes more than a symptom of power, rather it is its most enduring and devastating expression.

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Spectres of Violence : A Žižekian Reading of the New Trends in the Visual Adaptations of Detective Fiction

Abstract

Visual versions of detective stories no longer simply put familiar puzzles on the screen. Over the last few decades they have turned into busy testing grounds for worries about nation, gender, technology, and the emotional cost of living with constant risk. This article traces some of the currents that seem to be tugging the genre in new directions: the way detectives are now anchored in specific national and transnational settings; the steady unsettling of the “default” figure of the white, male, solitary investigator; the fold of digital technologies and surveillance into the very texture of plot; and the greater weight given to grief, trauma, and psychological strain. These shifts are read alongside Slavoj Žižek's distinction between subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence, not as a rigid grid but as a way of noticing what recent films and series keep out of view even as they revel in crime scenes and clues. Rather than treating adaptations as simple transfers from page to screen, the discussion approaches them as cultural locations where ideas of crime, justice, and identity are continually reworked for viewers who are themselves living inside global circuits of violence. In such worlds, the detective no longer looks like a neat guarantor of restored order, but more like a figure who walks through damage that refuses to end.

Key words: Doyle; Žižek; violence (subjective / systemic / symbolic); gender and identity; Gothic / uncanny; transcultural adaptation; trauma and affect; surveillance and technology.

“When once your point of view is changed, the very thing which was so damning becomes a clue to the truth.”

— Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, 194

Detective fiction is one of the very few popular forms that has managed to stay recognisable and yet constantly change its skin. Since Sherlock Holmes first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Doyle's detective has slipped across languages, media, and historical periods, becoming less a single character than a template that others keep borrowing and bending. On the page, the printed narrative gave Holmes a firm stage: the world arrived as a chain of facts and impressions, and the investigator's reasoning stitched

them into a pattern that seemed to close the case. Once the stories moved into visual media, that older assurance did not vanish, but it began to share space with other ways of seeing and feeling the same material.

Sam Naidu, in *Sherlock Holmes in Context* (2017), notes how quickly Holmes outgrew his original setting. From the moment *A Study in Scarlet* appeared in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, he writes, the figure of Holmes “captured the imagination of readers and sparked the creativity of writers the world over,” spawning Doyle's four novels and fifty-six stories and then “a bounty of stories and novels, films, radio dramas, television series, magazines, plays, Internet fan fiction, computer games, and other forms of adaptation, with astonishing success and popularity” (1). That sheer spread matters: the detective is no longer only a Victorian creation but a shared resource that different cultures and media re-stage according to their own preoccupations. Silent films, radio serials, prestige television, streaming platforms—all of them have brought Holmes and his successors into contact with new visual habits and new types of anxiety.

Early cinema seized on Holmes as soon as it could. The grainy silent shorts gave way to the 1939–1946 cycle with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, which did as much as any single set of films to fix Holmes's public face. The deerstalker cap and the pipe, details that barely register in Doyle, became almost inseparable from the character in popular memory. Christopher Redmond remarks in *A Sherlock Holmes Handbook* (1993) that Holmes has appeared in more films, and been played by more actors, than any other fictional figure, and cites Ronald De Waal's estimate of “over 150” films by 1974, ranging from ephemeral pieces to the classic Rathbone series that “for four decades defined the public image of Holmes” (164). Meanwhile, mid-century film noir—*The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Big Sleep* (1946)—pulled the detective away from the clean lines of rational mastery into worlds where corruption, desire, and betrayal blur the moral map. Later television series such as *Columbo* (1968–2003), which shows the culprit at the outset, or *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), which plants investigation firmly in domestic spaces, further widened the possibilities of what a detective story could look and feel like on screen. Taken together, these earlier works form a visual storehouse that contemporary creators still dip into, revise, and sometimes deliberately unsettle.

In the more recent past, one noticeable change has been the way detective narratives have become easier to move across borders. Streaming platforms carry crime series from one continent to another with very little delay, and viewers are now used to watching detectives at work in cities far from their own. This has encouraged not just translation, but local re-imaginings. The Japanese series *Miss Sherlock* (2018), directed by Junichi Mori, relocates Holmes to Tokyo and casts him as a brilliant young woman, with Dr Wato Tachibana as her companion. The shift is more than cosmetic. It brings questions of gender, social expectation, and urban modernity in Japan into a framework originally built in late-Victorian London. Crime here is not simply a puzzle to be solved; it is

entangled with how a society negotiates tradition and change, and with how global forms—like the Holmes myth—land in specific places.

A related development is the steady diversification of the detective's body and biography. For a long time, the figure at the centre of the genre tended to be imagined as white, male, intellectually gifted, emotionally withheld, and marked by an array of eccentric habits. Recent reworkings disturb that silhouette. Netflix's *Enola Holmes* films (2020 and 2022) place a teenage girl in the midst of the Holmes family, making detection into both an exercise of intelligence and a way of pushing back against Victorian patriarchy.

CBS's *Elementary* (2012–2019) gives Watson to Lucy Liu and makes her a trained professional whose partnership with Holmes slowly becomes a relation of parity, rather than the deferential recording of another man's genius. *Veronica Mars* (2004–2019) splices noir with high-school and college life, following a young woman who navigates class divisions, sexual violence, and small-town corruption. In all these cases, the detective's encounters with sexism and institutional indifference bring to the surface conflicts that earlier versions often left in the background. The mystery is still there, but the act of investigation also exposes the social ground on which certain crimes become thinkable.

Another strand that has come to the fore is the use of technology and data as part of the detective's world. Series such as *CSI* build entire sequences around forensic procedures: zoomed-in images of tissue, slowed-down bullets, intricate reconstructions of the crime scene. BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–2017) overlays the screen with floating text when Holmes observes a room or a person, so that his chain of deductions appears in front of the viewer almost as quickly as it forms in his mind. These devices are showy, but they also tell us something more basic: information now travels through screens, codes, and databases, and any believable detective has to live inside that environment. The traditional props—the magnifying glass, the notebook—do not vanish, but they share space with laptops and smartphones, with CCTV feeds and server logs.

Questions of sexuality have also become harder to keep off the surface. In Doyle's stories, Holmes presents himself as largely uninterested in romantic attachments, and at one point (“The Adventure of the Second Stain”) remarks that “the fair sex is (Watson's) department” (Doyle, 785). That aloofness has often been read as a sign of his single-minded dedication to work, or as a way of keeping the stories free of emotional entanglements. In BBC's *Sherlock*, by contrast, the possibility of a *homoerotic* bond between Holmes and Watson is openly joked about and repeatedly raised by other characters. Lynnette Porter notes that the series “makes no attempt to hide the potential homoeroticism” in their relationship, and that gay references become a running gag, from Mrs Hudson's first assumption that they might be sharing a bed to the knowing remarks of friends and strangers who see two unmarried men living, working, and caring deeply for

each other (Porter, 13). The joke is played for humour, but it also signals a world in which the detective's intimacy with his companion can no longer be treated as either invisible or irrelevant.

Doyle's epigraph suggests that a shift in point of view can turn a damning fact into a clue. The visual histories sketched above show that something similar happens when detective fiction moves across time and medium. As the genre is recast in different bodies, cities, and media ecologies, the same basic figure—the investigator—begins to draw out new kinds of threat and new forms of harm. The following analysis takes that intuition seriously and reads a set of contemporary adaptations through Žižek's distinction between subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence, asking less how the detective restores order than what kinds of violence come into focus once the point of view has changed.

In *Mindhunter* (2017–2019), the pace slows down. The series follows the early years of FBI profiling in the 1970s and sits with the work of turning talk into evidence. Tape recorders, handwritten notes, and typed transcripts appear again and again. They remind us that before data could be instantly stored and searched, someone had to listen, replay, and patiently type out each word. The show quietly registers a broader unease about surveillance and information: it suggests a world in which files, recordings, and archives become as central to detection as instinct and face-to-face interviews.

Many recent detective series place trauma and loss at their centre. They move away from the clean resolutions that shaped earlier models of the genre. *Broadchurch* (2013–2017) stays with the aftermath of a child's murder in a small coastal town. The investigation is important, but the story keeps circling back to the way suspicion spreads, trust breaks down, and neighbours begin to look at each other differently. Long shots of the shoreline and streets, filmed in muted tones, give the landscape a heavy, unsettled mood. The case is formally solved, yet the emotional damage does not disappear, and no detective can fully restore what has been lost.

A similar shift is visible in *Mare of Easttown* (2021). Kate Winslet's character is a local detective who carries her own unresolved grief while trying to hold together a community fraying at the edges. Her professional work and her private sorrows constantly overlap: she questions suspects, attends family gatherings, and breaks down in the same spaces. The story suggests that the effort of grieving and the effort of detecting cannot be neatly separated. Crime appears not only as a puzzle but as a wound in a town's life, one that calls for both procedural work and emotional labour.

Streaming platforms have changed where and how these stories circulate. Detective series are no longer tied to the timetable of a national broadcaster; they can be watched in long stretches, dubbed or subtitled, and recommended across continents. This has encouraged new kinds of experiment. *Sacred Games* (2018) in India and *Narcos*

(2015–2017) in Latin America both use detective and investigative threads to map the larger networks of crime, politics, and history, rather than to close a single case. Other shows stretch the genre in different directions. *The Irregulars* (2021) turns Holmes's London into a haunted city filled with supernatural threats, while *True Detective* (2014–2019) pushes noir toward philosophical and sometimes metaphysical questions. These hybrids suggest that audiences are drawn to crime stories that carry other layers with them—historical, fantastic, or cosmic—and that streaming, with its global reach, gives even locally rooted detectives a much wider, and more demanding, audience.

Žižekian Interlude: Violence and Detective Fiction

The detective story keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilisation itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions . . . It is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. [The police romance] is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.

—G. K. Chesterton, “A Defence of Detective Stories” (6)

Detective fiction has always circled around violence. Yet violence in these stories is never only the splash of blood on a wall or the final confrontation with a killer. It can be harder to grasp, folded into habits, institutions, or the quiet pressure of “how things are done.” To draw out this complexity, it is helpful to bring in Slavoj Žižek's account of violence, which gives language to forms of harm that do not always look dramatic. Žižek, the Slovene philosopher and cultural critic whom Terry Eagleton once described as “the most formidably brilliant exponent of psychoanalysis, indeed of cultural theory in general, to have emerged in Europe for some decades” (London Review of Books 19.23: 1), is concerned with the ways in which spectacular acts of aggression often distract us from the background that makes them possible.

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek argues that our attention is drawn first to what he calls “subjective violence”: visible eruptions such as crime, terror, riots, or war. This focus, he warns, can blind us to other, less visible forms. Alongside subjective violence, he speaks of “objective” violence, which includes both systemic and symbolic forms. Systemic violence is the slow, grinding harm produced by unjust social arrangements, economic inequality, or the “smooth functioning” of institutions that quietly exclude or exploit. Symbolic violence operates through language, images, and categories of meaning themselves. As he writes:

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” violence, violence performed by a clearly

identifiable agent... subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence. First, there is a “symbolic” violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call “our house of being.”... this violence is not only at work in the obvious—and extensively studied—cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms; there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. Second, there is what I call “systemic” violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. (Žižek 1–2)

Read through this lens, detective narratives do more than recount crimes. They stage encounters between these different layers of violence, sometimes exposing them, sometimes helping to conceal them. Doyle's Holmes often appears as the figure who restores order by bringing rational light to irrational acts. In many contemporary adaptations, that confidence is harder to sustain. The investigator still names the culprit, but the work of detection keeps brushing against legal systems, state agencies, religious institutions, and media networks that participate in the very harm they claim to police. The detective becomes a channel through which the audience glimpses how reason and systemic damage are entangled.

HBO's *True Detective* (2014–2019) is a telling example. The first season begins with a scene that looks familiar enough: a woman's body is found in a field in rural Louisiana, posed with ritual symbols and eerie details that suggest the work of a lone sadist. It could be the opening to a conventional serial-killer story. As the investigation unfolds, however, the killing stops looking like an isolated eruption. The case leads the detectives into a web of local elites, churches, schools, and law-enforcement officials who have, in different ways, allowed violence to flourish. The spectacular crime is the doorway through which a longer history of neglect and complicity comes into view. Žižek notes:

Subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the “normal,” peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this “normal” state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious “dark matter” of physics, the counterpart to an all-too visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be “irrational” explosions of subjective violence. (Žižek 2).

The series gives that argument a concrete shape. The horror does not reside only in the killer's acts, but in the institutions that close ranks, lose files, look away, or quietly profit from others' vulnerability. The murder is shocking; the ordinary mechanisms that allow it to happen are, in a different register, more disturbing because they feel so familiar. *True Detective* also brings another dimension to the surface. Rust Cohle's long monologues about time, memory, and the futility of human effort are not decorative touches. They pull the story into a philosophical register in which violence is not just something that breaks into an otherwise stable life but something woven into the fabric of existence. Corruption in this world is not simply a social flaw that reform might fix; it feels closer to a condition under which people go on living. Žižek's figure of the investigator who wavers between exposing a particular deed and staring into the void that makes such deeds possible is helpful here. The season closes with a sense of work done—someone is caught, a case is closed—but the deeper disturbance persists. Justice appears thin and temporary, and the larger field of damage remains.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Khufiya* (2023), released on Netflix, is disturbing less for its set pieces than for the way it lets state power seep into the most ordinary corners of life. The film, loosely drawn from Amar Bhushan's *Escape to Nowhere* (2012), follows an officer in India's Research and Analysis Wing as she shadows a suspected traitor. On the surface, it is an espionage narrative: surveillance operations, coded exchanges, quiet eliminations. As the story moves on, a different kind of unease begins to thicken. The violence that matters here is not only the targeted killing or the betrayal; it is the routine intrusion of the state into bedrooms, kitchens, and friendships. Žižek speaks of “social-symbolic violence at its purest” as something that appears simply as “the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell, of the air we breathe” (34). *Khufiya* gives a local habitation to that phrase. Couples watch each other with new suspicion. A shared meal is no longer just a meal but a possible scene of information gathering. The operative herself is not standing outside this process. The work follows her home, and her own capacities for tenderness and trust are slowly bent to match the harsh logic she serves. Espionage, in this sense, is not merely a tool that uncovers violence; it becomes one of the forms through which violence is quietly carried out.

Hansal Mehta's *The Buckingham Murders* (2023) shifts the scene to Britain and places a South Asian woman at the centre of a police investigation. She is grieving, exhausted, and still required to perform the calm, procedural face of the law. The case—a child's killing—is terrible enough, yet the film does not allow the viewer to treat it as an isolated act. Everyday moments keep cutting in: an awkward pause with colleagues, an offhand remark, a look that reminds her she is marked as different. Žižek notes that whenever we name something violent, we do so against an unspoken picture of what counts as “normal” life, and that “the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as 'violent'” (65). In Mehta's film, the “normal” setting is a small English town where the detective remains half inside and half

outside the circle. The investigation forces her into people's homes and lives, but that movement never quite turns into belonging. The murder, in this light, reflects another kind of wound: the slow, wearing violence of not fully belonging anywhere, even while wearing the badge of the state.

Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019) appears, at first glance, to be a playful tribute to the country-house mystery. An ageing crime writer is found dead, his family gathers, and an eccentric private sleuth appears on the scene. The machinery of the whodunit is intact. Yet the film keeps steering attention away from the mechanics of the act and toward the conditions that make it possible. The real cruelty lies not simply in the death but in the way the wealthy family think about money, inheritance, and the people who work for them. Marta, the nurse who becomes the moral and narrative centre, occupies an uneasy place: needed, trusted, and yet perpetually reminded of her precarious legal and social status. The eventual redistribution of the estate exposes the family's sense of entitlement as a kind of quiet, everyday violence. In Žižek's terms, this is the sphere of *symbolic violence*: the realm in which certain hierarchies are treated as natural and where exclusion is built into what seems like common sense. The film uses the pleasures of the puzzle to draw the viewer into a sharper awareness of how class power sustains itself without ever needing to raise a hand.

Kenneth Branagh's *A Haunting in Venice* (2023) takes a more openly uncanny route. Drawing on Agatha Christie, it places Hercule Poirot in a decaying Venetian palazzo during a storm-lashed night, with a séance and a cluster of possible suspects. The ingredients of the classic Christie puzzle are there—motives, secrets, alibis—but they are overlaid with a persistent sense that something remains wrong even when explanations are offered. Shadows move, voices echo, and the house itself seems to remember older crimes. The murders can be traced and named, yet the film insists that trauma does not vanish once Poirot has reconstructed the chain of events. The ghosts, whether taken as “real” within the story or as projections of guilt, mark the return of what the polite surface of society has tried to bury. In this sense, the supernatural element is not merely decorative. It works as a figure for symbolic violence that has been repressed—pain, shame, unacknowledged wrongdoing—coming back into view in a form that rational speech cannot fully manage.

Netflix's *The Irregulars* (2021) returns to Holmes's London but refuses to keep the focus on the famous detective. Instead, it follows a group of street children who, in Doyle's stories, appear only briefly as the *Baker Street Irregulars*. Here they become the main investigators in a city overrun by strange occurrences. The series puts two registers of harm side by side. One is material and recognisable: overcrowded housing, hunger, disease, and the threat of being discarded by the authorities. The other is supernatural: ghosts, monstrous apparitions, and psychic disturbances that seem to grow out of the city's own misery. Žižek's reminder that violence is bound up with the “frame” that

decides what counts as ordinary life is useful here. The creatures that haunt *The Irregulars* can be read as embodiments of social damage that has never been addressed. The fact that it is the poor and marginalised who are asked to deal with these unleashed forces is telling. Those most exposed to systemic violence, the ones who were already invisible in earlier versions of the Holmes universe, are left to face its most frightening shapes.

Conclusion

“If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then, crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough. Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.” (Žižek, 217).

At this point, a pattern starts to take shape. Žižek's threefold scheme—subjective, systemic, symbolic—does not sit awkwardly on these texts; it runs through them. *True Detective* begins with a shocking murder and ends by showing a landscape where institutions themselves are rotten. *Khufiya* draws the cold, bureaucratic violence of espionage into the bedroom. *The Buckingham Murders* lets the strain of migration, the feeling of being neither fully here nor there, stand alongside the official crime. In *Knives Out*, class injury is played out as sharp dialogue and drawing-room farce, but its effects are no less biting. *A Haunting in Venice* allows old guilt to return as haunting, while *The Irregulars* turns Victorian deprivation into literal spectres. The visible act—the body, the stabbing, the betrayal—is the starting point. What unsettles more is the background: the rules, expectations, and histories that make such acts possible and then help them to be forgotten.

In such a landscape, the detective cannot simply be the calm agent who restores order. The figure now moves through institutions that are themselves compromised, through communities that carry long memories of harm. The films and series discussed here rarely claim to “solve” violence. They show it refracted through grief, through bureaucratic routine, through class and caste, through the afterlife of empire, through the uncanny return of what has been pushed down. The detective looks less like an answer and more like a guide who keeps finding that every apparent resolution opens onto deeper fractures.

Žižek's remark that “sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do” (217) may sound extreme, yet it speaks to what these narratives quietly insist on. Violence is not only the eruption that makes headlines; it is also the inertia that leaves structures untouched. When one looks across *Sherlock*, *Khufiya*, *The Buckingham Murders*, *Knives Out*, *A Haunting in Venice*, *The Irregulars*, and the other texts invoked here, a shared intuition emerges. The genre still trades in mystery and revelation, but it has become harder to imagine a final, comforting restoration of balance. Cases are closed, reports filed, but the conditions that produced the harm remain largely intact.

This is perhaps why detective fiction, in its current visual forms, continues to feel

timely rather than quaint. Viewers are drawn to the familiar pleasures of clues and red herrings, yet they also encounter something more disquieting: the sense that subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence are woven into the ordinary routines of contemporary life. The detective, deprived of some of his old authority, is still on the scene—but now as a figure moving through ruins, pointing at cracks that cannot easily be sealed.

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Liberation Vs. Alienation : Memory Loss in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Abstract

Cinema, as an important medium of storytelling offers profound insights into the multifaceted human experience and relationships. Through nuanced narratives and visual storytelling, cinema can illuminate the social, emotional and psychological aspects of illnesses and its lived realities as well. This paper entitled Liberation vs. Alienation: Memory loss in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema explores the intersection of cinema, health humanities and vulnerability studies by analysing the representation of memory loss and its associated care practices in two films: Kishkindha Kaandam and Bougainvillea. Both films employ memory loss as a central theme but present contrasting narratives that illuminate the multifaceted nature of this condition, ranging from empowerment to precarity. This paper aims to examine how Kishkindha Kaandam challenges the stigma associated with memory loss by presenting it as a tool for subversion while Bougainvillea underscores the precariousness of individuals who lack adequate support systems. By situating these cinematic narratives within the broader framework of health humanities, this paper also aims to explore the role of contemporary Malayalam movies in reshaping the understanding of memory loss and caregiving. Ultimately, this paper attempts to highlight the transformative potential of cinema as a tool for fostering empathy and advocating for a better understanding of memory loss and its associated care practices.

Keywords: Cinema, Health Humanities, Memory loss, Vulnerability.

Cinema plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions, addressing complex subjects, reflecting societal values and transformations. In its effort to explore multiple dimensions of human experiences through its layered narratives, cinema offers profound insights into the physical, emotional, psychological and social aspects of illness experiences by challenging the existing stereotypes, destigmatizing illnesses and fostering ethical care and empathy. However, its role in skewing the public perception of illnesses by disseminating stereotypes and reinforcing stigma should not go unnoticed. When illnesses are portrayed in a "humane and empathetic manner, they can help to foster a better understanding of many conditions and disorders" (Kalra et al. 54). Thus, cinematic discourse can heavily impact how audiences perceive and interpret illness and its associated care practices.

The intersection of cinema and health humanities highlights the role of cinematic narratives in fostering a holistic comprehension of health, illness and care giving in the

wider health and social care contexts. Health humanities focuses on the intersection of healthcare with arts and humanities to "develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy and self-reflection, all of which are involved in humane medical care" (Crawford et al. 18). Moreover, health humanities also underscores the vitality of illness narratives in educating the healthcare workers and shaping the contours of doctor-patient relationships. These narratives bring to light the subjective realities inhibited by patients from their point of view that the dominant biomedical field often fails to address. In this context, the convergence between cinematic narratives and health humanities serves as a crucial framework for exploring how humane representation of illness experience can induce a deeper understanding of the true reality of many severe health conditions in the biomedical and social contexts.

Memory loss, a recurring theme in cinema, is depicted through various lenses ranging from medical implications to its psychological and social dimensions. *Cleveland Clinic* identifies two different types of memory loss- acute and progressive. Acute memory loss, such as amnesia, is typically caused by trauma, brain injury, ischemic stroke, environmental toxins or infections in the brain. Irreversible type of memory loss or progressive memory loss is often associated with neurodegenerative conditions like Alzheimer's disease (AD) and other forms of dementia, which has far-reaching consequences. Cinema has played a critical role in rendering the disorientation experienced by individuals affected with memory loss and its emotional toll on their caregivers and the audience. Through its character-driven plots, realistic settings, thematic lines and cinematography, Malayalam cinema has carved a distinctive place in the larger cinematic landscape. The theme of memory loss is often addressed with great sensitivity and depth, which allows the audience to engage with the psychological and relational dimensions of this condition. Post-traumatic amnesia (PTA), which is followed by traumatic brain injury, is presented in films like *Innale* (1989), *My Big Father* (2009), *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* (2014) and *Premam* (2015), adding to the narrative either an emotional core or whimsical touch. Similarly, *Mumbai Police* (2013) explores PTA as a critical element in unravelling a suspenseful investigation mystery. When it comes to chronic forms of memory loss like AD and dementia, *Thanmathra* (2005) serves as an empathetic examination into the vulnerable lives and interpersonal relationships in the lives of individuals affected with AD. By integrating memory loss as a central motif in the cinematic discourse, Malayalam cinema continues to sensitize audiences to caregiving practices, thereby destigmatizing and humanizing the condition.

Recent films excavating the multifaceted experience of memory loss in Malayalam include *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *Bougainvillea*. Both films, released around the same time, broaden the Malayalam cinematic discourse on memory loss by introducing contrasting perspectives. The former attempts to reimagine memory loss as a liberating force by distorting the dominant stigmatic perception, while the latter sheds light on the

alienation faced by vulnerable bodies. These narratives not only expand the thematic scope of Malayalam cinema but also offer critical reflections on the layered experiences of memory loss and its impact on individuals and communities. By focusing on the subjective experiences of the characters through the lens of health humanities, *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *Bougainvillea* promote a compassionate understanding of the multilayered nature of this condition. Further, these narratives also underscore the significance of the transformative potential of cinema to reshape the existing notion associated with memory loss and foster empathetic care.

Memory Loss as a Liberating Force in *KishkindhaKaandam*

Kishkindha Kaandam, a 2024 Malayalam mystery thriller directed by Dinjith Ayyathan, reconstructs memory loss, particularly dementia, as a multifaceted condition comprising both challenges and opportunities for liberation. The narrative centres on Appu Pillai, a retired army officer who has dementia, whose life takes a dramatic turn when his grandson, Chachu, goes missing. The complexities of his cognitive state become more apparent as he sets out to investigate Chachu's missing case. During the course of his investigation, Appu's memory lapses, lead to moments of tension, poignancy and disorder. Surprisingly, his dementia guards him from the guilt, regrets and legal entanglements tied to the past, allowing him a sense of liberation amidst the chaos. This unique characterization of the dual nature of dementia, entailing both the challenges and liberating features of this condition, subverts the reductive biomedical and socio-cultural narratives reinforcing negative stereotypes and stigma associated with it.

Kishkindha Kaandam aligns with the broader framework of health humanities by rejecting the inherent stigmatizing practice associated with dementia, which often brands the affected individuals as 'zombies', 'empty shells' or 'living-dead' and instead, delves into the subjective reality of individuals. By delving into the subjective reality, the film highlights that not all dementia experiences are alike. Drawing on Tom Kitwood's different personality types in dementia patients, Appu can be seen as embodying an 'independent personality' as he "resist facing the truth about...disabilities and like to feel they are in charge" (Kitwood 71). Instead of succumbing to the societal stigma of helplessness, Appu exhibits a proactive approach by being aware of his condition and by attempting to maintain a sense of control over his life. As part of his approach, Appu keeps a notepad to document important information and adorns his room with numerous notes containing the details of his family, friends and Appu's missing case and newspaper reports related to it. The notes and notepads underscore Appu's conscious effort to feel grounded with the reality and a form of self-directed care. Appu's coping mechanism directly attacks the societal stigma that strips individuals of their identity and reduces them to passive recipients of care.

Dementia acts as a shield for Appu by liberating him from his past regrets, guilt, and emotional and legal repercussions associated with the tragic death of Chachu. His

memory loss allows him to forget the key details of Chachu's death and his own role in covering it up, sparing him from the burden of regret and guilt. His memory lapses block his realization of his actions of disposing Chachu's body and the destruction of evidence related to that. This forgetfulness, a pathological condition, creates a buffer between himself and his distressing past, and each time he rediscovers the truth about Chachu's death, he destroys the evidence. While the truth of Chachu's death could leave him devastated, his memory loss followed by dementia, liberates him from the tragic event. Similarly, when he is interrogated about the discovery of an ape's skeleton and his missing pistol, he is freed from the following legal consequences on the grounds of being affected with dementia. Again, his condition shields him from any direct accountability and effectively disqualifies him from being held as legally culpable. In essence, for Appu, dementia transforms from a feared cognitive condition into a mechanism of liberation by guarding him against the emotional torment of guilt and legal consequences.

Kishkindha Kaandam stresses the relevance of empathetic and holistic dementia care through the portrayal of the doctor-patient and patient-caregiver relationship. In the doctor-patient relationship, instead of taking him to the hospital for treatment and regular check-ups, doctor visits Appu at his house under the guise of an old friend which underscores a compassionate medical approach. This strategy aids the doctor to preserve and uphold Appu's sense of autonomy and the independent nature he has always embodied. Additionally, the doctor artfully assesses Appu's cognitive state through their informal conversations, highlighting the role of narrative competence and the significance of "empathy, trustworthiness, and sensitivity toward individual patients" (Charon 8). Accordingly, the doctor enters the subjective world of Appu by and fosters a medical approach that values the subjectivity and autonomy of dementia-affected patients. Similarly, the film stresses the relevance of the patient-caregiver relationship by emphasizing Kitwood's argument that relational care is essential in preserving the personhood of individuals with dementia. Kitwood argues that personhood is maintained through positive social interactions and respectfully treating the individual even as cognitive functions deteriorate. Ajayan, his son, adapts his approach to align with Appu's independent nature and engages in subtle acts of affirmation that preserve his father's dignity. He does not force rigid caregiving routines or confront his father for losing the pistol and instead, carries very respectful interactions and allows his father to maintain a sense of control. Kitwood terms this approach of dementia care as 'positive-person work' where caregivers enhance the personhood of their patients in different ways by "strengthening a positive feeling, nurturing an ability, or helping to heal some psychic wound" (Kitwood 89). Through these seemingly small yet profound actions, Ajayan upholds his father's agency and reinforces the idea of relational care in maintaining the personhood of dementia-affected individuals. This model of dementia care challenges the traditional depersonalizing model propagated by the reductive biomedical and socio-cultural discourse and instead prioritizes an empathetic and holistic care approach that

embraces the personhood and dignity of individuals.

Memory Loss as an Alienating Force in *Bougainvillea*

Bougainvillea (2024) is a Malayalam psychological thriller directed by Amal Neerad, exploring the intersection of amnesia, alienation and vulnerability. The film centres on Reethu, a woman suffering from amnesia followed by a traumatic car accident. Reethu unconsciously exists within a fabricated reality weaved by Royce, her husband. Reethu likely suffers from dissociative amnesia, a condition characterized by the rupture of episodic-autobiographical memory, where individuals usually lose their access to their past (Staniloiu et al). Though her ability to access her past memory is fractured, her semantic and procedural memory remains intact as she engages in activities like reading, writing and painting. However, her cognitive vulnerability makes her susceptible to Royce's manipulation, which erases her past identity as Esther and reconstructs a new name and reality. The current existential disconnection experienced by Reethu and her lost memories are portrayed through the recurring visual motif of drowning, where drowning becomes the metaphor for Royce's act of ensuring her memories remain buried. Neerad employs a distinct visual grammar to communicate Reethu's alienation. The film utilizes a desaturated colour palette and high-contrast lighting to evoke a sense of clinical coldness, mirroring Reethu's emotional isolation. The recurring visual motif of drowning is not merely metaphorical; Neerad uses underwater cinematography and muffled, distorted sound design to simulate the sensory experience of a mind struggling to surface for air.

Reethu's connection with the outside world is also severed through spatial and social confinement by isolating her in their house and being monitored by a caretaker. Thus, Reethu's alienation from her past autobiographical memory is exacerbated through Royce's psychological control by alienating her from her own agency and identity. As a result of these techniques, Royce reduces Reethu into a “docile body”, assuring “the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault 137). In the hands of Royce, Reethu transforms into an object by subjecting her body, actions and even thoughts to a power dynamic, which renders her as a vulnerable body.

Judith Butler defines vulnerability as an inherent human condition and highlights its unequal distribution based on power dynamics and social structures. According to Butler, “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies.... exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20). Reethu's amnesia deepens her vulnerability under the exposure of Royce, who positions himself as both her husband and primary caregiver. Her amnesia is not merely a neurological disorder, puncturing her autobiographical memory, but a condition that displays her to 'epistemic and bodily precarity'. Due to her loss of memory, Reethu is subjected to epistemic precarity, relying on Royce, who manipulates her access to autobiographical memory and

reality. He controls Reethu's epistemic access by imposing her past and manipulating her sense of self. Simultaneously, by directly inflicting physical harm on her body and isolating her from the outer world, Royce turns her body into site of power, exposing her to bodily precarity. Therefore, Reethu's dependence on him places her in a precarious position which underscores the presence of an unequal power dynamics where specific groups are more vulnerable to harm due to their cognitive health conditions.

In *Bougainvillea*, the patient-caregiver relationship between Reethu and Royce becomes a method of control, and the techniques used align with Kitwood's theory of 'malignant social psychology' in dementia care (in this case, amnesia). Kitwood argues that malignant caregiving practices emerge from cultural and systemic factors and not from deliberate cruelty. However, Royce's actions are deliberate manipulation for his own personal gain. The weaponization of her amnesia and their abusive dynamic undermines her personhood and aggravates her vulnerable state. Consequently, Royce's role as a caregiver highlights the ethical crisis in care, where care is altered into a means of exerting power. But despite of the vulnerability, her bougainvillea paintings symbolize a fragmented link to her past, constituting an unconscious act of resistance. Royce collecting her bougainvillea paintings and the following burning of them encapsulates his act of erasing her past. Similarly, her act of shooting Royce at the end becomes not only a symbolic act of resistance but also a reclamation of her lost identity, emphasizing Butler's idea of 'grievable lives' that have the capacity to resist. Accordingly, Reethu's actions become instrumental for her transformation from a passive victim to an active agent by asserting her agency over her own body and disrupting the imposed precarity.

Conclusion

This essay expands the understanding of serious cognitive conditions like dementia and amnesia by emphasizing their under explored dimensions through the medium of cinema. *Kishkindha Kaandam* and *Bougainvillea* project the raw experience of memory loss on the screen and invite the audience to interrogate the diverse human conditions. In a state like Kerala, with an aging population and high literacy, cinema acts as a primary educator. These narratives help destigmatize dementia by showing that "personhood" persists despite memory loss, encouraging a shift from institutionalized care to empathetic, social support systems. While the former reimagines memory loss as a liberating force, the latter portrays it as a source of alienation and a profound sense of vulnerability. Both films provide a unique representation of memory loss, challenging the prevalent discourse that homogenizes the experience as an irreversible decline of agency. These cinematic narratives expand the Malayalam cinematic discourse on memory loss by transcending the conventional stereotypical narratives that either stigmatize or sensationalize the condition. By highlighting how malignant social psychology can erode the personhood of affected individuals and positive social interactions can reinforce it, this essay explores the relevance of Kitwood's person-centred care theory. This calls for a

critical reflection on the significance of ethical and empathetic treatment. Moreover, through the nexus between cinema and health humanities, this essay throws light on the potential of this medium to bridge the gap between scientific and humanistic realms of these cognitive conditions. To conclude, cinematic narratives on memory loss can adversely challenge reductive narratives, reshape cultural perceptions and promote awareness in the public.

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