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## **Editorial**

Over the years, a belief has grown stronger that the text is an open-ended system of writing, a dynamic body of representations and an economy of meaning. It is no longer a self-contained repository of determinate authorial meaning. At the same time, another belief that the literary text is not self-evidently 'literary' has also gained ground. Both beliefs have combined to give a culturalist turn to literary studies. For its part, literary studies has fashioned itself as critical humanities in a bid to hold its grounds against the challenges of science, technology and all those disciplines directly linked with money-making, health and material benefits. We situate ourselves with greater rigour of analytic theory than ever before as subjectivities in society and history while reading the texts. While we acknowledge the importance of form and beauty as ethos and structural principle of art, we still want to break out of the self-validating models of aesthetics in trying to understand why certain representations and ideas appear more significant at the expense of others at certain times and places. We also study how the various forms of legitimacy are fashioned and maintained. With these new objectives of enquiry, we go beyond traditional literary studies and look around for social and cultural texts. We do not just marvel at the beauty and affective power of art, we also emphasize ethics and empathy in our study of history and society.

The essays contained in the present series of *SSLC* reflect the culturalist objectives stated above. With a wide swathe of issues and concerns like ethnography, materialist reading of popular culture, visual arts and film studies and environment studies, the journal also contains studies of literary texts. For special features, it contains an interview with Jacinta Kerketta, a young tribal poet, and a book review.

**Ashok K Mohapatra**

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## **Baigapada: Biography of an Indian Village**

**Raj Kumar**

My study has convinced me of the enormous value of studying Indian sociological problems in single villages. I do not say that all sociological problems can be studied in the village. But those that can be studied in single villages or in small clusters of neighbouring villages will yield rich insights into Indian social life.

M.N. Srinivas, *Village Studies and Their Significance*, 1962:135.

The Indian village as the symbol of a tyrannical system that obligingly conforms to nineteenth-century left-Hegelian depictions of feudalism, the Indian village as the obstinate symbol of mindless homicidal patriarchy, the Indian village as the depot of 'pure' environmental-cultural sensitivity and people's critique of conventional development, and, above all, the Indian village as the counter-city and escape from the city — these are all markers of the changing political-cultural

Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*, 2007:74-75.

The primary objective of this article is to study the changes in an Indian village. For the purpose of the study, I have chosen my village named Baigapada, which is a part of the erstwhile Kalahandi district of Odisha and now comes under Nuapada district. I chose to study Baigapada because I have known my village intimately for the last five decades and hopefully will be able to document the changes the village has witnessed over the years.

Several sociologists and social anthropologists have emphasized the need of studying an Indian village to understand the dynamics of Indian social life. My focus in this essay is not just to explore and understand sociological problems of my village. The reason for doing so is simple. Sociological problems have their origin in certain social structural factors and the interplay of these factors in time. Structural factors and their interplay have their roots in particular historical condition and are both undergirded by and reflect certain cultural, economic and political factors. Moreover, there is involved time span in which the interplay of structural factors develops, takes concrete shape, and yields certain consequences for individual lives and social relations. As such, a simple sociological approach to the ever developing pattern of individual and communal life does not and cannot fully illuminate the experiences in the sense that have injected daily lives. In view

of this, I will cast my net wide and include historical, political, economical, cultural and religious factors that have impinged on the life of my village and shaped its onward movement in time.

Since the time-period of this study spans over five decades, it is difficult to encapsulate the complex process of change and the evolving life patterns in the village. However, even a brief account of the village caught in the process of change will go a long way to not only enhance our understanding also to properly evaluate it. The time-span of fifty years relating to a village that was stationary or what economists call “steady state” for long and then suddenly exposed to external forces, rousing it up from its long slumber must have been jolted by the impact of these forces and reacted or responded to them. For example, one can immediately think of such external forces that impinge on the village life as the various welfare programmes undertaken by the government of India after independence and their impact on the placid life pattern of what was characterized Indian villages as “little Republics”. Further, the liberalized economy introduced in India some twenty eight years back has already brought several changes in the lives of the people all over the country. These two examples are enough to show the lives of change in the modern time is primarily economic. It is through the modification, alteration, and even overturning the pre-existent patterns of social life and relation in different spatially organized entities that it is expected to bring into being the kind of society that has been the preferred goals since Enlightenment. As such, in order to apprehend the character and the significance of the economically induced social change, it is desirable to focus on those economic factors that impinge heavily on village life today. Though no concrete study is yet available on the impact of the liberalized economy on Indian villages, I will try to have a closer look at this phenomenon in order to highlight some of the salient feature of changes going on in my village. This, I propose to do not with the help of aggregate data or abstract ideas. Instead, I will document the day-to-day life-experiences of the people of my village and critically interpret them so that they become intellectually relevant. In other words, what I intend to do in the following pages is, in a way, to try to bring out a biographical account of my village, which has remarkably undergone changes over the last five decades. This account, in all probability, may also prove to be the biographical account of any Indian village, which has undergone similar changes over the last fifty years. However, it is also true that no two Indian villages are identical because of the differential location and the inherited past that are unique in themselves. But one can still generalize the special features of a particular village because, except for the time and situation, the human experiences reflect a similar quality across geographical boundaries. That is the reason why most of the

social scientists generalize their findings even though their studies are located in a particular set-up. Also, specificities of positivist studies in the Social Sciences pursued as an end in itself become self-defeating, particularly from want of a larger theoretical perspective and explanatory power to tackle wider phenomena that are after all constructed and understood in terms of experience and ethical consciousness, the core of human subjectivity.

## **History**

As mentioned earlier, Baigapada is a part of the erstwhile Kalahandi district of Odisha, which now falls under Nuapada district (since it was divided in 1992), and inherits all the stereotypical images of what Kalahandi, in general, has been known for: poverty, backwardness, corruption and mass migration. Baigapada is an average village consisting of 90 families. The caste characteristics of the village is like this: ten families out of the total belong to Brahmans, five Telis (oilmen), ten Malis (gardeners), two Adivasis, sixteen Domb or Ganas (Dalits) and the rest belong to Gaudas (Yadavas). Like any other Indian village, the settlement-pattern of Baigapada is characterized on the basis of caste. Each caste group has separate dwellings, which is collectively known as a pada. Thus, the village has several padas such as, Bahman pada, Mali pada, Teli pada, Gaud pada and Gana pada. Each caste group, while interacting with others, strictly follows caste rules. Thus, caste system with its various practices, is very much prevalent in the village.

So far as the history of the village is concerned, it will be little more than 150 years old. People in and around the village believe that Baigapada was founded by an Adivasi named Baiga. As such, there is no evidence to ascertain who this Baiga was; where did he come from and what happened to his family members, etc. But even today, there proudly stands a hillock at the outskirts of the village named Baiga Dongri as a memorial to the founder. Actually, according to the ethnographic records 'Baiga' is the name of a tribal community which lived in many parts of Kalahandi district in the past. It so happened that this community once lived in and around Baigapada village. Though no proper archaeological survey has been done by any agency to ascertain this fact, people of Baigapada, at times, especially while ploughing their fields, have come across several artifacts used by a generation several years ago. Today, the villagers remember that a certain man belonging to the Yadava caste came to the village as the founder-member, who eventually became the Gauntia (headman) of the village. He later invited several families from outside to settle down in the village. Accordingly, he brought a family each of Mali, Teli, Adivasi and Domb, who were put into different services of the village. For example, the duties of the Malis were to supply the villagers murhi (puff rice) and chura

(flattened rice). The Teli was responsible for supplying oil. The adivasi gentleman was made the village priest. He was in-charge of worshipping village deities. The Domb was the messenger for every errand. He was also responsible for doing all kinds of menial works such as sweeping village roads, clearing dead animals, etc. Later, a Brahman family was brought in to help the Gauntia collect revenues. The number of families that exist today in the village are the descendants of those six families, who came to settle down in the village from the very beginning.

People recall that earlier Baigapada was also called Salebhata. This was because there were sal trees all around the village. Even today people in their interactions call Baigapada as Salebhata. But in revenue record Baigapada has replaced Salebhata. Thus, officially Baigapada is a revenue village. Before India's independence, the revenue of the village was collected by the Gauntia, who was directly appointed by the King of Khariar, under the Zamindari system. The King of Khariar was responsible to collect and deposit revenue to the King of Kalahandi, who was a direct appointee of the British government for the purpose. It may be mentioned here that British government took over Kalahandi only in 1818. Prior to the British occupation, Kalahandi was under the Mughals and the Marahattas from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth century. As a part of the deal, the King of Kalahandi agreed to pay a nominal annual tribute of Rs. 4000/- to the British. Accordingly, Kalahandi was recognized as a feudatory state with full control over the internal administration but the British appointed a political agent at Bhawanipatna, the capital of Kalahandi, to introduce their ideas of law and order and revenue administration.

The consequences of the deal made between the King of Kalahandi and the British government were several. One of the immediate results was that each and every villager had to compulsorily pay the revenue amount fixed up by the revenue collectors appointed by the King. Sometimes repressive measures were taken by the revenue official to collect the maximum revenue from the villagers. If the villagers could not pay the amount in time they lost the ownership rights of their lands. In that case, the ownership of the land got transferred to the person who instantly paid the revenue as demanded by the official. This was contrary to the land rights that have prevailed before coming of the Britishers to Kalahandi. It may be recollected here that the Permanent Settlement Act and the Ryotwari Act introduced by the Britishers during the eighteenth century directly affected the autonomy of Indian villages. According to these Acts, land became a commodity so that it could be bought and sold anytime in the market, if the owner desired so. Further, heavy taxes were imposed on the farmers and those who could not pay, had to lose their land to the British government. The village land or the community

land also became the land of the government. Thus, the traditional ownership of the land was lost and new land policy came into effect.

In the case of Kalahandi the result was worse. The land rights newly introduced by the Britishers severely affected the farmers of the district. Local historians like Fanindam Deo who have done research on Kalahandi have found out that till the eighteenth century Kalahandi was ruled mostly by the Kandhas, an Adivasi community. There were as many as thirty-two Kandha clans ruling allover Kalahandi during the eighteenth century. Each clan ruled over a territory called a desh which comprised between 12 to 84 villages. The chieftain of each desh was called Umrao. The Umrao had all power to control over the land of the entire desh. In order to run the administration smoothly he appointed a Mukhia, the headman choosing one of the elderly persons amongst the villagers called Majhi. Thus, the villagers who were mostly Adivasis owed allegiance to Majhi, the village head and the Majhi owed it to the Umrao.

This traditional set-up immediately changed when the King made a pact with the Britishers. The King no more consulted the Umraos when he took any decision on land. Instead, he initiated several measures that went against the interest of the Kandhas. For example, in order to collect more revenues he invited skilled cultivators from outside the district. Now, the village, instead of desh, became the unit of revenue administration. Fanindam Deo and Padmalochan Barma in their joint article titled, "Roots of Poverty: Historical Contexts in Kalahandi, Orissa" underline the following changes:

Village was auctioned for three year terms. Nazrana or levy was demanded at the time of auction from the thekedar/gaontia or leaseholders. The old system of one "Umrao" one "desh" on single patriarch for a circle of a village was abandoned. The effects were wide-ranging. Umrao, Majhi and Kandh in general, unaccustomed to regular revenue payment, now became liable to pay it. These traditional head failed to collect revenue from their own classmen. They could not compete in the auction, and moneyed men mostly outsiders (Kultha, Su(n)dhis etc.), gradually took the village in auction and became gaontia/thekedars. Not only Kandh headmen were removed, but they also lost their power, position and prestige. The Kandhas revolted in 1850s but were suppressed. Very little attempt was made to educate the Kandhas. (3)

Due to the reorganization of land rights, people of Baigapada were also affected. The immediate result was that the Yadava Gauntia was now replaced by a Brahman, who was directly appointed by the King of Khariar. The change of the guard had, perhaps, more to do with the demand of the situation than the

caste factor. Actually, the Yadava headman of the village was an illiterate person, who could not cope with the new regime. The Gauntia had to be a calculative person so as to devise the revenue policies from time to time and collect the revenues following a few harsh measures, if necessary. In contrast, the Brahman Gauntia was not only a literate person; he was also well versed in the revenue policies introduced by the Britishers. His further advantage was that his forefathers were already working under the King of Khariar. Once appointed, the Gauntia used his power and position to his advantage and amassed lots of wealth - both in cash and kind. He also imposed his decisions in several spheres of village life, be it social, political or cultural. Thus, his monopoly continued in the village for more than five decades. After his passing away, two more generations of his family members succeeded his power and ruled the village quite autocratically.

Today, the Zamindari system is a thing of the past. The Gauntias, the Zamindars and the Kings may still be around, but their official powers have long been cut immediately after India's independence from the British Raj. Even though these people have already lost their official positions they still continue to wield power under the new dispensations and they have also donned new roles with the changing passage of time. Many of them are into active politics, thus, retaining their traditional power over people. Some of them have become social activists by setting up various voluntary organizations or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and collecting money in the name of the people. The scene at Baigapada is more or less the same. The Gauntia and his family members continue to be at the helms of affairs of the village, even today. For example, the post of the Ward Member of the village has always been occupied by a member of this family or their representative. Politically speaking, the family not only gained control of the village, they also extended their power outside the village. The fact that the elder son of the Gauntia became the Sarpanch of Niljee panchayat proves this point. Interestingly, the former Naib-Sarpanch of Niljee panchayat happened to be the grandson of the Gauntia, who was also elected the Ward member of Baigapada for two consecutive terms. Thus, the political power of a family has been transferred to several generations.

Apart from politics, the power of the Gauntia was also felt in other spheres of the village life. For a long time nothing was done in the village without his consent. Even the local bureaucrats - be they from the department of forest, Block, panchayat or police - who came to execute different programmes in the village, entirely depended on his personal judgment. This process of dependence not only marred the development initiatives started by the Indian government after independence, but this also paved the way for corruption in the public arena.

Personal recommendations were made by the village headman so that his loyalists got the maximum benefits from the various welfare schemes - be it Indira Awas Yojana, Antyodaya scheme or even a small loan to the farmers from various banks. The result was that the needy and deserving villagers could not avail themselves of government assistance, which was their due. This phenomenon continues even today.

The Gauntia also presided over several committees of the village. He continued to become the Chairman of the village Primary school as many years as he wanted. He was a natural choice for the head panch of the village council, if any dispute had to be settled within the village. During various social functions, people at large paid respect to him, as if bound by traditions. For example, during Nuakhai, the new rice eating festival, all the villagers thronged to his house to pay their respect. For his part, the Gauntia would give them a token gift - a bidi (country-made cigarette) to the elderly male and a pitha (rice-cake) to the each female. This is undoubtedly an example par excellence of a patronizing role.

The economic condition of the Gauntia was far more visible than his socio-political power. Apart from owning several hundreds of acres of fertile land by virtue of Zamindari, the Gauntia also controlled the entire village land. It was he, who generously gave few acres of free land to Jhankar, the village priest, an Adivasi, who was made in-charge of worshipping the village deities and to the village chowkidar, a Dalit, whose duty was to guard the village at night, carry messages from place to place and do various menial works of the village as assigned to him from time to time. The Gauntia also had an influence over the local administration. Whenever there was any public works like making of roads or digging up the village ponds sanctioned either by the Panchayat or by the Block, he or his family members were assigned the contract work. Thus, the Gauntia, apart from being a very powerful man, was also very rich and wealthy.

The family members of the Gauntia continued to enjoy their power and privileges till the 1960s. Thereafter there were serious contestations at several power-points of the village. The first power-contest was for the post of the Ward Member of the village. Defying the dictates of the Gauntia, the villagers, for the first time elected a Yadav man who continued to become the Ward Member for the next two terms. Another Yadav man became the Chairman of the primary school. Four to five young men from different families came forward to take charge of the village's public works such as building roads or digging up the ponds. Thus, for the first time, people from different castes and communities came forward to get involved in the affairs of the village. It may be mentioned here that several forces

were working at the same time to bring positive changes in the village. However, the role of education definitely becomes quite significant in effecting this type of change.

### **Politics**

There was no school in Baigapada till the 1950s. Way back in 1963, the idea of setting up a Lower Primary school was mooted out. Surprisingly, the proposal came from the Gauntia of the village, who had already lost his formal power by then. This is indicative of the fact that not all the Gauntias were exploiters; many of them were also reformers, who took developmental initiatives in their areas. Once a school was established people irrespective of their caste affiliations came to help it run. Thus, with the participation of the villagers at large, the Lower Primary School was upgraded to become an Upper Primary school. Later, in 1989, a Middle English school was also established and the state government sanctioned full grant to the school in 1991. All these small details about the school are important because without education, the villagers would have continued to be illiterates. Earlier, being illiterates, they accepted their existential conditions passively. Now that education was within their reach; they could not only feel the wind of change blowing but also help it to gather strength and momentum by assimilating the impulse in their own being and reorienting their orientation and behaviour in accordance with their self-understanding.

The beneficiaries of the school education were mostly the children of the marginal farmers, wage labourers and girl children, who, due to several socio-economic problems, never attended any school earlier. Before the local school was established, there were several schools, but they were located in far-flung villages. Only a few rich farmers could afford to send their male children to such far off places. These students were required to stay in a mess and they needed money to meet the expenses that living away from the family setting involved. Naturally, the poor farmers had no money to spend for educating their children. Now once the school was located in their village, the poor farmers were able to send their children – mostly the male children – to study. They hoped that after the completion of school education, the boys would, at least, become government school teachers and bring economic security to their respective families. Today, the village is proud of having at least a dozen of school teachers who are also agents of social change. There is another half-a-dozen of government employees who are also the products of the same school.

Girl children going to school was definitely another big achievement. Earlier, they could not dream of going out of the village to study. Like elsewhere in India,

the patriarchal social order was very strong in Baigapada. Except for the working class women, who came out to work in agricultural fields, the rest of the women were confined within the four walls of their houses. The women especially from the upper castes were in the most pitiable conditions, because they were in purda. They had hardly any interaction with the outside world. And the lower middle class women imitated everything that the women from the upper castes did in the name of keeping the so-called “tradition”. All these stereotypical roles of women started changing, once the girl children started going to school. Several girls who completed their school education later entered into public domain, mostly becoming Anganwadi workers. Becoming Anganwadi workers may not be a big achievement. But, it clearly shows that if equal opportunities are given to women, they can always do better. Education among girl children is definitely a desirable step in the direction of bringing gender equality in a society.

Apart from women, another section who made use of education for the benefit of its members was comprised of Dalits. It may be stated here that the caste system was very much prevalent in Baigapada. And as a corollary to this, there were instances of very crude forms of untouchability being practiced by the upper caste people. There were clear segregations in all fronts. For example, Dalits were living in the outskirts of the village. They were not allowed to draw water from the common wells used by the upper castes. Dalits had separate bathing ghats, cremation grounds etc. They were also not allowed to participate in any religious functions of the village. Since most of them were landless they did not have many options but to do menial works in the village for their survival. They were daily wage labourers, drum beaters, domestic servants, etc. Almost for everything they used to depend on the mercy of their upper caste masters. Their dignity and self-respect were at stake. Once formal education was opened up for them, they sent their children to village school with a hope that education would bring among them a social mobility and finally a social change. The Dalit children worked very hard and most of them completed their school education. Some of them, later, joined High schools, colleges and even some premier universities of the country like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. After completion of their education few of them have succeeded in getting government jobs. Thus, education not only gave them opportunities to better their economic situations, it also brought in its wake social awareness.

Once Dalits were conscious of their rights, they were quite assertive about achieving them. When the Dalits made their claims for basic human rights, initially, there were retaliations from the upper castes. There were even social boycotts. But eventually, Dalits obtained what was their due. For example, Dalits are now

allowed to take water from the same tube well which was denied to them earlier. They are also participating in various social and religious functions organized in the village from time to time. This does not mean that atrocities against Dalits have come to an end. The upper caste people still find their ways and means to subjugate them. But Dalits are no more mute spectators to the injustices perpetrated against them by the upper castes. They have been protesting against all forms of inequalities so to have dignity and self-respect which they had lost in the past.

The overall effects of all these changes mentioned above signified some positive results insofar on the question of the deprived and the depressed social sections are concerned. The villagers, now, were no more passive onlookers. Instead, they were actively participating in the decision-making processes as they affected village life and relations. Thus, a democratic environment emerged gradually out of the earlier moribund traditional society based on separation and suppression in the village. The immediate result was that in the 1980s, the youths of the village came together to set up a club. Named Beenapani Yuvaka Sangha, the club had its main objective to organize socially sensitive cultural events through dance, drama etc. The Sangha, at one point of time, started a library movement, which eventually had to be closed down. However, the initiatives taken by the villagers had long-lasting effects, the results of which are now being enjoyed by today's youths.

### **Economy**

In the past, people entirely depended on agriculture. Therefore, the village economy revolved around the land. Forest was everywhere and people cleared parts of the forests to create agricultural land. The various grains they cultivated were: paddy, mandia, kodo, gurji, suan, and several kinds of pulses and cereals such as, chepta chana, nak chana, matar chana, arhar, mung, kolath, biri and mushri. Crops such as wheat, jowar, bajra, etc. were hardly cultivated. A few farmers who had private arrangement of irrigation cultivated sugarcane. Among vegetables, the farmers produced onion, brinjal, tomato, vendi, pumpkin, lau, karela, etc. Apart from agriculture people also entirely dependent on forest for their day-to-day needs. They collected several edible roots, fruits, leaves and nuts for their consumptions. It may be mentioned here that there are as many as fourteen to fifteen kinds of green leaves which people collect from the fields even to this day for cooking. Some of the names go like: chakoda, chench, dahipatul, kena, sirial, kulher, musakani, sunsunia, kosla, gubi, etc. They also collected several forest produces either for consumption or for selling them in local markets. Some of these included: kendu, mahul, chahanr, dhoop, kardi, kunjher, etc. In addition, they also collected various kinds of medicinal herbs and plants from the forest, such as, rasna, pita

kanda, etc. Thus, in the past people never had any problem getting food and medicine. It was only after the population went up that resources became scarce and people thought of expanding their agricultural and homestead land. But the forest reservation laws were already in execution. So people had hardly any options but to entirely depend on whatever resources they had for their livelihood.

The land of the village was unevenly distributed. Except for the Gauntia family who had more than hundred acres of land a few farmers had more than ten acres of land and the rest were marginal farmers, who had between two to five acres of land. There were also a good number of landless households, whose sole earnings came from working in the agricultural fields as daily wage labourers. Basically, the village had subsistence economy till the nineteen forties and fifties. However, from the sixties onwards, the people faced with uneven rainfalls and uncertain monsoons, which brought regular droughts and, sometimes, famine. Since there was no irrigation facility available, the people could not depend fully on agriculture in the aftermath of failure of the monsoons. Thus, the people were forced to switch over to many non-agricultural economic activities, which provided them alternative sources of income and livelihood. In 1965 Kalahandi region experienced a big drought, and it was during this time that many landless agricultural workers and marginal farmers from the village migrated in bulk to the nearby towns or even outside the state particularly to cities such as Raipur, Durg and Bhilai to work as menial workers, factory labourers, hotel attendants, rickshaw pullers, servants, domestic maids and so on and so forth. With the continuous failure of both rains and crops in recent years people are accustomed to migrate to far distant places than earlier. It is, therefore, hardly a surprise if, today, we happen to meet people from Baigapada as rickshaw pullers in Raipur, the factory workers in Bhopal, the brick makers in Andhra Pradesh or even as daily wage workers in some remote parts of Delhi or Mumbai. Poverty is the main reason for such a phenomenon of mass migration.

It may be mentioned here that poverty that we see in a village like Baigapada in particular, and erstwhile Kalahandi district in general, is more of a man-made phenomenon than a natural calamity. In the past, Kalahandi was very rich with plenty of natural resources. At one point of time, 60 per cent of its total area was covered by rich forest. Kalahandi was also known for its best rice, particularly its Dubraj variety, an equivalent of Basmati. For several years, the district had records of yielding more rice per hectare of land compared to the state as well as the national average. For example, even in 1989-90, the per capita production per year was 331.86 Kg compared to 253.03 for Odisha, and 203.13 for India as a whole. In fact, the meaning of the term “Kalahandi” states the obvious: “kala” means black

and “handi” means pot. This implies that the soil of Kalahandi was very fertile. In fact, it continues to be so even today; except that there is no regular rainfall now. To find its reason, one has to go back to the nineteen fifties and sixties and unravel the history of Kalahandi’s poverty.

The nineteen fifties and sixties was the time when India went through a series of changes under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. The welfare economics which Nehru propounded and propagated during his premiership was supposed to have brought ‘development’ in all spheres of lives of the people. But that did not happen, especially for the people of Kalahandi. Instead, on the name of development “the worst” came to Kalahandi region. It was as if a coincidence that when India was, after a decade of her independence, celebrating the glory of freedom, the people of Kalahandi suddenly witnessed hundreds and thousands of trucks plying days and nights together on its rough and uneven roads. People still describe the scene with awe about how these trucks took away all the valuable woods -including teak - from their deep, green jungles. This was purely loot. The looters were builders, contractors, bureaucrats and politicians, who together, hand-in-glove, worked out the plan. Kalahandi, they thought, was a “goldmine” and they extracted as much as they could to amass wealth for themselves. They left Kalahandi only after it became grey, barren and useless.

This is not to say that there was hardly any exploitation of forest before the independence. In fact, the depletion of forest started during the British rule in the district when the king of Kalahandi invited non-advasis contractors to exploit the forest resources primarily to increase the revenue collection. This was the first instance of commercial exploitation of Kalahandi’s forests. Fanindam Deo and Padmalochan Barma document the inevitable fall-out of such a callous proposition:

(I) the feudatory chief, in order to enhance his income, encouraged the non-advasis gaontia to cultivate wasteland. He also opened forest to commercial exploitation, which led to the denudation of some sal, and teak forest of Kalahandi. Forest contractor used the cheap advasis labour in their mission. Gradually, the minor forest products, an important source of livelihood of the advasis, were taken over by the traders. This reduced the means of livelihood of the advasis, on the other hand indiscriminate felling of trees and over exploitation of forest resources led to the breakdown of ecological balance. This was one of the reasons for the frequent drought and famine in the last decade of the 19th century. Earlier this advasis withdrew to the interiors, into the deep forest. In the 20th century this avenue was closed for the advasis. Due to forest

reservation laws, construction of dams, and declaration of wild life sanctuary etc. land became scarce, on the other hand population of Kalahandi grew. This contributed to the unequal distribution of land. Scanty irrigation provision to agricultural land made the problem more complicated and created vexed problems. (5)

Thus, the ill-famed phenomenon called “Kalahandi”—known for its poverty, backwardness and child selling - is very much a making of the so-called “civil society”. In the name of “development”, the entire region had to be deprived of its rich and varied natural resources. The creation of wealth for others meant the complete depletion of the natural wealth of Kalahandi. It is rather a contradiction that while independent India gave the people of Kalahandi the idea of “freedom”, it took away their rights to livelihood and thus making them “slaves” in their own country. Government after government, both in the centre and the state have undertaken several measures to correct the wrongs done to the people of the regions. Changes also have come on their ways. But these are only cosmetic in nature. The much-talked about central government assistance towards the implementation of Kalahandi-Bolangir and Koraput (KBK) project has hardly yielded any desired result in spite of several thousands of crores rupees being pumped into the region for several years. As more money has been injected in the region, more and more cases of corruption and nepotism are coming to limelight. There are also evidences of more and more people in the region becoming thieves, dacoits and cheats. There is also the presence of Maoists in the region. Thus, the development projects have brought chaos, confusion and law and order problem in the region.

Before talking about the political economy of the village at present, it may be relevant here to mention as to how the people managed their economic life in the past. As stated earlier, the village was characterized by subsistence economy. Barter system was the common practice among the villagers. The villagers got almost all their household needs from their fields. Only for a few items such as salt, oil, clothes, kerosene and medicine, they had to depend on the outsiders. Luckily, these items also came to their door-steps through the vendors, who went from village to village to sell their goods. Moreover, there were weekly markets in nearby villages, where people went to buy and sell their goods. The circulation of money was very much limited. It was only during the nineteen seventies and eighties that people started using money in a big way.

Where did this money come from? People remember that during the nineteen seventies and eighties several welfare schemes were undertaken by the Indian

government, particularly in the rural areas, when money was distributed on a very large scale for the first time. Earlier, government had introduced “food-for-work” programme and as the part of the payment, the workers were given wheat, gur and rice. It may be a co-incidence that with the circulation of money, corruption entered public life. So much so that when Rajiv Gandhi, after becoming the Prime Minister of the country visited Kalahandi district, he publicly acknowledged the bureaucrats-politicians nexus eating away as much as much as 90 per cent of the public money and spending only the rest 10 per cent for the people. Today, people, in fact, believe that the proportion of corruption has gone up. There is corruption everywhere: in government offices, whether it is police, forest or revenue department, Block, panchayat, banks, even in schools. For instance, in schools teachers eat away the money meant for the mid-day meals; in banks loans are sanctioned only when the officials are given certain percentage of loans; in government offices no file moves unless the concerned officials are given bribes. With corruption everywhere one does not know how to bring a positive change in the region.

In spite of a grim future the village has undergone remarkable changes in different spheres of life in the last few years. These changes are due to the new economic policy, which has been introduced in India in the nineties of the last century. With the new economic policy, money is seen circulating everywhere including in the remote and rural villages like Baigapada. This has resulted in people able to buy more and more of market products. As witnessed elsewhere, consumerism has, in a way, become the rule of the day even for the rural village folk. For instance, till few years back, the village did not have a single motor vehicle or television set. Few people who had owned bicycles were considered to be luxurious. Today, the village has at least half-a-dozen four wheelers, 20 motorcycles, 15 television sets and 50 mobile phones. The statistics given here may not be sufficient to prove the point that the liberal economy has entered even the remotest corner of the nation. But it does reveal that people are accepting changes. It is another matter that these changes are market-driven and hence, people have, sometime, no choice but to accept it. In the process, however, the people’s culture becomes a casualty. I turn in the following section to exploring the ways in which it is happening.

### **Culture**

Culture can be anything; it can be food, dress, language, religion, festivals, etc. It is also defined as a way of life, i.e. the way people live, think, behave and conduct themselves in different spheres of their life: whether public or private. Thus, it is through people’s culture that we come to know about their worldviews and civilizational ethos. Of course, most of the cultural habits of the people are

determined by several factors, such as their geographical locations, economic conditions, their mindsets etc. Raymond Williams endorses this view when he writes:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first act. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressure of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. (11) Considering the importance of culture in the life of the people, it is better to describe a few characteristics of the village culture and its changing characters in the remaining pages.

It has already been mentioned earlier that agriculture plays a dominant role in shaping people's lives in Baigapada. That is why most of the cultural activities are centered around agriculture. But with the change of time there have been several changes in the village life as well. Thus, the oral community which had earlier been isolated from the rest of the world is now a community living side by side with both tradition and modernity. In other words, there is change as well as continuity in the village culture.

To begin with, let us discuss first the food pattern of the villagers. The staple food of the people is rice. Dal and curry made of vegetables are taken along with rice by the well-to-do families. Dal is generally prepared from various pulses and lentils such as, *arhar*, *mung*, *chana*, and *mushri*. Sometimes, rich people are seen eating dal prepared from semi and *jhudanga*, which belong to beans family. Poor people, however, manage with only one item: either dal of lesser varieties such as *chepta chana*, *kulath* or even *jhilo*, a wild and coarse pulse. Since majority of the people are poor, having secured to themselves two square meals a day is considered to be a luxury in the region. Since there are droughts regularly in the area, there is always food scarcity, and hence, it becomes difficult for the poor to manage a good living throughout the year. Even if there is a normal monsoon, they always suffer during the lean season during which neither do they have any stock of paddy nor do they get any work to support their families. And during such difficult days, they usually have *pakhala* i.e. watered rice with or without salt, chilly and onion simply to keep their body and soul together.

Here it may be worth noting that Kalahandi is a dry region. Its water table level has gone down very deep (sometime, you don't get water even after digging up as much as 300 feet or more). Such a situation makes difficult for people to

grow vegetables, which demand regular water. It is only during the rainy and winter seasons that people eat varieties of vegetables, grown by themselves and also by others. Some of the common vegetables grown by the villagers in their fields are: *bhendi, janhi, lau, kumda, baral, kakharu, sapua, semi, jbudanga, korkoet, kundru, karla, bheja, began, koche, saru* etc. In other times, they somehow manage to eat rice along with dal or potato which was introduced in the area thirty or forty years back only. In the past, because there was forest everywhere, people managed to collect several varieties of green leaves (namely, *chakoda, chench, dahipatā, kena, sirial, kulher, musakani, sunsunia, kosla, mungna, bhaji, kunjher*, etc), fruits (such as, *kendu, chanhar, boer, aam, jam, lanka bhulia, kusum* etc.), roots (for example, *kardi* made of bamboo shoots and pita kanda), flowers ( for example, neem) etc. as part of their food items. However, with deforestation, they have been deprived of that opportunity. Since green leaves and vegetables are only seasonal, people try to preserve them through traditional methods. For example, kumda, baral, began and bheja are made sola. People make solas by cutting or scraping the vegetables into pieces and putting some spices, salt and rice powder they keep under the sun to dry. Likewise *hanua* is made out of kardi. Badis and pickles of different varieties, such as, mangoes, tamarind, chilies, etc. are also made to be used from time to time.

Along with vegetarian dishes, people across castes and communities also by and large enjoy non-vegetarian dishes. In the past when the village was surrounded by the jungle, the villagers used to go for hunting to obtain meat as their staple food. They hunted fowls, hares, deer, boars and also nilgai. But now with the enactment of forest laws, hunting is forbidden. Therefore, a majority of the villagers rear poultry, birds, goats, sheep etc. in their homes to have their meat. It may be mentioned here that during various festive occasions such as nuakhai basi, puspuni, chhadkhai and dussehera, people make it a point to have at least some non-vegetarian food as a part of their celebration.

Apart from meat and chicken people are fond of fish. When there is a good monsoon people catch varieties of fishes of small sizes such as, *kotri, balia, tengna, jian, magur, singi, robu, bhakur*, etc. from various water sources and prepare curries. Poor people even collect crabs and snails from the fields to prepare dishes. But now with uncertain rainfalls people are deprived of getting these free gifts from nature. Of course, at times fishes are available in the village as well as local markets, thanks to the Fishery Department of the State Government which is trying to bring blue revolution even to the remote parts of Kalahandi district. But, people's purchasing capacity is less and therefore, a majority of them can hardly afford to buy them. Only those who are in the service sectors, both government and private, are able to buy fish.

One cannot deny the fact that there is the impact of urbanization and modernization in the village. This process has already brought about several changes in the life-styles of the people. For example, in the past, people used less edible oil and spices for cooking. Oil extracted from til, groundnut or mahua seed called *tol* was used as edible oil. Now, people are found using edible oils belonging to some well-known brands such as Dhara, Fortune, etc. Earlier people used turmeric, chilly, garlic, *jeera* and *dhania* to make spices. Now they can buy varieties of ready-made spice packets including *garam masala* and meat *masala*. People earlier used unprocessed sea salt. Now they are using iodized salt processed through machines. There are few big and small shops in the village catering to the demands of the villagers.

It may also be pointed out here that a small percentage of the people have developed the habit of taking tea, at least once in a day. Coffee has not yet entered into the life of the villagers. However, one thing, which can be seen, is the increasing tendency among the villagers to replace tea and sometimes suji for the basi pakhala (leftover watered rice from the dinner) they used to take as breakfast before leaving for their work. As far as the drinking habits of the people are concerned, a good number of people take country-made wine regularly. It may be stated here that in the past, it was part of the rituals to offer wine to gods and goddesses during the worship. People also used to take wine during various festivals and social occasions including marriage ceremonies. This practice has already been stopped over the years. Now, drinking has, become, on the other hand, a fashion with more and more young men getting addicted to it. As a result, more anti-social elements can be found in the village. Earlier, people used to drink country liquor prepared out of mahua flower. Now-a-days, apart from the country liquor, several shops are also selling cheap foreign liquor.

Like the food and drinking habits, the dress patterns of the villagers are also changing. Men generally wear dhoti with kurta on special occasions. On other days, they use lungis and carry towels with or without banyans on their bodies. Women in general, use sarees, blouses and petticoats. But poor women are seen wearing single *sarees* without any blouse. Earlier, people were buying hand-woven coarse cotton clothes directly from the local weavers who were either Dombs or Bhulias. Now-a-days, they prefer buying factory-made printed colourful clothes available in the local markets and also gifted and donated by migrant relatives and friends coming back from various towns and cities. It may be mentioned here that with more and more garment factories taking over the markets the local handlooms are about to be disappeared from the region. Evidently, one can see how the young

men of the area are putting on clothes comprising pants and shirts from some of the international brands like Peter England, Pan American, etc. Young women are seen using frocks, *salwar kamij*, and *chudidhar* apart from wearing varieties of *sarees*.

There are also changes in costumes and toiletry. Women earlier used to wear several ornaments in different parts of their bodies made of gold and silver. Many of these ornaments are no more in use now. For example, some of the fascinating bracelets such as, *katria*, *bandria* (wore on hands), *paunji* (wore on legs), *mathamani* (wore on head) and *kamarmani* (wore on waist) have already been disappeared. *Chaunri* and ribbon earlier used by women to tie up their hair are also disappearing. Instead, new modern toiletries are being used. Some of the cosmetics commonly being used by village women are: powder, cream, nail polish, *bindi*, colourful rubber bands, etc. The use of footwear including shoes by both men and women is also slowly gaining popularity. In the past no villager used any slippers. Much before the modern footwear came to the market few villagers used wooden footwear called *kathau*. Some were seen using rubber slippers made by the local *mochis* or the shoemakers who generally used old bus or truck tires for the purpose.

As regards language, the spoken language of the people is a western dialect, with lexical, morphological and syntactic lexical distinctiveness, and variously labeled as “Koshali” or “Sambalpuri” in the cultural discourses. It is spread over an area comprising the of pre-divided Kalahandi, Bolangir, Sambalpur and Sundargarh districts. However, the written language of the people is Odia. It may be relevant here to note that in recent years there has been a systematic attempt by the people of western Odisha to articulate their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness with a regionalist ideological impulse within the state. Many activists of this cultural movement, particularly those affiliated to the *Koshali* bandwagon, have also attempted at developing a script for their language, given the cultural, intellectual and political importance the written language assumes and readies itself to emerge as standard language over the years. A few magazines and journals have come up to propagate the western Odishan language and culture. However, Odia still continues to be the official, standard language of the region. Apart from the spoken and written languages mentioned above, every community has its own sociolect (caste dialect) to use it for intra-community communication, cultural cohesion and a marker of collective identity. For example, communities such as Teli, Mali, Bhunjia and Domb have their own dialects which might be at times difficult for other communities to understand. Sadly, these dialects are slowly disappearing as they are considered to be inferior in comparison to the upper caste dialects. Unfortunately, no attempt has been made so far either by any person or institution to preserve these dying languages or endangered cultural embodiments.

So far as the religious tradition of the village is concerned, it has the presence of both what social anthropologists call “the little tradition” and “the great tradition”. Being a tribal dominated area, almost all the gods and goddesses of the village are of tribal origin. The villagers still believe in “totemism”, according to which a particular god or goddess is personified through a form, the structure of which is made of either stone or wood. Some of these prominent gods and goddesses are: Budharaja, Dokribudhi, Pardashen, Jhitku, Gangadi, Chhotibudhi, Kulaten, Jakenjiren, etc. The villagers attribute to each god or goddess a supernatural power and worship him or her for securing their own wellbeing. People worship them round the year by sacrificing hens and goats. If they do not find any bird or animal to sacrifice, they offer them cocoanut or even areca nuts, together with flowers and bel leaves, and worship them. Since the village life is centered around agriculture, no agricultural produce is consumed by the villagers before offering it to the village deities. In the past, elaborate arrangements used to be made by the village priest to offer any new grain to the village deities. Now that fervour is no more there, except during nuakhai and dussehera, in no other time do people turn up to worship the village deities together. It may be stated here that nuakhai is the main festival of the region. During the festival the prasad made from the new rice is offered to the village deities, mother earth and ancestors. Since this is the main festival people celebrate it for long three days (called upas, nuakhai, and basi) with elaborate arrangements. Poor people even take loans to participate and enjoy the festival fervor.

Dussehera is another festival when people worship the village deities with lots of zeal and enthusiasm. The festival sometimes lasts for a month when the deities wish to visit people from door to door and from one village to another giving darshan to everyone, irrespective of caste, class or gender. During these visits people come close to their deities and ask for several favours. Dehuris, who are supposed to have been possessed by the spirits of different deities give them boons and wish them good luck. Critically speaking, these festivals are some of these examples of how the members of an oral community imagine things and structure their immediate surrounding and the larger world beyond.

Though various ritualistic practices have changed over the years, the faith of the people has remained more or less the same. For instance, when they fall ill, instead of immediately going to a medical doctor, they go to the village priest or the traditional medicine man, who, in order to cure the illness, sacrifices a chicken or a goat to appease the evil spirit or the village deities. People still believe that it is due to the wrath of the gods and goddesses that brings them suffering. This may be due to blind beliefs and lack of scientific education. However the literate and

educated people of the village prefer to go to the medical doctors for their illness. There is a Primary Health Centre in the nearby village where a medical doctor and nurse attend the patient. Since the village is situated in the remote area most of the days the doctor does not come. In serious cases the villagers take patients to either Sinapali (which is seven and half kilometers) or Dharamgarh (some twenty six kilometers) or Khariar (forty five kilometers) hospitals.

Apart from believing in totemism, the villagers also worship some of the so-called mainstream Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Rama, Krishna, Durga, Ganesh, Laxmi, Parvati, Saraswati, etc. Perhaps, it is due to the dominant influence of the Brahman families that the rest of the villagers are worshipping the gods and goddesses mentioned above. This is, perhaps, a part of the “sanskritization” process, as the sociologist M.N Srinivas refers to. There are also other evidences, how people are now exposed to new religious orders. It has been observed that after the campaigning of the Ram temple movement by the Hindu fundamentalists, more and more religious functions are being organized so that people, irrespective of faiths, could be attracted into the Hindutva fold. For such purposes, Yuga Shakti Gayatri, a religious organization is openly indoctrinating followers from all castes including Dalits. It may be remembered that earlier, only the upper caste people, those who had the right to wear the sacred thread, were its followers. In many villages of Kalahandi district, including Baigapada, some Dalits also now wear the sacred thread; they also become priests and perform various religious duties, thus challenging the hegemony of the Brahman priests.

The villagers celebrate several festivals round the year. Some of the popular festivals are: nuakhai, dussehera and chherchhera. Earlier we have already described at length nuakhai and dussehera. Chherchhera is also another festival related to agriculture. Once the harvestings are over people try to relax after several days of hard work. To celebrate this festival people select a day and enjoy by eating varieties of food including non-vegetarian dishes. Generally the harvestings are completed by the end of Pausa, one of the Hindu calendar months and the first day of Magha is selected for this celebration. Apart from these, there are several other festivals which people celebrate from time to time. In the past, people celebrated these festivals as a mark of friendship and goodwill. They whole-heartedly devoted their time and energy to enjoy the spirit of the festivals. But now-a-days, the very character of the festivals is somehow lost. There is always the display of ostentation which brings commerce in every function and people’s participation is becoming less and less meaningful. For instance, now-a-days, during the festivals video shows are organized by collecting money from the people. Thus, people’s participation is confined to mere time pass and entertainment rather than social celebrations. Often,

the villagers are seen fighting over certain trivial issues. Factionalism is increasing in the village. Thus, instead of a harmonious peace-loving village, we often find the conflict-ridden communal village.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this essay was to study the changes in an Indian village. Baigapada, a village in the erstwhile Kalahandi district of Odisha was chosen for the purpose of understanding the situation. After documenting the various changes in the village spanning over fifty long years, it is now fairly clear that some changes were inevitable, whereas some others were definitely unwarranted. For example, the upsetting of the power-centre was definitely a revolutionary step taken by the villagers to create a democratic environment so as to assert their rights. But, later, in the same environment, they became selfish, individualistic and so much corrupt that there emerged disunity and disharmony in the villagers. This analysis is not to suggest that the villagers need to go back to their good old days, to their “golden past”, since there was never a golden past. Yes, there was less competition in the past and still less was ill-feeling towards each other. There were exploitations of the poor by the rich, but there was also protection of life from time to time. Thus, every change has its own logic and consequences.

Finally, no one can predict what will happen to a village like Baigapada in the next couple of years. Now that the government-backed liberalization, privatization and globalization processes are going very strong, more and more changes are in the offing. Whether the coming changes will lead to better or worse, only time will tell.

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## Constructing Postcolonial Pedagogies of Folk: Archiving Oratures of India's North-East through 'Play' and 'Pictures'

Partha Sarathi Gupta

*But wherefore do not you a mightier way  
Make war upon this bloody tyrant, Time?  
And fortify yourself in your decay  
With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?"* - Shakespeare. Sonnet 16

Even Shakespeare in his *Sonnets* maintained his reservations about the legitimacy, virility and power of the written word to offset the advances of time's sickle to preserve the youthful glow of the Fair Youth. He appealed to him to seek fortification from physical decay, debility and death "with means more blessed than my barren rhyme". Hence as a poet he was in search of more potent means to preserve moments from the past. The above lines may prove apt enough to sensitize research attempts at preserving and archiving fast fading oratures of yore, across the globe under the encroaching influence of modernity and urbanism. India's North-East, as we all know, as a space, is an archive of orature. Folk tales belonging to distinct communities of the region have circulated over generations in the lips of tellers in different languages. Tripura, one of the seven sisters, is no exception, herself having nurtured in her breast, multiple ethnic communities with their distinct languages and oratures, which by virtue of the changing times and the encroachment of modernity, are now on the verge of extinction. English has proven a great friend to these fast dying cultures, languages and oratures, enabling the translator to preserve them in the archive of literate culture. This paper proposes to assess the prospect of the translatability of the oral folktales of Tripura into visual forms of representation, through simple 'play' and 'pictures', which may have the potential to be reproduced further by the aid of multimedia graphics. The paper proposes to examine the possibility of engaging with the diverse ethnic communities of the North-East, flung to the peripheries of the mainstream population of India, doubly marginalized in the domains of language and its politics.

### I

Although the heterogeneity of the tribal population in the North-East – and for the purpose of this study, Tripura in particular – is an ethnographer's delight in collecting, transcribing and anthologizing the oratures of the region, it is often a serious challenge for the scholars in pursuit of the means to archive the folk of

the region. The Bongcher community may be cited for a case study, a community which stands culturally on the brink of extinction, in the face of assimilation into the melting pot of nationalist and ethnic politics. Kamal Bongcher, a living encyclopedia of Bongcher culture, felicitated by the Department of Information and Culture, of the Government of Tripura, in recognition of his services rendered for the cause of the Bongcher language and culture, observes in one of his accounts:

The Bongcher population is so small that it appears as a community on the verge of extinction. In 1988 there were 385 Bonchers belonging to 76 families. There is no up to date record of the Bongcher population, but after careful scrutiny, the Boncher population appears to be in-between 680 and 1000 now. In no case it can be more than a thousand. (Bongcher, "Introduction" v – vi)

The statistics provided, threateningly legitimize Bongcher as an endangered language too, if we go by David Crystal's claim in *Language Death*. Using statistical data, Crystal establishes the stark reality that "nearly 500 languages have less than 100 speakers; around 1,500 have less than 1,000; and 3,340 have less than 10,000. If a population of 20,000 is again taken as a danger-level datum, we are talking about 4,000 languages" (Crystal 15).

However, the Sahitya Akademi has gone a long way in transcribing, translating and archiving the oral literatures of such tribes as are on the brink of linguistic and cultural extinction. Publications such as *Tales and Tunes of Tripura Hills*, *Echoes from Lungleng Tang: The Bongcher Literature Oral Tradition*, *Mraima Folk Tales and Folklore*, *Achik Poetry*, *Chakma Folk and Modern Literature* are some of the recent attempts on the part of the Sahitya Akademi to inscribe and archive oral literatures of India's North-East within the corpus of 'Indian Literature'. The prospect of their entry into the canon is a separate question which deserves a separate forum for debate. However, the inevitability of 'writing' the oral may invite several inescapable questions of authenticity. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson point out: "Ethnography is inescapably a textual enterprise..." (191). But it remains to be seen how far this noble attempt on the part of Sahitya Akademi, to voice the silences of dying voices, cuts ice with not just the academia but the present and upcoming generations of the people of this region. It remains yet to be seen whether they too, like their grandparents and parents bequeath the orature of their own cultures, embedded in the archive of their memory, to their posterity, through the aid of such documented literary means. But, as Hammersley and Atkinson observe, there may be different genres of ethnographic writing, and we can never reduce writing to a simple set of skills and prescriptions: "There are different styles, different theories and different audiences. Each way of constructing

‘the ethnography’ will bring our different emphases” (91). This study proposes two alternative means of archiving the oratures of this region, both of which may stand up to the test of time, being visual in form. These are in fact pedagogic methods. The first is that the ‘play’ method may be introduced right at the middle school level curriculum among children of the region who may be trained to be the future carriers of tradition. The second is the inevitable entry into the print and visual medium.

Written texts can thus be illustrated by placing visual and audio materials on websites that parallel the written text, and the written text can contain keys to particular web pages, where relevant illustrative materials and data sets can be displayed. (Hammersley and Atkinson 207)

However, this study attempts to look at a simpler version of the pictorial graphic, in a form akin to that of graphic picture books. Let us first take up the ‘play’ form of representing orature. Select folk-tales from the hills of Tripura in English translation may be selected for case study, whose narrative form may lend themselves toactable ‘plays’ either in English or in the indigenous languages of the region, of durations short enough to engage a class full of children and sustain their interest. For instance, a popular short Mraima (Mog) folktale on the legendary court-clown Ongkhyleng in English translation may serve as a raw script for young children to participate in a ‘play’ involving characters such as a king, queen and some courtiers. The tale circulates around the inimitable Ongkhyleng and his comic potential and timing to make a fool of the king. The climax of the tale involves Ongkhyleng’s feigning of lifelessness in presence of the king and queen in order to dupe them into sympathy. The bare deep structure of the tale narrated in simple English may provide ample scope for a child-learner to indulge in ‘play’. However, let us first explore the various nuances of the signifier ‘play’ in order to understand its implications in alternative methods of teaching in general, and teaching of English in particular. ‘Play’ is an inclusive term which accommodates a wide range of activities ranging from structured games and organised sports ‘played’ by the young and adults alike, to unstructured activities or ‘free play’ that are intrinsically motivated, freely chosen and enjoyable, chiefly for the purpose of self expression and emotional escape. Although the term is indiscriminately used to imply any dramatic text which is performable or actable, the root meaning of the word goes back to the unstructured free play of childhood:

Unlike adults, whose natural medium of communication is verbalization, the natural medium of communication for children is play and activity...Play is the singular central activity of childhood, occurring at

all times and in all places. Children do not need to be taught how to play, nor must they be made to play. Play is spontaneous, usually enjoyable, voluntary, and not goal directed. (Landreth 7)

Unhindered, the child's play thus is an act of self- empowerment, and has been around since centuries across cultures. Blind-man's buff, safe-on-land-from-the-crocodile-in-the-water, leapfrog, piggy-back, cop-thief chase are some common instances, among many others, of unstructured play indulged upon by children in our country. M. Takeuchi, renowned Japanese educationist, observes, how rapid urbanization of neighbourhoods and poor urban planning are fast erasing parks and open spaces which have traditionally been habitats of "traditional forms of group play like hide- and- seek, ball and stick games, blind-man's buff, rope skipping, spinning a top, etc" (qt in. Maitra and Seshadri 26). Rapid technological growth has replaced these traditional forms of play with digital games circulated on the nimble finger-tips of children. India's North-East is a minefield of orature. As every community in this region has its own treasure of folk narratives, writers, illustrators and publishers can draw on these resources and produce children's story books in various translated versions, accompanied by pictorial illustrations somewhat in the manner of those found as in the Hans Christian Anderson story books. The same may then be reoriented to fit the demands of 'play' by the teacher/ trainer, who may then invite the child himself/herself to participate in a narrative that belongs to his/her own spatiality. However, not all folk-tales may lend themselves to easily performable texts, for a number of them, cutting across the entire gamut of diverse community oratures, address some extremely complex social issues which may not be deemed fit enough to serve as raw materials for child's play. Despite this limitation, there is an equal number of tales in English translation whose contents, if rendered and transformed into 'playable' or 'actable' versions for children, may contribute effectively to construct pedagogies of the teaching of literature, social studies and even language learning for students from the hills of India's North-East.

A potential raw script may be found in the "Sura" skits of the Bongcher community, a cluster of folk-tales collected by Kamal Bongcher and Zohmin Thanga Bongcher, who have themselves translated them into English. The following is an extract from Kamal Bongcher's observations on the "Sura" stories:

Stories related with Sura in Bongcher society are of ancient time. Sura is physically strong and diligent but very foolish and as a result very poor too. Usually Sura meets with others in the society but he lacks something of common sense. People use this lacuna and make fun of it. They give

him wicked suggestions instead of good ones...they suggest mischievous advice...But Sura is a simple minded, calm, brave strong boy. His deficiency is the shortage of average intelligence.

There are many well-circulated funny stories related to Sura in Bongcher society... (Bongcher 139)

Sura's misadventures arising out of his idiocy become potentially short comic pieces for one-act plays for children. The tale on Sura's inability to either pluck mangoes or forest potatoes may provide a delightful performance text for child-learners of the English language. The tale of Sura's inability to distinguish between a goat and a tiger is a story of both simplicity and indomitable courage. However, the role of 'play' as a child's activity has been poorly studied as a model of pedagogy. To adult eyes, "it can look random, unfocussed and seemingly purposeless." But one must remember that it may serve as both vehicle and consequence of learning. It fits smartly into Kolb's model of experiential learning – a combination and a "sequential circle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation...it is perhaps the template for all experiential learning" (qt in. Shashi Kiran M.G 44). Shashi Kiran M.G in his essay "Play: A Description of Processes that Underpin Play" observes:

Experiential learning is now being recognized as perhaps the oldest form of teaching and researchers are gathering empirical evidence for this. The role of experiential learning becomes invaluable in the teaching of issues like life-skills, behavioural choices, anti-bullying activities, etc., which are not part of any formal curriculum but equally important for the venture of education. Play has an important role in this nature of pedagogy. (44)

Folk tales of the North-East in English translation, if put into the 'play' mould, may be able to perfectly recreate Kolb's combination of the "sequential circle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

## II

With the evolution of print culture towards the visual and virtual, we may look forward to new methods of archiving orature. Despite advanced print technologies, there have been scanty attempts at illustrating oral folktales of India in text books or readers for toddlers and young children. One may begin with an introspection of the prospect of developing coloured illustrations of the same stories from India's North-East, accompanied by short introductory sketches to

narrate folktales circulating through centuries. Models may be consulted from other parts of India and abroad and followed closely. A reputed Chennai based publishing house *Tulika* has been engaged in the arduous task of illustrating oral narratives from various regions of India, collected from the mouths of elderly members of the respective indigenous communities, in the picture-book format aimed at the child-reader. A reading of any one of them would reveal that on each of the back covers of these volumes, the intended age of the target reader has been mentioned by the editor. Special care has been taken in specifying the age bar as “Read aloud 5 +” or “Read alone 8 +” at the back cover of each of these volumes to guide the parent or teacher overseeing the reading habit of the child. Uma Krishnaswami, reputed illustrator, designer and teacher at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Chennai, has been the illustrator for each of these volumes. A random survey may reveal *Tulika*’s selection from a range of oratures, culled from regions like the North Sahyadri Range of Maharashtra bordering Gujarat, in and around the district of Palghar in Maharashtra, where the Warli style of tribal art flourishes, painted in white on red ochre walls, to the Bhilala folk of the oral tradition in Madhya Pradesh. Shamim Padamsee, a Mumbai based folk collector and children’s story teller, has attempted to anthologize the motifs of the Warli folk paintings of Maharashtra in the form of picture books for toddlers and children, which have been ably illustrated through colours and sketches by Uma Krishnaswami, *Tulika* Publisher’s collaborative attempt at archiving the folk tradition of the Warlis through summaries and illustrations opens up new vistas for similar attempts at archiving folk through pictorial illustrations accompanied by texted summaries and dramatised ‘tellings’. The cultural USP of such an attempt is immense. Unlike the Bongchers of Tripura, the Warli is not an endangered tribe. It is the largest tribe found in the Northern outskirts of Mumbai. But, despite being situated at a stone’s-throw-distance from the bustling metropolis, Warli tribesmen carefully avoid the winds of urbanization, almost shunning them. Their art goes back to the tenth century AD, and they embellish the walls and doors of their dwellings with representations of their oratures. Shamim Padamsee and Uma Krishnaswami brilliantly recreate a popular story from the same tradition in a picture-book titled *Dancing on Walls* (2007), concerning a little girl Shirvi Sahadri who wanted to give her parents a happy surprise and engages upon an incredulous journey. Her adventures in the process are depicted through parallel placements of passages summarized in English and colourful illustrations. It has been translated into Hindi and Bengali by the same publisher for wider circulation across India. Cathy Spagnoli, story teller and researcher on Asian cultures since 1977, engages in an attempt to document a typical chain-story from the Warli orature, aptly aided through suitable colour

illustrations in Tulika's 2006 project titled *It's Only a Story*. Illustrator Uma Krishnaswamy once again fascinates both the child and adult reader alike with her potent illustrations of the popular chain narrative, beginning with the ant and its catastrophe. The same has been translated into Bengali titled *E toh Shudhu Golpo*. Cathy's English rendition of the Warli tale has been translated into Bengali by Indrani Krishnaia. Another attempt by a senior editor at Tulika Publishers, Sandhya Rao recreates an endearing Creation-myth of the Bhilala tribe of Madhya Pradesh entitled *And Land Was Born*. Pictorial illustrations by Uma Krishnaswamy aptly aid the reader in navigating through Rao's simple narration of the genesis of the Bhilalas, who believed that in the beginning, there was only water. Weary of the wetness of the watery world in the beginning, the subjects sought dry land in a prayer addressed to their only God, who was himself lazy and immobile. This Creation myth has been engraved on the walls and arches of the Bhilala homesteads. It is worth noting here, that nowhere does the editor or illustrator bypass the source of the story, and document the same right at the very outset. In the opening section of the volume, credit is granted to the eldest surviving member of the Bhilala tribe, a certain Guna Baba, who had originally bequeathed the tale for posterity. Guna Baba recited his stories in mud hut of Jhabva District of Madhya Pradesh, in a village called Thinjhin. His story of the origin of land, translated and illustrated by Sushma and illustrated by Uma Krishnaswamy may pave the way for similar pedagogical attempts across India, for the teaching of language, culture and creativity.

Similar attempts may be patronised by the likes of Tulika Publishers elsewhere in the country to promote the development of pedagogies of language and literature teaching through regional oratures which are fast fading under the impact of global teaching modules. A school child in Tripura at the entry level may actively relate to the oratures of the region through such attempts. Instead a disjunction is imposed on the learner when he/she is forced to read aloud foreign nursery rhymes and fairy tales which have no connection whatsoever with the child learner's world, his/her own roots and heritage. New pedagogies may be forged through the appropriate synthesis of cultures – that of the oral, print, the visual and the digital media – to facilitate a postcolonial syncretism through which the child learner may naturally place himself/herself within his/her own spatiality and at the same time relish the knowledge of the outside world.

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## **Affect, Materiality and the Production of Contagious Sacrality: A Cultural Studies Perspective of Jagannath in Puri**

**Avishek Parui**

### **Introduction**

This article aims to examine the holy figure of Jagannath as an entanglement of materiality and contagious sacrality that is acquired through complex historical and metonymic modes of appropriation and classification. It will thus examine the history of the formation of the deity – its tribal origins and its increasing inclusion in the high-Hindu Brahmanical tradition through complex semiotic and political processes – with a specific study of the complex of affect and materiality. Drawing on recent studies in geography of religion and religious affect, the article will also examine Puri as a contact-zone that is marked by cultural, gastronomic and linguistic hybridity, the chief identities being Odia and Bengali. It will examine the way in which the figure of Jagannath as a worshipped deity transforms into a transcendental signified in collective religious imagination, generating religious tourism as well as affective markers in Puri. Of special interest in this article is the study of spaces, especially productive spaces where materiality and experientiality intertwine to produce narratives of identity and their contagious consumption. Puri emerges in this reading as a space overdetermined by its religious affect and its associated identity-politics, where metonymic and metaphoric identifications are interwoven through food, customs and language, often unsettling easy divisions between insider and outsider, native and tourist.

The article will also examine affect as a contagious category, an orientation towards objects, examining how objects vacillate between purely consumerist and quasi-religious significance in Puri, depending on their semiotic proximity to the collectively sentimentalized signified Jagannath. The article will thus draw on space theory, affect theory and thing theory in its examination of Puri as a semiotic space embedded in as well as extended by religious experientiality. In its study of religious emotions and shared spaces by multilingual and multicultural communities, the article will draw on the historian Rajat Kanta Roy's notion of "communities of emotion" (Roy 2002: 48) which is a retelling of Max Weber's notion of communities of sentiment and K. V. Aiyangar's study of how the wanderings of pilgrims mapped an idea of one India even before such unification was attempted politically (Aiyangar 1942: 33). By drawing on a range of historical and theoretical studies, the article aims to examine and highlight the affective markers of shared religious and

emotional experiences in its study of Jagannath as a worshipped deity and of Puri as a shared sacred space.

The article will be divided into several sections. The first sections examine the relation between space and affect inasmuch as those inform each other in structures of sacrality, referring to research done on religion and geography. Drawing on affect studies, space studies, and Material Engagement Theory (MET), the sections will examine the ontology of objects as affective markers as well as carriers of culture as instantiated in Puri. Of special interest in these sections will be a study of sacrality, its production and consumption, through complex material and metonymic networks. The subsequent sections will study the evolution of Jagannath as a deity through complex material and political processes, from being a local tribal god to a high-Hindu figure of worship. Those sections will examine the coded quality of Jagannath worship and temple rituals, underlining the markers that corroborate the transition from the local to the universal quality of deification. As in the previous sections, close attention will be paid to the material and metonymic processes informing the economy of devotion which, in the case of Jagannath, clearly comes from various nodal points with an interplay of languages and customs. The article will conclude by re-emphasizing the complex entanglement of affect, materiality and sacrality that characterizes the evolution and reception of Jagannath in Puri.

### **Space and the production of sacrality**

In her extensive study of the religious geography of Hindu India, Diana L. Eck argues how the sacred sites of Hindu pilgrimage or *tirthas* transcend their local quality and attract tourists and pilgrims affectively:

Many of India's great places of pilgrimage have a transregional magnetism, and the circulation of pilgrims to these *tirthas* creates a broader arc of experience for people all over India. Many Indian scholars have noted the significance of the network of pilgrimage places in constructing a sense of Indian "nationhood," not as a nation-state in the modern usage of the term, but as a shared, living landscape, with all its cultural and regional complexity. (Eck 2012:15)

Eck's study underlines how geographies of religious emotions create communities and structures of sentiments that break away from rigid rules of insider and outsider in sacred spaces, which often emerge as multicultural and multilingual in their affective associations. In fact Eck's understanding of affective collectivity and unity gains stronger grounds when one recalls M.K. Gandhi's

formulation of India as a nation in *Hind Swaraj* in terms of extraordinary affective unity with sacral underpinnings; for his imaginary nativist Editor says to the westernized Reader<sup>1</sup>:

What do you think could have been the intention of those farseeing ancestors of ours who established Setubandha(Rameshwar) in the South, Jagannath in the East and Haridwar in the North as places of pilgrimage? You will admit they were no fools. They knew what worship of God could have been performed just as well at home. They taught us that those whose hearts were aglow with righteousness had Ganges in their own homes. But they saw that India was one undivided land so made by nature. They, therefore, argued that it must be one nation. Arguing thus, they established holy places in various parts of India, and fired the people with the idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world. ( *Hind Swaraj* 41 )

In her seminal essay entitled “Arts of the contact zone”, Mary Louise Pratt had defined the term as the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991:34). Pratt’s essay examines the production of hybridity in the aftermath of unequal negotiations in knowledge, power, economy, language and cultures. Describing the salient features and recursive markers in a contact zone, Pratt lists the following: “Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression” (1991:37), thus highlighting the complex of assimilation and acculturation operative at a contact zone. This article draws on Pratt’s term and extends it further by examining how Puri emerges as a space where such negotiations take place in the tangible marketplace as well as in the affective orders of experience, most visibly emblemized in the figure of the worshipped deity Jagannath. The figure of Jagannath may be examined as an example of a mixture of material signifier and transcendental signified in popular imagination, attracting different orders of attention (religious, commercial and touristy) from a variety of cultural communities across India as well as internationally.

In his complex study of space and production of spatial identities, Henri Lefebvre describes the intersectional and interstitial quality of the same. Thus, as Lefebvre argues, space “may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location. As for representations of relations of production, which subsume power relations, these too occur in space: space contains them in the

form of buildings, monuments and works of art” (Lefebvre 1991:33). It is interesting to study the spatial semantics of Puri and the auratic presence of Jagannath as a religious architecture (in the form of the massive and monumental temple) as well as an affective architecture (drawing devotees across India and from around the world). Drawing on Lefebvre’s notion of relations of production in space, one may also examine how Puri produces affective identities (in the form of religious practitioners and devotees) as well as cross-cultural identities in an economy of affect and associations. The temple of Jagannath in Puri, along with its affective associations, qualifies as what Lefebvre defines as “special preserves” (1991:35), religious spaces at once exclusive and mysterious. With its rich and complex sentimental investments and human history, the Jagannath Temple in Puri may also be described as what Lefebvre classifies as “representational space” which has an organic “affective kernel” which “embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time” (Lefebvre 1991:42). Such a space embodies a complex of matter and metaphor in its engagement with time which “may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (Lefebvre 1991:42).

The geographer Lily Kong has been one of the most prominent figures exploring the intersections between space and religion and how the latter informs an affective engagement with one’s sense of spatial location. Examining the various components of geographical analysis, Kong asserts:

I will also argue that religion deserves to be acknowledged fully and in like manner alongside race, class and gender in geographical analysis. Most significantly, I underline the geographic significance of examining religion, not least in the intersection of sacred and secular forces in the making of place. This is specially so in urban contexts where the sacred and secular and, indeed, varieties of the sacred, frequently exist cheek by jowl. (Kong 2001:212)

Kong’s examination of the asymmetric entanglement of the sacred and secular is particularly pertinent for the purpose of this article which looks at how Puri emerges as a space for religious tourism where the commercial and the sacred orders are often indissolubly interlocked. This results in a production of spaces which, as Nigel Thrift describes, “quiver with affective energies” (2004:57) that emerge as a complex of historical knowledge and phenomenological experience. The geography of religion and its affective quality is examined closely in the context of India in Diana L. Eck’s study where she argues how affective mappings play out across real places and imagined landscapes (Eck 2012:37). Eck’s description appears

to draw on the idea of imaginary communities but gives it a more affective turn by underlining the story-quality emerging out of shared myths about gods and heroes, one which makes the religious geography part of a shared phenomenal space as well as an embodied experience.

### **The distributive economy of sacrality in Puri**

The phenomenological quality of spatial and embodied experience in Puri crystallizes around the totemic architecture of the Puri Temple as well as through the more metonymic, distributive and ubiquitous presence of Jagannath in almost all spaces of touristy and commercial interests including hotels, restaurants and travel offices. This is most immediately and visibly exemplified in the area called Swargadwar (literally meaning the gateway to Heaven), which is the holy cremation site for the Hindus as well as a major shopping centre for silk sarees, sweets and souvenirs such as the Odisha Handloom House, Cuttacki Saree Centre<sup>2</sup>, and Jagannath Khaja Centre. Swargadwar and Swargadwar Road thus emerge as an entanglement of sacred and commercial orders in a space of linguistic and cultural hybridity where Odias and Bengalis co-inhabit as sellers and buyers with their respective languages, customs and cultural codes. With its transcendental signified of sacrality embodied by Jagannath and the Jagannath Temple (Bada Deula) and its associated material markers in souvenirs, food items and clothes, Puri emerges as a space where existential sensation and performative faith are interwoven with the materiality of the marketplace in a linguistically, cognitively and culturally complex economy of signs.

The work of the neo-Durkheimian philosopher of religion Veikko Anttonen is interestingly relevant here. Anttonen examines the politics of body and space and describes how those emerge as “domains of experience whose social meanings are symbolically construed [and] [. . .] cognitively organised at a preconceptual level” (1996:41). The complex of cognition, experientiality and social semantics is particularly pertinent in the examination of Puri as carried out in this article. The religious artifacts, dresses, and objects of consumption in Puri in the vicinity of the Jagannath Temple are interwoven with affectively marked cognitive significance while also retaining their commodity-quality in a telling testimony to the transformative economy of faith and value embodied by Jagannath and the Jagannath Temple. Of special relevance here is Anttonen’s definition of a sacred space, an order of experience generated “when boundaries between the categories of male and female, life and death, pure and impure, left and right, inside and outside of sacralized space, inside and outside of the human body, are in transition” (2005:191). Puri with its massive temple of the local Lord becomes a pointer to

the liminality underlying such experience, whereby the divisions between life and death are in constant flux in the economy of faith, as evinced in the proximity between the holy burial site and the touristy commercial marketplace in Swargwadwar. What makes Puri even more interesting from the perspective of studies in religious geography is the distributive order of sacrality whereby the signifiers of affective religious experience are spread across the city and its various commercial spaces such as hotels, restaurants and tourist offices, both Government-owned and private, through various material markers such as wall photos, calendars and clocks containing the image of the Lord and His holy temple. Instead of a centralized monument of religious experience, what Puri offers is a map of material markers of sacrality in the marketplace.

Generally considered to have been built in the year 1135 AD under the supervision of the monarch Anantavarman Chodaganga Dev, the Jagannath Temple in Puri is a towering testimony to the growing Vaishnavite tradition in Orissa and other parts of Eastern India. It may be noted that the term Vaishnava, signifying the devotee of Lord Vishnu (the preserver-deity in Hindu iconography) is quite possibly a 5th century AD addition to undercut the differences between the Bhagavata and Pancharatra sects in Hinduism. The very iconography of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra reveals, as Gaya Charan Tripathi argues, how long after the total integration of the Jagannath figures into Hinduism, their iconography persistently reminded the people of their origin and when the texts propagating the glory and the holiness of this religious place were composed, the tribal origin of the figures was neither concealed nor suppressed, perhaps because it could not possibly be suppressed or overlooked, being too prominent and obvious. (Tripathi 1986: 477)

Tripathi's study shows clearly how the very ontology of sacrality as embodied by Jagannath exhibits a contact zone of different orders of divinity which are mapped onto each other through complex historical, material and textual processes. What strikes one immediately and visually is the seemingly incomplete anatomy of holiness as embodied in the legless dark figures of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra, perhaps an ironic instantiation of the fault lines emerging out of the attempted merge between different orders of divinity: the original aboriginal order and the subsequently interpolated Vaishnavite order. One commonly shared and circulated mythical story is that of Gundicha, the curious queen of Indradyumna who interrupted the carpentry of the disguised Vishnu on the 14th day of work, thus breaking the promise of three weeks of undisturbed time for creation, resulting in the divine carpenter abandoning his work unfinished. To complicate things further, the figure of Jagannath had often been compared and characterised as the

Buddha avatar of Vishnu, as instantiated several times in 15th-Century Odia religious literature, most notably in Sarala Das' *Mahabharata*.

### **The growth of the Jagannath cult in Puri**

The multiplicity of Jagannath in terms of stories of origin and belongings is a telling testimony to the quality of repeatability characterizing Hindu sites of sacrality as examined by Diana Eck, which focuses specifically on issues such as “polycentricity, pluralism and duplication” (Eck 2012:5). Eck's study highlights some of the key categories in the production and promotion of popular myths apropos of the imaginary community of worshippers and believers: multiplicity, repeatability and plurality. These features further stress the storytelling quality associated with the creation of imaginary religious communities subscribing to shared stories about creation and resurrection through which geographically distant sites are assembled in a shared imagination. It is also not uncommon to find stories that attempt to efface as much as they attempt to articulate, their narrative bias in keeping with certain selected pointers of privilege that often seek to undermine historical materiality in favour of religious respectability. It is, however, the association with Krishna that has been the most prominent marker for the divinity of Jagannath over the years and one which has accounted for the popularity of Jagannath in the South and most immediately in Bengal where he is unequivocally revered as a Krishna avatar.

The Bengali interest in Puri may be traced, among other factors, to the historical presence and legends around the 15th century Bengali Hindu reformer Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) in the Jagannath temple. P. Mukherjee studies the Chaitanya presence in Puri as a watershed moment in the monk's life where “he discovered his true self for the first time. He realized his inseparable bond with Jagannatha” (Mukherjee 1986: 310). Examining Chaitanya's influence on the Odia Vaishnavite tradition, Mukherjee argues how the Bengali monk left a legacy of multilingual religious devotion in Odisha:

He introduced the practice of Nagara kirtana, the street singing of holy names, in which persons of different beliefs can participate. The mediums of kirtana called 'Nadia Kirtana' are Oriya and Bengali. Some years ago, the writer spent a night in a village, the inhabitants of which had no knowledge of the Bengali language. But early in the morning, some of them sang in Bengali that Gaur (Gauranga) had come to the street to spread devotional love. Ignorance of language was no bar to the sincerity of their devotion. (Mukherjee 1986:317)

Mukherjee's description is interesting here as it emerges as a powerful pointer to the affective contact-zone of Jagannath-worship in Orissa performed through local rituals and folk-songs that transcend the objective boundaries of language and culture. Affect emerges as an instrument of unification here which more than makes up for the lack of linguistic knowledge. Chaitanya may also be credited as one of the factors which brought the Jagannath-cult closer to the Krishna-cult of worship as exemplified by the Hera Panchami festival where Jagannath and Krishna merge in their nostalgic longing for Vrindaban. Despite several conspiracy theories surrounding Chaitanya's sudden and dramatic death, it is undeniable that Chaitanya's life and legacy at Puri further centralized the significance of the place as a hotbed of multicultural and multilingual religious devotion and pilgrimage as testified by the Sonar Gouranga Temple on the Chakratirtha Road in Puri.

### **Puri through the lenses of Material Engagement Theory (MET)**

The economy of faith and consumption in Puri may be interestingly investigated using material engagement theory (MET) whereby the quasi-commodity quality of the food items and souvenirs retain their religious significance while also becoming an integral marker of the marketplace. A classic case in point are the two sweet items khaja and jibegaja which are veritably sold, bought and consumed as signifiers of the space and may be read as a more touristy and extended embodiment of the holy mahaprasad from the temple. Of special significance here is the Bengali obsession and appropriation of the jibegaja and khaja (there is also a very valid debate that what is now called Bengali rasogolla was also an appropriation from a similar sweetmeat made originally in Orissa). As markers of touristy local sweets as well as carriers of religious affect, Puri's unique sweetmeats perform the dual function of faith and consumption and become metonymic symbols of the culture of the place. In his work on material engagement theory (MET), Lambros Malafouris examines the vital materiality of things and argues thus:

[. . .] for MET material culture is not merely the backdrop against which human cognition takes shape. Things mediate, actively shape, and constitute our ways of being in the world and of making sense of the world. Things also bring people together and provide channels of interaction. Things envelop our minds; they become us. (2013:44)

MET's methodological tools may be gainfully employed for a fuller examination of a complex affective space such as Puri where things become symbolic signifiers of sacrality while also being bought and sold in the marketplace, in correspondence to the complexly distributive semiotics of sacrality and its

consumption examined in this article. The entanglement of sacrality and its extended symbolic signifiers gets a unique form in Puri in the local quality of sweets in the marketplace which are often sold and consumed as proxy to the mahaprasad, in an instantiation of Malafouris' description of the "causal and affective efficiency of things in the enactment and the constitution of a cognitive system or operation" (Malafouris 2013:44).

In continuing the study through thing theory or material engagement theory, it is worth examining the mutable markers of commodities and processes of commodification in complex cultures of consumption and production. This is particularly relevant for a space like Puri which produces unique objects out of its temple space and market place which appear and are purely consumed as commodities in certain situations, as sacred signifiers in certain other situations while as an asymmetric entanglement of both on other occasions. As Igor Kopytoff examines from a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must not only be produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions (Kopytoff 1986:64).

Kopytoff's analysis here is underlined by an argument that corresponds closely to the core idea in this article. Along with the mutability of ontologization and de-ontologization that characterizes commodity-production and commodity-consumption, what is significant here is the study of the moral economy of invisible transactions that stands behind the objective economy of the visible. If one applies this theory to the study of the semiotic space in Puri, one can clearly see the moral economy at play inasmuch as it determines the value-quotient of things that inhabit the liminal space between affective abstraction and commodification, between the tangible and the intangible orders of ontologization. The theory of commodity-study is furthered by Kopytoff by examining how certain objects are precluded from becoming commodities in an economy of sacrality and symbol-centric faith:

In every society, there are things which are publicly precluded from being commoditized. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and are upheld collectively. [. . .] This applies to much of what one thinks of as a symbolic

inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects, and so on. Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects. (Kopytoff 1986:73)

It is interesting to examine how the *mahaprasad* inside the main Jagannath Temple in Puri is one such instance of ontological re-singularization of an entity that precludes it from being a pure commodity in the purchase-consume economy. Although purchasable with a symbolic payment, the mahaprasad is only available in the temple premises and exists in a clear spatial distinction from the more distributed order of religiosity in Puri that exists in the marketplace through sweetmeats and souvenirs.

### **Jagannath and the anatomy of sacrality in Puri**

The relation between the material and the affective orders of religious embodiment in Puri is quite direct and dramatic. The very wooden body of Jagannath and his companions Balabhadra and Subhadra necessitates a religious ritual designed to generate a certain affect while also being practically purposeful. As Gaya Charan Tripathi states in his study:

Navakalevara—the new embodiment, so is called the ceremony of the periodical renewal of the wooden images in the Jagannatha temple, a ceremony which is unique in many respects in the field of Hindu religious worship. The ceremony involves a total replacement of the four worshipable images through the new ones after a certain period. The old statues are then discarded and buried underground. (Tripathi 1986:223)

The example above corroborates the combination of objects and affect in Puri and the shifting signifiers of religious significance that operate in the temple space as well as in the marketplace. In terms of its cultural and linguistic complexity and in terms of its array of objects that vacillate between sacrality and consumable commodities, Puri has interesting parallels as a semiotic space with Assam's Kamakhya which too draws a dominantly Bengali population of devotees and has priests and local shopkeepers fluent in Bengali. Like Puri's Jagannath, Assam's Kamakhya too comes from tribal origins (the key difference being that now Jagannath belongs to the Vaishnavite tradition while Kamakhya still embodies the Shaiva and tantric traditions) and may have been incorporated in mainstream Hindu pantheon subsequently through complex material and sentimental processes.

Anncharlott Eschmann's study of the Hinduization of tribal deities in Orissa is particularly pertinent here and emerges as a poignant pointer to the metonymic material processes around the phenomenon of Jagannath as examined in this article. At the very outset, Eschmann describes the complex processes informing the Hinduization of local tribal cults:

Above all it must be remembered, that the process of Hinduization is a continuum: the realms marked by the ellipses are not rigidly cut off from each other, but the transitions are fluid. [. . .] there might be instances of Hinduization, where tribal cults are incorporated directly into a temple, without having gone through the intermediate stage of being associated with a village cult. Or the focus of a tribal cult without elements of Hinduization may not be existent at all, in which case the end of the chain would have to be imagined as a circle. (Eschmann 1986:84)

Therefore, metonymy plays a crucial role in the affect induced by such processes where certain features of the old cult are retained while certain others get dropped off through complex material and religious rituals. What is uniquely interesting in the case of Puri and Jagannath, is to examine how the deification into the high-Hindu order from tribal origins is simultaneously visible as a product as well as a process. This is in correspondence to the central argument in this article, which seeks to study the semiotic and distributive orders of affect through material, historical and demographic levels. Eschmann examines the mappings of cults in Orissa thus:

In Orissa both relations between Hinduization and regional tradition can be studied simultaneously. Important centers of Orissa's religious traditions, as the Jagannatha temple, have admittedly developed from Hinduized cults, and still prominently display elements of tribal origin. Moreover the same tribes, whose cults were incorporated, are also still living as tribal and semitribal communities in the region, and Hinduization can be observed "in the making". (Eschmann 1986:85)

What underlines Eschmann's description here is the textual material process of Hinduization, whereby one may examine the formation of Hinduization as a phenomenon as well as an activity, with the original tribes still existing with their rituals and totemic markers which in turn can be seen in their 'sanitized' structures in Hindu mainstream orders of deification.

Uniquely interesting about Jagannath are the anatomical markers which reveal the God's tribal origins, markers which are explained and mapped by a myth of

Krishna's burnt body. This makes the deity multicultural, multilingual and complexly embodying various orders of devotion and worship. Eschmann describes the origins thus:

The Jagannatha cult is of tribal origin. The legend of the Puri temple, of the Indradyumna legend, narrates that the deity was originally worshipped by the aboriginal Sabara chief Visvavasu in the woods, and only later on miraculously appeared in Puri. Accordingly, the Jagannatha figures still display what seems to be a "tribal look". The wooden figures may be called "crude" and certainly differ considerably from the images worshipped in other great Hindu which correspond exactly to the described iconographical canons. (Eschmann 1986:99)

As Eschmann points out later in the same work, the aboriginal quality of the deity and its politics of worship may still be seen in the presence of the Daitas, the special priests entrusted with the work of dressing and moving the figures of Jagannath, and who happen to come from the original tribal worshippers of the God. Interestingly enough, the Daitas are responsible for observing the decay in the wooden statues of the deities and for all rituals in the re-embodiment, thus symbolically corroborating the tribal origins of the deity instantiated, despite the high-Hindu appropriation, by the wooden body. It is interesting to note that the word Daita comes from the Sanskrit word Daitya, which means 'demon' but in common and colloquial Odia it means the aboriginal inhabitants of the forest. It is thus an interesting take on the spatial quality of identity and identity-production in an affectively and discursively determined space. What is also interesting to observe is the presence and proximity of the Daitas apropos of the religious rituals of the deity inside the temple space in a way that underlines the deities' tribal origins despite the current location at the centre of high-Hindu religious iconology. As exemplified by the Daitas, even within the core sacred space of worship, one can observe complex cultures of assimilation and performative identities, in keeping with the production and consumption of affect studied in this article. The movement and mutability of the deities' bodies in the Jagannath Temple – during ceremonies such as Snana Yatra (bathing ceremony) and Rathayatra (the chariot ceremony) – stand in complete contrast to the immovable stone statues of most Hindu deities in South India and further corroborates the examination of the entanglement between materiality, movement and affect as studied in this article.

The cult of Jagannath gets even more complex as research reveals that the "history of Jagannatha shows different stages in which the deity was subsequently interpreted as Narasimha, Kama-Purusottama and Krisna" (Eschmann 1986:106), thus highlighting the various embodiments of sacrality signified by the deity with

complex origins. Scholars have variously studied the politics of production of affect and iconography of the Narasimha (the lion-God avatar of Vishnu) and how that emanates from tribal origins and were subsequently sanitized into mainstream Hindu iconography. Anncharlott Eschmann examines how a comparative study of Narasingha and Jagannath may throw useful and explanatory light on the physiognomic features of Jagannath:

The identification with Narasimha would also offer the iconological reasons for the peculiarities of the Jagannatha figures. The round eyes are a typical feature of Narasimha. His eyes are big and round because of his fury (krodha). And the curious shape of Jagannatha's head would no more seem curious if taken not for an attempt to reproduce a human head, but an animal's, a lion's head, where the emphasis is on the lower parts, the jaws. [. . .] The iconographical and iconological identity between the figure of Jagannatha and Narasimha is exemplified by the cult of two mathas in the villages of Jenapur and Sukhinda on the bank of the lower Brahmani. (Eschmann 1986:111)

Eschmann's theory is interesting in its explanation of the iconology of the Jagannath figure through a man-animal interface as per tribal traditions, thus accentuating the metonymic quality of embodiment and its associated affect. Instead of a pure anthropomorphic form, Jagannath embodies, as per this theory, a complex combination of human and non-human orders, in continuation of the Hindu-tribal interface historically associated with this deity. It is also interesting how Narasingha and Jagannath proxy for each other on certain occasions. A case in point is the period of anasara, the period of time when Jagannath falls ill annually and cannot be seen due to his illness. Narasingha proxies for Jagannath as the worshipped deity during this period and receives the ritual medical treatment meant for Jagannath. Equally significant is when, during the Navakalevara ritual in which the figures of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra reappear, they are addressed as avatars of Narasingha.

In his work on the evolution of Jagannath, H. Stietencron studies the Tantric legacies that were invested and may have historically informed the production and physiognomy of the deity. Of special significance in Stietencron's study is the figure of the Tantric deity EkapadaBhairava, which he examines, like Narasingha, as lending its features into the formation of Jagannath cult. Like Narasingha, Ekapada Bhairava too is a wooden figure and Stietencron argues that the latter comes closer to the appearance of Jagannath than Narasingha. The description goes thus:

The leg gradually increases in width to merge with the trunk of the deity. This gives to EkapadaBhairava the peculiar inverted conical shape, with a narrow base and a wide top, which is also present in the early Jagannatha images. [ . . ] Narasimha is invariably shown with two legs one of which is slightly bent. He therefore also lacks the rigid static quality which is another characteristic of both Ekapada and Jagannatha. (Stietencron1986:120)

Stietencron's theory seems to suggest that the formation of Jagannath drew on Shaiva deities as well as the more commonly accepted theories of Vaishnavite influences. In an interesting analysis of how the figure of Jagannatha may have been worshipped by both sects in different forms, Stietencron states how the Vaishnavite order gained influence with time due to royal patronage but the Shaiva markers could never be erased entirely:

For some time the Wooden God must have been worshipped by Saivas and Vaisnavas alike. He was probably considered as Bhairava by the Saiva community and as Narasimha by the Vaisnava community. [ . . ] It is likely that two gods of the same shape were simply juxtaposed: Siva Bhairava in his Ekapada form and Narasimha Purusottama. (Stietencron 1986:122)

Stietencron's study appears to correspond to one of the central objectives of this article: an examination of the figure of Jagannath in Puri as a metonymic marker of sacrality, an affect informed and influenced by historical shifts and material conditions, extending across the sacred space of the temple as well as distributed in the marketplace of economic exchange. As a historical study of the cult of Jagannath reveals, the Narasingha association was gradually replaced by the Krishna association in later times in keeping with the increasing Vaishnavite influence in Orissa.

As G. N. Dash argues in his study of the increasing Brahmanization of the Jagannath worship traditions in Puri, the shift in the caste-based hierarchy was a response to the increasing importance of Puri as a pan-Indian pilgrimage site housing the heart of Hindu religious signifiers:

As the name and fame of Jagannatha spread beyond the border of the Ganga empire, pilgrims from all over India started visiting Puri and they expected a Brahmanical shrine, i.e. a Brahmanic deity worshipped by the Brahmin priests in accordance to the Brahmanical mode of worship. To satisfy the feelings of these

pilgrims it became imperative to strengthen the Brahmanical elements in the cult. (Dash 1986:163)

Dash's study reveals the artificial formation of the material markers of affect through a combination of religious tourism and identity politics. The emergence of Puri as a major site of Hindu pilgrimage thus produced and necessitated the Hindu hegemonic signifiers of worship with a dramatic departure from the tribal origins of the deity. The Brahmanical/non-Brahmanical divide among priests in Puri may be read as a tension between the regional/tribal moorings of the deity and the increasingly national importance the temple and its religious order began to assume through time, bringing in complex questions about the economy of affect and its associated material markers around the deity.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to examine the complex semiotic and mutable markers of sacrality that have historically informed the affective embodiments of Jagannath in Puri, from a perspective in cultural studies. It drew on historical research about the evolution and politics of embodiments of the worshipped figure through complex cultural shifts and political processes while also applying current works on affective spaces, material engagement and religious geography, in its attempt to blend historical research and theoretical study. In its examination of affect, materiality and the semiotics of sacrality around the Jagannath cult, the article also attempted to offer a study of Puri as a complex contact-zone and an affectively productive space that is multilingual and multicultural, with interesting entanglements of commodity and signifiers of sacrality that are distributive in quality. Affect emerges in this study as a material, metonymic and mutable process as well as a contagious category that is complexly connected to sacral embodiments as well as to the markers in the marketplace, in true testimony to the figure and phenomenon of Jagannath as it evolved and consolidated in time.

### **Notes**

1. *Hind Swaraj* is a sustained dialogue between an enlightened Editor of a journal (Gandhi's persona) and a young westernized Reader. In opposition to the position of colonial modernity of the young Reader, the editor takes a nativist position with regard to western culture and British colonialism and criticizes both. Notwithstanding the extreme and indefensible views that the railways increased the frequency of famine, spread of contagious diseases and proliferated differences among people, Gandhi contested the idea of the Railways as a technology of national unity and argued that sense of unity germane to nationhood comes from a sense of sacral

space created out of places of pilgrims. This alternative culturalist view of nationhood as offered by Gandhi has had pervasive presence in Indian psyche.

2. Cuttacki saree is in fact Sambalpuri saree, falsely designated so. The affective semiotics of Puri culture overdetermined by mostly Bengali tourists and pilgrims entails the re-invention of the commodity, like that of Jagannath, in suitable cognitive terms, irrespective of provenance, and re-investment of fresh meaning. Cuttack being historically more important than Sambalpur or Western Odisha, signifies greater affect.

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## **Emancipating Ekphrasis: Reflections on a few Edward Hopper Paintings**

**Anshuman Mittra**

That ekphrasis is not very popular today in spite of it having been in use since the ancient times and even having entered the English language since 1715 is not really surprising, considering the fact that many works are actually ekphrastic without we or their creators ever noticing them. In his essay “Ekphrasis and Representation”, James A. W. Heffernan writes that many people writing about art do so without using the term ekphrasis to describe their work. Still, the term has developed and taken on new dimensions in course of time. Unfortunately, however, notwithstanding the fact that the term has been an exceedingly dynamic one since its inception in ancient Greece, the definition that readily comes to our mind today is that it is the verbal/textual description of a work of art. The truth is that this term encompasses a territory far wider than the definitions that we are acquainted with.

In the aforementioned essay, Heffernan, after having discarded the definitions by Kreiger and Davidson, suggest a new definition that, according to him, allows ekphrasis to cover all ekphrastic works from the beginning till today. The definition that he suggests is, “ekphrasis is the verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan 299). James A. Francis, in his essay “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of Ekphrasis”, writes that in antiquity the term ekphrasis was applied to a kind of description that brought the thing being described in front of the audiences’ eyes. At that time it was a term and not a genre. From this essay we also get to know that the four ancient formal definitions of ekphrasis that have survived are from the first through the fifth century C.E., and are by Aelius Theon, Hermogenes of Tarsus, Aphthonius of Antioch, and Nicolus of Myra. They were a part of rhetorical exercises called *Progymnasmata* which was designed for budding orators or public speakers. He writes, “The oldest definition from Theon in the first century C.E. can serve all four: “Ekphrasis is the descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight. There is an ekphrasis of persons and events and places and periods of time” (Francis 4).

Heffernan cites the example of Homer’s description of Achilles’ Shield and says that Homer made it clear that he was representing representation. This gives us three topics for consideration: the ekphrasis of process (a type), notional

ekphrasis (a modern distinction) and the role of verbal and visual representation in creating meaning. Francis writes, “The principal focus of the poet’s descriptive energy is not on the shield, and the context of the description is not a static appreciation of the completed work but rather the dynamic process of the god fabricating it” (Francis 9). He also makes it clear that the modern-day distinction between actual and notional ekphrasis did not exist in antiquity. As far as the third category is concerned, he says that both the visual and the verbal are required. To illustrate this point he gives the example of the harvest sequence on Achilles’ shield where the king silently stands behind the workers. This silence can only be described through words. He also gives the example of Pandora about whom he writes “The gods give her the form of a modest girl but fill her with guile and shamelessness” (Francis 15). The true nature of Pandora that her unusual physical beauty hides can be described in words. So, Francis says that both the visual and the verbal are the poet’s creation, and together they create meaning. Heffernan takes the examples of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and Shelly’s “Ozymandias” and says that no variety of representation can command complete authority. However, the one thing that both these varieties of representations do is contribute to the process of meaning-making.

The quality of vividness has been a dominant feature of ekphrasis right from the beginning. In rhetoric, it helps the speaker to transcend logic and convince the audience more effectively. In his essay, “Before Your Very Eyes: Pliny *Epistulae* 5.6 and the Ancient Theory of Ekphrasis”, Christopher M. Chinn writes about the ekphrasis of antiquity, mentioning that it encompassed, “descriptions of all types, usually characterized by the common feature of vividness” (Chinn 265) and heightened the descriptive vividness. The *Epistulae* are a series of letters that Pliny the Younger wrote to his friends, and Chinn discusses this work because he thinks it “contains a significant perspective on the ancient concept of ekphrasis” (Chinn 265). This epistolary collection contains a lengthy description of the Tuscan Villa. Pliny the Younger defends the length of his description by saying that a detailed description of something will be long and since it does not penetrate out of the boundary of context, there is nothing wrong in it. This entails a “digression that depends on his description” (Chinn 265) and a conclusion. According to Chinn, this description is in line with the ancient theory of ekphrasis, and hence, it should be given due notice, no matter how architecturally unsatisfactory or politically metaphorical it might be. What is of great significance in this epistolary collection is Pliny’s equating his description of the villa with an actual tour of it. In other words, he is equating the place described with its textual description. This also reveals to us another type of ekphrasis, the ekphrasis of place.

Heffernan makes an intriguing point when he says that the visual artist begins the process of ekphrasis when he names his picture as the picture title, like sepulchral epigrams, tells us what it is. He also addresses unusual titles by referring to Rene Magritte's famous picture title of the painting of a pipe "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe) and saying that it mocks the textbook labeling of images, in that it shows that graphic art and verbal representation can together misrepresent. Ekphrasis does not prescribe any specific style, approach or length of description. Frank J. D'Angelo, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis", says that while Philostratus the Elder chose to describe only those elements of an object which he thought to be important, whereas Philostratus the Younger preferred a more detailed description of the object. However, when the title of an ekphrastic response is different from that of the object it is describing, then one might infer that the ekphrastic artist is probably taking a different approach than the visual artist had taken. Additionally, it may also mean that the response is merely inspired from the visual object and is not an ekphrastic response to it.

From the points I have discussed so far, we can infer a few things. Ekphrasis has its origin in the tradition of the rhetoric in ancient Greece, and that vividness of description has been a very crucial aspect of it. Vividness, clarity and describer's skill can make the description artistic; a mere description of something is too shallow to be considered as ekphrastic, unless it has evocative, suggestive and affective power. The description needs to be powerful and evocative enough to be able to generate the image of the object being described in the audience/reader's mind. The approach, length and style of description are as flexible as the describer's imagination. Additionally, as has been written in anonymous online article <sup>1</sup>, "In addition to the description of a work of art, an ekphrastic poem usually includes an exploration of how the speaker is impacted by his or her experience with the work."

The question that strikes me is: Is it right to tie so dynamic a process as ekphrasis down to a rigid and a somewhat orthodox a definition? The term was born when the paraphernalia of communication and visual culture had not attained the level of technological sophistication we see now in the digital age; now we need to take the ekphrastic discourse beyond something that only allows verbal/textual description of a work of art to be ekphrastic. We have to not only hermeneutically negotiate between the image and inscription, but also think of a whole series of spin-offs any text can generate across the generic boundaries of art and mediums. I have in mind a few painting of Edward Hopper to illustrate the theoretical position I am inclined to take with regard to ekphrasis.

There have been various poems written on the paintings of the famous American realist painter Edward Hopper(1882-1967). His paintings, namely 'Nighthawks', 'Early Sunday Morning', 'Girlie Show', 'Gas', 'House by the Railroad' etc have attracted the ekphrastic attention of a great number of poets. On 'Nighthawks', for example, a large number of poems have been written. While the poems by Joyce Carol Oates, Ira Sadoff, Samuel Yellen and Wolf Wondratschek are excellent examples of an ekphrastic take, others by Charles C., Kevin Adam Flores and David Ray are only inspired by the paintings and cannot really be called ekphrastic. Things are, however, different when we take into consideration the collection of fifty-one poems written on Hopper's works by Ernest Farrés. The English translation of this collection is contained in a book titled *Edward Hopper: Poems*.

Lawrence Venuti, the translator of Ernest Farrés' poems writes in the introduction, "Farrés's poems tend not to describe. Instead they freely speculate, using Hopper's paintings as springboards for reflection and invention" (Venuti XV). This is true. What Farrés does in this series of poems is that he builds a narrative, using fifty of Hopper's paintings taken together in a particular sequence. In fact, he uses fifty-one, the fifty-first one being for the epilogue. He does not change the titles. It starts with Hopper's 'Self Portrait' where Farrés says that he and Hopper are one. He makes it clear that it is the married and settled artist and not the amateur artist who had been to Europe to learn. From here on, through this series of poems, or maybe through this series of paintings, Hopper, through Farrés' poetic power, takes us along on a journey through his life, through his world. So, the first poem introduces us to the lead character of this narrative. From the second poem onwards he takes us on a virtual tour of his life which ends with an epilogue.

The second poem is based on the painting 'Stairway'. In it he reveals his intention to go out into the world and experience it. He then boards a train to go to where he hopes to realise his dream. The next four poems tell us about what he sees onboard the train and his thoughts about them. He wonders where the tracks lead to, and he is prepared, in spite of the uncertainty, to carry on with an imaginative, calm and contented demeanour. He observes a woman co-passenger and remarks that she keeps herself so busy with reading that she misses the beautiful sunset outside. He also confesses that he steals a glance at her because he thinks that it is the perfect time and place to do it. By the eighth poem he finally reaches the city. He is sometimes unimpressed, some other times overwhelmed, and constantly scared by the city, although at the same time he steadies himself, saying

it is okay and carries on with some degree of determination. In the city lands in a job. He is angry and agitated, but focused and determined to explore opportunities to the fullest and never to accept anything less than he desires. He wants to proceed without fear or nervousness. He likes the trees because they make him feel at home in an urban environment, an environment he is obviously not accustomed to or fond of. He tells us how a beautiful sunset and a statue brighten his mood and reenergize him. He is aware of the troubles his choice of a career will invite, but he will not let them stop him. His reading of Siddhartha makes him see rivers in a different light. He says that rivers are like human beings who keep flowing with the hope of becoming one with something great one day. He says that he finds himself odd for finding beauty in small things like a child, and if people notice this then they will not have good things to say about him. And yet he says that he will ignore them. He refuses to change for people. Everything happens for a reason. He examines the city streets with a scrutinizer's eyes to find evidences of life. He sees people, people stare at him. He is the odd one out. The city-dwellers who have become accustomed to the unpleasant noises are prepared to go on with their lives as they are, with industrialization, with the ugliness. He is aware of the Great Depression and the misery caused by it. He does not agree with the way things are and hence, keeps to himself and his art. He voyeuristically observes a half-naked woman through a window and wonders what will happen of her. He can see but cannot know. A series of unanswered questions bombard him. He has realized that life puts everybody where they belong. He likes the night. He is a voyeur who keeps his room lights off so that he can watch others without being seen. He knows that he has to work, stay optimistic, has to be different and yet, change with time to be acceptable. After the hard work is done he knows he needs to take a vacation as soon as possible. He again observes a woman secretly in a hotel room and concludes that her beauty will pass, people will forget her, and the world, too, will come to an end one day. When he observes another woman sitting on her bed in strong sunlight, he says that the past and the present make her up. Memories disturb her but she has to follow some order and do what she needs to. He justifies his watching the woman step out of the house by saying that it keeps him away from the tensions of the world, helps his heart and mind retain their bond, and saves him from feeling purposeless. In the poem 'Nighthawks', he eavesdrops on a man-woman couple talking in an all-night diner and tells us that both of them have realized that neither of them is irreplaceable and that they try to suppress their worries and anxieties by not talking about them. Then through his observations he realizes how some run after things that take them away from the harsh realities of life, while some others run after love. He also notices how some got too tired and have resigned. He goes to the cinema to escape the city. He

visits a strip club and expresses his unhappiness at the degrading standards of art. His various observations in the city show how everybody is trying to appear normal even when they are not. He does not like people who marry those women who they consider are good for their growth. Practicality has murdered love. He learns that being a couple brings not only fun but also responsibility. He and his wife have had disagreements because they should have had a child and have not. They travel. They observe how humanity has failed. Memories excite him but since he cannot afford to give them too much of his time, he runs away. When they arrive at Cape Cod (the artist bought a land in Cape Cod in 1933, built a house there and spent almost every summer there with his wife after that) we find him in a contemplative mood. He enjoys the beauty of the place, their marital relationship attains maturity and he enjoys the laidback lifestyle away from the crowd. He realises that his creative faculties are deserting him. Towards the end, both husband and wife confess that art has been the key for them and they always knew what they were doing. They never said a lot. Instead, they let his paintings do that. The epilogue tells us how they follow norms without any interest or belief in them.

When one reads the poems by Farres, he/she realizes that most of the poems do not describe the image they represent and hence, simply by reading the poems one cannot figure out what the painting actually looks like. So they cannot be called ekphrastic. However, since Farres, from the very beginning, identifies himself with Hopper, his poems do, in a sense, describe his involvement with the work. Still, based solely on this the poems cannot be called ekphrastic. Some of the poems, however, like “Nighthawks”, “Briar Neck”, “Hotel Room”, “Compartment C”, “Car 293”, “Gas” etc are descriptive. Among these poems, while some are described in detail, in the others the descriptive attention is focused on what the poet thought to be the main elements of the visual work of art. Also, I must mention here that in some poems like “The City and Summertime” contain Marxist elements which one knows Hopper would never include. These poems pull the reader out of the illusion that they are reading the poems by Hopper and make it clear that it is Farres, and not Hopper, who has written the poems. Venuti has also pointed this out. I chose to write at some length about Farres’ narrative as Farres’ narrative is almost certainly a biographical one.

An interesting feature about this collection of poems is, I think, that because it is one continuous narrative, many poems which are merely a response to the painting and do not describe them also are very convincing. If we take the poem Lighthouse at Two Lights for example then we will see that the couple in the poem is not in the painting. Still, since we are on a tour with him we can almost ‘see’ them in the painting, especially if we have already seen the painting. The language

is clear. However, since most of the poems, taken individually, fail to create a mental image in the reader, we cannot call them ekphrastic.

Farres' poems do not always describe the paintings they are representing but they do something even more crucial – they verbally explain the meanings of the paintings on the painter's behalf. So, in essence, they do describe the paintings. Therefore, I would hazard to opine that even if these poems, taken individually, are not always ekphrastic, the series can be considered to be a brilliant example and a new mode of ekphrasis.

Let us also consider the movie *Shirley: Visions of Reality*. The movie's official website says: 13 of Edward Hopper's paintings are brought alive by the film, telling the story of a woman, whose thoughts, emotions and contemplations let us observe an era in American history.<sup>2</sup>

So, what the makers of this movie have done is that they have, with the aid of technology, managed to move the still paintings, add verbal commentaries in the form of inner monologues of the protagonist, add music and songs, and create a narrative. Because the protagonist can voice her feelings and emotions and because the pictures move, they describe the paintings used without having to inform the audience in detail what exactly the paintings are made up of, and what they signify. The movie, then, not only describes the paintings but also builds a narrative using the thirteen painting in a particular sequence. This is another example of a description that is artistic and vivid. It takes the paintings beyond their frames. For description it has used both the verbal and the visual media as well as various technological aids now available. This, too, I think is an ekphrastic response.

In her essay "Beyond Description: Ekphrasis and the Expanding Lens", Vievee Francis writes that ekphrasis is rich in potential for the poet. She writes about how Homer passes on Achilles' shield to Hesiod. Then, centuries later, Auden takes it and gives it back to its original owner. He makes the shield represent the dark realities of his time. Francis uses these examples to show "how the culture of an age may shift what an object represents" (Francis 708). According to Francis, Auden, through his poem, was speaking to Homer. She tries to show "how a series of interactions occurs over time, space, and culture, creating a dialogue between pieces and poets" (Francis 708). If Auden was talking to Homer through his poem then in the spoof given below (Fig. 1), its creator can also be said to be talking to Hopper.



Fig. 1. Nighthawks(1942), Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 2. A spoof of Nighthawks.

Hopper had famously remarked that, “Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city” (Farres 129). The Great Depression of the previous decade, the Second World War, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the busy and practical city life etc. made the times rather tumultuous. In today’s global village there is one thing that connects people while, at the same time, alienating them from each other. It is communication technology. This might sound paradoxical but it is absolutely true. To me, therefore, this spoof criticizes two things- technology becoming a barrier between people and people visiting places where they can have access to free Wi-Fi, for whatever reasons. I genuinely feel that the way I feel looking at this spoof today is the same way an American of the 1940’s must have felt while looking at the original painting. When I see “Nighthawks”, I come up with certain interpretations but when I see this image after having seen the painting,

both the images seem strikingly similar to me. Seeing both the images creates a narrative that spans over a good seven decades and more. The spoof, for me, eliminates the necessity of a verbal description for the need of understanding an image that does not belong to a period of time or place that I have experienced personally. This is probably the reason the previously mentioned statement by Hopper on this work does not surprise me at all. A comic visual description, then, also manages to describe something without the assistance of words and also, in the process, shows something else- it shows how this spoof ends up representing the same thing that the work it parodies represented.



Fig. 2. Alemany, Alex. Algo Personal.

I would also like to discuss here the painting *Algo Personal* (Fig.2) by the Viennese hyperrealist and surrealist painter Alex Alemany. This painting is a painting within a painting in which the painter paints his self-portrait while the self-portrait paints him painting the self-portrait. On his website, this painting can be found under the category *Retratos*. The date of composition is not mentioned there. This painting, regardless of which genre it belongs to, does a few very intriguing things which are ekphrastic in nature. It, through the visual medium, paints the artist's experience with the work. It clearly shows who is painting what and where. When the self-portrait is depicted painting the artist painting it, it shows how an artist is the work that he creates. The process of painting is shown albeit not step by step. The title, which translates into something personal, most likely refers to the fact that the process of creating a work of art and the artist's involvement with it are personal things. I have previously discussed how picture titles begin the process of ekphrasis. If we go by this interpretation of the title, then all that I have said about the painting seem to fit together. So, is it right to not consider this

spectacular work of art as ekphrastic just because the description is visual and not verbal, except for the title?

Commercials are also ekphrastic for they describe the product they are advertising. In order to convince the perspective buyers to choose that product over others, they need to inform them how it is made and what it looks like and many other details about it. The actors/models in both audio and video ads also speak about their experience with the product. An image of the product is always supplemented by some kind of a description. Audio ads are probably closest to traditional ekphrasis as they only verbally describe something.

A dynamic term with such immense possibilities cannot be taken lightly and limited to an outdated definition. In ancient Greece, where ekphrasis was born, it had to be limited to the only two modes available to them- visual and verbal. Today, however things have changed to a great extent. Technology as well as various developments in the field of literature and complex forms of digitized visual representations has helped ekphrasis to take under its wings several other types of descriptions. Therefore, limiting so dynamic a term to an orthodox definition forecloses all possibilities. The term needs to be emancipated from its restrictive definition of being a verbal/textual description of a visual work of art.

### **Notes**

1. See, the link [https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom\\_resources/curricula/poetry\\_and\\_art/downloads/ekphrasis.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/poetry_and_art/downloads/ekphrasis.pdf) for further information about the source.
2. For additional information on the source, see <https://shirleyvisionsofcreality.com/>

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**Moral Truth of the Questions in Bob Dylan's  
'Blowing in the Wind':  
A Burthen/An Ethical Burden**

**Srishti Sharma**

*Two brothers quarrel; one of them repents and re-awakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace; nobody takes note of this. But if the two brothers, through the intervention of solicitors or some other reason take up arms or go to law—which is another form of the exhibition of brute force,—their doings would be immediately noticed in the Press, they would be the talk of their neighbours and would probably go down to history. M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj<sup>1</sup>*

History has stood witness to innumerable wars, genocides and deliberate obliteration of an entire religious or ethnic group either condoned or approved by authorities. Since time immemorial war has often been used to resolve conflicts, but to no avail. Studying the causes and consequences of the two World Wars, Eric Hobsbawm said so insightfully that neither of the wars pronounced any lasting end to the perceived malaise:

It was an absurd and self-defeating aim which ruined both victors and vanquished. It drove the defeated into revolution, and the victors into bankruptcy and physical exhaustion. In 1940 France was overrun by inferior German forces with ridiculous ease and speed, and accepted subordination to Hitler without hesitation, because the country had almost bled to death in 1914-18. Britain was never the same again after 1918 because the country had ruined its economy by waging a war substantially beyond its resources of violence and discontent. (10)<sup>2</sup>

In this context, 'peace' – or rather the peace of the graveyard – derived its meaning when two conflicting forces neutralized each other. Thus, the story of this kind of peace is an age-old one like that of war. But as the epigraph suggests, Gandhi would not endorse this kind of peace; nor indeed would he believe the peace based on non-violence would be recorded in history. History records the doomed attempts at peace that is predicated upon suppression of the vanquished. Consequently, the peace treaties recorded in history have always been based on a set of rules laid down by the victor, and hence, these peace 'talks' failed to contribute towards peace-building as was evident in WWII: the peace treaty after WWI hurt many sentiments culminating into the catastrophic WWII. It is common knowledge

that the War Guilt Clause mentioned in article no 231 of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) caused the Germans national humiliation and imposed on Germany reparation cost amounting to what would be equivalent to US \$ 422 billion now. This peace treaty rankled the Germans, and the mass discontent was the breeding ground for Hitler, whose popularity and power eventually increased, leading to military reappraisal. Peace does not come into existence merely by signing of a peace-agreement. Rather, it is when war ends unconditionally that the real struggle towards the pursuit of lasting peace begins.

Peace has often been viewed as a control or an agreement to end war or any dispute and conflict between two people in the light of the etymological meaning of its Latin root *pax*: 'call for a truce'. In the military discourses of Europe and America it signifies absence of war, and therefore gets defined in terms of opposition to war. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* also drew on this dichotomous relation of the two, although giving a new aspect of a dialectic relationship between the two in the 'world', a sense signified by the Russian word *mir* that also means 'peace'. Whether negative or positive, Johan Galtung, for his part, defines peace in terms of a certain kind of *absence*, be it of personal violence as regards negative peace and of structural violence for positive peace (184). So conceptually, it is a *presence* conditional and predicated upon certain absence. Hence there is a need to define it more and more in unconditional terms.

Within the western tradition, in *The Theological and Political Treatise*, Spinoza postulates peace as a product of the State, a rational political order that secures to the citizen justice, freedom and security. But the equilibrium required between forces supporting and opposing the sovereign in the State or the balance between various conflicting interests cannot be always ensured to guarantee peace unless it is grounded in moral principles of piety and religion. He says granting of liberty to the citizen is indeed the precondition for ensuring peace in the State, which is never safer than when piety and religion are taken to consist solely in the practice of charity and justice..." (259). Piety and religion are obviously absolute and unconditional categories of beliefs and sentiments to control reason and liberty that yield peace. Peace is also a psychic, affective, moral state and spiritual state consisting of tranquility, harmony, balance, justice, goodness, equanimity of mind or equilibrium of powers as propounded by saints, philosophers and wise men like the Buddha, Mahavir Jaina, Rumi, Bulleh Shah, Lao Tzu etc. Since peace derives its meanings from multiple sources, it becomes a concept, just like justice, difficult to tie down to any one definition or set of rules. Peace, thus, acquires an uncannily paradoxical nature: it is and yet it is not, like the wind which is there and yet one cannot touch it. It may refer to internal state of mind/personal peace or external

state of affairs, or in case of a peace treaty, it may refer to particular relations in a specific condition, or in case of world peace, it may span across countries/communities/societies<sup>3</sup>. According to R.J. Rummel, peace is perceived differently within different theories or frameworks i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, socialism, liberalism etc. Within any of these frameworks, peace derives meaning when associated with other concepts and ideas within a distinct cognizance of reality, and through its connection with ideas or conjectures about history, violence or justice. Since, all the theories have different perspectives about peace, therefore, peace derives meaning through perspective when it is linked to other concepts within a cognitive framework which provides an explanatory view of reality.

Contemporary times have been marked by genocide, riots and wars, owing to multiple issues such as ideological extremism, religious fundamentalism, misguided nationalism, economic injustice and inequality, violation of human rights, suppression of freedom, racial and ethnic discrimination, and the like. Hence, peace has become more necessary than before, especially because the lethal effect of violence has intensified manifold due to the development of sophisticated nuclear weaponry. And that peace has to be unconditional and an inner quality of the mind is well reflected in the Preamble to UNESCO Constitution that reads thus: "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed"(UNESCO 1946). The minds can be moulded by rhetoric and dialogue, both being the civic methods valorized in the Greco-Roman times and still used as part of diplomatic efforts to diffuse tension, de-escalate belligerent moods and help establish peace. But dialogues carried on through the diplomatic channels between warring countries seldom prove effective as issues of conflict and possible solution are discussed more in a theoretical way and with technical knowledge, although at best colored by deep-seated prejudices as well as distrust, and at worst undermined by perfidy and fraudulence. Dialogues fail oftener than they succeed in clinching a peace deal in the face of ongoing violence and suffering. World history is so full of such instances that are so well-known that one does not need to cite them. Closer home, India's dialogues with Pakistan since Shimla accord have achieved little to put an end to the troubled relationship between the two countries or resolve the Kashmir issue. What could be an alternative to diplomatic manoeuvring and dialogue to end war to usher in peace, and to promote peace as a deterrent to war? Could popular culture that binds peoples of the globe, cutting across political, ethnic, linguistic and cultural divides, be harnessed to the task of promoting peace?

This paper seeks to explore the possibilities of songs as a means to engage in peace-building through dialogue with reference to the Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan's song 'Blowing in the Wind'. Given their popular appeal and accessibility, songs that belong especially to popular culture usually offer a creative way to engage people across nations in the creation of a community of shared aesthetic and affective values, cutting across political, linguistic, ethnic and social boundaries.

Popular songs, the songs by the people for the people, can be readily accessed and offer a means to achieve equality in a stark contrast to the inflexible, exclusive elite classical music (Rojek ix). Popular songs are easily accessible, and due to their widespread appeal they influence people across the barriers of hostilities and incompatibilities. One such instance is that of the famous Christmas Truce between the British and the Germans troops during the WWI. On Christmas Eve 1914, British soldiers saw lights and fir trees going up along the German line and the singing of Christmas carol 'Stille Nacht' - Silent Night - drifted across on the cold night's air. The British listened to their foe, enthralled and applauding when they had finished, and then responded with a hearty chorus of 'The First Noel', which also received an ovation from the other side. After exchanging more carols, the Germans extended calls for a truce. One man from either side met in the middle of the no man's land and shook hands with the other, before signaling to their comrades that the coast was clear. This exchange of the Christmas carols was an instance of the gesture of humanity, love and peace that still thrive even amidst brutal bloodshed and mayhem of war.

Another such instance of truce accomplished through the power of songs was that of Bob Marley's *One Love Peace* concert during a political civil war in Jamaica between opposing parties Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP). In the concert Marley joined the hands of political rivals Michael Manley (PNP) and Edward Seaga (JLP) as an act of ending discord and establishing peace between the conflicting parties.

In the same context, Bob Dylan famously sang at the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. On August 28, 1963, in Washington, D.C., when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his legendary "I Have a Dream" speech, Dylan performed "When the Ship Comes In," and "Only a Pawn in Their Game." at the Freedom March to support the American Civil Rights Movement struggle. His most popular song "Blowing in the Wind" became an anthem for the American Civil Rights Movement and it is still an inspiration to many who face similar struggles in their lives.

In the light of arguing the role played by popular music to break discord and engender an acceptance of the other among two conflicting groups or nations, it would be pertinent to discuss the influence of the Beatles on the Soviet youth and how they acted as the unofficial ambassadors of peace during the Cold War. “The Beatles promoted a cultural revolution in the former Soviet Union that played a part in the demolition of communism in that part of the world,” said the British Cold War spy and documentarian Leslie Woodhead. In his book *How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin*, Woodhead talks about how the Beatles songs penetrated the Soviet Union in the late ’50s and early ’60s, when the youth thought it was “cool to be a Communist.” Woodhead remarks that when, the First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev banned the electric guitar calling it “an enemy of the Soviet people” and also when later Leonid Brezhnev ousted rock music and any other form of creative expression that was not state-approved:

[...] precisely this time, Beatlemania hit: electrifying, carefree, rhythmic freedom, pulsating through a Höfner violin bass, two Rickenbacker guitars and a drum kit. Suddenly the youth’s drab, gray world, characterized by dull patriotic anthems and military marches, exploded into extraordinary Technicolor. (6)<sup>4</sup>

Kids worshipped John Lennon and Ringo Starr, and a generation of schoolchildren, including Vladimir Putin’s Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov, claimed to have learned English by scribbling Beatles lyrics in their notebooks. The Soviet State launched an anti-Beatle campaign that mocked them as “the bugs”, a bourgeois side effect of capitalism. “The Beatles were totally illegal,” Woodhead said, and then he went on to add, “It made that forbidden fruit even sweeter ... the kids thought, ‘the Kremlin told us this is evil music but it’s not true. It’s lovely music! Maybe they’ve been lying to us about other things as well.’ That had a very corrosive impact” (7)<sup>4</sup> Further, another truce wrought by popular music emerged in 2018 during the Red Velvet band concert in South Korea which was attended by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. North Korea and South Korea have been separated since 1953 with little less than no exchanges, cultural or otherwise. Moon Jae-in, the South Korean President, pledged to boost cultural exchanges with the North Korea once remarked: “I thought of why we are separated, and why we are confronting one another...it is the power of culture, art and sports that could drive and tough people’s hearts” (1)<sup>5</sup>.

Closer to home, if we consider the hostile relations between India and Pakistan after the brutal mass riots during their Partition, the cultural exchanges between the two nations have significantly contributed to a peaceful exchange between

them in the form of music, cinema and similar popular art forms. Popular folk songs and music from both the countries found their way into Indian and Pakistani households through the *Coke Studio* and *The Dewarists*, building tolerance and love for either's culture.

The next question is what cultural role does popular culture play to bring people into a cohesive space of understanding? Since time immemorial, the hegemonic authoritarian groups of any nation have mostly held the required authority to build the socio-spatial orders based on their own ideas and values. Which is to say that it is only a privileged few who hold the power to the *auktion block* buying, using and selling property as they please for their sole benefit. These groups comprise people having similar ideological, ethical and economic understandings. In a stark contrast, the remaining population is subject to subordination due to economic and political weaknesses, forced to accept the rules forged by the iron fists of the nation.

As a culture of struggle, opposition and resistance, the popular culture has always been structured in defiance to the dominant ideology (Fiske 13, Hall 28-34). It is a vehicle that conveys the struggle of the oppressed masses of creating their own social meanings in opposition to the oppressors who impose their own values and ideals. Aside from the profanity and its anarchical elements, Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* unleashes a force of the popular culture, a counter-culture to the hegemonic, official culture<sup>5</sup>. In this process a new culture of the people emerges out of their lived and experienced realities; since they cannot produce any new resources on their own, they use the resources of the authority to produce their own culture (Fiske 13). Therefore, popular culture displays signs not merely of only the dominant groups but also carries traces of struggle, opposition and resistance, therefore it carries multiple meanings. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), Michel de Certeau uses the metaphor of guerilla to explain the struggle of the diverse groups of people belonging to different classes who face powerlessness in everyday life. Their resistance to the authority is not outright aggressive, but is carried out through guerilla tactics. They syringe their own ethics into the public spheres which invariably affects the authority, therefore, lending the people a chance to exist and evade terminating attacks simultaneously (de Certeau 47-56). Thus, the people's culture – popular culture, reconciliates social diversities and represents the field of struggle, where the common masses accept the values of the authority and yet make efforts to overthrow them using the popular tactics (Fiske 13). As this struggle is universal in nature, it is shared and reflected by the struggling masses across socio-geographical boundaries.

Songs have been a ubiquitous part of the documented history of humanity, strengthening human relations, inducing emotional catharsis and establishing peaceful co-existence. Eric Falt, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for External Relations and Public Information, highlighted the role played by songs "as the universal language of cohesion, embodying the power of living heritage to unite humanity around shared values and aspirations." "This has never been so important", Falt added, "than in these times of turbulence, when culture is under attack. Art is especially essential today, as a force for sharing passions and building peace."<sup>7</sup>

Literature is strewn with historical telling and re-tellings of conflicts, and songs are not far behind in this context. As oratures, songs act as a mode of establishing inter-generational communication, allowing us a panoramic view of the world-past through the lens of world-present, thereby providing us with an opportunity to learn from the yester-years and prepare for a better tomorrow. Songs simultaneously act as an inter-cultural spokesperson by permitting communications between people from variegated cultures, since they are a compelling mode of participation. They are also powerful educators, since they entail exchange of ideas, learning to accept and respect 'the other,' and at the same time, developing solidarity, unity and empathy on levels both musical and humane. An audience finds those songs to be meaningful whose lyrics contain a personal link to the events experienced by them in life. It makes the listeners feel buoyant, relieved or empowered by the urgency and importance of the message which the lyrics convey. Hereby, a song doesn't transcend into being emotionally meaningful for the listeners merely because of its familiarity. Rather, meaning is found in the issues contained in the lyrics which give rise to emotional catharsis and response. Therefore, songs act as a unifying medium by inspiring such bonds of acceptance and understanding across cultures.

In this context, the songs of Bob Dylan gain significance and instantiate the argument at hand. The thematic thrust and emotive power of Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind,' among others, seem to negotiate between the present and the past aesthetically. Dylan is an artist with historical consciousness inasmuch as he understands the pastness of the past, as also its presence. In his endeavour to capture, however fleetingly, the spirit of his times, he has also become an active story-teller of his of his times. Rather than make a factual record like a chronicler, Dylan, is dialogically engaged with his times, intoning his take on the state affairs in the present as much as anticipating as others' responses, and thereby creating collective resonances of its times. Entering into these resonant spaces, Dylan improvises them to sing about his times and continues to do so in the present.

Thus, the participative composition stemming from the dialogue between the self and the collective effects a kind of collective hermeneutic with great lyrical ease.

A series of rhetorical questions raised in *Blowing in the Wind* goad the readers to probe deeply various issues. In each stanza contains three apparently simple, yet searing, questions are followed by the refrain: *The answer my friend is blowing in the wind*". By leaving the answer unstated, Dylan triggers a range of possible responses which, though located in the song, transcend its contextual specificities and reductively fixed semantics. The ambiguity so resulted entails conflicts rather than resolution. In addition, the repetitive patterns of "*how many...*" signifies the futility of tediously long fact-finding, hair-splitting and pettifogging sessions when the answer is close at hand and borne afloat in the wind, as it were. Only that one needs the courage to hear it and call a spade a spade.

The song also wrestles with an age-old belief that a man is worth his name if he performs great heroic feats. In fact the lines invoke the cultural memory of the legendary chivalrous and heroic masculinities of medieval knights and epic heroes that always needed the endorsement of maidens. Adventurism, knight errantry, triumphalism etc. were distinctive features of the manliness already culturally constructed in terms of the binary opposition to the domesticated femininity. By posing the question "How many roads must a man walk down, /Before you can call him a man?" the song questions the cultural authority of migrancy, adventurism and 'experience' – perhaps like those of Ulysses – that assign the coveted notion of manliness to one already biologically grown as a man. Here Dylan empties 'man' of its privilege meaning of experience, knowledge, power etc and reduces it to a purely biological category of male adulthood. This way the patriarchal façade of masculinity is challenged.

According to Paul Theroux, masculinity is essentially 'right-wing' for it is puritanical, cowardly and neurotic in nature and is fuelled largely by the fear of the "other," which in this case are women. He disapproves of being pressurized, socially and politically, into behaving in accordance with the rules set to assign gender roles to control the behaviour of an individual, and therefore a community/group:

I have always disliked being a man. The whole idea of manhood in America is pitiful, in my opinion. This version of masculinity is a little like having to wear an ill-fitting coat for one's entire life (by contrast, I imagine femininity to be an oppressive sense of nakedness). Even the expression "Be a man!" strikes me as insulting and abusive. It means: Be stupid, be unfeeling, obedient, soldierly and stop thinking. Man means "manly"—how can one think about men without considering the terrible

ambition of manliness? And yet it is part of every man's life. It is a hideous and crippling lie; it not only insists on difference and connives at superiority, it is also by its very nature destructive—emotionally damaging and socially harmful. (309)

The song's lines question obliquely how much longer shall individuals continue to endorse this cult of masculinity by seeking the approval of others, and in the process allowing themselves to be broken and re-molded to conform to a set of ideals. The lines also re-animate the images of protest marches during the American Civil Rights Movement when the African-American protestors overcame great odds to be finally recognised as fellow American citizens with equal rights and freedom. Here, the lines take on the form of a historical narrative, immensely nostalgic, expressive and evocative of uncountable memories and realities. Beginning from the journey undertaken by countless slaves in Africa, who were made to travel to the shores to be sold as slaves and put onboard the British ships, the story stretches further to the black soldiers fighting on foreign lands for their masters, to the emancipation of the slaves by the American Government led by Lincoln, and ultimately to their fight for equal rights in the form of the American Civil Rights Movement in 1963.

The next line: "*How many seas must a white dove sail, before she sleeps in the sand?*" raises the question of how many times wars will be waged before peace is achieved, and how long the white dove, the symbol of peace, must fly on before it finally settles to sleep peacefully on an untroubled shore. This line is a reference to the passage in the Old Testament in which Noah sends out a pair of doves to find land after the flooding of the earth to find a place to disembark and rest. The doves returned back with an olive branch signifying that the great flood was over and peaceful times were ahead (Genesis 5:32). A dove is very strongly associated with and much elaborated upon in the ancient Roman mythology, the *Hebrew Bible*, the Old Testament and the *Quran*. In ancient Roman mythology, the image of dove appears when Venus, the Goddess of Love transformed into a dove and nested in the battle helmet of Mars, the Roman God of War: Mars decided against his intent to battle in order to not disturb the peaceful slumber of the dove. According to a legend in Christian mythology, two doves alighted on the shoulders of the Cardinal when he was elected as the Pope: since then, dove became a symbol of the Holy Spirit and Popes are often portrayed with two doves on their shoulders. The Islamic legend follows that a dove helped Prophet Mohammed to escape from his pursuers. Hinduism portrays the presence of doves in any vicinity as the harbingers of peace, since the dove being a peace-loving creature only inhabits peaceful places. Therefore, the image of dove has been adopted as the symbol of

peace. However, the portrayal of dove as a symbol of peace was further strengthened when Louis Aragon, a French poet who was also a member of the Communist Party chose a portrait of a dove painted by Pablo Picasso as the poster to commemorate the Peace Conference in Paris in 1949.

The lines seem relevant even in the contemporary times, juxtaposed against the incident of the drowning of the little Syrian refugee kid Alan Kurdi in 2015, whose body was recovered on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, therefore evoking the question of peace denied: how many shores will continue to ignore the pleas for safety and refuse peace to the suffering masses? How many shores will refuse to let in peace? Here, the fight of a lowly man for recognition is compared to the white dove as a symbol of peace and the constant battle for peace in a world fraught with violence. The line criticizes the futility of peace treatises and talks that end up with the symbolic release of white doves, suggesting that the day no white doves take flight, and all talks of peaceful co-existence are replaced by practice, will be the day that everyone will be at peace.

As we move on to the next line, we find medieval echoes of war in modern times: “Yes, and how many times must the cannonballs fly/Before they’re forever banned?” Cannonballs have been the instruments of massive destruction since medieval times. War mongers, have justified purchase of weapons in the name of security, as was witnessed during the Cold War, but it is actually humans that cause destruction, not the weapons. Therefore, cannonballs symbolize the evil intent of humankind that is intent upon destroying all life on earth that it finds contrary to its liking. The banning of cannonballs is in actuality the denouncement of this destructive nature that questions, like Cain questioned God after killing his brother Abel: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9).

If there is an answer to these questions, then the next question is where is it? In answer Dylan writes, “The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind...” The answer surrounds us like the wind does, very close at hand and yet it is fleeting and elusive. The answer is not unlike a letter blown away by the wind: although it is within the reach of our fingertips, it escapes again and again. Yet, one mustn’t give up the pursuit, for the possibility of touching it even by the skin of the tooth is greater than the probability of losing all answers.

Stanza two begins by mocking human ambition for eternity and the infallibility of anything colossal and powerful: “Yes, ‘n’ how many years can a mountain exist,/ Before it’s washed to the sea?” The mammoth size of the mountain, strong and invincible, is countered by the sea which represents change and true freedom

gnawing away at that rigidity slowly, but surely. Perhaps it is the truth of the eternal flux as propounded by Heraclitus of the late 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE.

James Baldwin, in his book *The Fire Next Time*, writes:

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. (105)

This question portrays the futility of the efforts humans waste in their quest to become immortal: Firstly, by barricading and alienating themselves away from physical harm, leaving no stone unturned towards safe-guarding their interests. This can be observed in the way people belonging to a particular religious group are led into believing that they are safe living in areas predominantly inhabited by other people belonging to the same religious community. Secondly, waging wars to obliterate all opposition so that they provide the other with no opportunity to cause them harm. During the Holocaust and the Partition of India, mass genocide was triggered by the fear which led many to believe that if they do not strike the other first, the other will obliterate them. And lastly, when all else fails, they create their own mausoleums, monuments, mosques and steeples so that they be remembered even after death as, Hitler tried to create his own version of Nazi Germany devoid of ‘impurities’, as the Egyptian Pharaohs who sacrificed many slaves to build Pyramids, or Henry VIII who built numerous castles and forts so that he be remembered by the posterity as a great visionary.

The following line: “How many years must some people exist/ Before they’re allowed to be free?” is the most glaring criticism of the discrimination and injustices the African-American people faced before the American Civil Rights Movement. The history of enslaving Africans began during the Elizabethan times, when slaves were bought by the British from the head of the African tribes in exchange for saltpeter and guns and then hired as unpaid labour to row the galley ships. There are innumerable such examples of discrimination and oppression in history: Bible makes a reference to the story of Exodus, or known as the Passover in the Hebrew Bible, when Moses led the Jews oppressed by Pharaoh Ramses to freedom. Apart from this interpretation, the line also mirrors the predicament of the Jews imprisoned in concentration camps during the Holocaust, denied the status of being human.

These questions give way to the next major issue that shelters and bolsters the oppressors: “And how many times can a man turn his head/And pretend that he just doesn’t see?” The line demands an explanation of the pretense/farce maintained by people where injustices, trials and tribulations exist but in fairy tales. The line is a searing criticism of the unctuous and sycophantic nature of people towards authority, where they turn a blind eye to the underhanded dealings of the authority, or worse, they try to validate these wrong-doings out of fear or sheer malice. They are either too afraid to help, or they just feel that nothing is wrong. This line was highly charged with intense emotions for people in early 1960s, for whom the Holocaust was still a living memory and the American Civil Rights Movement was a living reality. In contemporary times, these lines challenge the rape culture, derisively reprimanding people’s indifferent attitude towards sexism which runs rampant in the society. As a historical comment, the line question how long must history keep repeating itself before humans will learn the lessons from others’ past mistakes and avoid repeating them. The mistakes of a common man are never recorded in the annals of history but only those of they who towered over the most, because being “rather cleverer than most men, (their) mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger” (Rowling 187). Thus, the line serves as a forewarning to people who hold powerful positions in a country’s policy-making that to err on their part would not be considered human, and may lead to a clash of civilizations. Dylan had once remarked that if he being 21 years old could recognise the wrong-doings of the world, then those older and wiser than him could do better than to ignore the reality.

How many times must one tread the same path before he realizes that it is not the right one? The following stanza questions if a person has the ability to recognize the stark and obvious truth: “How many times can a man look up/Before he sees the sky?” It is similar to the previous lines that question how much more time is required for people to realize what they are up against. The sky is the easily recognizable stark truth of infinite freedom and opportunities anyone can pursue. The import of the question here is the belief that humans must be allowed to step out of the status-quo and pursue their dreams across the socio-economic, racial and gender-based barriers. Indeed the barriers deny equity and level playing ground, to remove which the voice of the underprivileged and the disenfranchised must be heard. Hence, “Yes, how many ears must one man have/Before he hears people cry?” How many ears does a person need indeed to register the cries for recognition or help? How long will the gender pay gap continue before equal wages become a reality? How long will the common voters have to protest against unconstitutional elections that debunk the very foundation of a Democracy?

Released a year after the Cuban Missile crisis that threatened global annihilation, this song asked how many threats to international peace it would take before the war mongers stopped their mad pursuit of power. “And how many deaths will it take ‘till he knows/That too many people have died?” This lines carry immense historical significance in view of the US government’s much hated and criticised deployment of more troops and much more fierce bombings in Vietnam, which were brutal and unnecessary. Even the Indian King, Ashoka the Great realized the horrifying magnitude of lives his war with Kalinga had cost, and when he saw the blood-red river Daya, and brought it to a halt and had a moral transformation. The lines express skepticism about people’s ability to realize the horrors they commit upon others in order to have things done their own way. It is also a criticism of justification of mass killings in order to salvage a few important lives.

The striking simplicity of the song with repetitive and parallel patterns of syntax bring it into affiliation with oral narratives for fables and parables and children’s stories that carry some moral and message. The questions are asked almost like riddles, carrying commonsensical answers as in many stories. The images in the song, though simple, symbolize hope for justice, peace, harmony and equality as an alternative mode of establishing a dialogue with the people at the helm of affairs in the pursuit of peace.

“The answer” to all these questions “my friend is blowing in the wind...” whispered through teeth clenched in fear, lest it should ruffle the feathers of those who don’t want to “hear people cry.” If the answer, bathed in blood of the crying masses, still falls on deaf ears, then the resultant violence shall culminate into a never-ending chain of revenge, and the world shall never see peace again. Like the wind, the answer is crucial for the survival of humanity, for the answer is in taking responsibility and being accountable and answerable for events.

However, the questions are more vital than the answers, for the latter are blowing in the wind, and anybody with ears can hear them. Answers are anybody’s guess; they might sound imposing, trite and banal if stated straight away; but they can lend great cognitive and moral power to the questions, if withheld. Hence Dylan structures the questions that offer cues for the answers but refrains from answering them. Moreover, raising questions and seeking answers on one’s own is an ethical obligation which Dylan enjoins upon the people. It is a collective responsibility, and it requires moral courage. The answers, as statements, maybe banal, but seeking them and realizing them amounts to committing oneself to their moral truth. Like in any oral narrative that is structured with already built-in

answer or answers, the questions like riddles become resonant with meanings. That is what Bob Dylan does in this poem: a burthen/ethical burden, perhaps.

### **Notes**

1. See Gandhi's reflection on history only as a record of the interruption of love and peace in the context of the necessity as well as importance of passive resistance. *Hind Swaraj*, 64.
2. See Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1996).  
<[https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2009/SOC763/um/7373230/lecture\\_1/\\_6-19\\_1a-Hobsbawm.pdf?lang=cs](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2009/SOC763/um/7373230/lecture_1/_6-19_1a-Hobsbawm.pdf?lang=cs)>
3. See R.J Rummel's *Understanding Conflict and War*.  
<<https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/UCW.HTM>>
4. See Leslie Woodhead's reflection on the effects Beatles had on the Soviet youth in the times of the Cold War. <<https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/beatles-beat-communism-spy-article-1.1360024>>
5. See Mikhail Bakhtin's 'Carnival and Carnavalesque' in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* edited by John Storey.
6. See Cultural exchanges between North Korean & South Korea  
<<https://abcnews.go.com/International/south-korean-president-pledges-cultural-exchanges-north-korea/story?id=55091259>>
7. See UNESCO's "UNESCO hails the importance of music as a force for building peace"  
<<https://en.unesco.org/events/unesco-hails-importance-music-force-building-peace>>

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## **Postcolonial Adaptation of the Masculine Genre of Detective Fiction in Rituparno Ghosh's *Shuvo Maharat* and *Satyanweshi***

**Koushik Mondal**

Detective fiction as a genre of literature, was developed in the mid-nineteenth century, in the English-speaking world, especially by Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle. The most typical feature of the genre includes the commitment of a crime by a culprit violating the order of the society and the restoration of the social order by a detective, after identifying and then punishing the criminal. The detective, gifted with rationality, technical and forensic knowledge, extraordinary cognitive ability, patience and equanimity of mind, is the hero and usually a white heterosexual male. In contrast, women are generally portrayed as feeble, unfaithful or deadly, given to irrationality and emotional turbulence. The male detective like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is always physically tough who uses his rationality and scientific knowledge to solve the crime. He is a loner who avoids the company of women because of their emotional and frivolous nature. While embracing masculinity, Doyle also excludes the presence of women in the social sphere. Thus, stereotyping of masculinity in contrast to the feminine passivity becomes central to the genre itself. Though some "golden age" detective fiction writers like Agatha Christie assigned the role of the detective to women, Christie created memorable characters of great female sleuths like Tuppence Bersford, Adrienne Oliver and Miss Marple brought about a change situating a woman like Miss Marple in the place of a detective, her characters are informed by patriarchal ideology in establishing the traditional gender roles for men and women<sup>1</sup>.

The ideology of hegemonic masculinity and vulnerable femininity is used by the British detective fiction writers like Doyle and Christie too to consolidate the binary construction of the colonizers and the colonized. Doyle's celebration of masculinity not only exposes his Victorian moral-prudence, but also his deep concern for the Empire in the colonies. Holmes' masculine authority to suppress criminality alludes to and justifies the Colonial suppression of Indian mutiny in 1857. In Christie's novels too, the colonized are represented as feminine, infantile and savage. In the oeuvre of British detective fiction, colonized land and its people are portrayed as essentially feminine, lacking in masculine prowess. Since literature was used by the colonizers to reinforce British cultural supremacy and colonial legitimacy, this particular genre of masculine detective fiction became highly relevant.

Ashish Nandy in his seminal book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) has shown how the British colonialism followed the existing Western sexual stereotypes which validated the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity. The colonizers portrayed themselves as harbingers of modernity, helping the natives in their journey from feminine infantility to masculine adulthood. Interpellated by these discourses of colonial modernity and also to defend themselves from the state of colonial emasculation, the Indian nationalist leaders started to lionize their masculine virility, especially through their literature and culture. Nandy observes, “They did resurrect the ideology of the martial races latent in the traditional Indian concept of statecraft and gave the idea a new centrality” (Nandy 7). Consequently, like many other genres of literature, Indian detective fiction too became Euro-centric in its portrayal of the masculine detective after the European detectives like Holmes, Poirot etc. Since Kolkata was the cultural and administrative capital of the British colony in India at that time, Bengal was much influenced by the imperial canon and hence the proliferation of the Bengali sleuth-writers. But until the emergence of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and his detective hero Byomkesh Bakshi in the literary canon in the late-colonial Bengal, most of the detective stories were European in their conception and execution. Pinaki Roy notes:

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay might have initially taken Sherlock Holmes as the model, but unlike his predecessors like Priyanath Mukhopadhyay or Dinendra Kumar Roy he went on to recast and restructure the basic tenets of Western investigative narratives into a subaltern, especially Indian, perspective. (2)

Rituparno Ghosh as a postcolonial intellectual not only criticizes the idealization of masculinity, rather he rewrites this Western genre challenging its hyper-masculine convention in his films *Shuvo Maharat* which is based on Agatha Christie’s *Mirror Cracked from Side to Side* and *Satyanwesi*, based on Sharadindu’s *Chorabali*. While in the traditional English detective fiction or in the films based on them, a white heterosexual male represents the ideal form of humanity and looks down on those who fall short of the ideal, e.g. women, homosexuals and the racial others, Ghosh feminizes the genre itself by situating either a female or a feminine hero in the position of the detective. While the masculine hero, like Holmes, is a loner and refrain from any disposition of emotion, Ghosh’s detectives are family persons who are emotionally attached with others. The Western detectives boast in an asexual image of themselves, whereas Ghosh’s detective Byomkesh is married. In Ghosh’s own words, “. . . male detectives are often given a kind of asexual

image, which I don't find very exciting" (qtd. in Mandal 13). Even Ranga Pisi, the amateur sleuth in *Shuvo Maharat*, is a widow, unlike Christie's Miss Marple who is an aged spinster.

In *Shuvo Maharat*, Ghosh situates an independent Bengali widow in the role of the detective. Like the traditional male detectives, though RangaPisi stays alone beyond the patriarchal dominance, she is not emotionally detached from others. She bears a close kinship with her niece who is staying with her for the moment and also with her pet cat Haridasi. In the film, the criminal too is a woman, an authoritative rich lady, named Padmini. She is hosting a grand ceremony on the occasion of the first release of a film which she is producing. In the party, she offers a poisonous drink to Kakoli, the actress and latter dies while reaches home. Padmini kills her because she is the cause of her maternal deprivation. Once while Padmini was pregnant and acted with Kakoli in a film *Nithur Daradi*, the latter was suffering from a contagious disease which she suppressed and this caused Padmini to deliver an abnormal child who died after some years. Padmini left for America but could never forgive this and after many years has come back to take revenge. She even kills Kalpona, her hairdresser, who somehow sensed the murderer. Her maternal deprivation turns her into a murderer. However, she comes out of her self-centric world when the futility of vengeance dawns upon her after her confrontation with RangaPisi. Unlike the other male detectives RangaPisi does not hand her over to the police, nor does she herself offer any punishment, rather she remains satisfied, making Padmini realize the futility of revenge. The realization is also brought to her not at the point of a gun, rather recounting before her RangaPisi's own reaction at the murder of her baby cats. Her purpose is not to punish, and hence she does not resort to violence; rather she aims at the purification of soul. Though she never wanted Padmini to die, yet Padmini's confession at her suicide note substantiates the detective's success of the purification of the soul of the criminal who even leaves behind some money for the treatment of Kalpana's child. But no such realization takes place in Christie's novel and the detective remains satisfied identifying the murderer. In the film, Ghosh offers an Indian version of Miss Marple, the woman sleuth in Christie's novel. As Ghosh himself says, "I have taken off from an Agatha Christie novel, but that is all. The story is totally Indian in flavour...created a sort of Bengali Miss Marple" (qtd. in Mandal 104). While Christie focuses on the depraved change between the old village life and the new glamorous world, Ghosh's sole intention is to show the depraved psyche of a betrayed mother. The emotional intensity from a motherly perspective is more appealing in the Indian version than it is in Christie's novel.

In the masculine view of the world, women are considered either emotionally weak and vulnerable creature or sexually dangerous femme-fatales. Ghosh's construction of RangaPisi, the detective, and Padmini, the villain, does not conform to this conception of the female. Neither of them is feminine in the traditional sense of the term. RangaPisi is intelligent, rational, courageous and at the same time emotional, sensitive and humorous. She remains busy in household chores, watches television, spends time with pets. She is not idle or illiterate, but rather inquisitive, curious and calculative. Though she does not cross the physical boundary of her home, yet she can successfully execute the so-called masculine affairs of the public sphere. On the other hand, Padmini's authoritative presence in the public sphere controlling and manipulating most of the characters according to her own design establishes a rather masculine façade of her character. But on the other hand, she is also feminine and emotional in her filial attachment with her dead son. She kills people one after another, only to alleviate her pain. While the police department fails to resolve the mystery through logical reasoning, RangaPisi gets to the conclusion, realizing the pangs and pain of a mother for her dead son. It is not only the calculative reasoning and scientific approach, but her intuition that help her to get to the conclusion. In spite of being the detective herself, RangaPisi cannot remain indifferent to the murderer like the traditional detectives. Rather the pangs of Padmini affects her. Though Padmini always remains under the invisible gaze of RangaPisi, but she is neither chased nor threatened for her crime. Rather the detective sympathises with the murderer and tries to convince her about the futility of revenge to alleviate her pain for her lost child. Ghosh himself justified his approach:

The difference between the male gaze and female gaze is what stirred me. Men look at crime differently. Their mode of detection is also more theoretical, where the mind and logic get the upper hand. With the woman, her intuition, her innate common sense, her native intelligence and her power of observation, which is at times deemed mere inquisitiveness, is what works wonders and this also seems to be a more interesting way of tackling crime (qtd. in Mandal 13).

Instead of extolling the physicality and the rationality of the detective to attain success, Ghosh's narrative suggests that mere physical prowess and rational faculty are not always enough to resolve a mystery; rather an emotional and humane approach is also necessary to unravel the mystery and purify the society.

Ghosh's postcolonial politics also re-appropriates India's cultural nationalism, which being moulded by the colonial discourses of modernity, is deeply gendered.

Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, observes, the Indian nationalist leaders, after acknowledging the colonial ideology which associated masculinity with the male body and femininity with the biological female, created the binary sphere of *ghar* and *bahir* and restricted women within the private sphere of domesticity while men were allowed to actively participate in the material world of public sphere. Women were supposed to possess inherent femininity and hence unable to successfully execute the activities of public sphere which necessitates valour, violence and rationality. Resisting this colonial view of the identity, Ghosh shows masculinity and femininity are mere cultural constructs which do not bear any coherent relation with any particular sex. As Judith Halberstam says, “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (1). So, in Ghosh’s films we often come across male characters who behave in a feminine way as well as women characters who are more masculine than their male counterparts. In *Shubho Mahurat*, Padmini, in spite of being a woman, unhesitatingly kills her suspects one after another in a cool and calculative brain. She writes her own story as well as the fate of others. She hoodwinks the flag-bearers of masculinity, whether her husband or the police department. While the masculine police force even fails to identify the criminal, it is RangaPisi, another independent woman, who resolves the mystery. Restricting herself within the home, she crosses the metaphorical boundary of private and public sphere. RangaPisi exemplifies the potentialities of women who can successfully take entry into the intellectual and rational world of masculinity. RangaPisi’s success and Padmini’s authoritative dominance of the public sphere throw a challenge to this precarious distinction between the private and public sphere and also to any inherent connection between masculinity or femininity and a particular human body.

Rituparno Ghosh’s *Satyanweshi* is based on the detective story ‘Chorabali’ by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay who for the first time brought the detective hero out of its colonial heritage in India through the character of Byomkesh Bakshi, a Bengali gentleman, who is more interested seeking the truth than punishing the criminal. However, Ghosh’s story is more nuanced than the original text. Though the film is based on the story ‘Chorabali’, Ghosh names his film *Satyanweshi*, the truth-seeker, as Byomkesh is popularly known by. Thus, Ghosh’s motto is to grasp the vast canon of Byomkesh than a particular story. The detective hero Byomkesh Bakshi is a complete Bengali gentleman with his dress and demeanour. He does not carry a gun; does not resort to violence either. He rather undertakes a psychological approach to unravel the mystery. There is conspicuous absence of the colonizers or their authority in the narrative, though the story is set in the

colonial era. Himanshu, the London-educated king, posits more faith in his Bengali detective friend Byomkesh Bakshi than in the ability of the Scotland Yard.

The uniqueness of Ghosh's narrative lies in his weaving together the murder-mystery with that of the discourses of patriarchal heteronormativity. The women in the film, draw serious attention, since Alaka as well as Leela creates a rupture in the heteronormative structure of the patriarchal society. In their venture Byomkesh and Ajit give equal importance to Harinath's disappearance and the intricacies of relation between Himanshu and Alaka, Alaka and Harinath, Himanshu and Leela, Leela and Harinath and also Kaligati's relation with the Royal family. Along with the serious theme of greed and murder, love and lust are also given the space to articulate in the narrative. The delineation of feminine desire and envy in a masculine genre like detective fiction is a crucial intervention undertaken by Ghosh. On his death-bed Himanshu's patriarchal father dictates if his son marries a non-Hindu girl, or even after marrying according to his caste and religion, he fails to give birth to a legitimate heir to the family, he will be disinherited from his father's property. Ironically, however, though Himanshu is married to a Hindu girl according to his father's wish, no child is born out of their wedlock, since Himanshu's wife Alaka is a frigid, and the heir to the royal family actually hails from Himanshu's illegitimate affair with Leela, their maid-servant, daughter of Kaligati. All this happened due to Kaligati's lust for the inheritance of the property of the royal family, and Leela becomes a prey to her father's lust. However, after getting Kaligati killed by Himanshu, while the film accentuates the death of the patriarchal father, at the same time rescuing Leela with her illegitimate son, Byomkesh even confuses the moral integrity of the society. While in a traditional detective story, the detective, the moral agent of the society, brings moral integrity back to the society, after a temporary rupture, Ghosh's film ends up questioning that very social fabric of a heteronormative society. While in a heteronormative society, giving birth to a child is supposed to be the prime duty of a married woman, presentation of Alaka as a frigid woman, becomes a way of refuting the basic idea of marriage and motherhood. Alaka's romantic friendship with Harinath on the one hand, and Ajit's romantic inclination towards her on the other, in spite of her sexual frigidity, strike at the basic idea of heteronormativity which doesn't admit in the existence of any romantic relation without its necessary sexual counterpart. Alaka's enjoyment of companionship with any person other than her husband, deviating the patriarchal propriety of a married woman of a royal family becomes threatening to the moral code of a heteronormative society. Even while her husband is thinking of adopting a child, Alaka propels him to give way to his basic instinct to sire a child upon Leela. Alaka, in a way, renounces heteronormativity, through her inability to give birth to a child, as well as intentionally violating the moral codes of conduct.

In the European detective fiction, hegemonic masculinity is usually attributed to the detective hero who not only subordinates women but any other form of masculinities, turning them into marginalized masculinities<sup>2</sup>. For example, in respect to Sherlock Holmes's hegemonic masculinity, his companion Watson represents marginalised masculinity. Though Holmes shows his masculine emotion of friendship, but he bears a condescending attitude towards his friend. Sometimes Watson also expresses his aggression towards Holmes. In contrast, Byomkesh does not disregard or ignore his friend Ajit, though the detective's superiority is accepted by his friend. Rather the detective has a good faith on his friend's intellect and he decides to unravel the mystery together in their own respective ways simultaneously. His close kinship with his biographer friend Ajit or rather a very subtle homoerotic bond between them contradicts the convention of the detective hero's emotional aloofness from others. Ghosh's criticism of the hegemonic masculinity is apparent also in his characterization of Himanshu. Himanshu, though educated in Britain and is a king, but he neither puts on the air of hypermasculinity, nor boasts of his Western education. He is more interested in hunting than in ruling his subjects. Unlike an authoritative king, he has a good rapport with his servants. Instead of causing any distress to his wife for failing to give birth to a child, he himself suffers from anxiety to alleviate his wife's distress and misconception.

The intervention and transformation of this masculine genre is also reflected in Ghosh's mise en scène. Madhuja Mukherjee in her article "En-Gendering the Detective: of love, longing and feminine follies" observes, "Ghosh clearly domesticates the genre of detective film by locating the action within lived spaces of middle/upper middle-class homes" (145). Whereas the European detective stories explore the exotic places like hills and jungles, Ghosh restricts himself to the interior spaces of house, as his main objective is to expose the inner recesses of human psychology. Though his camera sometimes moves beyond the interior spaces, his narratives mainly take place in the feminine spaces of everyday life. In *Shubho Mahurat*, the detective RangaPisi never moves beyond her home. Her connection with the outside world takes place chiefly through television and telephone and of course through her niece who is a reporter. Though she remains busy with her household chores, her brain is not idle. She has a good reading habit. Her inquisitive nature and observatory power and above all her feminine intuitiveness, instead of masculine violence, that help her to unravel the mystery. She needs not undertake any adventure to chase the villain, but can compel the murderer to come to her own house to confess her crime. In *Satyanveshi*, though the murders take place outside the house, in the jungle, the plot of murder as well as the unravelling of the mystery is done within the house. The jungle is present

just as an extension of the royal palace where others visit occasionally either to enjoy hunting or do picnic. Kaligati uses a broken deserted house in the jungle just like a prop either to hide her daughter or to plan to kill Byomkesh and his friend. Ghosh's mise en scene creates the environment of the jungle within the interior space. His use of greenish colour, paintings of animals and birds, light and darkness create an uncanny sense of the danger within. To unravel the mystery and kill the murderer, though Byomkesh goes out to the jungle, but not alone in any adventurous spirit like the traditional male detectives, rather he takes with him Ajit and of course Himanshu who can shoot well either to save themselves from any danger or to kill the villain. Such kind of an unheroic detective in this traditionally masculine genre is a real subversion, accentuated by Ghosh.

With implicit criticism of the colonial worldview, implicit in the British detective fiction, Ghosh's detective narratives not only offer an alternative culture and epistemology, but also appropriate the genre itself. As no genre is ever a closed space and it continues to evolve, Ghosh rewrites or rather Indianizes the Western genre from a postcolonial perspective, challenging its hypermasculine and heteronormative conventions and characteristics. In modifying the genre, especially by breaking the relation between a particular gender and a specific genre, Ghosh offers value and significance to the marginal voice.

### **Notes**

1. Alison Light is unimpressed by Miss Marple's "specialized knowledge" fails to challenge the conservative view of femininity. See Light (244). Margot Peters and Agate Krouse accuse Christie of sexism and anti-feminist stereotypes (150). Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, for their part, say that Christie's detective novels have "no authentic feminist voice", though occasionally a character may give vent to an outburst of simple-minded feminism" (169). Kathleen Gregory Klein omits from her book *The Woman Detective Gender and Genre* (1988) the detective characters of Agatha Christie for the reason that they are not entirely professional.
2. Lately this pattern has been broken to some extent. One of the most widely read novels in recent times, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000), is a case in point because the famous British detective from London, Christopher Banks, the hero, goes to Shanghai in search of his missing parents and bumps into certain inconvenient memories of childhood until he discovers his mother in a mental asylum. A systemic change has been brought into the very genre of detective fiction by Ishiguro, in that it is a memory narrative with flash-backs and flash-forwards, the scrappy memories and their reconstruction becomes fraught with uncertainty,

absence of who dunnit-type suspense and the crime in question is not so much of specific individuals as of nations against a large swathes of historical background of times of Opium War days and the Korean war. Above all, Banks is not a dashing alpha male, but a compassionate man, fashioned either as an orphan or as a 'mother' to an orphan girl. Mother indeed occupies the central place in the psyche of this man. In its own way this novel also challenges hegemonic masculinity.

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## Diotima and Ubhaya Bharati: A Postcolonial Colloquy on Eros, Wisdom and Responsibility

Anway Mukhopadhyay

In Plato's *Symposium*, when Socrates speaks of Eros, he acknowledges that all he knows about Eros was taught to him by a wise woman from Mantinea named Diotima. He then goes on to describe the lesson imparted to him by Diotima regarding the right kind of pederasty (Plato 31-42). Diotima is a female instructor in erotics who is, however, physically *absent* from the symposium Plato focuses on. The symposium is not a space for academic debate, and the polylogue between the symposiasts assumes an informal tone. All of them utter encomiums for Eros and then go on to discuss, classify, categorize, and evaluate various modes of love, through apparently non-academic discourses.

On the other hand, in Madhava Vidyaranya's *Sankara Digvijaya*, the hagiographic life story of Shankaracharya (788-820)[Tapasyananda xv], the great mystic and philosopher who is famous for his preaching of Advaita Vedanta throughout India, we come across Ubhaya Bharati, the wife of Mandana Mishra with whom Shankaracharya engages in a debate. Bharati is different from Diotima in many ways. She is, first of all, *present* as the witness and adjudicator of a debate on scriptural meanings in which her husband and Shankara participate (Vidyaranya 86-87). Secondly, she urges Shankaracharya, when the latter defeats Mandana Mishra in the debate, to show his knowledge of *kama shastra*, i.e. erotic knowledge (Vidyaranya 112). Diotima teaches Socrates how to re-epistemologize Eros, and the latter part of her teaching is focused on the movement of Eros from mere physical desire to higher and greater planes (Plato 41-42). Socrates never says that he himself had undergone an erotic experience. Rather, he charts out, following Diotima, the trajectory of erotic wisdom from the particular instances of beauty to universal beauty and goodness, from the concrete to the abstract. Ubhaya Bharati, on the other hand, urges Shankara to gain experiential (and not just discursive) knowledge of Eros (Vidyaranya 111-112). Precisely, for her, erotic knowledge can never be merely a matter of discourse – it must be a product of bodily experience. Diotima is said to have been a priestess (Plato 31), whereas Bharati is a female householder. The latter shows a paradigm of wisdom which can integrate – probably more palpably than Diotima - intellectual-spiritual knowledge and physical love between the sexes (and, more specifically, spouses). Whereas, most probably, Diotima taught Socrates in private, Bharati adjudicates in an exegetical debate in the public space. Bharati appears to have a greater authority than Diotima.

However, when we try to initiate a colloquy between these two figures on the postcolonial critical spectrum, we first need to focus on the way the postcolonial critical intervention has shaken the hegemony of the Eurocentric modes of comparativism. Today, we need not be overawed by the *aura* of Plato, and can conveniently place his text side by side with a non-European text like the *Shankara Dignijaya* on a comparative spectrum. Secondly, the multiculturalist decentring of the hegemonic position of certain European authors and texts opens up those very texts to a refreshingly new series of interpretations. For example, when Diotima is studied along with her non-European sister, Ubhaya Bharati, the similarities as well as differences between the (erotico-)epistemic positions occupied by these women may become more conspicuous to us. This can help us in de-Eurocentricizing the kind of discourse produced by Diotima, and decentring her apparent positionality as one of the earliest *white* women philosophers of the *West*. Though historically Bharati comes *after* Diotima, they may be seen as occupying an alternative (cross-)cultural continuum characterized by female speech on Eros and wisdom. Is it possible that Bharati had many anonymous foremothers, able to speak authoritatively on erotic wisdom, who might have been contemporaries of Diotima? Western Classical Studies has always remained insulated from the “infectious” presence of other cultures, and seldom have the Classical scholars felt the necessity to relate their subject to the “Classical” cultures of other geo-cultural zones of the world. Even after Martin Bernal’s monumental *Black Athena*, such cultural myopia has not been rectified. It is precisely for this reason that the comparative framework I seek to develop in this essay can be seen as part of the project of a postcolonial cultural critique.

It is interesting that the absent Diotima is, paradoxically, the most powerful presence to convey erotic wisdom in the *Symposium*. Her history is almost unknown, and debates are still going on, regarding her historical status.<sup>1</sup> Ubhaya Bharati, on the other hand, is supposed to have been a historical figure, though the hagiographic structure of Vidyaranya’s text projects her as an avatar of Goddess Saraswati (86). She adjudicates in the debate between Mandana and Shankara and is totally impartial in her judgment (103-104). A loyal wife, she nevertheless declares that Shankara is invincible in the exegetical debate, and announces him to be the winner (103-104). Then she herself invites Shankara for a debate with her, and finally, finding him undefeatable, asks him questions on erotic knowledge (110-112). Shankara tells her that he should be given one month’s time so that he can gather the erotic knowledge he has so far remained devoid of (112). Then he enters the dead body of a king, Amaruka, and gathers sexual knowledge by engaging in carnal love. After gathering this experience, he comes back to Bharati and answers her questions,

thereby proving that he is really full of all forms of knowledge, including that of carnal love. Ubhaya Bharati finally accepts that she is defeated by Shankara and, knowing that her husband would now become an ascetic and a disciple of Shankara, prepares to leave the world. However, before her disappearance, Shankara makes her promise that she will be present in all the temples he will be instituting for her worship, as she is an avatar of the Goddess of Learning (Vidyaranya 112-124).

The interesting point is that while the apparently Dionysian mode of the symposium described by Plato betrays an Apollonian restraint, and the symposiasts do not engage in any carnal, erotic act despite their sparkling discourses on erotic love, the debate in the Vidyaranya text is temporarily postponed so that Shankara can gain experiential carnal knowledge. The body is verbalized in the discourses of love articulated in the *Symposium*, while in *Sankara Digvijaya*, despite its basic focus on the trans-physical Absolute, the *sannyasi* is sent out into the world, into the experience of *embodiedness*, so that his wisdom can become holistic. As Devdutt Pattanaik points out, Bharati taught Shankara that “wisdom cannot exist without including the household, the body and the woman” (“Who Is a Hindu?”). While Advaita Vedanta and Socratic monism have many points in common, Shankara accomplishes something Socrates continually shies away from; Socrates never engages in sexual activities himself. Rather, he seems to be obsessed with the idea of transcending the physical dimension of *eros*. Shankara, on the other hand, enters the body of the dead king with the firm knowledge that he is the spiritual, trans-physical Atman, and hence can never be defiled through the carnal experience he gathers as the Self embodied within the physical frame of Amaruka (Vidyaranya 112-116). Socrates’ heroism sees the transcendence of the body as an epistemological imperative (Nussbaum 195; Zoller 43-44), while Shankara knows how embodiedness is automatically transcended by the immanent transcendence of the Atman. Probably, Diotima also thought of this immanent transcendence (which can be emblemized by love itself), and moreover, she conceived of embodied beauty as a reflection of what Irigaray calls the “sensible transcendental” (30).

Both Ubhaya Bharati and Diotima seem to focus on the importance of embodied experience as much as the transcendental spiritual wisdom. Socrates shies away from accepting Diotima’s teaching fully, and distorts, as Irigaray insists, the original speech of Diotima while quoting it (Irigaray 26). On the other hand, Ubhaya Bharati’s insistence that the lack of carnal knowledge is not compatible with “omniscience” is unequivocally accepted by Shankara. While Shankara’s monism has often been seen as a flight from the world, the Vidyaranya text actually

foregrounds the way he could reconcile the World with the Spirit. In this sense, he may also be seen as embodying the confluence of Vedanta and Tantra (Pattanaik, “Who Is a Hindu?”). Pattanaik implies that, even though there are tensions between the Vedic and tantric ways of thinking, they, together, give rise to the “Hindu” ways of thinking. Shankaracharya, Pattanaik indicates, could integrate these two ways, at Ubhaya Bharati’s insistence (“Who Is a Hindu?”).

Shankara, I would argue, lets himself be substantially enlightened by the Wise Woman in a way Socrates can’t. Diotima, despite being his teacher in erotic knowledge, can’t convince Socrates that without experiential knowledge, one cannot be erotically wise. Eros is not just a matter of witty verbalization; it is something to be experienced, something which calls for involvement, and not detachment. Shankara, it is true, remains spiritually detached from his physical experience, but nevertheless, his attitude shows erotic involvement rather than a flight from erotic embodiment. He takes the *risk*. And these risks of (re-)embodiment are wonderfully delineated in the *Digvijaya*: there is the constant threat that Shankara would be perpetually imprisoned in Amaruka’s body and his own body would be lost (Vidyaranaya 112-114, 121-123).

However, the fact remains that both Shankara and Socrates generalize erotic knowledge; they don’t show that kind of erotic engagement where the beloved person is loved not only as an embodiment of abstract Beauty or Goodness, not only for the sake of some good quality in him/her, but rather as a “whole” person (Nussbaum 166-167). Martha Nussbaum, drawing on Gregory Vlastos, criticizes Diotima’s vision of love, precisely for this reason (187-188). For Nussbaum, personal love is represented in the *Symposium* by Alcibiades, whereas Socrates, following Diotima, only indulges in a generalized notion of abstract love, founded on equally *abstract* notions of beauty and goodness (188-189). Ubhaya Bharati, on the other hand, represents personal love, the love for one person. She loves her husband, Mandana, so deeply that she must have shuddered at the thought of parting with him (Vidyaranya 87, 103). But as an honest adjudicator, she cannot help declaring that her husband has been defeated by Shankara (Vidyaranya 103). She thinks that, after her husband takes up *sannyasa*, she cannot live without him and hence decides to leave the world (Vidyaranya 103-104, 123-124). She emblemizes that mode of love which Vlastos and Nussbaum would valorize. Diotima, however, does not speak of such a love. Nor does she herself represent such an erotic principle. Nevertheless, there is one similarity between Diotima and Ubhaya Bharati: both of them foreground the place of Eros within epistemology. The Advaita-Vedantic tradition of spiritual instruction initiated by Shankara has omitted this erotic dimension altogether (Pattanaik, “Who Is a Hindu?”), and that de-eroticized version

of spiritual knowledge has come down to us as the only acceptable mode of spiritual knowledge since the onset of our colonial modernity. Tantra may be said to have functioned as the frightening Other of the “Indian Renaissance”, lurking on the outer contours of the colonially modernized Indian psyche. However, Ubhaya Bharati’s intervention in the debate between Shankara and Mandana, when brought into the fold of the postcolonial debates on gender, sexuality and epistemology in India, may open up radically new critical vistas. In the contemporary neo-conservative milieu of India, it’s unthinkable that in an exegetical debate, the female adjudicator would urge an exegete to acquire erotic knowledge and claim that such erotic knowledge is an intrinsic part of spiritual wisdom. The British Raj, grounded in a Protestant ethic of anti-eroticism, had taught us to efficiently detach speech from desires and to create a deep alienation between what we did and what we said. This legacy of sexual hypocrisy has often tarnished the discourses and activities of many contemporary sects clustered round particular God-men: our postcolonial spiritual “speech communities” (Morgan 2). Had we learnt the lesson of erotico-spiritual holism from Ubhaya Bharati, Mira Bai or Mahadeviyakka, and grounded our colonial modernity in no bowdlerized version of “Indian spirituality” but in a *tantric* reconciliation between the word and the world, the body and the spirit, involvement and detachment, our postcolonial spirituality would have been founded on more solid grounds.

On the other hand, had Diotima’s teaching on the creative function of beauty and love (Plato 37-38) been accepted in the post-Socratic philosophical tradition of the West, the patriarchal binarization of the body and the soul, and of creative spirituality and procreative sexuality, could have been resisted more effectively. The post-Socratic – especially Aristotelian – “taming” of the corporeal dimension of being led to the emergence of the body politic and the healthy human body as analogous tropes of *sanity*, as Adriana Cavarero has observed (Cavarero, *Stately Bodies* 103). This programme of identifying the dispassionate soul as the ultimate locus of sanity in the midst of the madness of the desiring body, which became a hallmark of the ideological ramifications of Platonism and Neo-Platonism (though for Socrates himself madness had a meaning and a value – think of the *Phaedrus*), and which came to be more rigidly entrenched in the Protestant attitude to corporeality, has deeply vitiated the nation-building projects of South Asia, and the postcolonial nation-states in this zone have unconsciously followed the structure of the classical Greek political thought (perpetuated with various degrees of modification in the Western imaginaries of the state since the advent of Christianity), which saw hierarchy as the essence of health: the hierarchical predominance of the soul over the body and that of order over chaos have become the ideological

apologia for all kinds of oppressive, hierarchical structures produced or mediated by a statism springing from colonial modernity (Mukhopadhyay, “If the Moon Smiles” 10-11).

Andrea Nye has argued that Diotima does not teach Socrates to denigrate the physical dimension of being, but rather sees and shows “bodily love” to be the “metaphor and concrete training ground for all creative and knowledge-producing activities” (Nye 78). We cannot say that Ubhaya Bharati presents a similar perspective. She does not say that spiritual knowledge must *begin from* bodily love; but she does imply that bodily love is an integral part of holistic wisdom. The trajectories of *eros* suggested by Diotima do not correspond with those delineated in *Sankara Digvijaya*, either. Diotima suggests that the initiate in her Mystery should proceed from individual instances of beauty towards beauty-in-itself, which is coterminous with abstract universal goodness (Plato 41-43). On the other hand, in the case of Shankara, the experience of universal goodness and the knowledge of the Absolute have already been acquired. He does not lack in the great spiritual wisdom to which Diotima seeks to lead her initiate. However, Ubhaya Bharati makes him realize that the absence of erotic knowledge from his epistemological universe will inevitably make Shankara fall short of omniscience. When, towards the end of the text, Shankara goes to Kashmir to ascend the Throne of Omniscience ruled over by Goddess Sharada, the Goddess asks him whether he thinks he is still pure after gathering carnal knowledge in Amaruka’s palace. He answers that he is pure because he gathered carnal knowledge only by entering a *different* body – that of Amaruka. The Goddess is satisfied with this answer and he ascends the Throne of Omniscience (Vidyaranya 192-193). It is interesting to notice the very complex concepts of purity and omniscience articulated here. Of course, the discourse of purity here remains conservative and does not see flesh as pure. However, omniscience, according to Ubhaya Bharati who herself is an incarnation of Sharada/Saraswati, cannot but include carnal knowledge. If we keep the purity debate in this context in suspension, and focus on the co-configuration of Goddess Sharada/Saraswati and Ubhaya Bharati within the text, then we may say that, it is not in spite of the Amaruka episode but rather *because of it* that Shankara can ascend the Throne of *Omniscience*.

Ubhaya Bharati is, unlike Diotima, a wise woman in the domestic field. Her wisdom is, apparently, more intellectual than mystic. However, she remains a non-white sister of Diotima in her underlining of the significance of bodily love in knowledge and speech. The postcolonial colloquy I attempt to set up here centres round the strategy of mutual reflection. Just as Diotima offers us a critical vantage point to look at Ubhaya Bharati from the perspective of the conflictual relation

between monism and corporeality, Ubhaya Bharati offers us a significant critical perspective to have a fresh look at the debate on Diotima and her teaching. As both Irigaray and Nye have observed, corporeality is not denigrated in Diotima's teaching. However, Irigaray thinks that Socrates appropriates Diotima's speech and turns her essentially "daimonic" (that is, mediating between the physical and the metaphysical, the mortal and the immortal) discourse into a specimen of Socratic metaphysics (20-21, 26, 29-30). When we look at this issue from Ubhaya Bharati's perspective, we may promulgate that the metaphysical monism of Shankara and Socrates need not necessarily preclude the body. In *Sankara Digvijaya*, it is very clear that Ubhaya Bharati is convinced about the validity of Shankara's metaphysics. The monistic interpretations offered by Shankara, which come victorious over her husband's exegesis of the scriptures, are heartily accepted by Ubhaya Bharati. And yet, *after* accepting this monism, she underlines the significance of erotic knowledge. Hence, there is no reason to think that a "wise woman" or a woman philosopher should endorse *either* a corporealist stance *or* a transcendentalist, trans-corporealist one. When we are talking about these ancient wise women, we must be ready to acknowledge their difference from our contemporary paradigms of the "feminist philosopher". Maybe they offered a holistic view of spiritual life, a blueprint for a journey to the most comprehensive wisdom.

Nussbaum has seen the *Phaedrus* as containing a more authentic depiction of inter-personal, intersubjective love than the *Symposium* (211-213). However, Stanley Rosen argues that Socrates is "incapable of taking the necessary first step in the erotic ascent that he himself describes in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*" (Rosen 60). For Rosen, "Socrates. . . is, as we may call him, a sterile voyeur of the erotic madness of others, but is himself neither divinely mad nor a divine voyeur" (60). Rosen concludes that "the great specialist on *eros* is himself erotically deficient" (60). So, Diotima has not been able to send Socrates out to gather the erotic experience which he would later verbalize. She has not been able to teach Socrates that – to borrow the words of Audre Lorde – "The erotic cannot be felt secondhand" (59). But Ubhaya Bharati has been able to make Shankara gain this experience, even though he did not need to pursue an erotic ascent, having already reached the Absolute - not through *eros* but through the renunciation thereof.

Having said all these, we are still left with certain issues that are unresolved. For example, the issue of mutual responsibility that is central to any intersubjective erotic experience. As Nussbaum and Vlastos have rightly noticed, at least within the scheme of the *Symposium*, neither Diotima nor Socrates is concerned with this (Nussbaum 197-198). If one goes from one beautiful body to another to gain the knowledge that beauty is an abstract epistemic category (Plato 40-41), how will

the holders of these beautiful bodies feel once they are jettisoned by the erotic initiate of Diotima? In the same way, Shankara also fails to resolve the issue of responsibility in erotic love. He enters the dead body of Amaruka, and engages in sexual liaison with the women in Amaruka's palace (Vidyaranya 117-118). But why does he fail to have any sense of responsibility towards these women he will abandon soon? What will happen to them once he returns to his original body and Amaruka becomes a corpse again? We can't deny that neither Shankara nor Socrates can sufficiently address the issue of responsibility in love. However, Diotima talks about procreation in and through beauty, indicating that the erotic conjugations she envisages would culminate in the mutual immortalization of the mortal lovers through the act of love itself, as well as through the offspring: the corporeal offspring, and, also the offspring of the intellect – good speech or good art (Irigaray 24-25; Plato 37-39). On the other hand, Ubhaya Bharati, as a loving wife, represents a lofty principle of responsible intersubjective love, as I have already pointed out.

The other issue we need to take up here is that of *using* others' bodies for gaining spiritual/intellectual/erotic satisfaction. Should you *use* others to become knowledgeable in *erotics*? Should you not respect others' feelings? Should you treat the *other* bodies as arranged before you like sparkling steps to the heaven of Liberation, while caring a fig about the freedom of the ones embodied in those bodies? Audre Lorde writes:

To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us.  
(58)

How can freedom and responsibility, pleasure and ethics be balanced within an experience of love? How far is a bonding capable of avoiding the danger of becoming synonymous with bondage? And what about the mutual liberation of the lovers, the process through which two bodies come together, and the two souls get simultaneously liberated into a larger sky that transcends and yet contains both of the embodied lovers? In other words, can we ever think of the simultaneous freedom of both the lovers without envisaging a metaphysical matrix that transcends and yet encapsulates the ontological duality of the lovers? It appears that it is only this *matrix* which can reconcile the metaphysical One, the locus of ultimate freedom, with the duality and dualism without which love is impossible. But that kind of a spiritual process is not possible within simplistic monistic frameworks. Certain tantric frameworks of *sadhana* would, however, focus on the necessity of

contemplating and seeking freedom together (Shaw 4,11), something Nussbaum may approve of, something the *Phaedrus* attempts to capture. The sky encapsulated in two hearts is one sky, but this oneness can be appreciated only through the erotic togetherness of those two hearts, and not through the objectification of the beloved's heart as mere flesh by the erotic initiate/lover. As Devi Amma insists in *The Tantra Chronicles*, compiled by Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, tantra represents the web of "isness" through which the cosmos is linked to the Creator, the Divine Mother (5-6). It is this isness which makes all of us *creators* within the universe of the *Creator* (5-7). This definition of tantra as isness can be applied to the issues raised in this essay, the issues which are not fully resolved by either Ubhaya Bharati or Diotima, as their dualist sensibilities are hyphenated to a monism which they themselves find acceptable, and as they cannot effect a fully convincing reconciliation between the One and the Two/Many. The locus of love is very significant in that it is the space for *two*, and the *two* is the first palpable unit of the Many. By coming together erotically, two people come to realize how they are linked in the cosmic web of isness (Mukhopadhyay, *The Goddess* 68-69). This "passionate enlightenment" (à la Miranda Shaw) leads to their further realization of their ontological implication in the maternal matrix, that is, the Creatrix herself. And after this realization, their erotic experience manifests its deeper creativity, and they become *creators*, linked to the *Creator* through a loving isness which is inflected by erotic togetherness as well as meditation on Oneness. It is this isness which Diotima hints at but Socrates fails to grasp. Ubhaya Bharati does not delineate this isness in the *Digvijaya*, even though that may well be *her* version of Advaita Vedanta. As in the case of Diotima, Bharati too is probably not represented with complete authenticity within the Vidyaranya text. Is the full spectrum of her *darshana* lost in the textual encasement of her voice in *Shankara Digvijaya*?

These are questions that can never be answered satisfactorily. However, when we come to the end of the postcolonial colloquy between Diotima and Ubhaya Bharati, we find not a closure, but a "tantric" opening to isness, revealed by Devi Amma to Frankenberg and Mani, the postcolonial Diotima and the postcolonial Ubhaya Bharati, as it were, who themselves form an "affective community" (Gandhi 1-12) of *two*, bound by and in the cosmic web of being. It is here that colonialism truly ends and a new dawn emerges, containing the most authentic "postcolonial" sun. Love in its truest sense can only be *post-colonial*. It can emerge only when the colonial master-slave dialectic gives way to the loving, conjugal submission of the members of the affective community to the maternal matrix of the cosmos. Colonialism, whether political, economic, sexual or cultural, keeps barring love from attaining its fruition. It is only after the end of the will-to-colonize, after the

dissolution of the vicious circles of domination and servitude, that true love rises: the Aphrodite from the sea of isness. It is in this isness that *two* and *one* lose their difference and prepare the way for the harmony of the Many.

### Note

Mary Ellen Waithe has convincingly argued against the idea that Diotima is ahistorical. She has insisted, "For nearly nineteen centuries Diotima was, as the archeological evidence supports, considered a historical person. [Marsilio] Ficino's remark on the absurdity of thinking a woman a philosopher achieved and retained the status of received doctrine for the next 500 years" (106).

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## Apropos *Basanti* in English translation: Writing/interrogating the new woman

Ashok K Mohapatra

*Viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of “reality” – Hayden White.*<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I am going to reflect upon the interrogative potential of the complex textuality and discursivity of the multi-authored *Basanti: Writing the New Woman* (2019) in English translation. While this text has been made immanent through the process of its restitution from a state of oblivion and is now visible through translation<sup>2</sup>, it reveals its own discursivity in order to show how it functions as a textual archeology or archive of historical knowledge, questioning ultimately what it invokes. What is invoked is the ‘new woman’, the template of colonial Oriya<sup>3</sup> modernity, discursively formed and culturally constructed to produce its historicity. And yet, this historicity, which is delimited within a certain field of discourse, cultural assumptions about marriage and the role of woman in the society in the early decades of the twentieth century, is mediated through the critical perspective of the English translation, and its textuality is revealed through the very process of the making of this literary text that gets manifested. The subtitle “Writing the New Woman” makes all too evident its own *écriture à la* Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, in that writing is an intransitive act, self-directed and a *différance*, from which the figural immanence – ‘new woman’ in our case – emerges, while its truth-effects are revealed and recognized as logocentric truth-effects. What this text, like any other, does can be best dubbed by a profoundly illuminating remark of Jacques Rigaut that Barthes quotes: “Et même quand j’affirme, j’interroge encore.” (And even when I say, I’m still questioning).<sup>4</sup> And the moot question is whether the novel *Basanti* is interrogating the concept of ‘new woman’ while *writing* it.

Before I make an analysis of the intriguing textuality and self-reflexive implications as well as the interrogative propensity of this novel, I wish to make a few preliminary observations as to historicism as a cultural value assigned to personal/social and cultural events within the larger framework of the history of the nation. The events I have chosen are as disparate as marriage as a personal and

social happening within fiction on the one hand, and on the other lexicography, a cultural practice, both of which are embedded in the political and historical world and, for that reason, historicized.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* ends memorably not simply because Dorothea, the heroine, boldly announces to marry Ladislaw much to the chagrin and discontent of her relatives, but because the negative reaction generated by this radical decision on her part coincides with the rejection of the Reform Bill by the Lords in the Upper House in May 7, 1832. This setback which the momentous legislation suffered was but temporary, since the bill was passed in June 4, 1832, with the manoeuvrings of Earl Grey and cooperation of the newly made King William IV. It brought about far-reaching socio-political changes. In analogous terms, Dorothea's second marriage, notwithstanding disapproval by the people, turned out to be an amply rewarding event in moral and emotional terms. Evidently, Eliot's moral imagination endorses Dorothea's second marriage as a progressive act as much as the Reform Bill itself and locates it in the historical context of the sweeping changes that ushered in a new era of liberal democracy. This novel instantiates how the historical consciousness of a literary artist imbricates fictional events with historical references to historicize the events taking place in the ordinary people's personal and social lives. Here the effect of the historicism as a set of social events through referencing of the historical dates presupposes a discursive formation of documented citations, their repetitiveness, and linkages chronologically established, amounting to an archeology of historical knowledge in the Foucauldian sense.

In 1933, famous Odia lexicographer Gopal Chandra Praharaj made a curiously revealing statement in the Introduction to the third volume of his monumental dictionary *Purnachandra Oriya Bhashakosa* thus:

It must be meet to mention here that in the introduction of the first volume (September 1931), I had referred to the fact that the Oriya speaking tracts lie scattered in the borders of our provinces. By the time the second volume was out (August 1932), the question of the amalgamation of the said tracts was on the anvil at the Round Table Conference. Now, by the time the third volume was out (May 1933), the declaration of a separate Orissa province has been made by the secretary of the state for Indian Council at the end of the Round Table Conference. It is hoped that the two subsequent volumes are out at intervals of 9 to 10 months each, by the end of 1934, the creation of the Orissa province will be a settled fact. (Volume 3 VIII)

A dictionary, or compendium of references, or a directory with inbuilt structure of cataloguing and indexing is ostensibly metatextual. Its metatextuality reveals an intricate pattern of definitions, illustrations, usages, sense relations of synonymy and antonymy, which are in themselves the constituents as well as effects of both written and oral discourses. Praharaj's introductory, metatextual remark about the metatextuality of his lexicographic project embedded in a history of the unification of Orissa province does three important things. First, it historicizes itself as a synecdoche of a larger historical formation, i.e., creation of Orissa province. Secondly, its metatextuality projects onto the history of the formation of Orissa the metatextuality of a chronological dating and narrativity of events. Thirdly, and most importantly, as the discursive frameworks of history and lexicography overlap, the formation of Orissa province and compilation of a dictionary are presented as parallel processes. In consequence, the ostensible lexicographic metatext is historicized as much as history is presented as a metatextualized formation. Indeed, the metatextual knowledge of discontinuities and constructedness is part of postmodernist epistemology that ably critiques the lexicographic project of Praharaj and its nationalist ideology as modernist.

To come back to *Basanti*, what strikes me is its similarity with Praharaj's work in respect of its representation of the 'new woman' template of cultural modernity within a newly made, politically and culturally distinctive Orissa. Like the dictionary, this novel is a metatext that locates itself against the background of the formation of Orissa province to historicize the reunion of the eponymous heroine and her husband Debabrata, who have been estranged. As Basanti's intellectual and moral developments begin to take a feminist dimension, Debabrata perceives her as a threat and also eventually suspects her to be unfaithful in marriage. He banishes her from home while she is pregnant, but his remorse, and the change of heart that Basanti feels in the company of Basanta, the loving wife of Binod bhai, her cousin, are factors to bring them together, and the marriage is saved. The happy marriage of Basanta and Binod Bihari seems to offer her a vision of felicity and engender hope in her as well as in the middle-class Odia readers that an ideal companionate relationship between liberal-minded spouses in contemporary times is not an impossibility, and is, therefore, the preferred model marriage which the young educated men and women should aspire for.

In his scholarly introduction to *Basanti*, Himansu S Mohapatra, a co-translator of the novel, sounds rather apologetic in saying that "the ending of the novel seems to be somewhat of a letdown, a concession to the demands of the previously discarded marriage and romance plot. It is not entirely surprising in a novel which

is an early step in the presentation of the emancipated woman and is, therefore, bound to be in some sense incomplete and contradictory” (Introduction xxiv). I wish to add a point in this context that this novel, being set in the early phase of Oriya modernity that was infused with the radical, emancipatory energy of woman, has to accommodate radicalism within marriage. Basanti and Debabrata’s marriage is to be saved particularly because the stakes involved in it are very high. It embodies the ethos of social progressivism and cultural modernity, the cornerstones of a newly emergent colonial polity, that is, the unified Orissa province. In the closing chapter of the novel, at Burdwan hospital, where Debabrata is convalescing, he tells the inquisitive Bengali doctor: “The trouble in Bengal began because the Government divided Bengal right when the national movement was at its height. There’s no plan to divide Orissa; on the contrary, the problem for now is the reunification of a long-dismembered Orissa” (*Basanti* 239). A telegram arrives just about this moment announcing one more wedding in the offing: that of Suniti and Ramaesh. The overwhelming importance of the social event of marriage being embedded in the momentous historical event is a common point between *Basanti* and *Middlemarch*, while the context of Orissa’s unification is shared by *Basanti* with Praharaj’s dictionary, reflecting a social realism informed by a middle-class historical consciousness and nationalist ideology. Basanti has to be accommodated within the nation, and has to be part of the national imaginary of the colonial Oriya bhadralok. The marriage, its imperatives and aspirations have to be, of necessity, accommodated within the larger political as well as cultural priorities and urgencies of the new province of Orissa, which came into being later in April 1, 1936.

As though the historicization were not enough, the marriage and reunion, have also been mythologized in terms of not only the return of Sita from exile together with her sons Laba and Kusha, but also the reunion of Dushyanta with Shankuntalâ along and his son Bharata. This justifies the desirability of marriage to be part of the structure of a patriarchal utopia. In the *Ramayana*, however, Sita refuses to join with Rama. Inconvenient as this would have been, a shift takes place from Sita, Laba and Kusha to Sakuntala and Bharata to encode the mushy sentimentalism of the reunion scene as an archetype of narrative closure, with aesthetic resolution of all conflicts and transient feelings into pure, abiding bliss. Interestingly, the whole scene of reunion of Basanti and Debabrata has been witnessed and presented from the point of view of their baby boy, emphasizing the investment of secure futurity of the progeny in marriage and a stable domestic as well as social order that a unified Orissa offers in the future.

Since historicization is a conscious strategy on the part of the narrative to legitimate marriage, and the reunion of the estranged couple constitutes the logic of narrative closure, the intention of the authors is to build representative images of a modern Orissa, with its own idealized domestic and socio-cultural space for woman. This is but a modernist impulse, seen as animating the novelistic imagination of a whole group of writers who negotiate among themselves in order to explore in a programmed way the possibilities and inflections of the colonial modernity of a vernacular woman<sup>5</sup> through her attainment of intellectual and articulatory freedom. The collaborative novelistic venture of nine authors in Orissa, as Himansu Mohapatra mentions, was inspired by its contemporary counterparts between 1922 and 1924, namely *Baroyari*, *Bhager Puja* and *Chatushkona* from Bengal, was less a playful formalist experiment for a relatively new genre in Odia literature, and more a serious, “purposive, reform-oriented literature” on “the socially relevant theme of rethinking gender roles in Oriya society” (Introduction xxii). Mohapatra makes us feel the modernist urgencies of history in the 1920s and 30s through the cultural presence of Frieda Hauswirth Das, the Swiss woman, who married Sarangadhara Das in 1917 and made Orissa her home for some part of her life and transmitted the spirit of European modernity through the spread of female education, opposition to purdah of women, fight against caste system and untouchability, efforts to remove all types of inequity and so on. In fact Das’s memoir *My Marriage to India* (1930)<sup>6</sup> as mentioned aptly by Mohapatra is not just a historical document to create the contextual milieu for the translation, but to insinuate quite cleverly the idea of metatextuality through the mention of Frieda and add metatextual resonance to both Basanti and Sarala Devi, one of the nine authors of the novel, and decidedly “more advanced in her thinking” than Suprava and Prativa, the other women writers who wrote parts of the novel. It was Sarala whom Das met at Cuttack and was impressed with her intellectual ardour, vivacity and spirited nature at once. Das mentions a memorable encounter with her, though changing her name as Vimala “for reasons of confidentiality” (Introduction xix).

Whatever the reasons, the consequence seems to be more important. The discursive impersonation of Sarala Devi as Vimala at the hands of Das, and later her fictionalization as Rukmini in the novel *Into the Sun* (1933), which Mohapatra mentions (Introduction xx), produce a complex system of metatextuality. First of all, Frieda Das Hauswirth is realized retroactively from her memoir as the beacon light of the ethics of Western rational knowledge, intellectual freedom and agency for women, equity of social relations, liberal outlook and compassion for the other. In other words, she has first textualized herself, writing the memoir, and then she turns Sarala, a real-life person, into a textual figure under a fictional name. This

process of writing assumes complexity because in just about two or three years time Sarala herself was to write out her part of *Basanti* in her own way in the multi-author collaborative scheme<sup>7</sup>. Going by the chronological order of the publication of the texts, *Basanti* was serialized between 1924 and 1926, followed by *My Marriage to India* that came out in 1930. Thus, Sarala Devi became a fictional character, a discursive presence, overlapping with the character she fictionally created. The result of all this is interesting. For example, the radical engagement of Das with Vimala/Sarala in the life narrative of Das is a replication of Basanti's struggle. Hackles rise at Basanti's efforts to start a school for the girls of the neighborhood, and eventually the husband resents all this, yielding to the pressure of his mother and the orthodox, patriarchal values of the community just in the same way as Frieda's attempt at instilling self-confidence in the intellectually ambitious and freedom loving protégée Vimala to walk unveiled and make an affront to purdah is met with husband Sarangadhara's strong reproof: "You cannot antagonize the society so, and you will ruin my work if you meddle in other people's affairs" (*My Marriage* 64). Thus, the discursive mechanism does not just collapse the barriers between fiction and reality, it also works out a metatextual episteme in two primary ways. First, by explaining the authors, characters and works as textual entities that predicate one another, and second, by treating them as presences dispersed over a discursive terrain across textual boundaries.

Like the textuality of Das and Sarala/Vimala, that of Basanti is interesting. Among other things, she is an avid reader and writer. Love of letters is something she seems to have inherited from her dead mother Nirmala Devi, whose reading consisted of traditional Oriya literature and modern Bengali literature under the loving tutelage of her Christian friend Kalyani. For her part, despite limited education, she reads newspapers, exchanges letters, maintains a diary like the husband, reads Bengali magazines and even writes for *Nababâni* on the topic "The Place of Woman in the World", and above all read Tagore's *Gora* "a number of times" (*Basanti* 96). All her readings help her formulate the sense of a collective homogeneous self of womanhood and the idea of an extensive public space. This is very well explained in *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson who holds that reading newspapers develops the consciousness of a homogeneous temporality onto which people project their individual experiences, and relate the events as well as persons reported in the newspapers to those they experience and encounter in their own day to day lives as co-occurrences. Anderson goes on to add: "At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life" (35). This way

develops a sense of commensurability with the unseen and unknown others out there in an imagined community. Similarly, Basanti develops a sense of an imagined community of women and she is described as having had “a desire to do what she could to improve the lot of women” (*Basanti* 2) through her education and reading newspapers. This desire is also reflected in the topic of the essay she writes for the magazine. Though married, she desires that “her union would become more complete through their commitment to public life” (*Basanti* 111), and wishes to have an expansive and compassionate subjectivity. The liberating consciousness of such subjectivity is to come only from learning, and whatever distinctive qualities she is to be invested with by the nine authors have to ultimately come from the world of liberal humanist ideas mediated through printed texts.

Further, the psychologization of Basanti, the realization of the depth and interiority of this character is possible through the letters, and the diary entries she writes. In Chapter twenty, at the climax of the novel, we find her reading her own diary entry of a certain day, reviewing her deteriorating relationship with the husband, analyzing where and how things went wrong and discovering the double standards in Debabrata’s attitude towards the independence of women and education. In this most analytical chapter Basanti discovers the contradiction between what her husband had promised to her before marriage and what he gave her after marriage. The noteworthiness of this chapter is that the shaded pages from 154 to 158 foreground graphically its textuality. What is significant about Basanti’s discovery is a sign of cognitive empowerment that comes from reading and writing, and it assumes a somewhat radical dimension, since the woman who knows reading and writing happens to understand and question the patriarchal double standards of colonial modernity. Women’s writings often represented the radical consequences of such cognitive empowerment of woman during the period of colonial modernity. One may indeed take a look at women’s writings from the conservative Namoothri community of Kerala in the 1930s. A case in point may perhaps be the story “Is this Desirable” (1935) by Lalithambika Antharjanam, in which a young woman Paapi is subjected to the tyrannies of an oppressive mother-in-law and husband Unni who, like any educated young man of that time, wrote and spoke in public in favour of the education and liberation of Namoothri women from the prevailing social orthodoxy. At home, however, Unni believes that the wife has played truant to her wifely duties and responsibilities just because he has been liberal-minded and kind enough to give her concession. As for the spirited, sensitive and intellectually ardent Paapi, she desires progress and reform in the society. Above all she reads the newspaper *Yogakshemam*, and understands the hypocrisy, contradiction and double-standards of the modern educated reformists

that the men of her community self-fashioned themselves to be. She makes a grand attempt of protest by writing an anonymous and brilliant polemic in the same newspaper, and creates a stir in the reading circles of her husband. So, discursivity has been presented as both the cause and consequence of early forms of feminism in colonial India, which was in the cusp of modernity.

The *Gora* reference in *Basanti* is never casual, for Basanti's continuous reading of the novel suggests her discursive transformation into Sucharita, the young spirited heroine of Tagore's novel whom Gora, the patriotic, staunch Hindu protagonist regards "not as an individual, but as the personification of an idea...the whole nature of womanhood in Bharat" (*Gora* 330). When she visits Gora in prison, he understands the value of womanhood at an epiphanic moment that his blustery masculinity is of no use in his dutifulness to his country unless women are accorded due importance and given dignity: "the more dismissive we are of their value, and our manhood grows weaker in the same proportion" (*Gora* 330). The dialogic relationship between *Basanti* and *Gora* as regards a companionate man-woman relationship in marriage, its desirability in the context of the nation and woman as a trope of nationhood may be a critically enriching area of study. One may compare Debabrata with Gora in respect of their attitude to women and to the Brahmo religion as well as Christianity. One may as well compare *Basanti* with *The Last Poem* (1928), another novel by Tagore, which deals with the complexity of man-woman relationship within marriage and the extent to which romance can be accommodated within it, particularly when Amit and Labanya, both intellectually vibrant lovers negotiate between themselves to realize their potentials. But this essay is more interested in examining how the linkages between *Basanti* and the other texts as discussed bring about a metatextual discursive order where one text predicates another's themes, explains another's authorial intention, fictionalizes the truth content of another and vice-versa, and above all the author of one text fictionalizes the author of another. What comes into play, mediated through the critical consciousness of the translation, is a very postmodernist kind of textual deflection and diffusion of books, authors and characters underlying *Basanti*, a modernist text in thematic terms, with new woman as the focal point.

The translators, Mohapatra and St-Pierre, succeed in combining the metatextual potential of *Basanti* with its archival power when it gets translated by them. Translation unleashes the archival power of a modernist text by relocating it in different, postmodern times and an epistemic order that critically challenges the age-old epistemological notions such as reality, objectivity, universality and truth. No archive is believed to be self-contained and self-evidently true these days, but

something constructed, a ‘situated knowledge’<sup>8</sup>, and above all an interpretive process, yielding relativist meaning. Talking about the knowledge/power nexus in the archive of power and the power of archive, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook argue that a growing concern about identity politics, relation between history and memory and that between representation and reality necessitate a relationship between “archival practice and societal needs”( Schwartz & Cook 12). Archiving a single document or text does not just amount to investing it with historicity, but also reflecting “the needs and desires of its creators, the purpose(s) for its creation, the audience(s) viewing the record, the broader legal, technical, technical, organizational, social and cultural-intellectual contexts in which the creator and audience operated and in which the document it made meaningful” (Schwartz & Cook 4). Truly enough, the needs and desires of translators and contemporary readership coincide, with their demand for a nuanced critical knowledge about the early form of radical feminism and the linkages between female education and radical power in the context of colonial modernity. *Basanti*, with its inherent metatextual nature, is *archived* through translation to both negotiate with as well as challenge the western concept of new woman, the idea that the translation calls up while *writing* it, and, by so doing, interrogates its essential qualities that derive from the western canon.

In the 1890s, the ‘new woman’ writings underscored the novelty, excitement and challenges of women in pursuit of independence, both sexual and economic in opposition to the Victorian ideals of marriage, domesticity, and femininity that camouflaged the double standards of sexual morality approved by patriarchy. However, we find many precursors paving the way for this genre. Beginning from Ibsen’s play *A Dolls House* (1879) to Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) to Thomas Hardy’s *Woodlanders*(1887) to George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*(1893) to Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1894) and *The Beth Book* (1897) to Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did It* (1897) and *Typewriter Girl* (1897), we see a whole tradition of works set in where woman’s independence, unrestrained sexuality and professional career win out against marriage, dependency on man, sexual modesty and above all marriage. As is common knowledge, these busted the ‘Angel of the House’ myth and created an alternative images of either a clever, happy, spirited, career-minded, care-free and sexually liberated woman, or a perverted version of her which we see in Lucia Western, an oversexed, predatory woman in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), or a career-minded, nerdy woman who is deficient in social skills and disinterested in her sexuality, or a woman, who hates children or even preys upon them. But *Basanti* hardly matches any of these types of the new woman, who have their provenance in the western literary and cultural tradition.

Even as she is the new woman figure culturally constructed within the colonial modernity, Basanti inflects in an entirely new way the same radical agenda which her western counterpart assumes. The English translation, with its academic format of as reputed a university press as the OUP, persuades the reader (putatively well-versed in English literature) to read it academically, and the reader, for their part, brings to bear upon the reading a 'situational knowledge' of the new woman. What the reader is faced up with is the indigenous new woman and her own metatextuality and epistemic situationality. Thus, the translation interrogates while *writing* the new woman. If this is a type of deconstructionist practice, where does it lead? The answer is perhaps best offered by Walter Benjamin.

One may contemplate the larger implication of this deconstructive exercise of translation that shows the constructedness of western as well as indigenous, colonial new woman, and gestures towards what Walter Benjamin had famously said in "The Task of the Translator" that a translation ought to be *recognizable* together with the original as fragments of a pure language just as fragments are shards of a vessel<sup>9</sup>. What is implied here is the possibility of a transcendental idea of a New Woman, subsuming all versions of feminist radicalism in all kinds of historical and literary contexts, of which each is situated with all its particularities and is relative to any other. *Basanti* in English translation shows the historicization of a robust new woman radicalism within the context of Oriya colonial modernity, while the western counterpart has been historicized in terms of the rise of an industrial economy, liberal democratic politics, spread of education and the concomitant social changes in imperial England. In terms of literary tradition, the former belongs to and is informed by the progressive literature termed Sabuja Sahitya; as for the latter, it is the precipitation of a radical feminist ideology that challenged the conservative ideals of marriage, domesticity and double standards of sexual morality. A more crucial difference between the indigenous new woman Basanti and her western counterpart is that while the former draws upon the Victorian ideals of companionate relationship in married life, the latter throws the institution of marriage overboard altogether. And yet, notwithstanding all the historical and thematic differences, the two categories of new woman have a relationship much in the same manner as the relationship of languages is "suprahistorical", according to Benjamin, in the sense that "in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language" ("The Task" 257). In analogous terms, like any counterpart, *Basanti* in English translation interrogates the western concept of new woman. Not just that; it also shows how the intention of the nine authors is

also aligned with the intention of any new woman author in the western tradition to call up the larger transcendental semantics of the New Woman.

### Notes

1. See Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* (123), in which he develops a theory of tropography, or the formation of the pre-figurative modes as well as figurative turns of historical discourse (metaphoric, metonymic, synecdochic and ironic) that produce desirable effects of the coherent structure of truth passed off as knowledge. The discourse of history like that of fiction is in intent and effect cognitive, and mimetic in its means. In addition, like any other discourse its is "as much about itself as about the objects that make of its subject matter" and hence it has a tendency towards metadiscursive reflexivity that we find so clearly in fiction (123).
2. In an illuminating review of the novel titled "Bahudâ 'Basanti' O Tâ'ra Bhâi Bhauni Mâne" (The Return of *Basanti* and her Siblings) published in *The Sambad* on 19 April, 2019, Asit Mohanty writes that the publication of the novel was serialized between May 1924 to November 1926 in *Utkala Sahitya*, and was later edited by Sarat Chandra Mukherjee and published by the Sabuja Sahitya Samitee in the book form in 1931 and dedicated to Bishwanath Kara, the President of *Utkala Sahitya*. In 1968, the book returned in a revised and enlarged version, which Bhikari Charan Dash published by his personal efforts, with the help of Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, one of the nine co-authors of the book and the architect of this collaborative venture. Mohanty quotes Dash's preface to this edition, from which we learn that revival of the book after three decades was no easy job. The book had become unavailable, and Kalindi Charan Panigrahi was skeptical about the commercial success of an antiquated book, since in the 1960s the literary taste of people had changed. But undeterred, Dash scouted around for an old text of *Basanti*, and with great difficulty came upon a tattered text in the Library of Orissa Assembly, with pages falling apart, but tied up with a string. This is how it was revived and brought into life in the vernacular context. And yet, the book cannot be credited with commercial success, although it has a vibrant afterlife that is materialized through the English translation.
3. 'Oriya' and 'Orissa' are used in this essay only in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, given the fact that the modern equivalents Odia and Odisha came into effect only as recently as 2010.
4. See Roland Barthes' 'Ecrivains et Ecrivains' (1960).

5. As Ivan Illich has argued, vernacular is not just the language of the native as understood in the semantics of colonialism vis-à-vis English, but also a native subject, defined in terms of a certain pre-capitalist cultural economy as homegrown. Hence, illich's idea can be extrapolated to understand the vernacular woman as someone domestic, whose productive potentials and productivities have not been marketed due to her inaccessibility to higher education, and whose domesticity deprives her of freedom and agency. See Illich's. 'Vernacular Values'. *Philosophica* 26.2(1980): 47-102.
6. *A Marriage to India* was published first in 1930 by Vanguard Press, New York, and in 1931 by Hutchinson & Co, London. In 2006, an Indian Reprint by Prafulla Publication from Odisha came out.
7. Actually, Das does not mention the date of her meeting Vimala, but, in any case, from the reading of the memoir it is apparent that it has to be sometime between January, 1921 when a letter from Sarangadhara's mother reaches them in San Francisco, pleading with the son to come and their return and sojourn in Bombay, Calcutta and Cuttack on the one hand, and their trip to Cochin in September, 1922 on the other hand. The call for the new novel was published in *Utkala Sahitya* in 1924. Therefore in about two to three years from her meeting Frieda, Sarala must have begun to contribute to the writing of the novel.
8. See Donna Haraway's engaging discussion of rational knowledge as an on-going process of critical interpretation among fields of interpreters or decoders in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1990).
9. The vessel image in Walter Benjamin's essay has unmistakable mystical connotations of the *sefirot of Tohu* from Kabbalah, which is about the contraction of God's infinity into finite units and the separation of divine light into discrete qualities and attributes. The shattering of the vessels (ten of them in all embodying the divine light) which happened during the period of the contraction of divine infinity resulted in the shards of the vessels of Tohu, each of which still reflects the glory and radiance of the divine light.

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## **Seeing through Colonial Eyes: Women and Landscape in English Literary Texts**

**Aloka Patel**

This paper deals with the perceived intimate relationship between women and nature in the West as exemplified in the writings of some canonical English writers, and the gendered nature of colonial history. The paper will particularly focus on the writings of John Donne and William Wordsworth, and the ways in which their notions have been countered by two women writers from former English colonies.

Susan Griffin notes that perceptions of the relationship between humans and their environment, in the West, were gendered. Writing the preface to the second edition of her book, *Woman and Nature*, in 1999, she points out that assumptions about women being closer to nature than men are, as if, woven into the tapestry of European literature, their philosophical and scientific texts, and also their language (ix). Other critics like Gregory Garrard look critically at the binaries that define the relationship of men and women in terms of culture and nature: “men and masculinity are associated with culture, and culture is valued, whereas women and femaleness are associated with nature and both are devalued. These linked valuations lead to a hierarchy, which is then used to justify the domination of women, nature, and all those so associated” (48). Such associations have led to enforcing cultural stereotypes of women, even through literary representations.

English poets have very often, in their love poems, identified the beloved with nature and its beauty, or else have situated them in an ideal landscape from which they may derive, as Christopher Marlowe states in his pastoral, “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (1599) “delights” that “thy mind may move”. Marlowe situates his beloved in the midst of a natural landscape so that she might “live with [him] and be [his] love.” He makes her the source of the “pleasures” that “Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,/ Woods, or steepy mountain yields.” Similarly, Edmund Spenser in his sonnet 64 compares the intimate pleasures derived from the woman to the natural delights from “a garden of sweet flowers.” Even Shakespeare, in his Sonnet 18, asking “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” and then comparing: “Thou art more lovely and more temperate” and later in the poem, “But thy eternal summer shall not fade,” although may be ironical and critical of the courtly poetic tradition, nevertheless, acknowledges the prevalent tradition of comparing women’s beauties to that of nature.

Culturally, women were also thought to have more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles as mothers and nurturers, and their biological roles as procreators. Ancient mythologies of the West, beginning with the Greek, Gaia, or the Roman Cybele have contributed to the representation of earth as a mother because of its fertility and procreative abilities, likening it to a womb. Milton personifies nature as a mother in the lines from his masque, *Comus*:

Wherefore did Nature powre her bounties forth,  
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,  
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,  
Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,  
But all to please, and sate the curious taste? (lines 710-714)

and, in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, where he refers to fallen angels digging into the earth: “Rifl’d the bowels of their mother Earth/ For treasures better hid” (lines 687-688). William Cowper, similarly, refers to “Her beauty, her fertility” in his long poem *The Task* (Book 1, “The Sofa.” Lines 359-61). Another example may be seen in Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*:

Dear nature is the kindest mother still  
Though always changing, in her aspect mild  
From her bare bosom let me take my fill. (Canto 2, 325-28)

Metaphorically, we might then say, that English literature generally associated women with nature and landscape either as passive and nurturing, ‘mother Earth,’ or as a ‘virgin beauty.’ But new images of controlling and dominating nature emerged in Europe with explorations of new worlds and beginnings of colonialism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when white men began to plunder newly “discovered” lands and their resources, in the name of civilization. These “virgin” lands, as they called them, opened another view of nature (and the native woman) as passionate, wild and uncontrollable. Literature written during these times of colonial expansion often sexualized the conquered lands as feminine.

The well-known seventeenth century English poet, John Donne (1572-1631) whom John Dryden censured as “affecting the metaphysics” and Samuel Johnson dubbed, along with other poets like Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan and Abraham Cowley, as “metaphysical poets”, begins his “Eligie XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed,” with a warrior’s cry, addressing his lady as “foe.” But after a few lines he goes on to address her as “my America!” in lines that resonate the sixteenth century extension of British empire to American islands. Donne’s poem becomes an illustration of Western man’s feminization of nature during the period when English

explorers like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh were “discovering” new lands which were subsequently occupied by European rulers. These explorers were mostly, or more accurately, only men in the court of the “Virgin” Queen Elizabeth-I’s court, who felt the same desire for possession of the newly acquired land as of their “beloved’s” body. The well-known ecofeminist, Annette Kolodny in her landmark studies, *The Lay of the Land* (1975) exposed the ways in which representations of the female body as landscape is used as a rationale for subordinating both nature and women:

[...] not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification... first explorers to America virtually declared themselves ‘ravished with the pleasant land’ and described the new continent as ‘Paradise with all her Virgin Beauties.’ (4)

All of Donne’s elegies were written during his tenure at the Inns of Court. It is perhaps no accident that the quasi-imperial foray in which Donne himself participated—the military expedition against Cadiz in 1596 (often called the Islands Voyage)—was led by Earl of Essex and Francis Drake, two of the foremost petitioners for the Queen’s favour and regard. The following year he sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh and Essex hunting for Spanish treasure ships in the Azores. By 1580 Francis Drake had “girdled” the globe, and a few years later in 1583 Walter Raleigh laid claim to Newfoundland, “O America! my new-found-land” as Donne eagerly claims about the female body in his Elegie. Drake had petitioned and obtained a privateer’s license from Queen Elizabeth I, which was essentially a “license” to plunder “property”/ “new lands” already claimed by Spain. Donne could only be referring to such “licences” in desiring his beloved to “License my roving hands, and let them go,/ Before, behind, between, above, below.” This symbolic “intertwining of love and conquest” as Shankar Raman calls it in his essay, “Can’t Buy Me Love: Money, Gender and Colonialism in Donne’s Erotic Verse,” reveals “a fundamental unsureness regarding the object of desire” (136). As a volunteer on the military expedition, Donne sailed for material gain, as he also admits in his poem “The Calm”:

Whether a rotten state, and hope of gain,  
Or, to disuse me from the queasy pain  
Of being beloved, and loving, or the thrust  
Of honour...

“The worlds which were gradually opening up to the gaze of Renaissance explorers and cartographers,” in the words of Catherine Belsey “seemed the appropriate emblem of desire. They were vast, these territories, perhaps limitless

and enticing, rich and beautiful” (148). “Such beauteous state reveals,” as Donne says, drawing a parallel between the beloved’s body and the conquered landscape: “As from flowery meads th’hill’s shadow steals.” Not only does Donne invert the background metaphor likening the discovered land to the female body, but Raman says, “coarse cynicism” parodies the pious exultation of colonialism in early modern discovery narratives. Such metaphorical equating of colonial territory to female body by characterizing nature as a beauty, leads to stereotyping female gender, and concealing through flattery, its debasement.

Among the variously perceived images of nature as a benevolent mother, a withholding stepmother, a virgin or a seductress, the maternal imagery, perhaps, initially had a moral purpose of exercising restraint in resource management. Pliny of Rome (A.D. 23-79) warned in Book 33 of his *Natural History* against overmining, “We penetrate into her entrails, and seek for treasures... as though each spot we tread upon were not sufficiently bounteous and fertile for us!” (Web). Similar indictments were expressed hundreds of years later by Smohalla, a nineteenth century Native American of Columbia Basin tribes: “You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under [my mother’s] skin for her bones?” (Qtd. in Ruby and Brown 32). For the sixteenth century English explorer, however, the image of the matronly Mother Earth had become transformed and sexualized into the image of an untouched virgin land. Donne reframes the land as an object from which to seek pleasure: “To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use/ Are like Atlanta’s balls, cast in men’s views.” Similarly, the female body, seen as passive and ready to yield pleasure, becomes identified with the landscape when the poet evokes the image of “[A] Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,/ How blest am I in this discovering thee!” The reference to the “Mine,” “precious stones,” and the “discovering” reduces woman’s status to that of a commodity, or a piece of land to be possessed and colonized by men. A similar example of the Elizabethans’ perception of woman as a fertile land that yields pleasure may be noticed in the image of a sensuous Cleopatra that is evoked by Shakespeare’s Agrippa in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Royal wench!  
She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;  
He plowed her, and she cropped. (2. 2. 234-6)

The reference to woman as a personal possession becomes obvious in another poem by Donne, “The Sun Rising,” where the mistress is identified with “The Indias of spice and mine.” Further, there is also reference to the man’s claim to the mistresses’ body as much as to that of the colonized land: “She’s all state and all

princes, I.” The poem appears to suggest that when pursued by sexual love the female body becomes a natural source of riches. The woman, then like Ovid’s Daphne gets metamorphosed into symbolic “laurels” for the man. The mistress’ body becomes “productive” like the land and becomes his “possession” where his “seal shall be,” as king and master: “My kingdom, safest when with one man mann’d.” The irony, however, lies in the fact that, where Daphne had prayed to be saved from Apollo, the metamorphosis only worsened her situation. I would consider this transformation of the woman into a beautiful but muted “laurel” for the man, as more of a punishment for denying the man than an escape from rape. For Luce Irigaray, such mutism is a symptom of historical repression. Silencing women by metamorphosing them into metaphors of land and/or natural objects has made human and the male distanced from and superior to the nonhuman and the female respectively.

Men and women poets of the period, however, differ quite distinctly in their representation of the earth. Bill Phillips points out that Margaret Cavendish, an advocate for animals and the natural world, describes the tyranny of husbandry and mining and gives voice to nature’s grievances in her poem, “Earth’s Complaint”:

O nature, Nature! Hearken to my Cry,  
I’m Wounded sore, but yet I cannot Dye,  
My Children which from my womb did bear,  
Do dig my Sides, and all my Bowels tear,  
They Plow deep Furrows in my very Face,  
From Torment I have neither time nor place;  
No other element is so abus’d,  
Or by Mankind so Cruelly is us’d.

The implicit attitudes of a group of people, therefore, may be supposed to have an effect on the environment, which in effect influences human relationships, and power plays of class, colour, race and gender. To put it in the words of Berry Lopez: “The contours of subjectivity... are moulded by the configurations of the landscapes with which a person has been deeply associated.” (Qtd. in Gerrard). The canonical poet of the Romantic age, William Wordsworth has, for ages, been seen as an ardent champion for nature, who sought to ennoble and spiritualize nature, to idealize the portrayal of bucolic lives in his poems. Arnold has seen in him an upholder of the pastoral tradition. But as Garrard in his essay “Radical Pastoral?” (1996) notes, “any attempt to elevate the subjects of pastoral... any attempts to portray an ideal human ecology, can only be seen as mystification or distortion of reality” (457). A closer look at his poems reveal that Wordsworth

exploits the traditional cultural notion of women's subordinate position in the Nature/Culture divide, and transforms it into a transcendent idea. By locating them in an ideal pastoral landscape, he also situates these women in a culture that pushes them to the margins as muted, insensate objects that serve to perpetuate his own sense of self. We may note that in his poem "Solitary Reaper" the song of the reaper does not gain prominence because of some inherent merit that deserves a mention against the pastoral tradition. Rather, the repeated "I," suggests that it is the poet who features prominently in the poem, with the reaper only in the background:

I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;—  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

In "Nutting" again, the unidentified maiden is almost invisible. She is made manifest only towards the end as if in order to naturalize the temperament of the boy. The girl in "To a Highland Girl" becomes another object by being linked to a list of natural objects which she is supposed to embody and transcend. In fact it is the man in his poetry who seeks self-realization and gratification of his emotional and spiritual needs.

In the words of Marlon B Ross: "Wordsworth joins forces with the disembodied voices of tradition and reaction, for he subtly and quietly reasserts and solidifies the priority of male needs and desires.... and the female always serves that need as the object of his desire" (392). We might take a look at his "Lucy" poems to understand the fissures of gender defined by his perceptions of nature and its virtues that are criticized by a postcolonial Caribbean novelist like Jamaica Kincaid, in her suggestively titled novel, *Lucy*.

Lucy poems carry forward the tradition of projecting the girl child as an "object" closer to nature, bred and nurtured in nature in order to acquire its virtues of self-restraint, "Of mute insensate things," as he says in "Three Years She grew in sun and shower." Lucy, only three years old in this poem, shall be adopted and groomed by nature: "This child I to myself will take;/ She shall be mine, and I will make/ A lady of my own." But as Marlon Ross states: "The word lady makes little sense when dissociated from its social application, a form of status granted to women of a reputable class and chaste reputation" (399-400). "Grace," the poet says, "shall mould the maiden's form" to make her chaste, virgin and beautiful.

The prescription, as if, is to shun the “Strange fits of passion,” to refer to another of the Lucy poems. Passion could be only the “lover’s” prerogative, or perhaps of those people (it is not mentioned whether men or women) who live in “lands beyond the sea” as the poet draws a contrast between England, and “lands beyond the sea”:

I travell’d among unknown men  
In lands beyond the sea;  
Nor, England! Did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.

The implicit suggestion is clear: at home, in England, and, therefore, not overseas, is the cherished, virtuous lady:

Among thy mountains did I feel  
The joy of my desire;  
And she I cherish’d turn her wheel  
Beside an English fire”

What is most striking is that, like in his other poems mentioned above where we hardly get to see the girl, here too we never get to see Lucy, even though she is at the centre of the poems, and almost pervades the landscape that is described. In the 1815 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* the Lucy poems are arranged in two separate categories. “Strange fits of passion have I known,” “She dwelt among the untrodden ways,” and “I travell’d among unknown men,” are among “Poems Founded on the Affections”; “Three years she grew in sun and shower,” and “A slumber did my spirit seal” are with “Poems of Imagination.” The first poem in the series begins in a dream state. The poet-lover refers to the beloved as, “Fresh as a rose in June,” and then to his secret rendezvous, “Beneath an evening moon.” The rose, a traditional Western symbol of love and loyalty gets conjoined with something completely different, the moon, a traditional symbol of change, and therefore of inconstancy. The lover doubts the chastity of the lady as he gallops towards her cottage: “And all the while my eyes I kept/ On the descending moon.” And yet, the moon with its changing cycles also evokes ancient fertility myths, as also suggestions of “fits of passion” and madness and lunacy. The words “lunacy” and “lunatic,” after all, have their origin in the Roman goddess of moon, Luna.

Jean Rhys, the white Creole Caribbean writer from Dominica, responds to early explorers’ perception of the Caribbean landscape, and its women as wild, mad and mysterious. Her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) represents the pathologization by English gentlemen of Creole female who did not conform to

European ideological system, as mad. Situating her novel in the 1830s, Rhys gives evidence of the ways in which white women had internalized conceptions of themselves as closer to nature, and early explorers to the island conceived of it as an untainted paradise. Not only is Antoinette, the heroine, compared to the Jamaican landscape, but her garden in her family estate is given as Garden of Eden:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell.... Orchids flourished out of reach.... Twice a year octopus orchid flowered.... white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong..." (6)

The initial description of the tantalizing smell and the colours is reminiscent of early description of the islands by explorers who found the islands both sensuous and exotic, and wild and untamed. We might be reminded that Wordsworth had also evoked the Garden of Eden, original sin, and the fall of man by reference to the "orchard-plot" that the lover goes by before reaching "Lucy's cot." The poet-lover, no doubt, fears the loss of Lucy's chastity to the "strange fits of passion," and sexual betrayal. If "strange fits" ends with the possibility of Lucy's death: "O mercy! to myself I cried,/ If Lucy should be dead!" the other two poems in the series are like epitaphs to someone who is already dead. Lucy's maidenly nun-like existence: "A maid whom there were none to praise,/ And very few to love," her elusiveness: "A violet by a mossy stone/ Half hidden from the eye!" and finally her death serve as morbid inspiration for the poet: "she is in her grave, and, O!/ The difference to me!"

Writing much later in the nineteenth century, Robert Browning, in his dramatic monologue "Porphyria's Lover" (1836) also relates the story of a woman who brings in passion from the wild nature outside to be killed in the arms of the lover:

But passion sometimes would prevail,  
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain  
A sudden thought of one so pale  
For love of her, and all in vain:  
So, she was come through wind and rain.

Browning perhaps refers to an incident that may have taken place in 1818. Nevertheless, the poem does reveal a perverted mindset that would permit the "lady" a fuller expression of her innermost desires only at the risk of her life. The form of the dramatic monologue also does not permit the woman a voice, as is

also the case in “My Last Duchess.” Wordsworth’s Lucy also, in fact, has no voice except in the deleted 1799 MS version of “Strange fits of passion” where there is a reference to “Her laughter light.”

Women writers, like Jamaica Kincaid from former English colonies, question these ideological impositions on women, and the self-assumed superiority of English men. Kincaid, a native Caribbean writer born in Antigua in 1949, when Antigua was under British dominion, asserts that virtues associated with English women do not hold true with the Caribbeans. Her character, Lucy speaks of a mother [read mother country, as the colonizing country, England] who has internalized English patriarchal ideals, and now imposes them upon the young daughter as “a goddess from an old book” (36) making reference to the tyrannical god from the Old Testament, with only the gender reversed. Kincaid’s eponymous character, who is bitter, angry, full of self-doubt, and bold in her expression of such doubts, may be understood as An ironic inversion of the Wordsworthian Lucy. In opposition to Wordsworth’s Lucy who was subject to male voyeuristic gaze, Lucy Josephine Potter, the narrator and central character of the novel, and an exile from her native colonized island, is herself a voyeur. She has a voice, unlike her Romantic prototype, loud in its opposition to any kind of domination, whether physical or ideological. Kincaid’s Lucy, like her author, is from Antigua, an island politically colonized, and geographically drained of its natural resources by the English. Tourist guides, and even websites, describe the island as heaven on earth—the garden of Eden. Whereas, Wordsworth’s ideal English landscape had been threatened by the rising tourism industry and growing industrialization and urbanization, Kincaid’s Antigua had been plundered of its natural resources. Kincaid’s Lucy is deliberately shifted from a supposedly unspoiled rural landscape to an unnamed Western, metropolitan world to dramatize her encounter with Western ideals of chaste femininity. We cannot say for sure, and yet we may presume that Lucy Josephine Potter is what the nineteenth century English Lucy would perhaps have turned out to be if she had been allowed a voice. The Caribbean Lucy radically subverts Wordsworth’s feminine ideal. David Yost suggests: “Where Wordsworth’s Lucy lives in implied harmony with nature, Kincaid’s Lucy imagines walking through a field of daffodils dragging a scythe, in order to kill every single one; where the Lucy poem ‘I travell’d among unknown men’ features a narrator who loves England ‘more and more’ the farther he goes from it, Lucy features a narrator who could scarcely hate England any more than she already does” (154).

Kincaid testifies to the profound ideological impact of English Romantic poetry on women from the colonies. Lucy remembers an incident from her childhood when the colonial curricular indoctrination of the English language

and values, very much like in India, had forced her to memorize and recite the poem “Daffodils.” Her angry response is to the fact that daffodils were not native to Antigua, and she would not see the flowers until she was nineteen years old, and in exile. Her mother is made in the image of the Mother Nature in the Lucy poems, and accordingly is tyrannical in imposing English ideals of chaste femininity. She dresses the daughter in the image of a young girl in a picture that she possessed, a white girl against an English landscape, like the one in Wordsworth’s poems. In conformation to Western ideals, Lucy’s school is also suggestively named “Queen Victoria’s Girls’ School” (18). Lucy’s departure from the island signals an attempt to escape the rigid and oppressive laws. Ironically, although, the same ideals come back to haunt Lucy in the image of a surrogate mother, her mistress in the host country, Mariah, a name that evokes the Virgin Mary. Mary, also, not coincidentally happens to be the name of Wordsworth’s wife. The maid in Mariah’s house reminds us of the image in which the modern Lucy is made: “like a nun... so pious it made [the maid] feel at once sick to her stomach and sick with pity” (11). There is a reference to some unnamed “Great Lakes” in the novel, which Lucy visits with Mariah and her family, indicative of Kincaid’s indictment of the Romantic Lake poet:

From my room I could see the lake. I had read of this lake in geography books, had read of its origins and its history, and now to see it up close was odd, for it looked so ordinary, gray, dirty, unfriendly, not a body of water to make up a story about. (35)

Lucy finds the bestowing of such glory on so insignificant a body of water as ridiculous. She also finds equally ridiculous Mariah and her friends, who come to the lakes only for picnicking on holidays and show concern about the vanishing marshlands, like Wordsworth does in his book, *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*. All of them had houses built in these marshlands, and Lucy sarcastically questions their environmental concerns: “Well, what used to be here before this house we are living in was built?” (72).

Lucy has three dreams in the course of the novel, in which she is first chased by daffodils, then by Mariah’s husband Lewis, and finally by thousands of people on horseback. The dreams serve as a reminder of the ‘double-bind’ of her female subjectivity to a history of slavery and colonization. Her ancestors, like Wordsworth’s Lucy, had lost their tongue to their patriarchal masters. Lucy learns towards the end, that “taste is not the thing to seek out in a tongue, how it makes you feel—that is the thing” (44). The incongruity of her name Lucy, which evokes the image of an English womanhood “couched in assumptions of fairness, purity, frailty and

domesticity” with her black Caribbean womanhood and “its presumed closeness to nature... and unbridled sexuality” (Kempadoo 165) points to the partial vision of English writers, and the white male authors’ contradictory response of scorn and proprietorial longing towards the landscape and women of the colonies.

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## **The Environmental Turn in Literary Theory and Criticism and the “Truth of Ecology”: Understanding Ecocriticism**

**Bedika Bhattacharjee**

In his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1973), William Rueckert made an observation that “individually and collectively we have been through so many great and original minds that one wonders what could possibly be left for experimental criticism to experiment with just now in 1976” (Rueckert 105-106). His observation in the essay might lead one to think or question whether ecocriticism can be understood merely as an “experimental criticism”, or has it some deeper and far greater significance to the study of literature<sup>1</sup>. Commenting on the production and reception of critical theory, Rueckert says that the process involved is so quick and sudden that “if you do not get in on the very beginning of a new theory, it is all over with before you can even think it through, apply it, write it up, and send it out for publication” (Rueckert 106). The process or fact of experiment with theory in this sense seems an unending and unavoidable fact. However, Rueckert emphasizes the point that the procedure steeped in critical experiment should largely be based on the point of what he calls “relevance”. Regarding his experiment with ecology and literature Rueckert observes:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. (107)

Rueckert’s experiment with literature and ecology was based on the relevance of ecology in any sort of discussion which, more than an experiment, could be reckoned with as a fact or an inevitable reality being unearthed, than an innovation in the “experimental” sense of criticism. The study of literature and ecology can also be said to be a truth of all times not necessarily to do with a specific period of time worth to its popularity. By having found a place in Peter Barry’s the second edition of *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002) ecocriticism entered the literary forum as a method of critical enquiry along with the dominant “experimental” theories of the day as structuralism, deconstruction, feminism and so on and so forth<sup>2</sup>. Having said and accepted things as such it must be borne in mind that ecology is a truth of the biosphere, and the truth of

ecology cannot be relegated or recognized only within the parameters and experiments of critical domain. Notably, ecocriticism as a method of critical enquiry or analysis has to be understood with the fact of the “truth of ecology” that it inevitably embodies. It does undoubtedly go beyond the experiments of critical theory and can hardly be separated from a text or from any understanding of a text. Such an ecocritical understanding of texts encompasses dimensions which are as varied and complex as the biosphere. The study of ecology is importantly the study of relationships, of the sense of interdependence amongst different entities in the biosphere, including the miniature of species to the largest ever animals and plants. In *Mankind and Mother Earth* (1978) Arnold Toynbee asserted that consciousness mostly associated with human beings is in some sense a product or is shaped by the biosphere. He affirmed that although human beings apart from the physical biosphere is also shaped by the spiritual sphere, in its consciousness of spirituality and the sense of right and wrong is s/he related to the biosphere. To quote him:

Yet human nature, including human consciousness and conscience, as well as human physique, is also located in the biosphere, and we have no evidence that either individual human beings or mankind have, or could have, any existence beyond their life in the biosphere.(7)

Since human beings are located and rooted in the biosphere, every actions and thoughts they hold are likely to be shaped by the physical atmosphere to a great extent. In this sense it will not be wrong to say that any text, theory, literary or non-literary is liable to be affected by the biosphere or the environment as such. The study of the relation between literature and ecology which is termed as ecocriticism in literary theory and criticism in that sense cannot be dissociated from any aspect of literary study.

On the study of literary theory and criticism it will not be insignificant to refer to what Jonathan Culler once remarked:

If the observers and belligerents of recent critical debate could agree on anything, it would be that contemporary critical theory is confusing and confused. Once upon a time it might have been possible to think of criticism as a single activity practiced with different emphases. The acrimony of recent debate suggests the contrary.(17)

Culler’s observation to some extent can be taken as a reaction against theory. But the relevance of critical theory, any critical theory for that matter, in the discussion or interpretation of a text cannot be sidelined just by the mere fact of

its being in a state of confusion as cited above. The present essay does not undermine the importance of critical theory, but it attempts to highlight the point that ecology is a fact, a truth in itself, a phenomenon which is inseparable from any text in the sense that the text as such is a product of the biosphere and hence it indulges in a relational paradigm which is the study of ecology. It is this truth of literature and ecology that needs to be accredited rather than be regarded as merely another movement in the line of experimental criticism. It is probably for this very reason why ecocriticism entails diverse methods of analysis and criticism.

In 1962 appeared Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring* with its voice against the use of DDT and other such harmful pesticides. This turn in thought was reflected in literature as well<sup>3</sup>. Almost about the same time appeared Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), another influential book, focusing on the negative impact of technology in the environment. In fact, almost all the disciplines of thought and knowledge had addressed the issue of environmental degradation long before ecocriticism as a term was coined in literary theory and criticism to address the issue. Ecocriticism as a movement in literature was ultimately concretized with *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in the year 1996. The introduction of the book defined ecocriticism as "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). It cannot be denied that ecocriticism saw its emergence in literary theory guided by the ever growing destruction of the environment and it was as a response to such devastation that literary critics felt the necessity to address the most pertinent issue of the time. However, the appropriate frame for the study could not be concretized as such. The relationship between literature and the environment has been marked at different stratum. In attempting to analyze the framework of ecocriticism we see that a huge body of discussion in ecocriticism concentrates at times upon the biographical analysis of the poet/author concerned and is also at times liable to ideologies and propagandas. Ecocritics have very often tried to unearth the personal environmental concern in non-fictions such as essays, diaries, letters, pamphlets and so on. Even in an ecocritical analysis of poems the biography of the poet and certain environmentalist ideologies and propaganda inform the ecocritical analysis of the texts concerned. In this sense we see how Jonathan Bate, in *Romantic Ecology, Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), discusses most of the poems of William Wordsworth which he says were travelogues, corresponding to Dr. Johnson's emphasis that "writing always has an end"<sup>4</sup>. Ecocritical analysis and approaches to a text were also grounded in the representation of nature, biographical criticism and the theoretical phase (Glotfelty xxiv) which drew upon from the environmental movements like deep ecology,

ecofeminism, eco-phenomenology and eco-socialism, movements that emerged long before ecocriticism came into the literary scenario. It must be mentioned here that during the inclusion of ecocriticism in the Modern Language Association, insistence was made by its initiators that ecocriticism should not restrict itself to mere reference to nature and the green which was one of the reasons why certain critics were quite reluctant to include the field in the association<sup>5</sup>. And so at different times and at different phases several new versions or ecocritical approaches have been adopted, and the field of ecocriticism as such was developed in order to study the relationship between literature and the physical environment in its various forms and possibilities.

In due course of time and in keeping pace with the changing circumstances and conditions, methods for analyzing a text have changed, but the “truth of ecology” that there is an inherent relation between human and the non-human world cannot be denied under any changing conditions and circumstances. Literature in its varied aspects has addressed this truth. In the present discussion the term “truth of ecology” has been borrowed from Dana Phillips’ use of it and insistence over it in her essay “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and the Truth of Ecology” (1999). In the essay she highlights the reaction of certain ecocritics towards the use of theory and criticism in ecocriticism:

The nature of representation is one of the chief concerns of literary theory, but the preponderance of theory is something else ecocritics dislike about current literary studies. Many of them do not want its help. This is unfortunate, in part because complaints about literary theory and its rumored excesses were a central feature of neoconservative rhetoric during the cultural debates of the 1980s and early 1990s...still, the prevailing dislike of theory among ecocritics often seems like an expression of impatience not only with theory but with any intellectual activity entailing traffic in abstractions... (578)

Strongly emphasizing Umberto Eco’s remark in his essay “Travels in Hyperreality”, Dana Phillips observes that there lies a consistent effort to see on where the “truth of ecology” lies and how literature does addresses this truth. Ecocriticism as a method of critical enquiry is well suited and correct enough for the present day context<sup>6</sup> of global warming and climate change. At the same time it is also not sufficient enough to assign ecocriticism only to a place of critical enquiry based on the present environmental degradation, for the “the truth of ecology” exceeds time and place and is a fact that is associated with existence of life on earth. It is perhaps for this reason why Gilbert White’s letters constitute the

first entry of *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English* (1990). On the letters, the editors record an entry marked by Mark Daniel in his 1983 collection, *The Essential Gilbert White of Selbourne* in which he says that “White had no sense of responsibility to something called ‘nature’” (Finch 25). If the sense of responsibility is largely meant as an address to the harm done to the environment or nature by man and technology, then this sense might be explicitly absent as Daniel observes from White’s letters over nature. But what is important to note is that the sense of relationship with nature persists and that makes it the first record on nature writing. It is in this sense of relationship that the “truth of ecology” is embedded. In responding to the technological impact of the human world upon the non-human world resulting in ozone layer depletion, rise in pollution, etc. ecocriticism necessarily constitutes a study of the sense of relationship between literature and the physical world which it tries to discern in various ways, being embedded in various dimensions and complexities.

The most commonly understood meaning or synonym for ecocriticism has been “nature”, and ecocriticism involves a good amount of commitment in its way to protect the environment or nature taking the field of study from critical analysis to activism<sup>7</sup> as well. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976) defines nature as “the most complex word in the language” (219). He further associates this “complex word” with ‘quality’, ‘inherent force’ and the “material world” with the prospect of both excluding the human as well as including it as such (219). The general understanding of the term nature can also be borne from the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry on it as:

The whole universe and every created, not artificial, thing...the forces that control the events of the physical world...the typical qualities and characteristics of a person or an animal...the basic qualities or character of a thing. (Crowther 774)

The entry on nature given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* bears close resemblance to Raymond Williams’ definition or understanding over nature. It is also interesting to note that Bonamy Dobree in “Nature Poetry in the Early Eighteenth Century” begins the essay with the remark that the term ‘nature’ could have possibly implied “at least seventeen things” to someone belonging to the eighteenth century (Murray 13). It is important to note that ‘Nature’ which constitutes the very ground of ecocriticism can be associated with various traits and understanding. Robert Finch and John Elder say regarding the genre of nature writing that:

Since World War II the genre has become an increasingly significant and popular one, producing some of the finest nonfiction prose of our time. Yet too often it continues to be identified with or limited to landscape descriptions, accounts of animal behavior, or treatises on “environmental issues”, rather than being acknowledged as a literary form in its own right (*Nature Writing the Tradition in English*, 21).

Ecocriticism as a critical tool has hardly been limited to mere descriptions or representation of nature and a glorification of the green in a literary text. It became a consistent effort in the several conferences of ecocriticism to broaden its area from mere description of nature and address the deeper complexities pertaining to the relation between environment and literature<sup>8</sup>. For instance, Scott Slovic in the 1999 assembly of the MLA Roundtable defined ecocriticism as “the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world” (in *Coupe* 160). Slovic’s reference to texts “oblivious of the nonhuman world” suggests that an ecocritical study does not merely mean a study of those texts that explicitly and very overtly refers to the trees and plants and wilderness narratives. It opens ground for deeper penetration into the obscure and complex understanding of the relations between human and the non-human world.

Suellen Campbell in her essay “The Land and Language of Desire” stressing upon the sense of connectivity between the human world and the external world observes:

Theory sees everything as textuality, as networks of signifying systems of all kinds...but ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world—the nonhuman part—exists apart from us and our language (Campbell 133-134).

It can rightly be pointed out here that ecocriticism being a part of an ecological analysis cannot fail to understand and take into account the complexities and varieties of relationships that exists between the external world and the human world. Such relation usually tends to constitute that part of the inexpressible language and gestures of desire and other motives and actions of humans which are deeply rooted with the land, with the non-human world. In other words, there lies the necessity of literature to address that part of the non-human world which tends to build the human world. It needs also to be noted here that it is hard to find a text barren of the external world. The external world which is for that

matter a study of ecology had always made a presence active at times, and at other times passive in literature. This presence can rightly be called or said to be manifested in a relational paradigm. Hardly has a text established itself on a barren soil bereft of the sense of land, place, time and consciousness of it. Referring to the kind of relationship that Aldo Leopold has shown in *A Sand County Almanac*, Richard L. Knight says in *Aldo Leopold and the Ecological Conscience* (2002): “Because we evolved from nature, we still carry a part of nature in our hearts, in our souls, and in our heads. This is where humans feel their relationship with and responsibility to the land” (35). It is not necessary for a text to overtly address the issue of environmental degradation for it be categorised as an ecocritical text, it is rather in the various possibilities of relationship between the literary text and the external world that ecocriticism tries to discern ecological concerns or consciousness in it. In other words it will not be wrong to say that ecocriticism attempts to discern and decipher the “truth of ecology” in a literary text as such.

Ecocriticism being a small part of the big discourse on ecology and environment is full of complexities and ambiguities, which are perhaps the reason why ecocriticism still lacks a proper definition of its own. Tracing ecocriticism in nature writing and environmental programs its history can be traced long before the term itself was concretized<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, it should be remembered here that a poet or an author has his/her own world and a way of dealing with it. It is necessary to understand it as far as ecology is concerned. Erich Auerbach has said in *Mimesis* that:

Delight in physical existence is everything to them...they bewitch us and ingratiate themselves to us until we live with them in the reality of their lives; so long as we are reading or hearing the poems, it does not matter whether we know that all this is only legend, ‘make-belief’... and this ‘real’ world into which we are lured exists for itself, contains nothing but itself... (13)

The “truth of ecology” cannot be confined in theoretical parameters, ecocriticism as a tool in literary theory and criticism is just an attempt to address the issue of the growing environmental degradation. The “truth of ecology” is a fact that transcends any linguistic, cultural, philosophical, regional, national and theoretical parameters. Every single entity in the universe supposedly falls within this matrix, and a literary text cannot be an exception to it. It will not be wrong to say that a text is something that is born from and will end in the web of ecology and here again lies the “truth of ecology”. Given the kind of discussion that is going on the environment at the present time, any reader can be an ecocritical

minded reader, trying to look for ecocritical concerns in texts and any writer or poet can deliberately write on environmental consciousness for they constitute the milieu of the present discourse. It has been already established how canons effect modes of reading and productions of it as well. Frank Kermode in *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (2004) says how “political propaganda”(15) even went into the building of the cannon. He says “questions of literary value were for the most part set aside as without relevance or even derided as demonstrable nonsense” (15).

Imposition of certain ideologies and propagandas on a text is palpable. It undoubtedly sets new parameters and points of interpretation. But the point, however, is, can ecocriticism be really situated and contextualized in terms of what Rueckert remarked as “experimental criticism” or can ecocriticism be considered containing within its realm a much larger dimension and parameter that is true of all times and applicable to every context? Considering the developments in ecocriticism right from the time of its inception till the present day the ecocritical propensity for “truth of ecology” becomes visible. The different kinds of approaches in ecocriticism that discern environmental concerns and consciousness in texts even from periods when ecocriticism was not a technical term is suggestive of the comprehensiveness of the field. It will not be wrong to say that ecocritics are trying to situate ecological issues as something which is quite inherent in the text as soul is to body, very true to what Rueckert has said that, “I am not just interested in transferring ecological concepts to the study of literature, but in attempting to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision” (115). The “truth of ecology” necessarily lies in seeing literature “inside the context of an ecological vision” and ecocriticism cannot necessarily disregard the truth.

Interestingly, the various environmental movements like deep ecology, ecofeminism, ecosocialism from which ecocriticism has imbibed a lot of content, puts a lot of emphasis on the relational paradigm of ecology. To begin with, deep ecology as a world view constitutes itself in not only the possibility of and for human or environment as such but as Arne Naess advocates the “relational-total-field image” (Pojman 147). Such a “relational-total-field image” encompasses totality in spiritual and holistic terms. Ecofeminism, another such world view, is built round the web of dominance of one by the other (dominance of environment by human as with dominance of women by men, and here ecofeminism associates its relation with ecology). Eco-phenomenology, an area in ecocriticism which still needs a long way to go in order to establish itself as a definite approach, is particularly an attempt to establish the fact of how philosophy can contribute or play a role in the protection of the environment. Eco-socialism searches the root cause of

domination of nature by man in the very fact of man's intrinsic nature of dominance which initially begins with the human dominating the other human. And this results in domination of people of different castes, colour and race and ultimately of the domination of nature which hardly has a voice to repel such dominations. Eco-socialism believes in a proper understanding of the act of domination in order to understand the domination done to nature or environment as such, that it is this intrinsic attitude of dominance rooted in man which gives an impetus to dominate nature as such. All these approaches to the environment which ultimately have become ecocritical approaches in literary theory and criticism are justifiable in their own sense. They establish and attach a 'point of view' to ecocriticism but what is most important is that all these approaches and world beliefs can be said to be bound up by the fact of ecology or the truth of ecology in terms of its relational paradigm. They may all address differently different issues almost at times also to do with the ego-consciousness, but in analyzing the ego they necessarily address it in association with the eco. The very scientific definition of 'ecology' implies relation<sup>10</sup> and any existing body for that matter does not stand on its own in a void. It is a summation of relation existing amongst its immediate components and components even far detached from it as well. Michel Foucault in his essay "Texts/Contexts: Of Other Spaces" insists that "we live in a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (23).

It has always been that for a new theory or a point of view to emerge it must necessarily be built up by crushing the existing theoretical paradigm or point of view which Rueckert has termed "experimental" in criticism. It must be remembered that the theoretical domain of ecocriticism with its vast field of practices and approaches entails the "truth of ecology" that goes beyond the boundaries of "experimental criticism". In other words, to make a statement that ecology is at the heart of any literary text which ecocriticism tries to decipher will not be false all together. The "truth of ecology" occupies such a position in any literary text that it can hardly be dissociated from the text. The ever increasing field of ecocriticism these days perhaps offers more challenging and newer ways to discern the "truth of ecology" in a text than before. We see today how literary critics from different parts of the world are engaging themselves with ecocriticism or ecocritical theory in order to discern ecological consciousness in any text from antiquity and contemporary times as thereby promoting environmental consciousness. Years ago, T. S. Eliot said in *To Criticize the Critic* (1961):

There are, to be sure, statements with which I no longer agree; there are views which I maintain with less firmness of conviction than when I

first expressed them, or which I maintain only with important reservations; there are statements the meaning of which I no longer understand. (14).

This is something that he remarked in 1961, years much after his inception of ‘objective correlative’, ‘tradition and individual talent’ “dissociation of sensibility” etc. Now if something almost similar is said by Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell and the rest advocates and founders of ecocriticism years later that would perhaps mean an end of ecocriticism but it cannot for certain mean an end for the ‘truth of ecology’. This means that the “truth of ecology” which ecocriticism encompasses is much larger than ecocriticism as a theory has or can encompass.

### Notes

- 1 The essay is included in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.
- 2 While including ecocriticism in his second edition of *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002), Peter Barry makes an observation to the effect that although the book is the first amongst the many to have included or mentioned ecocriticism, “it is still distinctly on the academic margins” he further says that “the movement still does not have a widely known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures” (248).
- 3 Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (2000) builds an ecocritical approach to literature based on different positions. All these positions, namely, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, etc. arise from the ‘Beginnings: Pollution’ (the first chapter of the book), which draws upon its roots from Rachel Carson’s *The Silent Spring* (1962). Garrard claims Carson’s book to be the “founding text of modern environmentalism” (2).
- 4 Regarding the ‘representation’ of nature and biographical account of the author Jonathan Bate in his book, *Romantic Ecology, Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) posits that Wordsworth is known to people for two facts one “that he wrote about daffodils and that he lived in Lake District, and these two facts would seem to suggest that he was a ‘nature poet’. But some of the most eminent literary critics of our time have believed that Wordsworth was not a nature poet, or that there is no such thing as nature, or that if there is such a thing and Wordsworth was interested in it, than that interest was very suspect on political grounds.” (4) Bate himself in his analysis gave importance to the historical circumstances and the role that imagination played in it. Right in the introduction

of the book Bate supports Dr. Johnson's claim that writing has an end, says that critics always read text selectively in order to serve their own 'purpose' (5) hence much of the meaning and understanding of texts bears with the fact on how we want to perceive it.

- 5 Scott Slovic records how he had received a letter from Martha Banta, editor of the journal *PMLA* saying that environmental studies is "soft" and is characterized as "hug-the-tree stuff" (Coupe 161). It was believed as in Slovic's own words:

Environmental literature is generally devoted to be almost entirely an "Americanist" issue, and the Board feared being taken one more time around the track, with a flood of essays about Emerson, Thoreau etc, (Coupe 161).

- 6 In *On Poetry and Poets* (1957) T. S. Eliot says:

Many years ago I pointed out that every generation must provide its own literary criticism; for as I said, 'each generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses for art' (104). The observation made by Eliot years ago stands very still to the present day context of environmental degradation; the response to which has been concretized as ecocriticism. In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* Glotfelty has remarked that "the most pressing contemporary issue of all" have been "the global environmental crisis". And further insist that "until very recently there has been no sign that the institution of literary studies has even been aware of the environmental crisis" (xvi). Under such light the general understanding of ecocriticism bears light only to do with the "environmental crisis". But the present essay will insist on the fact that first it is important to understand ecology as a phenomenon, a phenomenon pertinent to poetry which has to do with relation as such. In doing so, nevertheless, it will fail to address the degradation of the environment and a feeling for awareness can possibly be promoted by a sense of relation with the environment.

- 7 Pramod K. Nayar in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2010) observes in regards to ecocriticism that it "focuses on the link between literature and nature. Its emphasis on a practice of reading that pays attention to social inequalities as linked to gender oppression and environmental exploitation turns theory into praxis, locating 'reading' within an activist framework." (253).
- 8 See *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2000) edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace in which such an effort has been stated in details.
- 9 Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) says regarding the history of ecocriticism that:

As the publication dates for some of the essays in this anthology substantiate, individual literary and cultural scholars have been developing ecologically informed criticism and theory since the seventies; however, unlike their disciplinary cousins mentioned previously, they did not organize themselves into an identifiable group (xvi-xvii)

- 10 Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology, Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) quotes in details the scientific definition of ecology provided by Ernst Haeckel as “by ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature—the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its organic and to its inorganic environment” (36). By its scientific definition ecology necessarily meant the study of the relations existing between organic and inorganic substances.

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## Cultural Ecotone and Transformation of the Human Geography in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

Asis De

It is by now a well-accepted historico-cultural reality that the imperial and mercantile aggression of European colonial enterprise has ruthlessly altered not only the bioregions of the colonized countries, but made substantial changes in the human geography on the planet as well. With the end of the twentieth century, more specifically saying, with the end of the European colonialism, the world has witnessed several historical changes in the value-systems, perceptions, thoughts and attitudes, which one may fairly assemble under the single umbrella term: 'postcolonialism'. Ecological consciousness could probably be seen as one of the major products of the post-colonial time. Apart from the scientific study of the relationship between the bio-organism and the environment, ecology now-a-days includes new disciplines like 'social ecology' or 'human ecology' which insist mostly on the changes in the 'human' environment. In his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Timothy Morton argues:

Ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling and solar power—and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans... It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism.... It has to do with concepts of space and time.... It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (2)

Taking this view as the basic premise I would like to argue that an ecological consciousness affects numerous aspects of human life, culture and community. Morton's opinion sounds quite proverbial when he says: "Human beings *are* each others' environment" (4; original emphasis). The interconnectedness and coexistence of human communities and cultures produce diverse landscapes, which can well be compared with the diversity of human geography and the notion of the 'ecotone' in ecology.

The idea of an 'ecotone' is primarily inspired by an ecological consciousness that tends to see the earthly paradigm as a cluster of 'biomes'<sup>1</sup> or specific climatic regions with particularly unique sets of living organisms and their biotic and abiotic environments. Environmental scientists like to see an 'ecotone' as a space that exists on the very 'border-edge' of two or more ecosystems. So, an ecotone is essentially an ecological frontier, where the most crucial reality is that of the border. But at the same time it should be equally clear that an ecotone is not only a space

of demarcation and separation, but also a space of transition and transformation. It is a contact zone between two ecological biomes, or natural communities, where element of both intermingle and coexist. In recent past, the concept of ecotone has found a wider range of application: for example, from the world of environmental studies or landscape geography to a broader space of human geography. Florence R. Krall, in her book *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* (1994), comments:

The ecotone, which, in the natural world provides a dynamic interchange, becomes exceedingly complex as a cultural metaphor and may represent a barrier that blocks some people from their rightful place in the scheme of things (5).

She seems to emphasize the idea of a ‘cultural’ ecotone, where diverse politico-economic and socio-cultural spaces exist side by side, though the relation between them is determined by a power discourse. To Krall, such ‘cultural’ ecotones may be seen as not only a ‘border’, but a ‘barrier’ that prevents the weaker section of human population from enjoying ‘their rightful place’. Invariably the politico-economic hierarchy affects the socio-cultural existence of the weaker human population. Mark Sutton and E. N. Anderson find ‘cultural ecotone’ as “a more culturally productive place where ideas and goods could intermingle” (47). It is the contact zone where the cultural spaces of two different communities of human beings with diverse socio-cultural realities meet and merge. This is the zone of intercultural encounter where the seeds of transculturality germinate and grow over several historical periods. This paper attempts an interdisciplinary pairing of ecocritical interest in human geography with postcolonial concerns with culture, language and representation to interconnect each discourse in new and exciting ways. In the Indian context, the tribal people living in small villages inside the forest through the ages face intercultural encounter with the clearing of the forest to create agricultural field or mining industry. Here the notion of ‘ecotone’ is purely the product of human socio-economic activity.

This paper deals with the idea of cultural ecotone with reference to Mahasweta Devi’s novel on an Indian tribal community — *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* which has been translated into English from the original Bengali narrative *Chotti Munda Ebong Taar Teer* (1980) by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 2002, and alternately relates to the relevant premises of cultural ecology to point out the changes and transformation of the tribal community depicted in the narrative. Devi’s novel spans from British Colonial rule to the Independent India of the 1970s and examine the place of a tribal community, namely the Munda people<sup>2</sup>, within the human

geography of the Indian nation. The life and culture of these tribal people living in the contact/ friction zone of two different cultural spaces — the indigenous and the non- indigenous, between the field and the forest, between the feudal system of agrarian economy and the fast expanding industrial (coal and mica mines) economy, have gradually ‘changed’ under the impact of cultural imperialism through the colonial and postcolonial periods. How the question of cultural ecotone is so important in relation to the changing scenario of human geography in the Indian tribal context and how this change has been represented in a literary production are my basic points of investigation in this paper. In response to the vexing issue of tribal transformation even in the postcolonial scenario, my primary observation rests on the fact that the tribal societies in India are still considered as the ‘other’ compared to the mainstream Indian population, and thus are socio-culturally ‘different’ from the non-tribal Indians. Even in the Indian Constitution this ‘otherness’ has been acknowledged: after the 89<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Constitution (28<sup>th</sup> September, 2003) an Act has been made for the establishment of a separate Commission for the welfare of the tribal people in India, commonly known as the NCST (National Commission for the Scheduled Tribes). As per the Statistical Profile of the NCST, the essential characteristics for a community to be identified as Scheduled Tribes are – a) indications of primitive traits b) distinctive culture c) shyness of contact with the community at large d) geographical isolation and e) backwardness<sup>3</sup>. All of these five features emphasize the Indian tribal people’s isolation from the mainstream Indian population and their retention of ethnic community-culture. The last two characteristics, in an oblique way, insist on Florence Krall’s idea of the ‘barrier’ associated with a ‘cultural ecotone’. Moreover, the tribal Indians, also known as the ‘*Adivasi*’— people of hunter-gatherer community, are usually considered as ‘primitive’ by the mainstream Indians<sup>4</sup>.

The tribal cultural space of the Munda people in Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* could well be seen as a potential site of transformation, with questions such as : how are the Munda people and their villages changing with time? How has the tribal cultural space been affected by the profit-oriented market economy both during the British Raj and even in independent India? How are the Munda heroes with their bow and arrow being transformed into cheap labourers of the local moneylenders and working as farming labourers with axe and spades? In her novel Mahasweta Devi weaves the story of a legendary Munda archer named Chotti, who becomes a far-sighted, wise leader of his community in due course of time by his acts of struggle and resistance against the odds thrust on them by the more powerful ‘outside’ world of the non-tribals. At the very beginning of the narrative, Devi depicts Chotti Munda’s forefather Purti Munda to migrate ‘from

Chaibasha to Palamau' with his wife and kids, after being evicted by 'many kinds of people—White-Bengali-Bihari' as the land under his home happened to yield 'Stone Age arms' (*CM* 1) quite alike his earlier evictions due to the availability of mica or coal underneath his house. This nomadic movement after multiple evictions from home due to the underground availability of minerals/ valuables apparently may seem to be a normal activity of tribal mobility, but in reality the Munda people are not nomadic. The Mundas are basically hunters dwelling in villages near/inside the forest and also living on meagre agricultural activities. Purti Munda's mobility is emblematic of the gradual shrinking of the tribal world. The narrator reads the mind of Purti Munda: "His Mundari world will shrink. He doesn't want anything, after all. A small village. All the locals adivasi, worshippers of god Haram. Followers of a priest, the pahan" (*CM* 1). Such self-sought confinement in an essentially tribal cultural space is a matter of relief for the peace-loving, forest-dwelling tribals: a border is intended. The non-tribal 'Diku' Indians and the tribals have mutually maintained such 'border' over centuries, though during and after the colonial period till today, this border is ever being stretched to the margin taking the '*Adivasi*' people at a corner, and producing hatred (for the tribals) and distrust (for the non-tribals) on either sides.

Historically, in most parts of pre-colonial India, the tribal people were notionally part of the 'unknown frontier' of the respective states where the rule of the regional reign in fact did not extend. They became soft target of the colonial rulers only when there is a question of harvesting natural resources like minerals, coal or the forest itself. Though Devi's narrative actually starts after the Ulgulan rebellion (1899-1900) led by the Munda hero Birsa Majhi (1874-1900), the devastation of the tribal world started squarely a century ago, in the last decade of the eighteenth century: along with ravaging of the forests of Bengal Presidency and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 by Lord Cornwallis, adivasi territories were designated to local feudal lords (Zamindars) for the purpose of revenue collection by the British. The Munda people, very much like some other tribes living in the eastern part of India started losing 'their' forests and the tiny pieces of land they used to cultivate came under revenue system. The cultural space of the non-tribal 'outer' world invaded the hitherto undisturbed tribal cultural space directly and prepared the contact/friction zone of intercultural encounter with a third deadly system of bonded labour. The local Zamindars/ landowners forced the tribals to work in their private lands all the year round in exchange of hardly one or two sacks of food grains a year, and virtually turned them into slaves. The Mundas lost all their rights to land from this time and became agricultural labourers only preparing swiddens for their landlords.

In Devi's novel, Chotti's trainer in archery—Dhani Munda, formerly a follower of Birsa Munda during the Ulgulan, tells Chotti that the 'diku' (non-tribal Indians/landowners) people have all confiscated the Mundas' lands and made them bonded labourers: "We've never seen landownin' Mundas and Oraons. All t' land is Diku land—Hindu land—since long ago" (CM 11). He also injects in Chotti the spirit of resistance and revolution against the feudal atrocity of the Diku people and the White 'Gormen'<sup>25</sup>: "We won' eat mealie, won' obey t' terrorizin' moneylender, Diku, polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take back t' right to t' forest" (CM 15). Rights to forest and land are related not only to the issue of dignity, but identity. From his teens, Chotti learns about tribal identity from a grandfatherly mentor. Dhani teaches Chotti 'the real instruction', alluding to the heroism of Birsa Munda: "T' forest cried. Told him, Birsa, Diku-Master-Whiteman—together they've made me unclean, naked, undressed, clean me up. Chotti gimme yer word, ye'll not tell no one all that I've told ye" (CM 14). It is this Dhani Munda, who shapes the issue of tribal dignity and identity in the first two sections of the narrative, thereby figuring out the tribal cultural space clearly to Chotti as well as to the readers. In the third section, Chotti is seen reflecting over the demise of Dhani Munda, and his own personal loss of a true mentor:

How many things does Chotti not know, didn't get to know because Dhani is no longer there. He didn't get to hear of the time when the Mundas were free, when *Diku* and *Gormen* and *contractor* and *recruiter* and *missionary* hadn't entered their lives. (CM 33; my emphases)

All the five words I have emphasized are connotative of the crises in the politico-economic, religious and socio-cultural world of the tribal Mundas, as Chotti finds it. The cultural ecotone—the contact/ friction zone between the tribals and the non-tribals in the second decade of the twentieth century was thus mostly filled in with a sense of loss and distrust that could never be recovered.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi carefully inserts multiple references to the tribal art of teaching and preaching eco-friendly ways of life: teaching the child to "drive th' eye in t'dark, to walk t' forest in t'dark" (CM 12); keeping the names of the children "after t' river" (34); practice of offering the first harvest to god—"After the Diwali Light Festival adivasis offer the first harvest of fruit and grain to the Sun God" (77); not to kill a female beast or bird—"T' fam'ly of life grows larger wit' girl animals, girl birds" (77). Ravaging natural resources ruthlessly is not a tribal practice. The tribal Mundas live with the forest, river, mountain and all the flora and fauna around their immediate natural surroundings: wild grass from the forest is used to weave mats; oil of the Mahua seeds is used for

lighting lamps; flowers of different colours and colourful limestone are used to dye their clothing and to paint the walls of their houses. In the tribal songs and stories there are teachings for future generations: “they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That’s their history as well” (*CM* 18). The myth of Chotti Munda’s magic arrow, for which, the Mundas and the local non-tribals believe Chotti remains unbeatable and victorious in every archery competition in the village fairs, finds its place in their community songs. The tribal cultural space in this novel initially seems to be intact and beyond any intercultural communication. But as Mahasweta Devi depicts the character of Ronaldson, who knows the Mundari language, and makes him conversing with Chotti in the novel, the reader hopes for intercultural exchanges. Though a revolutionary like Dhani Munda was Chotti’s mentor in his childhood, Chotti becomes even wiser, far-sighted and more tolerant to live life more ‘strategically’, as he tells Pahan (the head of the community/village): “There’s tiger in t’ forest, but also hare an’ hedgehog. No? They live by strategy. We’ll live like that? Lemme tell ya ‘bout strategy, fer Mundas” (*CM* 140). It is Chotti Munda, who fairly realizes the reality and the importance of cultural transformation by taking home the point of ‘strategic’ changes. And as “at the ecotone change is most evident and inevitable” (Krall 4), one would certainly notice how Chotti becomes aware of the changes to come in near future:

The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live with their identity. In all national development work they will have to be one with those who, like Chhagan, are the oppressed of the land, and work as field hands, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then there’ll be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the ‘Munda’ identity will live only at festivals—in social exchange. (*CM* 110)

The hero of Devi’s novel, Chotti Munda, who was duly tutored in his childhood by a Birsait revolutionary like Dhani, visualizes the grim future as just an impending unavoidable reality. There is no escape from the changes of time and culture, and continuous re-appropriation of cultural space through conflicts and change with the demands of time is a sharp phenomenon of cultural ecotones: “Cultural ecotones are the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict and change emerge; they are the places where the society smooths the wrinkles in her skirts” (Krall 4-5).

After the seventh section of the novel, Devi starts telling a ‘new’ tale of state-sponsored oppression against the tribal Mundas—this time in the Independent India. In her article “Tribal Perceptions of the Forest: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s

*Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, R. Sreelatha's observation is very true, as she comments: "Independent India's treatment of its natural resources is worse than the colonial master's use of it" (177). After the Independence of India in 1947, the curse of bonded labour did not immediately fade away: "Whatever their law, when it comes to enforcement, Congress looks the other way. Go ahead and forget the ceiling, keep more land than it allows, carry on with bonded labour" (CM 143). The Government of India took another thirty years to make an Act for the abolition of bonded labour<sup>6</sup> and meanwhile, there came newer policies to drive the tribal people out of their place in the name of different development projects like dams, factories or highways. Apparently "the power of the merchants and their advocacy for a parliamentary monarchism led to the demise of feudalism" (Sharma and Kaur 5892), but the still worsening the socio-economic condition of the tribal people: "the villagers... get the jobs of illegally killing trees, deforesting the hills, and breaking stones to make moraine" (CM 118). The feudal landowner named Tirathnath, who was all tyranny incarnate in the colonial period, is just replaced by a rather soft-tempered businessman Harbans Chadha in independent India: "Harbans is a blood-sucker but he's a small industrialist, and his way of thinking is more modern than Tirathnath's" (CM 143). The Tribal Welfare Department in independent India finds some officers and policy-makers for the development of the tribals, though they prove themselves to be useless effigies, as Chotti finds it: "There's an offisr now ta look after tribals and e'en he says, Sit home and weave rush mats, and cone baskets, I'll give help. I c'n do nothin' me son if ye speak of land" (CM 126). Sharing the frustration of the tribal Mundas, the narrator continues: "Thus do the Mundas and low-castes of Chotti village enter the national economic pattern of independent India. The state has left no spot for them in this pattern" (CM 140).

Chotti realizes that the Munda community, which was once led by heroes and unbeatable archers like Birsa and Dhani, is now facing the test of time and a cultural transformation that is not quite hopeful. Pahan, the community leader of the Mundas, laments the erosion of values in the present day Munda society:

Munda dies of drink, and of buyin' colourful things. Before t' Munda people didn't drink so much. At fetes, on holy days, they brewed, they drank. Now it's t' government toddy shop, they e'en buy an' drink (162).

The gradual transformation of cultural space may be lamented this way, but could not be prevented. The narrator of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* tells the reader another incident in the twelfth section of the narrative that may sound funny, but certainly emphasize the issue of cultural transformation:

There's little diversity in Munda nomenclature, but because of his birth during the First World War, and being named by a bad-news reading schoolmaster, one of them received the name German Munda. He's kept the name German, and renounced the name 'Budhna' which indicated his Wednesday birth. (171)

So, it is not all the hypocrite capitalists and the politicians of independent India, or the colonial European rulers, who should be held entirely responsible for the cultural transformation of the Munda society. There is also a share of the demands of the time and changes in the world. But still, there is no scope to say that the tribal Mundas, the forest dweller, peace-loving adivasis are not victims of an uneven power structure practised in India over a couple of centuries.

What is worst in the issue of tribal cultural identity in independent India is the practice of considering the tribal people only as vote bank. I agree with Renu Josan and K. Gokani, as they point this issue out: "adivasis (tribals) are not seen as human beings with their specific identity and rights and privileges but only as countable votes necessary to gain power and authority in the respective constituencies" (465). The narrator depicts this 'new' political trend and the resultant cultural transformation quite well: "The Chotti area graduates into modernity through the way in which the former Member was removed, the elections were won through fraud and armed robbery" (*CM* 189). Still, the political leaders in independent India want to avoid any direct friction with the tribals. Along with the contractors and businessmen they have made the tribal people working as labourers in clearing the forests, in holding axe and spade, but they have not yet forgotten the power of their arrows. During a personal conversation with the businessman Harbans, Chotti says: "Now Gormen is a big bastard, but they don't want to tease t' tribal" (*CM* 209). As the political thugs Romeo and Pahlwan shoot the Pahan (the aged Munda community head of the village) and his wife in the Chotti village dead, and set fire to the untouchables' dwellings, Chotti prepares himself and the other Mundas for resistance, but the government officers and the police settle the issue in favour of the affected people instantly. The terrible discontent subsides temporarily, but the tribals keep themselves ready for any sort of violent resistance, as Chotti tells Ananda Mahato, a local newspaper correspondent: "That's all I say now, lord, we'll finish t' man who brings us harm. An' I'm tellin' yer, I'm not scared to die" (*CM* 220). Being an activist herself, Mahasweta Devi could read the pulse of the tribals pretty well, and from her first-hand experience of the tribal people's social behaviour she knows that these peace-loving 'adivasis' often turn violent in the face of oppression and exploitation. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi insists on this particular characteristic of the hero of her novel:

About Chotti also, throughout the book you'll see, Chotti is never raising his arrow to kill anyone, he is basically a civilized polite person. If we think of what Gandhi means, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, tribals have it.... We get angry, lose our tempers, become beasts, they do not. When they do it, one must understand their extreme desperation. (xx)

At the end of the novel, the tribal Mundas, under the leadership of Chotti, raise a unified resistance against the violence of the thugs of Youth League, and in a direct confrontation some of the political ruffians get injured by arrows while two Munda villagers die being shot by the hooligans' guns. The Mundas do not kill but only injure those thugs just to prevent them shooting the villagers. In her interview with Spivak, Mahasweta Devi confirms that the Mundas do not possess a killing instinct: "A tribal lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders. With everyone. So when he kills, it is a necessary killing" (xix).

In the very final section of the novel, Devi shows a Munda archery festival on the day of the Goddess Feast in 1978, where Chotti assembles thousands of Munda tribal people with bow and arrow, and to monitor the event there come the Sub Divisional Administrative Officer, the Inspector of the local police station, Tirathnath—the landlord and Harbans—the businessman with an armed force of two hundred and fifty sentries: "There was tremendous tension in the air" (CM285). This event could be seen as a climactic presentation of the two cultural spaces—one tribal and the other non-tribal, one marginal and the other powerful, with the ecotone—the contact/friction zone omnipresent between the two. When the aged Chotti Munda rises from the seat of judgement of the archery competition to shoot the target himself with his bow and arrow, the S.D.O. exclaims: "You! You shot the arrow? Can you see the target?" (CM287). With a polite but confident smile, Chotti raises his bow and says: "I'll show ya. (Then says fast in the language of the Mundas,) Dhani Munda! I'm raisin' yer name an' shootin' yer arrow today. To stay true, meself to meself" (CM 287; my parenthesis). Chotti takes the name of Dhani Munda, his tutor and mentor as he is continuing the legacy of the tribals in the metaphoric magical arrow he received from Dhani. In her interview with Spivak, Mahasweta Devi makes the issue clear as she tells Spivak:

I find that Birsa's uprising did not die with Birsa. And so through the figure of Dhani, I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow that Dhani Munda wants to hand over. This arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity. Chotti is an emblem of that. (x)

Chotti, the “representation of tribal aspiration” (Devi xi), shoots straight “into the target” (CM 287). The narrator celebrates the victory, probably the last victory of the aged Munda hero Chotti against the age-old oppression of the non-tribals with a clinching effect:

Then he waits, unarmed. As he waits he mingles with all time and becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only the human can be. Brings all adivasi struggles into the present, today into the united struggle of the adivasi and the outcaste. (CM 287)

In the very final cinematic closure of the narrative, as Chotti challenges the S.D.O. to arrest him in charge of spreading the message of resistance, and the S.D.O. stands up and goes forward, “instantly a thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No!” (CM 288). Mahasweta Devi depicts the spirit of tribal resistance against any intruding socio-cultural influence which may distort the value-system of the tribal cultural space and destroy its equilibrium:

Chotti on one side, S.D.O. on the other, and *in between a thousand bows upraised in space*. And a warning announced in many upraised hands (CM 288; my emphases).

If friction can be considered as a type of contact, the ‘in between’ space of the cultural ecotone witnesses the message of tribal aspiration in retaining its unique identity despite all the cultural transformations the Munda cultural space has already experienced through the passage of time.

\*Abbreviation used: CM= *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

**Notes:**

1. ‘Biomes’ could be defined as specific ecological communities of animals and plants in a particular climate. Often determined by abiotic factors like climate or geology, ‘biomes’ are subject to change and transformation.
2. Cultural anthropologists find the Munda tribe to be one of the divisions of the Kolarian aborigines of India, now inhabiting the forested highlands of Chhotanagpur in eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Odisha. Present population of the Munda people in India is nearly two millions (1918218, as per the Tribal Profile Report (May, 2014). Web.<<http://tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Statistics/Tribal%20Profile.pdf>> accessed on 26 May, 2015.

3. Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, 2013, Page.1: ‘Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India refers to Scheduled Tribes as those communities, who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. This Article says that only those communities who have been declared as such by the President through an initial public notification or through a subsequent amending Act of Parliament will be considered to be Scheduled Tribes’. Web: <<http://tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Statistics/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf>> , accessed on 26 May, 2015.
4. About the tribal communities, the opinion of most of the non-tribal Indians still centre round the nineteenth century ethnocentric theory of Unilinear Cultural Evolution of Lewis H. Morgan that proposes the evolution of culture through three progressive stages: from ‘savagery’ (hunting and gathering) through ‘barbarism’ (pastoralism and agriculture) to ‘civilization’.
5. Throughout the novel, the word ‘Gormen’ has been used by the Munda people for the administration or ‘Government’. Even British individuals in the narrative have also been termed as ‘gormen’, probably for being a representative/ type of the rulers: “White means Gormen” (CM 35)
6. Despite the Bonded Labour Abolition Act of 1976, a substantial percentage of tribal people still act as low-wage labourers in the country. The form of oppression has taken a slightly different shape: they are being evicted from their rightful land holdings in the name of industries/ development projects and forced to find profession in unorganized sectors like brickfields, saw-mills, small-scale industries or simply as agricultural/ construction labourers far away from their homes.

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## Shipping Fictional Desires and Historical Disillusionments in Amitav Ghosh's the *Ibis* Trilogy

Sneha Kar Chaudhuri

Elleke Boehmer succinctly observes that contemporary postcolonial fiction “gives structure to, as well as being structured by, history” (1995:198). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin consider postcolonial fiction an ideological tool to subvert and appropriate the hegemonic historical discourse of Europe. They claim that this subversion is not just achieved by challenging “the message of [Eurocentric] history”, but by contesting the “dominant rhetoric” and “linear narrativity” of Western history itself (1997: 355-357). Therefore, opposition is implicated both at the level of form and content. Amitav Ghosh's engagement with the various aspects of colonial history has been a continuous trend in his oeuvre as in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and *The Glass Palace* (2000) he has explored various dimensions of the historical past to bring out the connections, continuities and discontinuities between the putative past and the historical/post-colonial present. There has also been a long and established critical and scholarly works to explore Ghosh's use of history in these early historical novels.<sup>1</sup>

It is in case of Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy consisting of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) there is still much scope to explore his engagement with the (in)famous opium trade and its cultural, social and economic implications. This trilogy is a very well-researched and well-documented “post-colonial” fictional rejoinder against the imposing metanarratives of the official records of the British opium dynasty. It rightly emphasizes upon the micronarratives of “history from below” that lays bare with an ideological vengeance the cruelty, injustice and exploitation determining the history of the opium trade represented from above by the British colonial rulers. The other major feature of this trilogy is also to give wide relief to the burgeoning instances of racial inter-mixing, inter-breeding and hybridity that produced an odd mix of cultures, attitudes, languages and value-systems as an offshoot of unchecked globalization and multiculturalism at its most primordial stages. And it is this second major aspect of all these texts that asserts the contemporary relevance of these historical narratives describing characters and situations long lost in the sands of time.

The first novel of the trilogy named *Sea of Poppies* (to be mentioned as *SP* in parenthetical reference), is divided into segments named “Land”, “River” and “Sea”.

It shows how major troubles in the land of India forces the characters from some parts of India to board the ship, *Ibis*, that carries forward their burden of desires, fulfillment and déjà vu. These characters from geographically, financially and culturally disparate backgrounds seek the refuge of the opium ship connected by the common thread of the opium trade that touches upon their lives with great magnitude and consequence. By showing the impact of the trade upon the Indian rank and file, the author makes us conscious about the tremendous socio-economic and cultural impact of opium as a market-commodity. Surprisingly, the effect is never uniform: Dheeti's husband Hukam Singh becomes an impotent drug-addict after consuming opium and that ruins his health and the normal course of their married life, but Bahram Modi shoots to fame after tasting success with opium trade and becomes a tycoon to reckon with. Hence, the consumer is always at the receiving end, but hardly the trader, be it Parsi, English or Indian unless the war happens. In this novel, however, the first two parts are more focused on showing the gender, caste and class discriminations that defined nineteenth-century India and from which most of these victimized characters seek refuge and hit the sea. It also lays lot of emphasis on the Dheeti-Kalua romance and the tottering zamindari lifestyle of the decadent babu Neel Kanta Haldar before the stress shifts upon narrating how in the *Ibis*, where the high and low are mingled in the common experiences of pain, anxiety and salvation.

Another portion of history that is very well explored in the novel is the representation of the conditions of the opium factory. There is a drawing by a British officer Walter Sherwill which show a clean, well-lit place, where a number of people are industriously at work. Ghosh deconstructs this knowledge about the factory in the novel where the scene encountered by Dheeti gives a different picture of the actual factory conditions. She is horrified when she goes inside the compound:

[Dheeti] was about to step in when she glanced ... into the weighing shed: the sight made her pull back, with a sudden start of apprehension. Such was the length of the shed that the door at the far end looked like a distant pinpoint of light. (SP86).

She saw a group of boys who were climbing and hopping from shelf to shelf to examine the balls of opium. The danger and risk of the job is expressed through the curiosity of Dheeti: "How could they throw so accurately with one hand, while holding on with the other—and that too at a height where the slightest slip would mean certain death" (96). These boys reminds us of the chimney sweepers in the industrial England where the boys were constantly exposed to danger. Dheeti

then finds herself in the mixing room, where wetted opium is mixed with water in large tanks. The description given by Ghosh of the mixing room evokes fear and horror:

The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat—a reek so powerful that she has to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging. No sooner had she steadied herself that her eyes met with a startling sight—a host of dark legless torsos were circling around and around like some enslaved tribe of demons. (SP 98)

The men working in the mixing room appeared to Dheeti as ghouls: “bare bodied men sunk waist deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading.” (SP 95). Thus the factory scene gives us the picture of cruelty that colonialism imposed on the poor natives and challenges the metanarrative of the brisk and prosperous triangular opium trade history disseminated by the British.

Ghosh’s re-analysis of the suppressed voices and the minoritarian perspectives of the Indian indentured labourers used the growth, cultivation and export of opium from India to China by the British. The novel is written in a context of economic exploitation and abuse of the Indian farmers by the foreign rulers forcing them to raise poppy instead of food crops completely disregarding the possibilities of famine and starvation in the Indian villages. This novel displays liberationist impulses by exposing the intricacies, contradictions and complexities of British oppression in Victorian India, economic plunder re-inforced by the foreign powers, the narrowness and superstition of Indian village communities, casteism, poverty, gender hierarchy, untouchability and the notorious Kala Paani. This system ensnared Indian labourers with the promise of a new life and better possibilities elsewhere, but resulted in their being horded aboard ships like animals, as on the *Ibis*, to be exploited as little better than indentured servants, the horrors of which Ghosh describes with both outrage and sympathy. In this first novel of the *Ibis* trilogy Ghosh’s two major interventions into the stable official metanarrative of the opium trade concentrates upon the discovery of suppressed voices, especially of women like Dheeti humiliated by both the economic and gender hierarchies in Victorian India. By re-instating women’s lost histories Ghosh establishes the towering endurance and dignity of Dheeti who survives widowhood, escapes burning as Sati, elopes with his low-caste lover and adopts a diasporic life as an indentured labourer. In the multicultural and male-dominated environment of the ship *Ibis*,

she symbolizes resilience and acumen to survive against all odds. The unearthing of localised micronarratives and the atmosphere of multicultural and inter-racial mingling indicated in this novel is further explored Ghosh in its sequel.

Since the author's ideological focus is on dissenting characters and their suppressed narratives, he describes the subversive love lives of Dheeti and Kalua with confident enthusiasm. Dheeti gains our sympathy as the victimized village girl deprived of love and togetherness within marriage with a sterile and dysfunctional man, and seeks to live anew by loving her social inferior Kalua. Even as the province of Bengal and Bihar came under the jurisdiction of the British after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British administration still failed to provide any legal assistance to Dheeti, and the old evil practice in the Indian society prevailed. Nothing was done by the Reformist masters to stop Sati which has been officially banned in 1829, which proves the claim of Cesaire of the master's pretentious mask. They actually did nothing for the weak and poor natives. Mr Justice Kendalbushe concludes that the offence of forgery committed by Neel according to English Law is considered a capital crime but as Serang Ali, the head of the Lascar puts forward the question to Zachary later in the novel: "Smuggling opium not blongi crime? Running slave-ship blongi better'n piracy?"(445), and this double standard brings the prevalent English Law to severe criticism. If the law of the upholder of the civilization is such that it is always against the non-western people then their evangelical mission that they undertook has to be probed. This novel by Amitav Ghosh presents the traumas, sufferings and helplessness of the non-western people in the colonial period which the history documented by the colonizers silenced. Though fiction, it represents the history of the colonized that was sidelined by British colonial history. Thus the colonial representation of the native Indians is challenged through this novel which presents its own share of history. Similarly, in the repressive Indian society the mutual passion of Deeti and Kalua is forbidden by the caste-driven rustic milieu, a perspective on Indian social taboos and customs that makes the author place them in the mixed social atmosphere of the *Ibis*. But the love story is not redeemed even outside the Bihar hamlet, since new forms of injustice and oppression hound the lovers.

The novel also exposes the business acumen of the British merchants which they employed to devastate the prosperous economy of India and China. With the abolition of Slave Trade the capitalist merchants suffered a blow as cheap labour would no more be available, and this is evident in the novel from the words of Monsieur d'Epinay: "My canes are rotting in the field Mr Reid. Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed."(21). To make up for the loss caused by the abolition of

slavery they came up with an alternative idea of cheap labour for the mono-cropping plantation economies of their various colonies like that of Mauritius, Fiji and Caribbean Islands, which they termed as indentured labour or 'girmitiyas'.<sup>2</sup> The mechanisms of exploitation devised by the capitalist colonizer were such that it forced the people to sign up as 'girmitiyas'. Through the circumstances that made Dheeti, the farmer-woman, to finally end up as an indentured labour, Ghosh exposes the vicious process of extracting indentured labourers who of their own will have decided to become girmitiyas. The other girmitiyas on the Ibis also become the victims sharing the same circumstances. But for Burnham both slavery and indenture are justified as a form of "emancipation" for Africans and Asians from indigenous tyranny:

Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races? As I see it ... the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider...the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?... When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatick. (SP112)

Ultimately, the first novel in the trilogy ends with a note of hope despite depicting the continuous presence of injustice, violence and discrimination both in the land and on-board the Ibis. There is a feeling uppermost in the surviving characters that a new beginning in a new land will mean freedom, self-respect and success. The fear of crossing the waters and the taboo of the kala paani is laced with a sense of a new beginning. The storm in the end also comes as an agent of nature's justice to save the condemned characters from human aggression. The novel ends at the threshold of a new world presaging the magnitude and variety we come across in the next one.

*River of Smoke* (2011) is predicated upon the success of Ghosh's first novel, and hence is invested with a historical imagination brimming with authorial energy and a measured astuteness to satisfy the reader's curiosity and expectations. *Sea of Poppies* is humbler and minute compared to the gigantic magnitude of the worlds depicted in this second novel. It offers us a window to a land conjured partly by fact and partly by the author's fictional imagination: the land called "Acha-Hong" (the good land), a utopian version of colonial Hindusthan, mostly divested of the entrenched hierarchical and discriminatory atmosphere prevalent in India. In this novel, the emphasis is to foreground the history of racial, cultural and linguistic intermixing ushered in by the triangular opium trade. Despite using the historical

records of Commissioner Lin, the pictorial documents left by the Macanese painter George Chinnery and the official ghettoization of foreign trade, Ghosh alters the flow of history by mining out a rich array of characters and their multicultural experiences left out of these official histories. The plot, characterisation and climax of this novel create the impression of immense variety and dizzying chaos similar to the historical context of the opium wars in China; simultaneously they represent historical episodes of the nineteenth-century presaging twentieth- and twenty-first-century diaspora, globalisation, multiculturalism and their attendant dangers, such as drug-trafficking, continuing economic exploitation, and armed conflict over raw resources.

“Acha-Hong” and “Fanqui town” culture is symbolic of a hybrid and multicultural spatial and human experience inadvertently ushered by the opium trade. The opium traders made no conscious attempt at producing these moments of diasporic hybridity, and, in fact, designed laws to prevent it, but according to Ghosh’s novel, the reverse happened. This aspect is clearly Ghosh’s fictional intervention in the official story of China’s refusal to let foreigner’s “mix” with the local population when there was in practice ample scope of cultural intermixing and hybridity.<sup>3</sup> Robin Chinnery’s letters are rich with repeated descriptions of the colourful, commercially vibrant and brisk world of Canton and he finds this space very similar to the busy and active commercial environment of Calcutta. (Ghosh 2011: 179-85, 206-220). There is a sense of “mysterious commonality” that these cities had, and this aspect has been magnified by the thick descriptions of the human environment in these cities by the novelist (193). For Neel Kanta Haldar, a zamindar forced to migrate to Canton, Robin Chinnery’s version is truly expressive of the right spirit of these far-flung places : “Fungtai Hong was a world in itself, with its own foods and words, rituals and routines: it was as if the inmates were the first inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achhasthan” (192). The cultural diversity indicated by Amitav Ghosh is a major aspect of the opium trade that has been usually ignored in the standard official interpretations of the opium trade history.

The language issue is as crucial to this novel celebrating cultural hybridity as it has been to most postcolonial novels about multicultural lives. The diversified and nascent multiculturalism of the “Acha-Hong” and “Fanqui town” culture is indicative of both the cause and effect of an anachronistic nineteenth-century globalisation ushered in through the trans-national opium trade. This aspect is clearly Ghosh’s fictional intervention in the official story of China’s refusal to let foreigner’s ‘mix’ with the local population when, in practice, there was ample scope of cultural intermixing and hybridity.<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of this world is the multilingualism it generates and the 'carnavalesque' mix of languages it produces, with the foreign merchants, referred to as "daaih-baan or tai-pans" (55), conducting their trade in an impure and random mix of English, Portuguese and Hindustani words in a pidgin or patois language (171, 221-224), which prompts the educated and refined Neel to plan a book on the variety of the language of commerce in Southern China (Kar Chaudhuri :141). Language as an expression of cultural hybridity underscores the multicultural experiences of the heterogeneous world. If Ghosh is interested in suggesting temporal 'mash-ups' effects, he is equally enthusiastic about the issue of linguistic 'chutneyfication' popularised by Salman Rushdie and produces a vision of multilingualism. Neel also feels intrigued by Modi sense of being at ease with an impure language, which came out "in braided torrents of speech, each rushing stream being silted with the sediment of many tongues – Gujarati, Hindusthani, English, pidgin, Cantonese" (221). Words like 'chai' (tea in Cantonese), 'samosa' (a fried snack in Hindusthani) and 'falto' ('fraudulent' or 'false' in Portuguese) expands Neel's lexicon, allowing him to participate in a process of linguistic 'creolization'. Ghosh repeatedly makes us aware about the politics of linguistic hybridity in southern China is the preference given to a patois business language over pure Chinese or English. The advantage of using this language was democratically available to all, since it not only comprised Cantonese but also English, Portuguese and Hindusthani words, that is words partially understandable to its various users who were equally reliant on the help of professional interpreters or 'linkisters' (Kar Chaudhuri: 141-142). It is only towards the end of the novel that the apparently promising and liberating prospects of Accha-sthan begins to turn dystopian and discordant as the Anglo-Chinese opium wars are about to break bringing in its wake a deluge of local skirmishes and disharmony. *River of Smoke* is ultimately a novel of discord and chaos ending with a strong note of disillusionment and abandoned desires and expectations culminating into the prospect of one of the worst showdowns in the history of the Indian sub-continent.

In the third novel of the trilogy, *Flood of Fire* (2015), Ghosh takes great pains to provide a fitting ending to the flow of fictional situations, episodes, experiences and narratives that have not been recorded by the official historians. The most important historical episode narrated in the novel is that of the Anglo-Chinese opium wars. The historical situations are enlivened by using fictional episodes and micronarratives of imaginary and real characters linked with the history of the war. The narrative descriptions of the strange mix of people, places, cultures and languages continue, while the focus is more on describing the anxieties, dilemmas and bloody action related to the destructive opium wars which partly destroy this

multicultural, multiracial and multilingual world. The crux of the novel can be regarded as the strange interactions that the larger forces of history has with the normal rhythms of individual existence and how these macro-forces crushed the micro-lives. This profound realization is articulated by Neel in the following words in the novel which are worth quoting in some detail:

Thinking about it later he understood that a battle was a distillation of time : many years of preparation and decades of innovation and change were squeezed into a clash of very short duration. And when it was over the impact radiated backwards and forwards through time, determining the future and even, in a sense, changing the past, or at least the general understanding of it. It astonished him that he had not recognized before the terrible power that was contained within these wrinkles in time – a power that could mould the lives of those who came afterwards for generation after generation. (Ghosh 388)

These lines express the helplessness of ordinary man before the grand surge of history which determines the present and future of all small lives. The power of history is seen as paradoxically fearful, both magnificent and dangerous for its impersonal determinism. Thus, it also indicates how the macronarrative of history can both overpower and overshadow the individual micronarratives of people experiencing it. It is this tense and complex interaction between the forces of history and personal histories that adds the momentum to this narrative and the novel mirrors the uncertainties and contradictions related to it.

However, most of the characters important in the earlier two novels are given a backseat to introduce new characters into the scene of battle and bloodshed. The most significant among them is Keshri Singh, the elder brother of Dheeti, a soldier having a mixed history of ups and downs. While he is made to bear lot of insult and injury in his professional life, he is ex-communicated because of his sister's elopement with the social inferior, Kalua. Kesri is at the receiving end of many adverse circumstances till he finds favour with Captain Neville Mee, who wants to lead a regiment of soldiers from the Indian sub-continent in the upcoming Opium wars. Kesri, who is otherwise, very hardened and experienced as a soldier has very limited experience of foreign lands and sea-travel and finds it extremely challenging to handle his amateurish and recalcitrant men for the war in foreign shores. The issue of multiculturalism and multilingualism also crops up here but in different dimensions – it disrupts and confuses more than it unites.

Ghosh's third novel explores the issues of crisis and triumphs of masculinity in various situations in the novel. Kesri, is one example of his articulation of the

resilience and grit of the Indian rustic common man, whose masculine values, once challenged, give him the impetus to prove himself as a fighter in the true sense. Another morally ambiguous character in the novel is that of the well-known Zachary Reid fearing the consequences of onanism due to a frustrated bachelorhood and the consequent guilt of having a very torrid affair with Mrs Burnham. Ghosh lays bare the various ways in which these men cope up with the given paradigms of masculinity within patriarchy and challenge or negotiate its boundaries. Using the grand opium wars as the context, Ghosh is able to show how male chauvinism is tested and challenged by the war front hardships and adversities. His discursive understanding of the traditional notions of colonial patriarchy gets expressed in the various anxieties, both public and private that the male characters suffer from.

Incidentally, Mrs Burnham takes much delight in copulating with Reid and causes tension in the Paulette-Reid affair, but ultimately shows her good self by convincing Reid to go back to Paulette. The Burnhams also reach the warfront, and accidentally the unfaithful wife Mrs Burnham loses her life and receives a burial in an alien land. The third book is located partly in the midst of the opium wars, but the novel ends with a happy note for most of the characters. Shireen Modi's character is one of the new attractions of this book as Ghosh traces her transformation from the devout housewife to the betrayed widow and finally the woman who dares to re-marry outside her community and religion by accepting the offer from her husband's friend Zadig Bey. Shireen not only pays back all the debts incurred back home and gifts her daughters with handsome portions, but also gets to retain a large sum of money all for herself. Initially wary of Zadig Bey as the friend who has tempted her deceased husband towards adultery, she softens towards him and realizes the value of marital bliss over an empty and frigid sense of wifely virtue. This mixed bag of fortunes that the characters have is also expressive of the great dilemmas of experiences and expectations of the characters in the novel. As a historical narrative about largely fictional characters, the events and episodes of the war and the aftermath have impact the lives of all the characters enduring them. The opium wars act as an apt historical culmination point of a trilogy of narratives exposing the various factual and representational contradictions of the histories of both the opium trade and the wars. Ghosh's endeavour in gleaning the truth out of the chaos of historical representation is undercut by the ironical implications of the ideologies of historiographic narrativization that seek to undermine some truths in favour of a host of others. Ultimately, the narratives also veer towards the acceptance of the elusive nature of the actual historical knowledge about the putative past and accept the attendant contingency of historical sources and information.

In all these three novels, Amitav Ghosh takes up the challenge to engage with one of the most critical and dense episodes of British colonial history in the Indian sub-continent that locked three major countries in a triangular international trade. By conducting thorough historical research for almost a decade he has gifted his readers this mammoth achievement, which seem daunting and insurmountable in the world of Anglophone fiction in terms of its content, style and ideologies. A pioneering historical trilogy in terms of its tremendous scope and historical sweep, it might also appear crowded and confusing for the huge array of characters and episodes in them. Besides, as always, there will be disagreements on why Dheeti and Kalua were not united despite their courageous passion and why fallen characters like Zadig and Zachary are wedded to virtuous women. But, ultimately, the emphasis of the novels are not on setting any moral paradigms but to show how the powerful flow of history determines the microscopic units of personal existence determining the proportion of hopes and disillusionments they encounter and how this history can be as diverse, chaotic and unpremeditated as the flux of time itself.

### **Notes**

1. See for example, Brinda Bose, "Footnoting History: The Diasporic Imagination of Amitav Ghosh" in *Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*. (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2002); Brinda Bose, *A Perspective on Amitav Ghosh*. (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003); Shubha Tiwari, *Amitav Ghosh : A Critical Study* (New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers, 2003); S.P. Auradkar, *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2007); B. Choudhury, *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Essays*. (New Delhi: PHI Learning, 2009); T. Huttunen, *The Ethics of Representation in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*. (Turku : University of Turku Press, 2011)
2. See Anupama Arora "The Sea is History": Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 42.3 (2012): 21-42
3. See Sneha Kar Chaudhuri, "Opium and the Tufaan of (Neo)-Victorian Imperialism: Review of Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke*", *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 4:1 (2011): 134-43, <[http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past\\_issues/4-1%202011/NVS%204-1-9%20S-KarChaudhuri%20Review.pdf](http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/4-1%202011/NVS%204-1-9%20S-KarChaudhuri%20Review.pdf)>.
4. The proposed title of Neel Kanta Haldar's book is *The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising a Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language of Commerce In Southern China*. In the 'Acknowledgements' Section Ghosh notes that Neel "was not so fortunate in stumbling upon Elijah C. Bridgman's *A Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect* (S.

W. Williams, Macau, 1841). He subsequently gave up all hope of publishing his own *Celestial Chrestomathy* and took the work in a different direction.” (See Kar Chaudhuri : 143)

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## Community as a Shared and Divided Space in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*

Sumandeep Kaur

In Franz Kafka's short story "Fellowship," five friends live together and consider their shared experience to be absolutely perfect. Everything is fine until a sixth person wants to join their community. This intrusion turns their order upside down and the sixth person is refused admittance. The five friends living in the same house are aware of their profoundly contingent relationship, but they forget this contingency and consider the sixth person to be an outsider. However in Nadeem Aslam's fourth novel *The Wasted Vigil*, the contingency inherent in the formation of a community remains intact and everyone is given admittance in Marcus Caldwell's house.

Situated in the period after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, *The Wasted Vigil* (to be referred to hereafter as *WV*) narrates stories of persons belonging to different nationalities who come to the house of Marcus for different reasons. Marcus, an Englishman, has lost his Afghan wife Qatrina to the barbarities of the Taliban and his daughter Zameen to the violence of the Soviet invasion. In this house, "seeking sanctuary and answers, converse a variety of characters," holding different world views (Clements 171). The common thread connecting all of them is their shared past and a common loss. There is Lara, a Russian art historian, looking for some information about her lost brother who disappeared during the Soviet invasion. There is David, an American gem merchant, former CIA operative and former lover of Zameen, who carries the pain of losing a brother in Vietnam War. There is Dunia, a primary school teacher. There is Casa who grew up in womanless Taliban training camps. And there is James, a Special Forces soldier, a symbol of "the war on terror." Each is keeping a vigil – Marcus for his grandson, Lara for her brother, David for his son and beloved, Dunia for her own dignity and respect, Casa for martyrdom, and James for his nation. In fact, all the inhabitants of the house are displaced persons trying to find new identities away from their homes. Eion Flannery points out, "Akin to the country itself, Marcus's house by the lake becomes an international crossroads, a global meeting point that is, variously, infused with mistrust, threat and community" (6). Sarah Elsing observes, "By bringing these diverse characters together under one roof, Aslam is able to imbue their voices with a democratic equality." Muhammad Hanif calls it, "A poetic

meditation on the destructive urge that binds us together.” Thus the village Usha and Marcus’s house become the meeting point for a transnational community.

The multiple narrative perspectives reveal the nature of fellowship developing between different individuals tormented by war in one way or the other. These also highlight the breakdown of the community in the wake of turbulent events during the span of two decades, from the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s to the American intervention in 2001. This paper deals primarily with the implications of a community-in-the-making as people from various nationalities live together in a single house for about a fortnight. A turbulent past and the civil war in the present determine their communication and bonding. The paper explores the ambivalent nature of the community as it emerges in the novel, both as a shared and a divided space against the backdrop of history, while it also raises questions pertaining to history, national identity and religious extremism.

### Community as a Shared Space

The persons who come from different backgrounds to Marcus’s house in *The Wasted Vigil* do not constitute a community conceived as property. According to Roberto Esposito, community as a property depends on three elements mainly: wholeness, a value/essence, and that “which is most properly our own” (2). The community in this sense is conceived of as a quality that is added to the nature of its members as subjects, and which identifies them as pre-existing subjectivities. The sharing of *munus* (exchange) in the novel among these various persons comes in the form of suffering what Aslam calls “a fellowship of wounds” (10). They establish “links out of separations” (87). It is a relation that can be described as “the gap, the spacing that relates (them) to others in common non-belonging” (Esposito, 3). Nevertheless, they form a community which is both isolated from and associated with the outside world of war and violence. Their community also represents “being-in-common,” as it highlights both connection and difference among the members. It refers to the way of entering a communication which does not have anything to do with possession. As Flannery points out:

Aslam’s novel can be read as a democratic representation of diverse voices. There is a range of nationalities, ages, genders and political affiliations congregated at the house of Usha (village), but *The Wasted Vigil* showcases a dramatic scenario in which connection is forged despite such differences. (12)

The possibility of sharing as a community is articulated in various exchanges and cross-cultural communication among Marcus, David, Lara, Casa and Dunia.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that it is communication that constitutes the being of singularities (27). Communication gives to the singular being the possibility of reaching outside itself. However, Marcus is already aware of the fact that their fellowship is not absolute or total in any sense. Their “being-in-common” is not something given and it does not stand for a kind of substantial entity. Rather it is co-existential framework where being *together* takes shape. Marcus knows that those who have come to his house in Usha would leave one day, but he welcomes everyone in the house because, “with him it is not due to age, it’s his character” (274). He wants this association to last beyond the boundaries of the house and the country. He says:

When she (Lara) leaves she should take a volume from the impaled library. Perhaps everyone who comes here should be given one so that no matter where they are in the world they can recognize each other. Kin. A Fellowship of wounds. (WV10)

Esposito points out that a finite subject is defined by the bonding between what constitutes his or her own and what remains on the ‘outside’. The ‘outside’ enters the community as “a spasm in the continuity of the subject” (7). This leads to the breaking of the individual limits and “the figure of the other returns to the centre stage” (Esposito, “Community and Nihilism” 26). In the novel, the confrontation with ‘the other’ forms a comradeship which transcends the differences of countries and helps these persons come to terms with their turbulent pasts.

The intimacy between Marcus and Lara begins in Marcus and Qatrina’s library. Marcus has become suspicious of everyone, but he recognizes the wounds of her spirit and opens his house to her. He thinks, “The tiredness and the large bruises were physical but they seemed connected with her spirit somewhere” (Aslam, *The Wasted* 40). When Lara comes to Afghanistan, she falls ill. She thinks that even if she had not fallen ill, she would have asked Marcus for refuge as she wanted to let “a portion of her weight onto another” (37). Marcus himself has been in the wilderness after the death of his wife and daughter. Her arrival in Marcus’s house provides a route back to their personal as well as the nation’s turbulent past. Their shared loss forms a sense of community – being-together. Marcus understands the loneliness of other characters also because they all are going through similar pain. He tells Lara when she will go back to Russia, David would feel lonely (230). Marcus inspires Lara to “delve deeper” into her life and “take the charge of matters more intelligently” (417).

David and Lara stand at opposite poles. Lara belongs to the Soviet Empire whereas he is a former CIA operative. He justifies his reason for fighting the Soviets. However, Aslam brings them together by making them leave all parochial borders behind. Their evolving sexual relationship is paralleled by the putting together of broken pieces of the mural which she finds in the room dedicated to love. Thus she tries to put together her broken life. David also finds a brief respite from the pain and desolation which have become an integral part of his life. Aslam writes, "They were both searching for themselves in each other" (143). This is how he describes the growing intimacy between them:

This intimacy between them. The moments when any third person becomes a stranger and to talk seems pointless. But they are talking anyway, their voices low, as they do during the nights, he asking her if he can come to see her in Russia, whether she would visit him in the United States. (*WV* 299)

The confrontation with the other gives them a better understanding of the self. Nevertheless, the losses of their lives have affected their present sensibility, "When he touched her he felt it was not in the present. He was as though a ghost, watching himself place his hand on her shoulder, his mouth on her thigh. Either a ghost or a memory" (*WV* 143). Even when David and Lara come close to each other physically, there remains an emotional difference. Intimacy and distance converge in their relationship (*WV* 144). It is because of David that she confesses the truth of her relationship with her husband Stepan, a well-connected army officer. She tells David that she married Stepan in order to pursue her search for her lost brother and to provide security to her ill and ageing mother harassed by the state. In confessing all this to David, Lara actually apologizes to her own self. She reveals to him that she was in love with somebody else, but she had to leave him for Stepan. David brings her out of the dark corridors of guilt and makes her realize that she was not totally selfish.

Lara's love for David inspires him to confront his anti-Soviet prejudices and the personal reasons that made him justify the killing of innocent refugees during the Soviet invasion. He rationalizes the deaths of refugees as a necessary sacrifice – 'bare life' that could be eliminated with impunity – for a better future. However, Lara raises the issue of their agency. She tells David:

I'm not arguing with you. But really, I cannot ignore the fact that nobody asked them (refugees) if they wanted to sacrifice their lives. For all I know probably all of them would have willingly gone to their deaths to secure a better future for their land, for the world. But no one asked them (*WV* 290)

If David can justify himself, he should justify the death of Zameen as well because Christopher, David's CIA colleague, lets her die for the sake of nation and its ideals. David and Stepen bear a similarity as Stepan is also extremely proud of his country even if it comes at the cost of massacre of innocent people. Lara tells David to confront the reality and asks, "You have spent your life believing such untrue things. Don't you know how alone you are David? We are most alone when we are with myths" (*WV* 384). Thus Lara questions the whole project of nationalism, the cold war and even Soviet Communism at whose hands she loses her father, her mother and her brother. Cristy Lee Duce points out, "Aslam articulates his re-centering discourse within the novel: to personalize politics and demonstrate how larger forces collide and react at the level of the individual, resisting a narrative that leaves history collective and faceless" (62).

Another link that binds David and Lara is that both have lost their brothers to the war. David has lost his brother Jonathan to the Vietnam War and occasionally he recalls the memories of childhood spent with him. Lara has lost her brother Benedikt to the Soviet War. The repeated references to the Vietnam War in the novel are not uncalled for. A similarity can be seen between both the wars. Rodric Braithwaite critically looks at this similarity. He points out that both the United States and the Soviet Union went for war in Afghanistan with this belief that war was indispensable for protecting their countries' interests. Both had ambitious aims: to build in the other country a social, political and economic system resembling their own. However, both had very little knowledge of the ground reality. Both the invaded countries (Afghanistan and Vietnam) rejected the political models imposed on them. The increasing power of the Mujahideen in Kabul and the entry of the North Vietnamese changed the course of both the wars. Both the wars continued for nine years and there were massive casualties in both Afghanistan and Vietnam as the common people found themselves at the crossroads. Both the wars were accompanied by the brutal civil war in the invaded country (332). Braithwaite further draws on the major difference between both the wars. After the Vietnam War, the victors were successful in bringing order and stability in their country, whereas Afghanistan was further embroiled in the bloody civil war (333). When Lara comes to know about David's loss, she thinks:

A different war – but may be at some level it was the same war. Just as tomorrow's wars might be begotten by today's wars, a continuation of them. Rivers of lava emerging onto the surface after flowing many out-of-sight miles underground. (*WV* 362)

It shows the interconnectedness of all wars that so deeply affect individuals. Aslam emphasizes that all wars are similar in nature as it is the human beings who eventually lose their lives in every war.

The bonding between Casa and Lara deeply influences Casa's self-reflection. He grew up in a Jihadi camp, where he was taught not to think about women. He now longs for tenderness of relations, a need he feels even more intensely after coming to Marcus's house. That is why he regards Lara as a mother figure, reflecting on his motherless childhood. As Aslam writes, "There is a faint trace of envy in him even today when he sees a boy accompanied by his mother" (*WV* 229). He also feels guilty as these feelings make him confront his own real face. He is not ready to question all his past actions. Nevertheless, there is "a wish in him to prolong the tenderness he is suddenly experiencing in his breast" (246). When he sees David, Lara and Marcus together, he is forced to ponder:

What small thing could the others in the world have done differently for a happier outcome, what small mistake was made? Wolves exhibiting strange behaviour – caught in traps and thrashing about, injured by other creatures or by bullets, pups suffering from epilepsy – are attacked and killed by their pack members. But here everyone is human and must try to understand each other's mystery. Each other's pain. (*WV* 224)

This fellowship is not a superficial and naive reconciliation but represents a foregoing of hatred and an effort towards empathy and understanding.

The relationship of Casa and Dunia is particularly remarkable. Unlike other characters, Casa and Dunia have gloomy and troublesome background to which they cannot return. In fact, they are in transit, in movement, and are suspended in a no man's land. Casa works for Nabhi Khan's organization. He has spent years in various religious institutions and in Taliban training camps. He is always eager to go to Bosnia and Chechnya to serve the cause of his religion. He cannot go back to his own people when he is seen with David in the hospital. He seeks safety, enclosure and immunity from harm in Marcus's house. Dunia is a teacher in a primary school opened by the Americans. The cleric of the village and his cohorts publicly accuse her of being dissolute and force her to shut down the school. She tries to defy the people at the mosque, but cannot return to her place and takes asylum at Marcus's house. Casa and Dunia are thus stigmatized as "others" by their respective communities. What does community mean for them? Two overlapping inside/outside permeable frontiers determine Dunia's life. She crosses to the other side of the village Usha to Marcus's house because she hopes it will lead to safety and protection. In fact, towards the end of the novel, she is abducted,

and nobody knows her whereabouts. Their association is built through the exchange of the prayer mat. Casa feels attracted towards her, but his training at the madrassa blocks his further movement on the path of love as he has always been preached to consider women as reincarnation of evil.

Casa and Dunia's meeting might be about attraction or repulsion, love or hate; the outcome is never the stable union of a new couple, the forming of a new family, or the finding of a home. Their coming together is an intersection of different routes, a meeting of different worlds. However, its significance lies in the contingent relationship which follows. Casa finds it unacceptable that this school teacher does not veil her face. Similarly, Dunia also does not like his violent ideology, but there is an unconscious drive that briefly connects them despite their reservations. As Dunia reflects, "But no, no she must avoid further contact. What was it that made her touch him?" (*WV*314). Similarly, Casa thinks, "Is he thinking of her? And he saw her looking into a mirror, and walking past it later realized that without her reflection it was nothing but a piece of glass" (*WV*363).

After coming in contact with Dunia, Lara, David and Marcus, Casa is forced to question his own life. He is "feeling tired of walking the endless road of his life, of absorbing the body blows as and when they were dealt and staggering on. He does not even know his name, doesn't even know how he ended up in the orphanages and madrassas" (*The Wasted* 327). Dunia is also briefly fascinated with him as she is close to tears when she notices that he is close to danger. This concern of Dunia upsets Casa and he cannot help thinking about her. He justifies his concern because he is responsible for jeopardizing her life.

They seek close communion yet form another community because their coming together is not about creating a community, but about facing the truth. Casa experiences this in silent agony:

He begins to write... Sentences about himself. The truth. He can only say it in the dark. But it is difficult to write like this, and so after only half a dozen lines, he moves towards the lamp that rests higher up. When he lights it, he sees that the pages are still blank... he continues to write however – no pigment, just pressure – until both pages are filled and several more. He drops them into the stone pit of ear and extinguishes the flame. (*WV* 372)

Nevertheless, this short-lived fellowship between Casa and Dunia is very significant. It sums up the whole idea of the novel. Nina Martyris points out that the relationship of Dunia and Casa is emblematic of Auden's view of love as

“Eros, builder of cities.” It reminds one of Yasmina Khadra’s *The Swallows of Kabul* where Mussarat urges her husband to acknowledge his love for Zunaira. She makes him realize that he has never felt it because people around him have always supported violence and hatred and this has turned his heart into stone. Similarly, Dunia’s presence forces Casa to see himself in a different light. In a world marked by turbulence and mayhem, love is only possibility which can revive the fellowship between people and can heal the physical and the psychological wounds that they have got from years of war. When Marcus notes the intensity in the eyes of Casa, he thinks:

Yes, love is still a possibility in a land such as this, though love means an eradication of selfishness and it could easily be assumed that in a country like this selfishness was the main tool of survival, everyone a mercenary. (WV352)

There develops a bonding between David and Casa as they build a canoe outside Marcus’s house. David earlier had experience of making a canoe with his brother James, it symbolically tells about the formation of brotherly association between David and Casa. Aslam symbolically describes the growing fellowship between them, “A trickle of blood flows out from the base of David’s thumb and slides into Casa’s wrist” (272). It can be compared with the bonding between Mikal and the American in *The Blind Man’s Garden*. David and Casa’s relationship is also marked by apprehensions and doubts like the relationship of Mikal and the American. David, while working on the canoe, traces the history of different lands which shows that different cultures flourished after coming in contact with each other. He wants to name the canoe after John Ledyard who was the first citizen of independent United States to explore the lands of Islam, thus building a connection between not only two places, but also symbolizing the association between Casa and David (WV 340). However, Casa is full of suspicion for David and other Americans because they try to undermine the cause of Jihad (WV 344). Aslam, quite skillfully, shows the interconnection of different communities and cultures, at the same time, he also raises questions on the role played by the United States in growing terrorism, Mujahideen and fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan where Pakistan is associated as ‘collateral damage’.

Nevertheless, the coming together of David and Casa in Marcus’s house helps each to come to terms with his self. Towards the end of the novel, David helps Casa escape from the hold of James as he realizes that people like Casa are not directly responsible for what they have been doing and that there is a chain of political forces determining their actions. In an interview with Chambers, Aslam

points out that “a novel is a democracy” where he makes “the reader understand every character” from multiple perspectives (“Nadeem Aslam” 142).

The formation of community beyond the constraints of nation, religion and culture is extremely significant seen in the context of Aslam’s own position as a writer. Asked whether he belongs to Pakistan or to England, he replied:

I like to think I am made in the East and assembled in the West. I once cut out Pakistan and the UK from the world map and stuck them close together. So the GT Road passed from Pakistan into England, from Peshawar to Khyber Pass through to Newcastle. I think that is where I am from. I don’t have a name for it as yet. (“UK/Pakistan”)

Aslam widely travelled Afghanistan while writing the novel. He talked to the tea-house owners, refugees, professors, historians and museum curators (Aslam, “An Interview”). He compares himself to Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* as he had to travel with both his nationalities alternatively. He says, “In some places I had to tell them I was a Pakistani because Pakistanis were liked there, and to be British would have been dangerous. In others I had to confess to being British because Pakistanis were loathed” (“An Interview”). He exhibits both the insider and outsider’s perspective while delineating the complex history of the region and his characters have transnational outlook.

Aslam also turns back to Afghanistan’s rich cultural legacy. The land, which had such a rich cultural past, is now identified only with terrorism, violence, bloodshed and Islamic fundamentalism. The Perfume factory in the novel is emblematic of significant Buddhist presence in Afghanistan. Marcus says, “It’s always been here. It is part of Afghanistan’s past” (WV/222). It is to be noted when Aslam turns to past, there is not a nostalgic yearning for the past. Rather, there is an attempt to better understand the present situation of Afghanistan in the light of its rich cultural heritage which has been devastated in an attempt to go back to some glorified golden past.

In this way, “a fellowship of wounds” exposes the characters to possibility of breaking their individual limits and confront their outside. This reinforces the relation of the self and the other and emphasizes that the other is necessary for the consolidation of the self. Though the novel focusses on these intersecting lives, the scope of fellowship of wounds enhances towards broader understanding of community, identity and history.

## **Community as a Divided Space**

However, outside Marcus's house, community is experienced as frighteningly unjust. It is a society without any noticeable order of law. What happens with Lara, Marcus, David, Casa and Dunia is horrifyingly unjust when measured against the norms of legal justice. Each character exists alone in his or her own world and can only reach another with great difficulty as his or her mind is a "haunted house" (*WV* 1). The loneliness cannot be overcome through mere companionship in a house. Through a fragmented, episodic and intricate narrative marked by flashbacks, the novel reveals each character's history. It also discloses something broken at the very core of their existence.

Marcus has lost everyone – his wife to the brutality of the Taliban regime, his daughter to the Soviet war, and his grandson to the Mujahideen warlords engaged in a bloody civil war. The result is a condition of utter grief and alienation. Even though "[h]is skin is dyed to fawn after the decades of strong sunlight and heat, making him look almost like a native of this country," (*WV* 58) Marcus remains an outsider in the Afghan community. His belonging to a different nation becomes the criterion to judge whether he has to be included in the community or not. He has been living in the house outside the village of Usha without any electricity, with books nailed to the ceilings, and paintings smeared with mud. He has confined himself to hours of darkness after the deaths of his wife and daughter. He has removed all sense of time and communication from his surroundings. His first reaction is that of mild incredulity whenever someone approaches him. Whenever he has to respond to somebody, he just responds with gestures or with a nod. He thinks:

There is no one. Letters and messages, and visits, are received from the departed. And so occasionally, and for a fraction of a second, it is not strange to expect such a thing from those who have died. It lasts the shortest of durations and then the mind recalls the facts, remembers that some absences are more absolute than others. (*WV* 16)

However, he knows that he is not the only casualty in the place. Every one's life lies broken in some way in general rubble. Aslam, pointing to the broken state of people, writes, "Some are trapped near the surface while others find themselves entombed deeper down, pinned under tons of smashed masonry and shattered beams from where their cries cannot be heard by anyone on the surface" (*WV* 38).

The community is wounded on account of the breakdown in relationships. The inhabitants of Usha were present the day Marcus's wife was stoned by the Taliban. She was treated as an adulteress because her marriage rites were performed

by a woman. They participated in the public spectacle holding bricks and rocks in their hands. After she was forced to amputate the hand of Marcus, “they entered a different geography of the mind altogether” (238). She did not speak to anyone and kept her face to the walls. She preferred the corners of the rooms or she used to roam in the streets in the burning sun. This cruelty bears testimony to the fact that she was sacrificed by the people of her community in order to protect community’s the so-called sanctity. However, she was regarded as one of them as long as she conducted herself according to the norms of the community. But she was expelled from the community when she violated the norms. This makes Marcus distance himself from other people.

There is a general sense of desolation among the people of Usha. The experience of war has made them paranoid and so they are suspicious of one another. Lara is attacked on her way to Marcus’s house. When she falls ill on her arrival, Marcus suspects that she has been poisoned by the people of Usha. Even living the normal life is a matter of guilt for them. When David comes back from Jalalabad with Casa, he is very eager to touch Lara. Later, he feels ashamed for this excitement and happiness and thinks, “What makes him think he deserves these moments of gladness amid all this wreckage? Afghanistan will still be there in the morning?” (*WV* 189) This tells a lot about the after effects of the war when people cannot live normal life.

This breakdown has been illustrated through the complex use of distance as both experience and metaphor in Lara’s case. She distances herself from others in her grief – “a sleepwalker in fog” (306). She has already lost her father, brother and husband to the demands of Russian state politics. She married Stepan in order to pursue her search for her lost brother. However, she had to bury her personal feelings. After her husband’s death, she withdrew from everyone. Aslam writes, “She desired no communication with anyone, entire days going by without speaking to even one person” (*WV* 137). This was an attempt to camouflage her pain, but it created a barrier for herself only. She is jolted back to reality after the death of her mother. It is because of this distance that she came to know about her mother’s death as many as fifteen days later.

David carries deep bruises on his soul. He is the one who lost his beloved Zameen because of his dearest friend Christopher. He lost his brother to the Vietnam War. David had married again after the disappearance of Zameen, but he divorced his wife four years later because he “had finally decided to wrap up the fiction he had created for him” (*WV* 219). He is psychologically affected and always wakes from sleep thinking that something has been taken away from him.

He does not easily express his pain. However, when he allows himself to express his unfathomable sorrow, the result is heart-breaking. Aslam writes:

Something has erupted inside his breast. He lowers himself into a chair and begins to weep, silently to begin with but allowing the sounds to escape as first one minute passes and then another.

A sorrow the size of the sky.

This has been the principal weather of his soul for a long time. (WV 324)

The isolation of grief indicates a crisis of the community and its breakdown which has followed the disruption caused by the war, including the civil war. In fact, at the very beginning of the novel, the first image the reader comes across is that of a ceiling to which hundreds of books have been fastened with iron nails. This has been described as “a spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred” (WV 5). The iron spike, violently penetrating history, love and the sacred, signifies the destruction the community has suffered under war.

Aslam suggests a more comprehensive understanding of the community in which the local, the national and the transnational are productively interwoven. However, it is also important to note that “a fellowship of wounds” is not without problems. The affinities between the characters are marked by aggressively defended political and ideological affiliations. David and Casa die in the suicide bomb attack. Dunia is kidnapped from the house. Marcus remains alone to face the abyss of the loneliness befalling his life. However, he is not without hope. He goes out to find the traces of his grandson with renewed energy and hope. This is where the strength and the beauty of Aslam’s writing lies. The community-in-the-making in the novel is “nothing but the placing-into-relation that presupposes at once proximity and distance, attachment and detachment, intricacy, intrigue, and ambivalence” (Nancy 29). There is no fusion in this kind of communication; instead, it exposes the singularity to the outside. The incompleteness of community-in-the-making does not mean here insufficiency or lack but suggests an ongoing, never completed activity of sharing.

To conclude, it can be stated that *The Wasted Vigil* deals with the question of the community in a complex way by including various historical, political and personal contexts. The communal fellowship portrayed is not a superficial and naive reconciliation but represents a foregoing of hatred and an effort towards empathy and understanding. The novel makes out a case against all attempts at

closing off communities or individuals against difference and otherness. The novel can be said to argue for a malleable sense of identity: community cannot be stagnant and absolute but has to be in perpetual transformation, and it cannot exclude the other from its embrace. It does not evoke a sense of absolute and finished identity but one that is always evolving. The community as exemplified at its best in the novel transcends narrow boundaries based on culture, nation and religion. It also offers a scathing criticism of the fundamentalist approach and distinct sense of identity where there is no space for the other.

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## INTERVIEW

### A Voice in the Wilderness:\*

#### An Interview with the Adivasi Woman Poet Jacinta Kerketta

Ajit Kumar Kullu

Jacinta Kerketta is a young upcoming poet, writer and free-lance journalist. She belongs to the Oraon indigenous community of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Her writings reflect the culture and society of indigenous people and raise various issues of economic exploitation and social injustice suffered by them. Two bi-lingual volumes of her poetry, namely *Angor* (Embers) and *Jaron Ki Zameen* (Land of the Roots) have already brought considerable fame. I met Jacinta in a literary programme at Sundargarh, Odisha, organised for the release of a book by some of the budding tribal writers of Odisha. It was a simple event meant to encourage the tribals to write. I had not realised how great a poet she was until her introduction was read out and testified by her German publisher Johannes Laping. I immediately got back to two of her poetry collections *Angor* and *Land of the Roots* and handed them to her for her autograph. She promptly obliged. Her first poem “An Evening in the Village” from *Angor* immediately caught my imagination. I got down to read both the books and found that she is a tradition in herself. Reading them was getting reintroduced to the tribal world – the land, the forest, the flowers and the filial bond man shares with nature. Her poems have been published both in Hindi and English simultaneously. She is also well received by her German and Italian readers. This is a rare feat achieved by a young tribal woman from a far away corner of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. She here talks to us about her poetic journey.

**Ajit Kumar Kullu:** How did Jacinta become a poet? A tribal woman poet, and how does this recognition define you as a poet? Does it limit your identity? Where does your poetry come from? What indeed is poetry for you?

**Jacinta Kerketta:** It is difficult to say how someone becomes a poet. I don't exactly know when and how I began to write. I can only tell you that it is an experience which suddenly flashes in one's inner being like a lightening in the sky. And with that experience you begin by scribbling on the paper. The origin of poetry can be discerned when one sees and listens to the self in the depth of the inner being. Poetry cannot be written without being aware of the self. Because no sooner does it disappear than it occurs to the mind, and hardly does it descend on to the sheet of paper.

- The interview which was conducted in Hindi has been translated by me into English

I think it was possible to write poems because of being aware of my emotions. Battered by good and bad times, life taught me the hard way how to be conscious of myself. When you have no way out you begin to run into your inner being. And there began the transformation.

Since childhood I have been reading one thing or the other and therefore expressions for the emotions emerge on their own. But I never try to write poems. Whenever something stirs from within, I always take care and try the words and expressions to approximate the said feeling. Thereafter I compose the poem. Poetry accords one an opportunity to work on herself. Unless one works consciously, faithfully and continually every day on oneself from within, one cannot become a true poet.

Like all other poets, I also always go through this process to be a poet. Being from a tribal background, I have never felt my frontiers are limited. In fact these have been expanding a bit more everyday. The background of every poet makes it different and special. My tribal background also makes me different and it makes me aware of my responsibility towards our society. My identity always insists that I write down what I am. I must write the truth, what I really feel and see. The truth could be harsh and bitter at times but I must write. The truth and honesty in my poetry is certainly due to my tribal background.

**AKK:** Is a tribal woman poet different from other women poets?

**JK:** There will always be a slight difference between a tribal poet and other women poets. The society I am from is very different from the ones inhabited by other women poets coming from other societies. My struggle is different and my story is unique. There is pain in the poems of other women poets as well but the backgrounds and their effects differ. The poems coming from diverse settings speak of various societies and peoples, with their respective social milues and personal backdrops, and individual takes on various social issues. This diversity makes them powerful because they ultimately talk of humanities. Thus the poems always reach out to every human being, bring them together and help them understand one other.

**AKK:** Who is first in you, the woman, the tribal identity or the poet?

**JK:** While writing poems the human being comes first. The background and gender catch up later. In the end the background, the identity of being a male or female becomes immaterial. S/he becomes a mere witness; s/he feels everyone and everything together and writes. This is what happens to me.

**AKK:** Is there a difference about non-tribals writing about the tribals and tribals writing about themselves?

**JK:** There have been so many works on the tribals by the non-tribals. It is relatively easy in fiction because it is mostly dependent on external events and happenings. Poetry comes from the depths of the soul. Without reaching to that depth one cannot speak of the intensity of the sentiments of a people in their poetry. Many a time, a number of things are written on the *adivasis* based on some superficial experiences quite far from the depth of the soul. This could be a mere concern the others have for the *adivasis*. It does not necessarily reflect the *adivasi* spirit. But yes, there are a few non-tribal poets who have wonderfully captured the *adivasi* spirit in their poems because they have lived in their midst.

Further, it doesn't mean that only an *adivasi* poet can better engage in topics related to the community. It depends on how s/he views his/her society; how sincerely s/he feels, understands and how deep s/he can see into the matters concerning the society; how much s/he gets influenced by *adivasi* life and philosophy. That's how comes the difference in writings on the *adivasis* by the *adivasis* and non-*adivasis*.

**AKK:** Do you have a target audience in mind when you write?

**JK:** (There is) no fixed readers' community in mind. I write poems for all. As I write I try to ensure that even the commoner should be able to read, understand and relate to the poems.

**AKK:** You are a tribal activist and you have journeyed from journalism to poetry. How was the journey? Whose voice is more credible, a poet's or journalist's? Does journalism help poetry? How? Please share your experience.

**JK:** I began to write poems first in my school. Then I started writing stories. I wrote stories for periodicals and magazine from my class eight to undergraduate days. During my graduation at St. Xavier College, Ranchi my stories and poems were published in newspapers too. I started writing articles later. While doing my under graduation in journalism I began to write reports and articles as an independent freelancer. After a course in Mass Communication I started working as a journalist in the newspapers. I had a new beginning only after I had decided to quit my job in newspapers and went back to freelancing.

I began to write poems again. Now I am writing stories and also travelogues, essays and reports, in addition. I am active in social work as well. This has been like

a journey, going back and forth to pick up the things which were left behind. Poetry flows from my heart. Report writings are shaped by mind. Now I am trying to write reports both after the heart and the mind. So that they don't merely make people think but also feel in their hearts. I can see the two blending in my reporting. This has been possible because of my poetry. The poet's point of view has proved to be immensely helpful in writing a good news report. Now it's a pleasure because I can write a report from my heart.

**AKK:** What language do you use as a poet? And how do you judge the poetry of our time?

**JK:** A poet possesses the language of the heart, a language which can be understood by all, even by the mute and the dumb. It always calls upon the mind-driven society to be a little sensitive. Thus, there will be equilibrium between the head and the heart. It is needed for all sections of the society; it speaks to each individual directly especially to those who are responsible for the happenings and drives home its message. So many poems are being written in the present time. Many from the *adivasi* society are also writing poems. But it is important to know how a poem touches and wakes up both the commoners and the administrators. It is important to know how it moves the insensate society and inspires it to wake up to new affective initiatives. Therefore it is a kind of responsibility for poetry as well as the poets.

**AKK:** Why did you choose Hindi to express yourself? Is it because of its literary acceptance? Are Kurukh or Sadri incapable of expressing your thoughts and imaginations?

**JK:** I use the language I have. Hindi is the sole language I know therefore I write in it. It is difficult for me to write in Kurukh because I didn't have an environment in which I could learn it. If I knew Kurukh, I would definitely write in it. I didn't begin to write in a particular language looking at its acceptance or reception. But I have a strong desire to learn my mother tongue. I am learning it. Once I have mastery of it, I will definitely write poems in it.

**AKK:** Your poems have been simultaneously published in Hindi, English and German? I have read the English translations. The translators have certainly done a wonderful job. But what is your opinion on these kinds of publications?

**JK:** Translation widens the frontier of readership. It is an extension which reaches out to a great number of human beings. In translation the poems crosses over the territories of its home, villages, states and countries. Therefore it is necessary. But it has its own issues: the original idea may get diluted and feelings and emotions

may get lost. I am grateful to my English, German and Italian translators as they ensured that the poems remain true to the original. Of course it has been pointed out that the English translation has certain differences with the original. It depends on the disposition of the translators. When the translator does not undergo the same experience as the poet the differences are bound to occur. You can imagine the difficulties because even for a poet it is impossible to dwell on a poetic mood all the time. Nevertheless in translation message gets delivered and the purpose of writing gets fulfilled, and therefore it is necessary.

**AKK:** The nature has been quite often personified in the poems. Tell us something about this.

**JK:** If you try to understand nature through your head, you will see only the flowers and leaves, and observe their age and colours. Nature is more than these. You have to see through all these to find its beauty, its soul. When you can establish an intimate bond with this you feel one with the nature. You can hardly differentiate yourself and the nature. I often begin my poems with “I” but that’s hardly my “I” always. Most of the times, it is others’ “I”. And every one/readers can feel that it is her/his “I”.

**AKK:** How was *Angor* born? The poems are on fire and blood is the colour they put on. “A rebellion slayed,” “Blood Stained River,” “The weapons in my hands,” “A Madua sprout on the grave,” “The call of the Dombari Hill,” “Why is the earth on fire,” “Stirring embers into flames,” “Closed doors,” “The Vermilion Bond,” “The age of Motherhood,” “The hero in you,” “Unprofessed” and “Angor,” all of them speak of some kind of purgation. Has the world been pushed into some kind of purgation like in “The Ties of Time Unfolding”? Your poems call for revolution. They are full of images and symbols of anger and protest. The ravaged nature is whimpering but giving birth to warriors. You clearly state that a war is on between nature and humans, between people for and of the nature and people against it. What’s the role of a pen in this situation? Your pen, as I found in your poems has already become a two edged sword. Your comments!

**JK:** Nature has its own laws. It treats everyone equally, gives freedom and also codifies the natural justice. It gives an equal share of light, sunshine and rain to each individual. The struggle begins when an individual tries to grab the shares of other individuals. I strongly believe in the ways of natural justice. Human beings who are in control of things and run the world can very well take care of it but because of their greed and selfishness they cause injustice to themselves and everyone. This is the struggle.

The *adivasi* society is governed by a unique ideology. It is in accordance with the laws of nature. Their philosophy has been ‘Live and let live’; and if you have more,

share it with others. All religions speak of this. But the *adivasi* society has lived this message even in the absence of an organised (*adivasi*) religion. This philosophy has been a point of difference and struggle between the *adivasis* and non-*adivasis*. *Adivasis*, though quite unwilling, are in the middle of a war. If they don't fight back they would perish because the aggressors are not going to stop.

Meanwhile what is my pen doing! People can tell this from their experience. But I can feel that it is also trying to communicate to the ancestors about oppressors who have always attacked. Let their descendants realise what history has done to us and how the same thing gets repeated over the periods of time. My pen is not only trying to capture the external struggle of *adivasi* society but also its thoughts, feelings and emotions. So that the people can come out of the shackles of caste and religion and give way to natural justice for the *adivasis* and the downtrodden; the good ones can unite to fight against the bad and the ugly.

**AKK:** Where is the root of the land of the roots? The poems ask hundreds of questions on human ways of handling the nature (which includes humans).

How convinced are you while saying that nature will one day redeem itself from the artificial rules created by human hands? Like in "A smouldering piece of Wood" and "Return"?

**JK:** It's clear that if you leave the earth alone and it has its own way growing things on it. Wild grass, flowers, plants and shrubs churn out of a fallow ground. Many kinds of creatures are born there. Each organism has its own tongue, tune and nature. The way humans are destroying each other to extinction, it is certain to create a void in future. But nature has its own way of replenishing the vacuum created by men. It will grow trees and forest for itself. New languages would emerge/evolve. The earth is certainly capable of a new creation.

**AKK:** Will there be an end to struggle between the urban and the rural world? Man has always tried to subdue nature. In the struggle between nature and man you also talk about the struggle between two men, one from the city and another from the village. How long will this struggle be? Will there be an end to it? Who will win the war, the city man or the village man or the nature?

**JK:** One day every man will come towards tribal philosophy and life. Apart from this, people will not have any choice. This is my faith. We are just a part of nature. Our intellect puts us in this illusion that man is ahead of nature too. He has won everything. He can build a new man. He can create anew the world. But even after doing all this, one day he dies and in this earth he has to settle down. This is true. And no man can run away from this truth.

The real happiness of life lies in being close to nature. The *adivasis* have been already doing this. The rest who are crushed by the system are either feeling empty or going crazy. Everybody is slave to his/her immediate needs. The world has learnt a lot from *adivasi* lifestyle. But it is too cunning to acknowledge that and it always boastfully proclaims them as its findings. The Adivasi philosophy either accepted or not, is slowly going to work out its way and get everyone closer to the nature.

It might take years but it is bound to happen. The developed countries are already headed in this endeavour. The developing countries are also going to feel its importance soon. As far as conflict is concerned it will continue till man has won over his greed. The struggle will continue. This is more about winning over self than others. And the so called civilised world is constantly losing and increasing its days of struggle against nature. The struggle will be less acute when the civilisation wins back itself. Since the *adivasi* society is caught up in this crossfire it has always got to be cautious and alert. It has to work on its weaknesses, protect its soul and safeguard its existence.

The *adivasis* practise and develop safety measures against the wild elephants, tigers, bears and wolves in the forest and mountains. Their situation is the same in the world outside. They must learn other languages, cultures and philosophy, but it must not be at the cost of their own. They must know themselves well before going out to understand others. They must go in search of the sky on the strength of their roots. This is the need and demand of the changing times.

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## **Book Review**

**Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds: A Novel*. Sceptre Books, 2012.  
Pp.241. Rs. 230**

**Chandralekha Panda**

Kevin Powers' book *The Yellow Birds: A Novel* plumbs into the depths of human consciousness and interweaves the idea of past and present, guilt and acceptance and of letting go of things with promises to hold on in a war-torn landscape. The debut novel by the war veteran is not only a story about bloodshed, but it is a poignant narration of human bonding over fear and instinct of survival complicated by the idea of morality and the choice between right and wrong in a place of bloodbath and violence.

The novel opens in the northern city of Al Tifar, Nineveh Province, Iraq where 21 year old Pvt. John Bartle, his 18 year old friend Pvt. Daniel Murphy and the colonel Sergeant Sterling are deployed with their team, fighting to take control of the city. In between dodging bullets and studying corpses blown apart by bombs as a survival tactics, Murphy starts to disintegrate. Getting disillusioned with the war that never seems to serve any purpose and thinking of going AWOL we see Bartle struggling with himself and simultaneously thinking of ways to keep his promise made to Murphy's mother to keep Murphy alive. Amidst this conflict and disillusionment also lies the instinct to differentiate between right and wrong, the desire to kill and survive, to save oneself and to save others while ducking mortar blasts and bullets that seems to be coming from all directions.

Written and published almost after a century, the novel still has uncanny similarities to T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The imageries and fragmented storyline that shift through Iraq and Virginia, Kentucky and New Jersey from 2003 to 2009, and the perplexity of the readers in trying to piece together the storyline through maze of memory narratives catcombed with guilt and self-loathing run parallel to the poem. Further, the novel opens with the war taking place in spring in Al Tifar, and it moves geographically through winter until it is "spring again in the spoiled cities of America." In addition, the recurrent use of the hyacinth flower in the first few pages even before any description of violence starts remind one of the lines of the poem that depicted the purposelessness and bareness of the landscape of the post The Great War: "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;/ They call me the hyacinth girl." The loss of senses leading to the inability to feel, tell apart good from bad, the incapacity for acting upon the good, and above all the inability to

differentiate between the living and the dead signify the cognitive and ethical paralysis Murphy has suffered from. His belief in the justness of things wanes day-by day as his platoon wounds and kills and maims the enemy in the same measure as it receives mortal affront from the latter. In the later part, we see him distancing himself from everyone as he longs to choose emotions above numbness, until finally he gives up and is found in a trance like state “in a patch of lifeless hyacinth”.

The uncertainty of war is laid out on the surface, but what baffles the reader at places is Bartle’s uncertain memories as he says, “Everything I could recall about the war flashed kaleidoscopically, and I closed my eyes, and felt the weight of time wash over my body.” Paired with this is his overwrought senses that trigger unwanted memories from the war even after he has finally returned home. Throughout the novel he is traumatized, and hence finds himself out of place. While at war he wanted nothing but to go home; and at home everything: touch, sight, smell reminds him of all gruesome sight that he had seen on battlefields. At home he is given a hero’s welcome but the irony is he is never comfortable with it. He does not want to pretend that he has done anything worth praising except just managing to survive through the killings. As he processes the war, sitting by himself far from his friends in his own country, he finds no glory, no valour, as he defines how “the war would take what it could get. It was patient. It didn’t care about objectives, or boundaries...” Its sole purpose was “to go on, only to go on.” As he passes through his life he sees the “ghosts of dead” everywhere even as he knows that he has left the war ravaged landscape of Iraq behind him. Yet finding solace in the past is not an option for him, as he tries to come to terms with his broken promise, and continues to suffer from horrific hallucinations recalling the sights of blood-soaked, blasted bodies as he scanned and studied the vacant streets of Iraq he patrolled.

Halfway through his meditation upon the merits and demerits of wars, the narrator realizes the futility of all that is being done. The killings on the battle fronts, the sound of bullets and staying awake on amphetamines and fear, nothing seemed more natural than to stay alive even at the cost of others being dead. Death was not rare in a landscape littered with mass graves, dead bodies of men, women and babies and the injured people. The desert of Iraq had no land for the hyacinths now, the land was marked with blood, and its images stayed in the mind of the narrator. Even as he sits in jail as the novel ends, he ponders over the morality of man that declines exponentially in a country wrecked by civil strife, wars and bloodbath that do not seem to end in the near future.

In his novel, Kevin Powers explores not only the issues of the loss of innocent civilian lives caught in the clashes between adversaries and pointlessness of the

war that ravaged the region of the East Mediterranean, but also the effect of past in terms of the havoc it wreaks on the present inasmuch as he offers details of trauma and guilt in respect of particularities of events and objects. The past ricochets around the present like the bullet that the soldiers dodge on the battlefields, only to be haunted by it for the rest of their lives. According to statistics war veterans suicide rates in America is high, with an average of 18 veterans committing suicide each day. With the horrifying image of brutality that they face on battlefields, paired with various other factors back home such as homelessness, substance abuse, loneliness etc. life for them never stays the same as it was before they signed themselves up for war. Even as they are valorized after a war, they re-enter the civilian and domestic world with a scarred psyche and traumatic memories. The hypermasculine glorification of violence adopted by men on the battlefields underscores the difficulty in accepting that they are psychologically and emotionally vulnerable. In fact one recalls Stanley Kubric's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) based on Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers* (1979), which is a telling example of this.

Kevin Powers thus projects an unredeemably grim public view of war while at the same time offering a nuanced private view of the trauma and loss of the individual soldiers suffer and are condemned to live with angst and a sense of revulsion towards all, including themselves. The cost-benefit analysis of war is most the damning evidence against its justification anywhere in the world, for it kills and cripples humans and does unmitigated psychic harm to the survivors as well. Once in a while we hear about war veterans going on a spree of mass-killing and such events have spiked in recent times. This novel joins the other war fictions such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* in providing the minutiae of human loss and suffering at the individual and general level. It is a profoundly haunting memoir of a veteran as well as an infinitely sad story of the emptiness and futility of the human life. It makes the reader to respond to the affective power of the narrative and ponder the ethicality of war.



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