



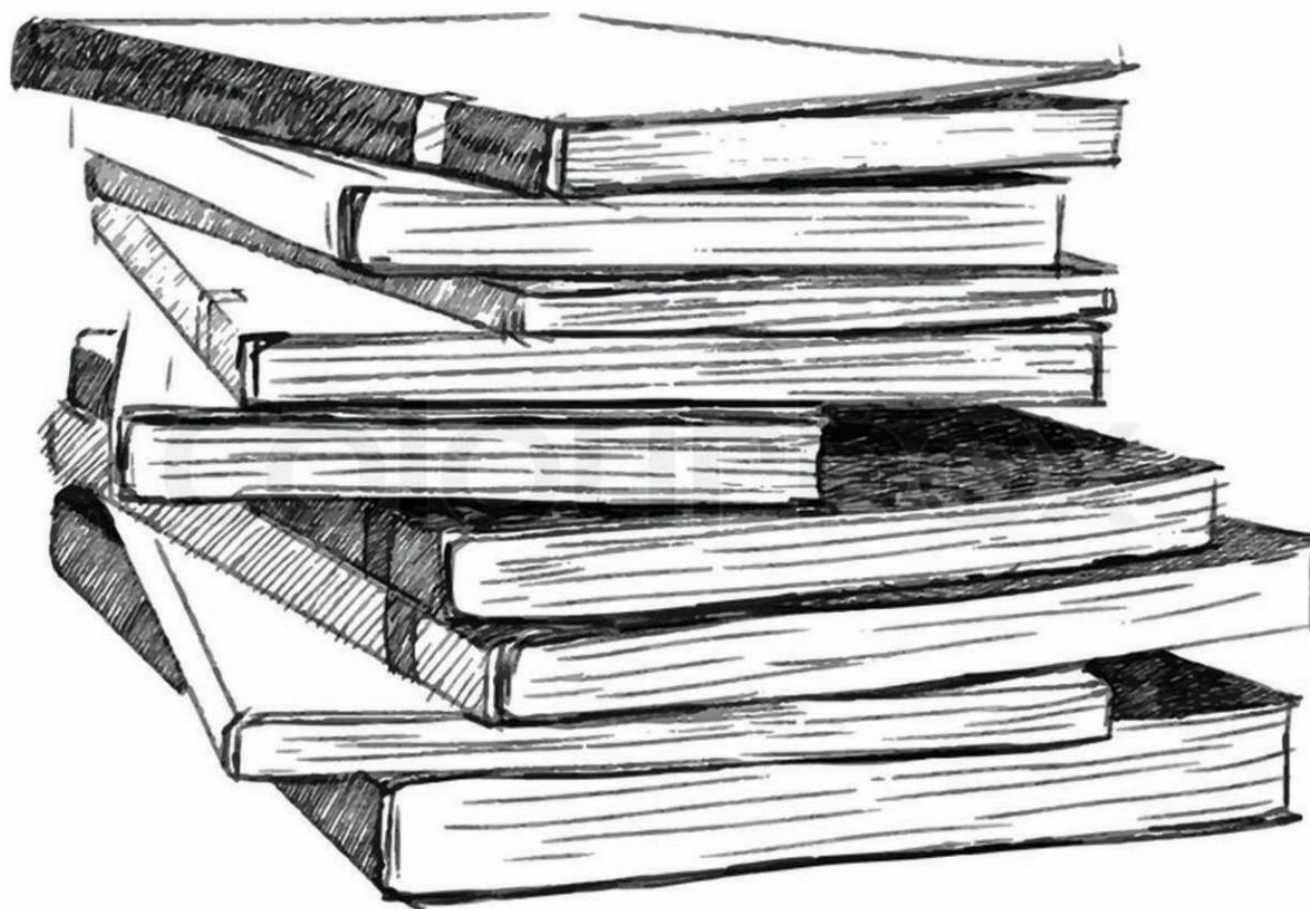
International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences

(IJELS)

An open access Peer-Reviewed International Journal

CrossRef DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Issue DOI: 10.22161/ijels.105



INFOGAIN PUBLICATION

Vol.- 10 | Issue - 5 | Sep-Oct 2025

infogain.ijels@gmail.com | editor@ijels.com | <https://www.ijels.com/>

International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)

(ISSN: 2456-7620)

CrossRef DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Vol-10, Issue-5

September - October, 2025

Editor in Chief

Dr. Manoj Kumar

Copyright © 2025 International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)

Publisher

Infogain Publications

Email: infogain.editor@gmail.com ; editor@ijels.com

Web: www.ijels.com

FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that we present this issue of the International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS). As an esteemed peer-reviewed journal, IJELS is dedicated to advancing scholarly research and fostering intellectual dialogue in English literature, Education and Social Sciences.

Our journal is a dynamic platform for academics, researchers, and practitioners to share their insights and findings. This issue encompasses a diverse range of topics, reflecting the multifaceted nature of our disciplines. From in-depth literary analyses to innovative social science research, our contributors provide valuable perspectives contributing to the broader understanding of cultural and social phenomena.

At IJELS, we are committed to upholding the highest academic rigour and integrity standards. Each submission undergoes a meticulous peer-review process, ensuring that only the most original and impactful research is published. Our editorial team, comprised of experts from around the globe, works diligently to maintain the quality and relevance of our journal.

We are particularly excited about the current issue, which includes groundbreaking studies and thought-provoking articles that challenge conventional wisdom and open new avenues for exploration. We believe these contributions will inspire further research and foster meaningful discussions within the academic community.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our authors for their dedication and contributions, our reviewers for their insightful feedback, and our readers for their continued support. As we strive to expand the horizons of knowledge, we invite you to engage with the content of this issue and participate in the ongoing dialogue that shapes our understanding of literature and social sciences.

Thank you for being so committed to scholarly excellence.

Sincerely,

Editor-in-Chief
International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)
www.ijels.com

International Editorial/ Reviewer Board

- **Dr. Manoj Kumar**, Amity University, Jaipur, India
- **Dr. Dinh Tran Ngoc Huy**, HCM, Viet Nam
- **Dr. Luisa María Arvide Cambra**, Professor with Chair at the University of Almería, Spain
- **Dr. Osama Mahmoud Abu Baha**, University College of Educational Sciences -UNRWA
- **Dr. Rabindra Kayastha**, Kathmandu University, Nepal
- **Prince Dawar**, Poornima College of Engineering, Jaipur, India
- **Rabia Najaf**, Department of Finance Government University Pakistan.
- **Farhana Haque**, Brac University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- **Dr. H.Saremi**, Islamic Azad university of Iran, Quchan branch, Quchan-Iran
- **Dr. Taher**, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan
- **Dr. Syed Damsaz Ali Andrabi**, Govt Degree College Boys Pulwama Kashmir, India
- **Dr. Ramel D. Tomaquin**, Surigao Del Sur State University, Rosario, Tandag City. Philippines
- **Dr. Rose Asayas Arceño**, Leyte Institute of Technology, Tacloban City, Philippines.
- **Dr. Vicente Alanoca Arocutipa**, Undergraduate and graduate teaching at the National University of Altiplano (Puno-Perú).
- **Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari**, MLSM College (LN Mithila University) Darbhanga, Bihar, India
- **Holmes Rajagukguk**, State University of Medan, Lecturer in Sisingamangaraja University North Tapanuli, Indonesia
- **Raikhapoor M.HumIAKN**, State Christian Religious Institue of Tarutung, North Tapanuli, Indonesia
- **Dr. Payal Chadha**, University Of Maryland University College Europe, Kuwait
- **Sarath W. Samaranayake**, Shinas College of Technology, Al-Aqur, Shinas, PO Box 77, PC 324, Sultanate of Oman.
- **Lidon. C. Lashley**, Lecturer, University of Guyana, Guyana
- **Ronato Sabalza Ballado**, College of Education and Graduate Studies, University of Eastern Philippines.
- **Dr. Andrew Sagayadass Philominraj**, School of English Pedagogy Department of Languages Universidad Católica del Maule, Chile
- **Prof. Dr. Misbah Mahmood Dawood AL-Sulaimaan**, Lebanese French University, Kurdistan Region - Iraq
- **Lahcen Belmekki**, Ministry of Education, High School Teacher of English, Kenitra
- **Dr. Agustin Nuñez Arceña**, Guimaras State College, Philippines
- **Mohsen Hanif**, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
- **Dr. Marwa Essam Eldin Fahmy**, MISR University for Science & Technology, Egypt
- **Reza Kafipour**, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Meshkinfam Street, Shiraz, Iran
- **Damianus Abun**, Divine Word College of Vigan and Divine Word College of Laoag, Philippines
- **Md. Tanvir Ahsan**, Jagannath University, Dhaka
- **Prof. Dr. Elsayed Ahmed Elnashar**, Faculty of Specific Education, Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt.
- **Agnieszka Hendo-Milewska**, Private University of Pedagogy in Bialystok, Poland
- **Ms Vo Kim Nhan**, Tien Giang University Vietnam
- **Nguyen Thi Phuong Hong**, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh city Vietnam
- **Dr. Sylwia Gwoździwicz**, The Jacob of Paradies University in Gorzow Wielkopolski / Poland
- **Kim Edward S. Santos**, Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines.
- **Dr. Morve Roshan K.**
- **Hoshimov Azamat Naziraliyevich**, Teacher of the Department of Geography Teaching Methods, Kokand State Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan
- **Rakhmanov Toshmurza**, Associate Professor of Digital Economics, Samarkand State University, Uzbekistan
- **Mehriniso Rakhmatova**, Symposium organizer and administrator, Fundamentals of Teaching Speaking online and designing e-materials. Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan
- **Nedy Coldovero**, Research Coordinator, Graduate Program Coordinator, IMs, Research and Journal Publication, College of Management, Capiz State University, Fuentes Drive, Roxas City, Capiz, Philippines
- **Dr. Rima Bharatkumar Soni**, Assistant Professor (Regular), Department of English, N. S. Patel Arts (Autonomous) College, Anand, Gujarat, India
- **Ellias Aghili Dehnavi**, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

Vol-10, Issue-5, September - October 2025

(10.22161/ijels.105)

Subaltern African American Female Silenced Voice in Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

Author: Shipra

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.1](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.1)

Page No: 001-003

Reconciliation as a Postcolonial Gambit against the Epidemiology of Imperialism in Malala Yousafzai's We Are Displaced

Author: Kawtar Ettour

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.2](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.2)

Page No: 004-010

Juxtaposing Hauntology in Solar-punk ideals of Bucky Chamber's A Psalm for the Wild-Built

Author: Dr. Ajay B. Chhuchhar

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.3](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.3)

Page No: 011-013

Archetypal Study of Female Identity in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters and Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night

Author: Vinaya Peter

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.4](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.4)

Page No: 014-016

Luxury Dreams, Patriotic Memes: Digital Fandom and Chinese Cult Cinema

Author: Qi Liu

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.5](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.5)

Page No: 017-022

Spiritual Despair and Femininity: The Absence of Redemptive Agency in Graham Greene's Women

Author: Dharmendra Kumar Rana

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.6](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.6)

Page No: 023-026

A Study on the Foreign Publicity Translation of Chinese Silk Culture from the Perspective of Linguistic Adaptation Theory--A Case Study of C-E Translation of Exhibits in China National Silk Museum

Author: Li Jiayi

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.7](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.7)

Page No: 027-035

Balancing Determination for Attaining Personal and Professional Fulfilments of Women with Reference to Chitra Banerjee's The Palace of Illusions

Author: Dr. Upender Gundala, Dr. P. V. Rajlakshmi

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.8](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.8)

Page No: 036-043

Twilight Tide: Narrative of Aging in Olive Kitteridge

Author: Ma Chaofan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.9](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.9)

Page No: 044-049

Scriptotherapy as Resistance: Tracing Generational Trauma in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses

Author: Hunufa Nasir

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.10](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.10)

Page No: 050-053

Living the Self: A Mirror of Modern Life in The Glass Menagerie

Author: Shivani Pawar

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.11](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.11)

Page No: 054-056

Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Shame

Author: Dr. Nabarun Ghosh

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.12](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.12)

Page No: 057-061

Magic, Myth and Multilinguism: The Echo of the Indian Knowledge System in the Language and Style of Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor

Author: Feroza Khatoon

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.13](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.13)

Page No: 062-067

Unattainable Infinity: The Divorce Between Art and Life in Robert Browning's Three Renaissance Poems

Author: Yifan Wang

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.14](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.14)

Page No: 068-076

Anthropocene Aquariums: Eco-critical Resistance in the Confined Voices of Duffy's "The Dolphins"

Author: Prosenjit Adhikary

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.15](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.15)

Page No: 077-080

Subtitling Chinese Animated Films under Functional Equivalence: A Case Study of Nobody

Author: Wang Xuyuan, Chen Shuangyu

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.16](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.16)

Page No: 081-084

Research on the Value of Ice and Snow Sports Culture Construction to Its High-Quality Development and Its Promotion Strategies

Author: Jintao You, Guanqiang Yang, Jiaqi Song

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.17](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.17)

Page No: 085-094

The Predicament and Countermeasures of Legal Supervision of Off-Campus Training under the "Double Reduction" Policy

Author: Wei Yuhan

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.18](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.18)

Page No: 095-102

"When the Goods Get Together": Luce Irigaray and the Critique of Exchange, Desire and Female Subjectivity

Author: Dr. Girija Suri

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.19](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.19)

Page No: 103-106

Tribal Voices in Translation: Negotiating Cultural Spaces in Narayan's Kocharethi

Author: Suresh Kurapati

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.20](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.20)

Page No: 107-111

Refiguring the Other: A Critique on the Politics of Teaching Literatures of the Marginalised

Author: Mr. Abdul Samad K, Dr. Basheer Kotta

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.21](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.21)

Page No: 112-115

The Poetics of Understanding Mizo Past

Author: Lalrinawmi Colvom Lulam

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.22](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.22)

Page No: 116-119

Informal Language Acquisition Among Moroccan Tourism Professionals: A Case Study of Chefchaouen and Marrakech

Author: Ikrame Chibani, Khalil Hsoun

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.23](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.23)

Page No: 120-124

The Partition of Bengal: History, Migration, and Literary Reflections

Author: Dr. Mamud Hassan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.24](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.24)

Page No: 125-129

Mapping Posthuman Rhizomes and Assemblages in the Spatial Distribution of Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash

Author: Dr. Reny Skaria

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.25](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.25)

Page No: 130-136

Widowhood, Orthodoxy, and the Crisis of Modernity: Re-Reading Indira Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker

Author: Akangkshya Sarma, Dr. Mukuta Borah

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.26](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.26)

Page No: 137-143

Affective Dimensions of Translation Tasks: Reducing Anxiety in EFL Learning

Author: Fatima Zahra Alaoui Mrani

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.27](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.27)

Page No: 144-150

Advocacy for Social Change in Indian English Novels

Author: Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.28](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.28)

Page No: 151-156

Ecocriticism and the Human Psyche in D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers

Author: Haaniya Irfan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.29](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.29)

Page No: 157-160

Towards Inclusive Sustainability: Exploring the Intersectionality of Climate Change, Gender Equity and Indigenous Women in Global Environmental Advocacy

Author: Hemalatha S, Mathangi S, Dr. R Archana

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.30](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.30)

Page No: 161-163

Brecht's Theatre for the Scientific Age: A Critical Reading of A Short Organum for the Theatre (1949)

Author: Dr. Girija Suri

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.31](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.31)

Page No: 164-168

Optimizing the Production of Proficient Explosive Detection Dogs: An Analysis of the Criteria in Selecting Puppies for Training

Author: Ma. Bonissa A. Ole

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.32](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.32)

Page No: 169-177

Satirical Realism and Classical Dramatic Structure: A Dual-Framework Analysis of Shrilal Shukla's Raag Darbari

Author: Diwakar Gautam

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.33](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.33)

Page No: 178-184

A Conversation Analysis Study on Identity Construction in Fraudulent Phone Call

Author: Li Jiaxin

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.34](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.34)

Page No: 185-192

The Impact of the Renaissance on the Development of Literature Period (14TH&17TH)

Author: Purvie Singh, Ashok Singh Rao

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.35](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.35)

Page No: 193-195

Exploration of Folkloric Elements, Ancient Indian Literary Sources and Epic Narratives in Contemporary Bodo Poetry

Author: Pranab Jyoti Narzary

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.36](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.36)

Page No: 196-201

Desire, Lack, and the Objet Petit a: Gregor Samsa's Transformation and the Lacanian Dialectic of Desire

Author: Abduladheem Khalaf Jasim, N. Solomon Benny

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.37](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.37)

Page No: 202-207

A Study on Translation Strategies of Mechanical English from the Perspective of Transformative Translation: A Case Study of English for Mechanical Engineering

Author: Zhiwei Sun, Mingxia Liu, Jing Wang

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.38](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.38)

Page No: 208-218

The Evolution of a Mother: Exploring the Subjectivity of Sujata in Mahasweta Devi's Mother 1084

Author: Nilofar Yasmin

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.39](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.39)

Page No: 219-221

The Paradigm Shift in Smart Guides: How Advancing AI is Reshaping the Industry's Future

Author: Xia Yongjie, Chu Chunyan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.40](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.40)

Page No: 222-226

Symbolism and the Politics of Survival in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

Author: Ms. Sukhwinder Kaur

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.41](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.41)

Page No: 227-231

Class, Caste, and Gender in Sujatha Gidla's Ants Among Elephants: An Intersectional Feminist Reading

Author: Dr. Raed Nafea Farhan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.42](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.42)

Page No: 232-243

Self-Confidence, Self-Respect, and Financial Independence: Pillars of Women's Empowerment in India

Author: G. Winmathi Marimuthu

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.43](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.43)

Page No: 244-246

What Do People Need in Panga? Posthuman Ethics and Companionship in Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot Duology

Author: Aparna. M

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.44](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.44)

Page No: 247-250

Shifting Grounds: Infiltrated Identities and Fading Roots in Pride and Prejudice

Author: Saloni Parmar, Dr Guni Vats

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.45](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.45)

Page No: 251-254

Silverware and Space: The Construction and Deconstruction of the Butler Figure through Object Metaphors in The Remains of the Day

Author: Bai Wei

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.46](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.46)

Page No: 255-260

Multiple Dimensions of Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk": A Study of Puritan Influence, Psychoanalysis and Racial Acceptance in American Literature

Author: Jangle Lalita, Mitkari S.B

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.47](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.47)

Page No: 261-266

The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of Emotions as Weights and the Identification of a Sinthome in George Saunders' "Sticks"

Author: Dr. Mehdi Morchid

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.48](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.48)

Page No: 267-271

Who Broke the Rule? Emotion, Ethics and the Play of Criminality in Contemporary Indian Folktales for Children

Author: Sreelakshmi R, Prof B. J. Geetha

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.49](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.49)

Page No: 272-277

Research on the hierarchical protection path of citizens' personal information in the data age by criminal law

Author: Chen Jiankai

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.50](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.50)

Page No: 278-286

Challenges of ICT Policy Implementation in ELT: A Case Study in a Vietnamese Province

Author: Vu Hung Le

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.51](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.51)

Page No: 287-300

Positive Psychology in Christy Lefteri's The Beekeeper of Aleppo

Author: Dr. V. Vijayalayan

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.52](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.52)

Page No: 301-305

Game-Based Instructional Design for Beginner Chinese: Constructing a Classroom Game Activity Database

Author: Trieu Khiet Loi

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.53](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.53)

Page No: 306-311

The Impact of Societal Expectations among Characters in the Novels of Somerset Maugham: Feminine Attributes

Author: Ms. Sujata Sinha

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.54](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.54)

Page No: 312-318

The generation and mutual learning of global symbols: Ritual practice and community imagination of the international communication of Dongpo culture

Author: Chen Jiliang

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.55](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.55)

Page No: 319-324

Exploring Women's Mental Health in the Yellow Wallpaper: A Medical Humanities Perspective

Author: Sweena Sweetlin .A , Vidhyavassni .M

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.56](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.56)

Page No: 325-328

Analysing loan blends and code mixing as main strategies to promote African languages in Chimamada Ngozie Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Matigari (1987)

Author: Sènamì-Fifa Blandine Araba, Charles Dossou Ligan, Abossèdé Paulette Okpeicha

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.57](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.57)

Page No: 329-337

Climate Change and Male Migration in Ganges River Basin of Bhojpur District of Bihar: Climate Adoption and Feminization of Agriculture

Author: Amrit Lal Jaiswal

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.58](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.58)

Page No: 338-343

The Phonetics-Phonology Interface and Overlap: A Brief Article Review

Author: Ina'am Abdul-Jabbar Abdul-Kadhim

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.59](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.59)

Page No: 344-350

Breaking the Cycle of Stagnation: Grief of Single Motherhood and Emotional Healing in Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer

Author: C. Lalmalsawmtluangi, Dr. Rafat Khanam

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.60](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.60)

Page No: 351-356

From Margin to Mainstream: Reeling Disability in the Cinematography of India

Author: Sushovan Mishra, Dr. Brahmananda Padra

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.61](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.61)

Page No: 357-364

Female Genital Mutilation as a Cultural Practice Controlling Women's Sexuality: A Study of Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy

Author: Shubham Chavan R., Dr. Stella Steven

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.62](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.62)

Page No: 365-369

Understanding the Grammar of Protest and Subversion through the lens of Dadaism

Author: Apal Jain

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.63](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.63)

Page No: 370-376

The Hermeneutics of Love: Ricoeurian reading of Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love

Author: Muhsina CK

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.64](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.64)

Page No: 377-384

Haunted Ecologies: Memory, Displacement, and Subaltern Landscapes in Mari Selvaraj's Cinema

Author: Mathivadhani M S

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.65](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.65)

Page No: 385-390

Rethinking Identity and Crisis: Representations of Young Adult Subjectivities in the Fiction of Selected Ugandan Women Writers

Author: Alice Jossy Kyobutungi

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.66](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.66)

Page No: 391-397

Bodies in Rebellion: Subverting the Normative constructs of Disability, Silence, and Marginalisation in South Asian literature

Author: Sidra Salafi

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.67](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.67)

Page No: 398-400

Caste Identity, Educational Mobility, and Institutional Change: A Study of Prof. Shyamlal's Autobiography Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor

Author: Dr. Santosh Kumar Sonker, Himachand Khobragade

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.68](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.68)

Page No: 401-405

The Alienation of The Other: A Study of Animal Metaphors in Gurnah's Paradise

Author: Duan Haisuan

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.69](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.69)

Page No: 406-428

Spectacle, Corruption, and Catharsis: The Crisis of Morality and the Neoliberal Psyche in Contemporary Indian Action Films

Author: Dr. Prasanta Ghoshal

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.70](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.70)

Page No: 429-433

Nihilism, Absurdity and Waiting for Godot: An Existential Approach

Author: Tawhida Akhter, Suad Abdullaziz Al- Kadery

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.71](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.71)

Page No: 434-439

Traces of Force Marriage: A Feminist Critique of Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories Subha and the Wife's Letter

Author: Muhammad Ramzan, Kashif Ahmad, Noor Muhammad

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.72](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.72)

Page No: 440-450

Ritual Songs as Gendered Discourse: Exploring Women's Oral Traditions in Haryana

Author: Anjali, Dr. Suchitra

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.73](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.73)

Page No: 451-459

Anthropocentrism and Ethical Blindness in Keki N Daruwalla's Hawk and Wolf

Author: Aradhana Panda

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.74](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.74)

Page No: 460-462

Growth and Performance of Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies (PACS) in Haryana

Author: Dr. Pushpa Rani, Divya

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.75](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.75)

Page No: 463-466

Re-Rooting the Green Feminine: The Postcolonial Ecology of Indian Womanhood in Markandaya, Divakaruni, and Lahiri

Author: Dr Dipti Agrawal

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.76](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.76)

Page No: 467-478

The Unfinished Project: A Critique of the Legacy of Cultural Studies from Birmingham to the Algorithmic Present

Author: Pramod Kumar K V

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.77](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.77)

Page No: 479-483

A Right to Reasonable Inferences: Re-Thinking Data Protection Law in the Age of Big Data and AI

Author: Ashikur Rahman

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.78](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.78)

Page No: 484-491

Bonnets & Bimbos: Internalized misogyny in Austen and Brontë's work

Author: Ariana De Andrade

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.79](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.79)

Page No: 492-496

Freud, Psychoanalysis, and the Tragic Psyche of Lady Macbeth: A Psychoanalytic Literary Study

Author: Alfred Vivek Joseph

crossref DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.80](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.80)

Page No: 497-499

Shared Symbolism in Diverse Cultures

Author: Dr. Shagufta Shaheen, Sumera

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.81](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.81)

Page No: 500-504

Kamala Das and the Politics of Gender: Rewriting Womanhood in Indian English Literature

Author: Dr. Sarbani Sankar Panigrahi

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.82](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.82)

Page No: 505-509

A Study of Female Biographical Writing in Officially Compiled Huizhou Local Gazetteers during the Qing Dynasty—Focusing on the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer

Author: Huifeng Chen

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.83](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.83)

Page No: 510-517

A Study on the Discursive Construction of Economic Growth in World Economic Forum Discourse

Author: Yuxia Xiao

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.84](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.84)

Page No: 518-526

Allocation of Powers under the Principal-Responsibility System— An Analysis Based on PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 Results

Author: Guan Xinyu

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.85](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.85)

Page No: 527-535

Patterns and Equations of Relationship in Kavita Kane's Tara's Truce

Author: Dr. Sreekala.B

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.86](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.86)

Page No: 536-539

Unquiet Twins: Yoruba Cosmology and Generational Haunting in Ayana Mathis's The Twelve Tribes of Hattie

Author: Wilfried Enagnon. B. Adjovi, Sènakpon A. Fortuné Azon

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.87](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.87)

Page No: 540-548

The intersection of Crime and Social Inequality in Vikas Swarup's Six Suspects

Author: B. Hemavathy, Dr. T. Senthamarai

 DOI: [10.22161/ijels.105.88](https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.88)

Page No: 549-551



Subaltern African American Female Silenced Voice in Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

Shipra

Research Scholar, Meerut College, CCS University, Meerut, UP, India

Received: 29 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 26 Aug 2025; Accepted: 30 Aug 2025; Available online: 03 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Toni Morrison, a renowned African American woman author, depicts the predicament of black subaltern women in her writings. African American women's situation was poignant, as they were subjugated by the patriarchal culture. Because of male and white dominance and oppression they were unable to develop their own identity in the society. They have plenty of aspirations, but they never have a place to showcase them. Their hard work and ability are never supported, and society and their community often suppressed their voice. The African American women experienced a variety of conflicting emotions, including hope and gloom, love and dislike, marital turmoil, and male chauvinism. 'The Bluest Eye' deals with class conflict, racism, sexism, gender difficulties, and identity crises. Morrison's main theme focus is the struggle of women in African American society. She also feels that it is crucial for people in black culture to recognize their principles and find their own identity in society.



Keywords— Subaltern, black African American female, silenced voice, oppressed, racism.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, formerly Chloe Anthony, has done a tremendous job of bringing African American literature to the forefront with a unique viewpoint. According to her, Afro-American literature is literature generated in the United States by African American writers. African American literature addresses issues such as racism, misogyny, class, oppression, and enslavement. In 1993, Toni Morrison became the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. She has created indelible characters and has tackled racism, inequality, oppression, misogyny, and enslavement as sources of psychological pain in her works. As a writer, Toni Morrison is well-known for her examinations of the lives of black women. Due to their race, black females had to endure physical, mental, and sexual assault during their formative years. The battle that black female fought to defend their right to exist in this world robbed them of their girlhood and their voices were silenced. The reason for caring about this topic is to bring attention to the ways in which young black girls have been mistreated, marginalized, raped and killed.

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* revolves around Pecola Breedlove, a black young girl who is obsessed by all white standards of beauty and yearns for blue eyes, which she associates with whiteness, as a means of escaping the sufferings that are the consequence of her dark skin. Because of the constant criticism she receives for her dark complexion and coarse features, Pecola develops an inferiority complex. This fueled her want to have blue eyes because she thinks that if she had blue eyes, all the bad things in her life will turn out for the better. Toni Morrison essentially throws the light on the black African American experience and her characters strive for their existence and their own cultural identity. Women of African origin have faced a dual issue as a result of their sex and ethnicity, and Morrison's books explore how racism and sexism may have devastating consequences.

Pecola encountered split awareness as she and her family entirely embrace white beauty norms. Pecola was motivated by the idea that only actual physical attributes of beauty are blond hair, fair complexion, and blue eyes. It was hard for Pecola to conceive of herself as attractive because of an aesthetics that elevates European standards of beauty while

lowering African American standards of beauty. This demonstrates Pecola's explicit desire for blue eyes, which she associates with whiteness and supports her split awareness. Because Pecola was black, Pecola's mother Pauline refused to acknowledge that she was her own daughter. She believed that black females were not worthy of being loved. Pecola's knowledge of her split awareness may be highlighted by this. Pecola had therefore gotten the most of her sense of split awareness from her mother.

Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* sheds attention to the lives of all the subaltern females who go unnoticed. Due to their battle for survival in the Afro-American culture, where beauty is linked with whiteness and there is sexist bias everywhere, black females are deprived of their femalehood. The black community people recognized themselves as the Others imposed by the white community. The same is true for Pecola Breedlove, who has been awarded the position of other by blacks inside the black community.

The Bluest Eye features young black females like Frieda Macteer, Claudia Macteer, Pecola Breedlove, etc. The book's narrator is Claudia Macteer, and Frieda is Claudia's 10-year-old sister. They both share a home with their parents and two tenants, Mr. Henry and Pecola Breedlove. The protagonist of the narrative, Pecola Breedlove, yearns for blue eyes because she associates them with purity and beauty. She thinks that being white is beautiful and that being black is intrinsically unattractive. Due to sexist prejudice, these girls' lives were extremely difficult. They attended a school where the white children were given preference. Even the so-called respectable white individuals, shopkeepers, family members, and educators exhibit abhorrent behavior toward blacks. Many incidences are present in *The Bluest Eye* to show how subaltern females voices were suppressed and silenced. Claudia is helpless in many ways. She loathes Shirley Temple and the blue-eyed, blonde-haired baby dolls she received for Christmas. Claudia questions why everyone believes that white dolls and girls are more attractive than black ones and claims that this is why she was never asked what she wants for Christmas. She despises white dolls and females because of the black girls' ignorance in a racist culture. She deals with the stress of having to deal with such things at such a young age, which creates disturbance. Henry, a renter in Mactier's residence, had the unfortunate experience of touching Frieda's breast at one point. She was left in the dark about the experience of coming into her sexuality, which left her bewildered. She was unable to provide any details on what had taken place. She is just aware of the fact that he is acting inappropriately, but she does not understand what this suggests. She was more concerned about what had been done to her as well as how her parents would respond to the

situation. All of this was due to the ignorance of her parents, who never provided her with a proper knowledge or education on such matters. But nonetheless Frieda being enraged by her experience was willing to act rather than suffering. However, Pecola, the main character, had a challenging home life. Her parents used to quarrel all the time because her father, Cholly Breedlove, drank alcohol and used to physically assault her mother, Pauline Breedlove. Her father once burnt down the family home, forcing Pecola to live as a renter at Macteer's house at such a young age when she should have spent her childhood with her own family in her own parents' house. Pecola is certain that if she were born with blue eyes, she would be more attractive, her parents would stop fighting, her dad would give up drinking, and her brother would stop running away from home. Pecola acquired a sense of inferiority in herself, which fueled her yearning for blue eyes, which she believed were comparable to the whiteness and beauty she had. Cholly Breedlove returned home one night under the influence of alcohol, and the next morning, when Mrs. Breedlove began to harass Cholly about buying coal for the stove, he refused to comply with her demands. Both parties immediately engaged in combat with one another. While Pecola is lying in bed, she feels anxious and lonely, so she prays to God to make her invisible. "Please, God, she whispered into the palm of her hand. Please make me disappears" (*The Bluest Eye* 45). Those nasty eyes, she thought. She reasoned that if she could switch her eyes, her whole identity would shift. Because of how unbalanced she was, she missed out on being a normal little girl. She suffered emotionally from seeing her parents' arguments.

The ugliness and otherness of these females is reflected in their choice to wear black clothing. When Pecola goes to a store owned by a white shopkeeper whose name is Mr. Yacobowski, she gets afraid of buying sweets from Mr. Yacobowski who is white since she has the impression that he did not even notice her when she entered the store to buy candy from him. "At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He doesn't see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (*TBE* 48). Mr. Yacobowski claimed outrage that he touched her hand to collect money because she was black, as shown between the lines. "He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand... Finally, he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm" (*TBE* 49-50). The existence that these black girls are forced to live is one of hardship and neglect. All these black females went to schools that have a history of repressing black female students and subjecting them to emotional and verbal abuse. Even within the confines of the educational system, white students are given preference. Pecola is subjected to teasing by the black schoolboys, some of whom are also black,

since she is a black female. Pecola asks Elihue Micah Whitcomb, also known as Soaphead Church, a psychic faith healer, to give her blue eyes. Soaphead instructed her to feed his landlady's dog meat, and if the dog behaves unusually, her request for blue eyes would be granted. Unfortunately for the dog, Pecola is being used as a poison delivery system, and he doesn't even want to be bothered with trying to hide his hatred for the dog from her. She thinks that if she feeds the dog meat, the dog will get her blue eyes, so she rushes away in shock. As thus, racism has catastrophic consequences. One more horrible incident occurred which shook Pecola from tip to toe when she was 11 years old, her father Cholly came home drunk and raped her while she was doing the dishes. He did it out of a mixture of compassion and wrath, and he left her unconscious on the floor. Therefore, the phenomenon of destroying young women's lives is exemplified in Pecola's Story.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's work, *The Bluest Eye*, in many ways serves as a reflection of her unwavering sense of duty for the situation of subaltern African American women. Because of sexist prejudice, the lives of women like Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda are often weird and unpredictable. Along with sexist prejudice, additional variables such as racism, poverty, enslavement, and oppression play a significant role in stunting the development of women in these situations. In this novel the voice of all the subaltern African American female was suppressed or silenced when they tried to raise it for their existence and identity. Morrison is doing a service to young black women by bringing them from the margins into the spotlight by referencing them in her writings. Morrison has been hailed for portraying the difficulties that black girls face and for bringing the experiences of black girlhoods to the forefront of public discourse. Every female in that culture is at risk of being a victim of sexist prejudice, regardless of the color of their skin, if the society of their times is racist and rules or restricts female of color based on their race, then all girls in that society are at risk.

REFERENCES

- [1] Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970.
- [2] Sharma, Shiwali. "Disrupted Girls and Disturbed Girlhoods in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye and Beloved*" In *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*. Vol. 6. No. 2, 2018. 1136-1146.



Reconciliation as a Postcolonial Gambit against the Epidemiology of Imperialism in Malala Yousafzai's *We Are Displaced*

Kawtar Ettour

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, University of Sultan Moulay Slimane, Beni Mellal

Received: 28 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Aug 2025; Accepted: 01 Sep 2025; Available online: 05 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *We are Displaced* is an anthropological and cosmological literary magnum opus where Malala Yousafzai perlustrates the ineffable quiddity of her past in the Swat Valley and the substitution into a state of devastation due to the socio-cultural and eco-political ramifications of the Taliban movement as a captivating and disenchanting threat. She investigates her text for lampooning all the fundamentalist groups that impose a set of restrictive and supremacist beliefs against the willingness of the Pakistani woman in terms of rights and psychological growth. All of these fluctuations get more intense with devastating and unprecedented events of nature as they get reified and interpreted as a mode of divine punishment due to the refusal to adhere to the extremist rulings. In fact, it's a call for de-homogenizing the Islamic doctrine by castrating and befuddling the economy of equal societal existence between men and women. This point investigates a bilateral trauma that can be addressed from a postcolonial and feminist theoretical approximation as we realize the onslaught of both imperialism and patriarchy in their material and immaterial dynamicity. The fundamentalism which is provoked by the Taliban movement is a real condemnation and disorientation for the regular equanimity of three inter-reflexive sectors that stand as a constructionist quilt behind whatever nation's proliferation, and which are: education, media and environment. The cursus through which the author embarks is one of revision and replacement of discursiveness as it is a causal-effect of a long historical fight which gets obfuscated by the nullity of different anarchist, subjectivist, individualist and hierarchist beliefs. Then, this Pakistani author attempts to create a counter-narrative that intentionally embodies a metaleptic self-reflexivity in the name of equalizing ethical exchange and dialogic extension with the reader. In other terms, the author exposes an epistemological quest that scrutinizes the shift from safety to threat by considering reconciliation as a kaleidoscopic medium through which peace will progress from the inside spirit to the outside land.



Keywords— *Displacement, Homeland, Nationalism, Ambivalence, Reconciliation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper essentializes the normativity of the postcolonial writer's quest for reconciliation as an attitude more than a reaction in the name of Malala Yousafzai and the Pakistani land. In its analytical approximation, it mediates the close verbal reading of Malala's text through the contestatory nature of 'representation' and 'resistance' as broad and irrevocable notions of the postcolonial discourse and its practical engagement with the intricacies of universal

imperialism. In fact, it's an assimilation and deconstruction of the different modes of consumption and production that galvanize the colonialist representation into circulating and persisting as a deliberate canon and habitual performance. This point seems highly critical for diagnosing how Malala fuses the concepts of 'Universality', 'Hybridity', 'Education', 'Consumption' and 'Production' as systemic manipulations which take the form of metaphorical approximations to the epistemic violence of the global imperialist regime. It's

indeed a postcolonial textual resistance which started in the 19th century as a parody by an unknown Bengali writer through *Macaulay's 1835 Minute*, till becoming a widespread practice from which Malala takes part as a revolutionist for canonical counter-discursive formations in the postcolonial theoretical significance. The thematization of reconciliation is meant to offer a transparent window through which the author-protagonist dynamizes her subtle and eternal quest for an objective reality of herself and the agency of the Pakistani land in the universal neo-imperial structure. It's indeed a postcolonial debate through which Malala radicalizes her refusal of too many colonialist issues like: the three worlds theory, the white man's burden, the antagonistic paradigm of 'Us' and 'Them' in the name of Manichaeism and so on of such proactive and provocative colonial dilemmas which strengthen their imperium from make-belief, condensation and propagation. On the other hand, this analytical paper interrogates the consistency of the native intellectual's resistance as a mode of necessity rather than luxury in terms of forging a post-identity that reconciles and aligns with the pre-colonial past in its anthropological fixity and epistemological overture.

II. THE MULTI-LAYERED DISCOURSE OF RECONCILIATION

2.1 The Contextualization of Reconciliation within the Familial Background of The Protagonist and The Historico-Political Circumstances of The Pakistani Society

The author approaches an undeniable nostalgic attachment to her childhood, regarding the faded dream from which all joys and calamities emerged. It's an identitarian quest where history forms the practical backbone as it conducts all the latent and approved feelings of the author in terms of fear, serenity, vulnerability, freedom, confinement, ad infinitum. Then, it's the exposure of a Janus-faced psyche that quests for self-reconciliation from a nostalgic orientation to reify the loss into imaginative possession. Within this temporal turn back, the author-protagonist refers to the obtrusive attack on girls' schools in Swat Valley at the age of 11, causing loss of electricity and a set of banning games. However, Malala recognizes the advocacy of her father in claiming, with full assertiveness, her irrevocable right to education to bypass all the genderist taxonomies: "Many girls stopped attending classes or left the area to be educated elsewhere when the ban was announced – my class of twenty-seven had dwindled to ten. But my friends and I continued going until the last day. My father postponed what would have been winter break so we could get in as much school as we could" (Malala, 11). This fact highlights the potentiality of awareness more than education for a

family, especially that patriarchy is traditionally dynamized from a father's perception till extending towards the ideological construction of a whole society. The threat of the Taliban movement is a metonymic approach to a whole imperialist enterprise that aspires to emasculate and enslave Pakistani people by cutting liaison with civilization, enlightenment and intellectual revolution within the practical manifestations of schools' destruction. The perspective which is promoted here appeals to many postcolonial writers, either Africans or non-Africans who advocate the supremacy of education as a cognitive weapon through which the colonized psyche reinitializes self-reconciliation and individual functionality for collective growth. At another dimension, Malala mentions how children imitate the set of battles and threats that take part in the real life. This is what the colonizer calls mimicry when trying to annihilate and de-essentialize the colonized figure by applying to them the normativity of iteration rather than alteration. In 2009, the decree to close all schools formed a climactic point by which Malala incarnates the alternative of starting a blog for BBC Urdu to mediate and mediatize the issue of girls' struggle for education. She's a figure of revolution who looks for reconciling with her dreams and future aspirations through embarking on an expedition of self-realization rather than being arrested and rejected like an inefficient social pariah with no identity or etiquette. All of these elements gradually perustrate the engendered incoherencies brought by the lack of reconciliation with culture. This culture is mystified within a subjectivist and contingent conventionality, which de-homogenizes the socio-political equilibrium of societies by the principle of division without accepting any alternative of revision or reformulation. It's not a belief but a make-belief which deepens the obfuscations of the heterosexual matrix into a real hiatus between gender identity and education for provoking the presence of human rights as a matter of biased extremism rather than a priori consistency: "We are shown woman solicited by two kinds of alienations; it is very clear that to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object, the Other; and at the heart of its abdication, the Other remains a subject" (Simone De Beauvoir, 84). At another dimension, the internal displacement of Malala's family brings into question the conceptual and structural appresentation of geographical reconciliation by relating to Homi Bhabha's modelization of 'Homeliness', 'Unhomeliness' and 'Homelessness'. The situation of the Pakistani native gets more intense when submitting to 'Unhomeliness' within their geographical belonging. This fact not mainly causes fear or displacement for them, but also severely causes the deregulation of nationalism as an identity and psychological

quiddity from which they stimulate their self-defense. Here, the geographical reconciliation seems extremely onerous or, to some extent, inchoate as it appeals to an internal chaos vis-à-vis the neutrality of the land as an identity within the historical, geographical and political codes. The ultimate aim for whatever postcolonial writer is de-politicizing the land, but it's a pre-given where freedom is innate and wilderness is absolute rather than being regarded as a construction through which we ingrain the criteria of force, division and sophistication. The government evacuation order is the explicit chaos from which uncertainty extends as people start looking for refuge in its superficial mode rather than a home in its authentic specificity. Malala starts epiphanizing the sublimity of geographical reconciliation when residing between her mother's and father's relatives' houses, and thus gets the suggestion from her cousin, Sumbul, to reintegrate in school with a sense of normalcy and perseverance. This point mediates the birth of a liminal space where Malala negotiates the past happenings for adapting to the ongoing living conditions: "resistance is an act, or a set of acts, that is designed to rid a people of its oppressors, and it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 107). Within the class, she constantly remarks the impact of genderist dynamics on the number of present girl students. It's a matter of resistance where education takes more priority and privilege than family and environment, as she regards it as the ultimate weapon for reuniting families and preserving the peace of different environments. Then, Shangla is delineated as a space of introspection where the author-protagonist fathoms the unpredictable and certain requirements of revolution against the effacement of Pakistani identity. This is the claim of too many postcolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Isabella Hummadaa, and John. Maxwell. Coetzee and so on who consider that intellectualism is the panacea for self-reconciliation with the postcolonial urges and drives to expand and verbalize the tone of revolution with severe arguments rather than make it vicarious and artificial: "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of collectivity itself" (Aijaz Ahmad, 109). The displacement of the family from Shangla to Peshawar creates an inner confrontation between peace and anxiety; the fact that brings the author-protagonist to refuge to silence as a simulacrum of spatial self-referentiality more than an attitudinal decisiveness. It's a matter of familiarizing with fragmentation in its socio-political incoherence for dynamizing a routinized equipoise by which the protagonist can vaccinate and filter the controversies of her past and ongoing life. This specific point draws an intense analogy

with the case of David Lurie in *Disgrace* within a set of postcolonial regulations that lead to interrogate one's fixity in stability more than fixation in past discursive sublimity. It's the point where the protagonist quests for her ipseity by reframing what Sigmund Freud appeals to as the topographical and structural models of human consciousness in the name of the Id, the ego, the superego and the external world.

In this text, the protagonist challenges the ongoing sophistication by de-politicizing internally and not externally to position herself beyond the scope of societal, hierarchical and patriarchal classifications. This point aligns with how Judith Butler considers that one's identity is a matter of continuous performance rather than a fixed or stagnant entity. The celebration of Malala's birthday is a metaphorical representation of how she vicariously documents the Pakistani land, taking into consideration that unhomeliness can be accepted when one's reconciliation designs and extends rather than designates and restricts: "the rediscovery and repatriation of what had been suppressed in the natives' past by the processes of imperialism" (Edward Said, 210). The exposed trauma is fully bilateral in its liaison to how gender and education are affected by the Taliban movement. This movement is not meant to essentialize Malala's individual experience, but to universalize it within the broader gamut of geo-political conflicts of globalization and Arab world's marginalization within a neo-colonial viciousness of systemic conservatism, juridical judgmentalness and subjective de-historicization. In other terms, the discourse of displacement is universal and ancient, starting from the revolutionary exigencies of the South African region till extending to other parts of the world by provoking their non-conformity and non-adaptability to what is acceptable in terms of modernity and enlightenment as engagement and practical agency. The protagonist's return to her hometown is a symbolic panacea which de-traumatizes her psychological hygiene from ambivalence to a quasi equanimity. It's a modeling of a post-identity that incorporates the performativity of sedulity more than revenge. In fact, the protagonist constantly appeals to the historically known comprador intelligentsia that ultimately epitomize an intellectual mediation of the colonialist issues and their ramifications on the postcolonial constitution in its theoretical and empirical dynamics as a deliberate process more than a subtle and univocal decision. This point is proved by how the protagonist takes of patience a processual nature through which she emblemizes her attachment to education as a non-contingent weapon against all discursive, taxonomic and de-regulatory attacks against her homeland. This means that reconciliation is an emblem of adaptability to whatever socio-political and historico-cultural fluctuations in their

subjective means for illustrating a positivist and reductionist alternative through which the suffering figure traces the trajectory of their post-identity in its psychological purity, moralist profundity and behavioral flexibility. What seems really challenging and engaging in this text is the perspective of migration within one's homeland. It's the point where the protagonist starts negotiating rather than negating the aftermath of what happened as war, conflict and deterioration: "Scary things became normal. We'd hear the big, booming sounds of bombs and feel the ground tremble. The stronger the tremor, the closer the bomb. If we didn't hear a bomb blast for an entire day, we'd say, Today was a good day. If we didn't hear arms being shot at night, like crackers, then we might even get a good night's sleep" (Malala, 11). In other political means, it's an interregnum between the past and the present in terms of familiarizing with a new societal, territorial and cultural fragmentation that forms the critical point of her urgent quest for reconciliation. This quest mediates the stream of consciousness through which the reader is constantly engaged with the protagonist's thoughts. In fact, the author-protagonist implicates a free indirect discourse that effaces the distance between narrator and focalizer for emblemizing an ambiguity at the level of the thematic approximations of the work, and thus deviating from the commonly accepted realist tone of traditional oeuvres into what is critical and challenging within the reader's psychological and conceptual perceptions.

2.2 Reconciliation as a Psycho-Spiritual Drive for Postcolonial Re-Contextualization

George Lamming argues that over three-quarters of the world has been deeply and unconditionally affected by the ruins of imperialism and its colonialist praxis. That's why we notice the emergence of too many artistic and literary creations that put decolonization as the ultimate purpose by dismantling and subverting the imperialist codes and thus appropriating their dominant discourses: "its long-term strategy is to effect a radical restructuring of European thought and, particularly, historiography" (J. C. Young, 158). This perspective is explicitly mechanized in this literary work, where Malala demands a post-identity with a new recovered reality that is free of all colonial taint and demarcation. Her demand is highly desirable and inevitable as soon as she contextualizes the pandemic brutalities, the epistemic violence and the cultural denigration in terms of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In fact, the majority of postcolonial thinkers fully declare that the reach of purity in their postcolonial culture, like the pre-colonial one, can never be utterly recovered and re-established. Malala practicalizes the hybridity which is commonly exposed in postcolonial works, regarding the necessity of dismantling and decoding the dialectical

relationship between the ontology and epistemology of imperialism and the impulse for recreating an independent local identity. The author-protagonist is highly convinced that decolonization is a process, not an immediate arrival to self-reconciliation. It contingently involves an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and the subversion of them into a peripheral position. It's indeed a postcolonial dismantling through textual and contextual configuration of the colonial resources and their modes of implementation within the colonized's mind, psyche and life. In other terms, Malala provokes the epiphany of the reader for mediating an in-between position rather than the formerly privileged one of imperialism for interrogating the conventional discursive strategies that subordinate the colonized regions into a rest of the world. She intentionally assumes the non-possibility of reformulating a wholly independent nation or region due to the historical implications, which turn out to be like fictional records and onerous tasks for the postcolonial writer. Malala's text is perceived as a re-reading and re-writing compendium of history by integrating three inter-reflexive elements: assimilation, subversion and essentialization. Then, the author implicates a set of counter-discursive instead of homologous practices that develop canonical strategies against the dominant imperialist discourse. Wilson Harris considers this practice as a dynamic operation that brings the text to primarily consume its own biases and simultaneously erode those of the dominant centrist and hegemonic discourse. Effectually speaking, it's a revolutionary challenge of literary universality by epiphanizing how much the postcolonial literature in the name of its writers, struggles for individuality in its theory and practice. On the other hand, we can't abnegate that Malala exposes a textual model of Commonwealth literature by rejecting the neo-assimilative bases of the imperialist discursive discourse and opting for a national or pan-national configuration of independence rather than neo-colonial independence: "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha, 1). Then, this text mediates its postcolonial examination by conceptualizing two important notions which are representation and resistance that constantly interrogate the dramatic effect of colonial relations in terms of entangling the alterity of the postcolonial subject into terror and lack: "they are the victims of projected fears, anxieties and dominations that do not originate within the oppressed and will not fix them in the circle of pain. The stirring of emancipation comes with the knowledge that the racially supremacist belief that under every dark skin there was a jungle was a belief that grew,

spread, touched every perpetrator of the racist myth, turned them mad from their own untruths" (Bhabha, 16). This point is intensely evidenced by the practical and immaterial fluctuations of the relationship between Malala and the Taliban movement. In fact, her presence is a metonymic simulacrum of the Pakistani society along with the political, anthropological and historical ramifications which are projected by the resistance of the imperialist movement for reaching an existential status of absoluteness. Then, the ongoing conquest provokes the certitude of a quest within Malala's psyche for textualizing her experience and concretizing its added value within the postcolonial realm. She radically rejects the acceptance of a social pariah model by submitting to the authoritative picture of imperialism, as she considers the formalization of her education a weapon through which she situates the Pakistani land as a postcolonial cultural representation rather than a colonialist archive: "sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization-the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination" (Elleke Boehmer, 3). Moreover, she takes her textual endeavor not as a projection of decolonial fear or a colonial desire, but an undeniable epitome of postcolonial objective knowledge of herself, the Pakistani land and the reader. It's quite conspicuous that Malala extends a metaleptic interchange with the reader and the other characters for bringing them to assimilate and peruse the intensity of her self-reflexivity on reconciliation as an attitude more than a reaction. It's an extensive and progressive appeal to Said's *Orientalism*, where he interrogates the historical records that mediated and simplified the emergence of imperialism as a global discursive formation. This literary attitudinal construction propels us to realize how Malala and other postcolonial writers dissolve all the previously offered authorities by substituting them into substance and silence. It's not a matter of silencing oneself, but delving into the global heimlich silence that turns out to be like acceptance and adaptability and to some extent an application of Bourdieu's habitus.

2.3 The National Consciousness as an Emotive and Cognitive Paradigm for Reconciliation with One's Identity

The author-protagonist exploits an extreme alacrity for emblemizing her proper national identity and cultural authenticity without neglecting how the colonial and neo-colonial agendas dismantle and disarm the nationalist demands by putting forward a set of inflexible eco-political doctrines. These nationalist demands engage with an assimilationist pre-requisite for recontextualizing oneself in the vicarious and practical consistency of one's homeland. However, these demands get obfuscated by an ostentatious

humility that constantly accuses the colonized country of an eternal serious underdevelopment in its societal stability and economic rigidity. It's a passionate quest for a national consciousness by evidencing its factuality before the emergence and propagation of the colonialist regime and thus finding a legitimate reason for the shared anxiety of the native intellectuals who struggle endlessly to deflect from the imperialist enterprise in which they are swamped. Malala is a symbolic and metonymic representation of those native intellectuals who are hot-headed as they relentlessly articulate an emotive and cognitive renewal of contact with the oldest dynamicity of the local pre-colonial life. It's a non-contingent hope for rehabilitation in a splendid era that is directed beyond the misery of self-contempt, abjuration, subjectification and resignation. This rehabilitation is a matter of evidencing one's existence by forging a post-identity that reconciles with pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods. Malala highly asserts that the pre-colonial past holds nothing to be ashamed of as it's the beginning and continuum of dignity, solemnity and gratification. She firmly believes that the national consciousness is not an aspiration but a constant inspiration from her identitarian authenticity without sophistication, justification and transmogrification. Moreover, she considers that national consciousness in all its spatio-temporal means is crucial for vitalizing her psycho-affective equilibrium and thus mediating the change that the native aspires for. The national consciousness can be only resistant when transgressing the biased and perverted logic of colonialism in terms of distorting, disfiguring and destroying the native's identity by rendering them constantly oppressed in their psyche and attitude for illustrating how colonialism is an implicit neo-conservative tone that keeps the continuity of its existence like an intruding ghost in the native's life. In fact, the aim of Malala in this work is to put into dialectical interrogation the pre-colonial history without devaluing its anthropological and epistemological significance. It's the ultimate backbone from which the native's post-identity can be forged with a reconciling instead of an alienating spirit with the pre-colonial past. These claims and assumptions are necessary rather than luxurious for bringing into coherence the native intellectual's program. For Malala, fighting for national liberation is realizing its culture as a material keystone for its rebuilding and regeneration. The fight for one's culture cannot be achieved without a popular struggle that fights for preserving the same rhythm, content and form of the pre-colonial homeland and thus mediating the ground for a vigorous postcolonial future. It's a belief in one's nature by emblemizing the national culture as an ongoing practical quest instead of an abstract populism that progressively turns out to be like a barbarian, random and hegemonic

folklore. The actions of the native intellectual or the native in general are not gratuitous, but they are systemic and enduring in their praise of an ever-present reality which is the authentic cultural identity of the national self. This national culture is a large compendium of efforts that eradicate the ethnic and subjectivist means that de-mystify the typical themes of the nationalist combat. In fact, this latter point appeals to Fanon's evolutionary schemata of the aesthetics of national liberation. This schemata is the one that is exposed by Malala's epiphany, attitudes and transforming nature.

Malala addresses a postcolonial theoretical approximation that is inter-reflexive with feminist critique. For her, the fight for nationalism needs to be addressed from a female discourse that transgresses all the practical modalities of patriarchal thinking. This perspective aligns with the one embodied by Boehmer and Helgesson in terms of defending the cause of nationalism and de-genderizing it for better illustrating the objectivity of postcolonial thinking in all its assimilative and interpretive paradigms. Moreover, the protagonist extends her delineation of nationalism into what is latent, unknown and commonly unacceptable to her, regarding the ideological perceptions of both Worthington and Cattin in terms of how exile, migration and homelessness affect our understanding of national identity via the Other's one. Then, the author-protagonist tries to mediate a re-fashioning space with a set of intellectual possibilities and an active moral hybridity. It's an explicit interrogation of the myths of power in their racist, patriarchist, ethnicist and materialist categorizations for better dismantling the imagery of subordination with a theoretical agenda of deconstruction and political subversion. What Malala really resists is her mapping as a colonized subject and body. This point appeals to how Harley implicates the three specific strategies of silences, positional enhancements and representational hierarchies that illustrate how the process of mapping is a metaphorical drive that can never be transparent or neutral, especially in its approximation of physical geography. This means that the protagonist moves towards a post-liminal space by transcending all the previously attributed significations to her body and land, and thus adhering to what Samuelson perceives as the forging and housing of a new culture in terms of her national identity and psychological equanimity. At another dimension, the aesthetics of national liberation in Malala's account appeal to Fanon's position in *The Wretched of The Earth* where we realize a cultural, literary, historical and political articulation of colonialism and its antithesis, regarding the materialist motive and the decisive determinant of the imperialist project and its impact on the postcolonial cultural question. He deliberately focuses on national consciousness by extending an evolutionary

paradigm which transcends the mechanical materialism and the racialist emphasis of colonialism. It's quite familiar among postcolonial thinkers and writers that there is an undeniable need to deconstruct and subvert the cultural emasculation that is generated by the imperialist entrenchment. In fact, Fanon advances a tertiary schemata where he adumbrates the main inter-reflexive phases that reify his national consciousness in all its practical means. This model is the one emblemized by Malala in this oeuvre. The first one is about the assimilationist phase, where Malala, as a native intellectual, realizes the intensity of occupying her land's power, and thus mythologizing its frailty. It's a matter of reacting to the literary tradition of colonialist discourses that simplify the taxonomic agendas between the colonized and the colonizing country in terms of knowledge, consumption, production and referentiality. Then, we have the cultural nationalist phase where Malala creates a cultural alienation from the ongoing epistemic violence to reaffirm her cultural authenticity without romanticizing the aesthetic and mechanistic conventions for that alternative. Finally, we confront the nationalist phase, which is considered the ultimate one for democratizing the fight for national identity with a non-traditional mode of literary expression. It's an introspective and retrospective auto-defense without fixation on the inflicted insults and psychological injuries of the uneasy structures of the colonialist past to legitimate the negotiation of a transitional phase where national liberation appears post-liminal more than transient.

III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the author-protagonist addresses the impact of reconciliation in all its practical means by interrogating the consciousness of the subaltern in terms of revolutionizing or submitting to the manipulations of the imperialist regime within a colonialist and neo-colonialist tone. She exploits a process of literary and artistic decolonization which requires a radical dismantling and postcolonial subversion of the dominant imperialist discourses. It's an urgent demand for an entirely new reality that recovers the Pakistani land with absolute freedom from the whole colonial taint. The author exploits it as an urgent and inevitable demand that serves to entangle the extension and exclusiveness of colonialism's pandemic brutalities and epitomize a processual reconciliation with the Pakistani cultural status quo and its hybridized means for recreating an independent local identity. In fact, the author is fully conscious that one can never revitalize the same effervescence, alacrity and entity of the pre-colonial culture in its purity and authenticity. That's why there is always a dialectical relationship between the postcolonial desirability

and the ontological as well as epistemological drives of the hegemonic centrist systems. Structurally and practically speaking, the postcolonial project is a medium through which its activists struggle for peripheralizing and dismantling all modalities of hegemony, centrism, and to some extent conservatism for re-establishing monolithic regional and national formations that are independent of whatever historical implication and discursive strategy that continues to privilege the position of the imperialist regime. The main aim for the author is to show the intensity with which she can re-read and rewrite Pakistani history without metaphorizing it within the vicious circle of the three worlds theory or the rest of the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1995.
- [2] Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory*. Verso, 1992.
- [3] Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [4] Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [5] De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 1949.
- [6] J. C. Young, Robert. *White Mythologies*. Routledge, 1990.
- [7] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [8] Yousafzai, Malala. *We Are Displaced*. Little, Brown and Company, 2019.



Juxtaposing Hauntology in Solar-punk ideals of Bucky Chamber's *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

Dr. Ajay B. Chhuchhar

Assistant Professor, Bahauddin Science College, Junagadh, Gujarat, India

Received: 30 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 31 Aug 2025; Accepted: 03 Sep 2025; Available online: 06 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Hauntology is a term coined by Jacques Derrida which refers to cultural elements of past haunting the present. Its association with dystopian fiction seems more organic. However, this paper argues that utopian and optimistic themes of solar-punk fiction often hint at a connection to the past. This paper attempts a hauntological reading of Bucky Chamber's *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. It juxtaposes the theoretical term referring to a cultural concept into a work of fiction. It also analyses how such juxtaposition can be a fulfilling way of reading a solar-punk text.

Keywords— Solarpunk, Hauntology, Science fiction, Utopia, Post-apocalypse



Introduction

Time is often depicted as linear in fiction and other literary and cultural texts. They have some understanding of past, present and future which adds to its value. These depiction of past, present and future may or may not be relevant to the reader's past, present and future. Thus, fictional time works as per the need of narrative. Todorov argues that description and narrative both presupposes temporality. (28, 1990) However, if reader's temporal place is to be considered, some texts can be categorised for some definitive genres on the basis of it. Narrative on past becomes historical fiction and on future may become types of futuristic genres. (dystopian and utopian fiction). Some genres are tied to time from perception of a reader's present. In speculative fiction past and future are distinct categories used for fantasy and science fiction. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* becomes 'past' (Franco, 2009), similarly time period in *Mortal Engines Quartet* is often seen as a Victorian future. (Petr, 2021)

Hauntology is about effect of time. It refers to past affecting present, often in a haunting way, making a presence of absence in Derridean terms. As Fisher argues it shows 'confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of future.' (Fisher, 16) It is an imperative that hauntology talks about bad past or its bad effect on present. As Donald Brackett explains hauntology seeks to "transform normative

narratives by channelling the disruptive force of the specter as a trend." (2025) The narrative norms found in speculative fiction tend to branch out, in larger terms, to post-apocalyptic fiction and solarpunk fiction. Though, both are not binary opposites, functional contraries can be found in both. As solarpunk manifesto declares its position in contrast to despair and denial. Therefore, optimism is the central key to the solarpunk fiction.

As spectral realism doesn't spread the belief in supernatural, it aims to present natural world as a haunted place. Instead of ghosts it refigures past as a haunting element. It turns certainty into uncertainty or uncanny. Solarpunk manifesto seems to defer here. Therefore, this paper pursues with objectives that may enable the unfolding of connections between solarpunk and hauntology.

Objectives of the study

Firstly, this paper aims to study solarpunk as a genre. It understands its history as a cultural movement, but it aims to position it as a subgenre of science fiction and interplay between culture and genre. Similarly, it aims to understand hauntology. Furthermore, it aims to study the cross-section of hauntology and solarpunk in the text. It juxtaposes the capitalist idea of haunted industrial past against optimist solarpunk ideals.

Hauntology as a literary-cultural category

Derrida's concept of hauntology is a critical concept. It tries to examine ways in which present is shaped by residues of past. It is paradoxical as it talks about both presence and absence of something. Functionality of it includes disrupting temporality and rejecting its sequential nature as generally perceived. It rather sees it as overlapping of past, present and future in mind. In art and literature, hauntology is used to examine how narratives, images and cultural forms are informed by what has been lost and suppressed.

Hauntology in literature is used both as a thematic as well as structural device. In thematic instance it establishes stories where the past is present in undistinguished form in the present. It is presented through memory, trauma, nostalgia and effects of historical events. Structuralised, it can be traced in non-linear timelines, fragmented storytelling, and recurring motifs that resists closure. It is reflected by Mark Fisher as 'the failure of future' where modernity is forestalled but never realised fully. As mentioned above, hauntology is also an element of postmodern storytelling, in form of spectral residues rooted in environments, technologies, or social structures. In dystopian science fiction remnants of past industrial buildings, or abandoned sites denotes a sense of future that never came to be.

This aligns with Donald Brackett's (2025) observation that hauntology can transform "normative narratives" by introducing disruptive, unresolved elements that resist assimilation into a stable present. In cultural studies, hauntology also serves as a framework for understanding how societies negotiate the relationship between history and imagination. It can be applied to the analysis of genres such as Gothic fiction, magical realism, and certain strains of science fiction that merge the real and the spectral. By destabilising the notion of a secure present, hauntology opens space for alternative readings of history and alternative visions of the future, making it a versatile and provocative literary-cultural category.

Solar-punk

Solarpunk is a recent literary and cultural movement that imagines hopeful, sustainable futures. It sees a future built on renewable energy, ecological balance, and social justice. Emerging in the 2010s as a counterpoint to dystopian genres like cyberpunk, it counterattacks thematic concept or story elements of environmental destruction, excessive capitalism, and technological pessimism.

Solarpunk blends science fiction with activism and envisions decentralised energy systems, and community-led governance, with aesthetics uniting nature and human-scale technology. Its stories and art pieces focus on cooperation and maintaining harmony rather than depicting inevitable

collapse. Rooted in real-world environmental movements, climate science, and indigenous knowledge, it serves as "prefigurative fiction"—modelling futures worth creating. While it can include conflict, it centres on challenges to sustainability, aiming to replace apocalyptic visions with narratives of resilience, adaptability, and collective agency.

Haunting of Panga's Past

The imagined world of Panga in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is defined by its sensible separation from a technological and industrial past. Humanity has chosen to abandon extractive practices, centralised industry, and unchecked automation, rebuilding society on principles of ecological harmony and decentralised living. Yet, despite this seeming break, the past continues to haunt the present. The very foundation of Panga's solarpunk ethos is a response to what once was—its rejection of industrial excess is inseparable from the memory of that excess.

This haunting is not expressed through ruins or apocalyptic decay, as is common in dystopian or post-apocalyptic fiction, but through cultural memory and ethical consciousness. The people of Panga live with the knowledge that their society is shaped by a deliberate historical choice: to allow the robots to leave and to embrace sustainability over expansion. The industrial era is absent in physical form, but its Specter lingers in stories, technologies no longer in use, and in the figure of Mosschap, whose return reactivates that memory. Derrida's notion of the "presence of absence" becomes evident here—what is missing physically continues to employ influence symbolically. Moreover, the haunting of Panga's past functions as a cautionary framework. The society's optimism is strengthened by the awareness that it has been acquired through rupture. This is consistent with Fisher's observation that hauntology confronts cultural impasses: in Panga's case, the impasse was the unsustainable trajectory of industrial modernity. By remembering this path, even in absence, the people of Panga maintain vigilance against repeating it. The past thus serves as both Specter and guide—haunting not with fear, but with responsibility.

In this sense, Panga shows how solarpunk futures are never entirely free from hauntological residues. Even as the society thrives in sustainable equilibrium, its identity is defined through dialogue with what it has left behind. The haunting of Panga's past ensures that the present remains self-reflective, and that the community's optimism is rooted not in naïveté but in historical awareness.

Mosschap as Hauntological Figure

Within *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Mosschap operates as a distinctly hauntological presence. He is first robot to come in contact with humans after centuries of absence. Mosschap embodies the spectral return of a past that humanity has

consciously abandoned. He serves as a living reminder of an industrial age defined by automation and extractive practices—a past now absent in material form but still wielding influence as cultural memory. In Derrida's terms, Mosschap can be seen as the Specter that represents absence present, unsettling the apparent stability of Panga's solarpunk present.

The robot's role is not confined to technological curiosity; it has been given the role of carrier of historical consciousness. It describes its purpose as to find '*what do humans need?*' (59, Chambers) As it is evident humans in Panga have chosen ecological sustainability and harmonious living. Mosschap recalls a different temporality in which machines were once bound to serve human industry. Its very presence destabilises the idea of a complete rupture with the past, reminding the community that their present is continuously haunted by choices made and paths not taken. When Mosschap describes to Dex how it is rebuilt from his predecessors, it says, '*I have some impressions. Single images. Feelings I know aren't mine.*' (93, Chambers)

This reflects Fisher's formulation of hauntology as the persistence of unrealised or abandoned futures: Mosschap embodies the industrial trajectory that might have continued, had humanity not chosen otherwise. Although, Mosschap's haunting differs from the unsettling or traumatic hauntings often found in literature. Here, instead of returning as a figure of guilt, dread, or unresolved trauma, Mosschap presents a dialogue and reflection. It is refreshing, aligning with hopeful themes of solarpunk. It does not mourn the industrial order nor seek to restore it; rather, it engages humans with questions of purpose, meaning, and coexistence. Hence, Mosschap transforms the haunting into a productive encounter, one that reinforces the community's commitment to its solarpunk ethos by requiring them to express why their chosen path matters.

Mosschap thus occupies a liminal space between two narrative modes: it is a Specter of technological pasts, but also a catalyst for solarpunk futures. It refigures the haunting as a opportunity for inquiry, escaping from dystopian cultural paralysis. Chambers positions Mosschap as a hauntological figure that bridges memory and possibility. The robot makes visible the spectral traces of history within the utopian optimism of Panga, showing that futures are never free of their pasts, but that such haunting can be a generative, sustaining force.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* through the thematic and theoretical frameworks of solarpunk and hauntology, showing how Chambers unites ecological

optimism with the lingering memory of an industrial past. Panga, as a utopian society, establishes that sustainable futures remain haunted by historical choosing, with the past playing less as a burden than as a guide.

Mosschap symbolizes this dynamic as a hauntological figure—recalling abandoned trajectories while enabling reflection and dialogue. Rather than arousing fear or paralysis, its presence reinforces solarpunk ideals by prompting transformed awareness of purpose and coexistence. The novel thus illustrates that speculative fiction gains depth when utopian and hauntological impulses intersect, suggesting that futures cannot be imagined apart from their pasts. In Chambers' vision, haunting becomes not an obstacle but a sustaining force for hope.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anténe, Petr. "It's a Town Eat Town World": Exploring the Possibilities of Young Adult Fiction and Steampunk in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines*." *Silesian Studies in English* 2021: 337.
- [2] Chambers, Becky. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. Tordotcom, 2021.
- [3] Brackett, Donald. "Hauntology: Spectral Realism in Literature, Film and Art" *Critics at Large* 2025
- [4] Fisher, Mark. "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2025.
- [5] Manni, Franco. "Real and Imaginary History in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 47, 2009, pp. 28–37. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614655>.
- [6] Todorov, Tzvetan. *Genres in discourse*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.



Archetypal Study of Female Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Vinaya Peter

Received: 03 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 31 Aug 2025; Accepted: 02 Sep 2025; Available online: 06 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Archetypal theory, rooted in Carl Jung's psychology and extended by Northrop Frye's literary criticism, examines universal figures and narrative patterns that recur across literature. When applied to women's writing, archetypal criticism reveals how female characters are framed within cultural scripts such as the mother, the daughter, the goddess, and the seeker. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* both engage deeply with these archetypes, portraying women who seek autonomy while being constrained by patriarchal structures. This paper applies archetypal theory to these novels to explore how their female protagonists both inherit and resist symbolic roles, showing how archetypes function as both oppressive patterns and sites of re-visioning.



Keywords— Archetype, Patterns, Narration, Literary criticism, Feminist Archetype, Seeker Archetype, Great Mother Archetype, Indian Women's Writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Archetypal criticism explores recurring images, motifs, and character types that reflect humanity's collective unconscious. Jung defines archetypes as "primordial images" that shape cultural imagination (Jung 3). Northrop Frye builds on this idea, identifying archetypal structures in literature such as the hero's journey, the trickster, or the Great Mother (Frye 134). However, feminist theorists have critiqued archetypes of women as limiting, pointing out how they often enforce patriarchal ideals of femininity (Beauvoir; Gilbert and Gubar). Both Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* portray women negotiating inherited archetypal roles while attempting to assert individuality. The application of archetypal theory to these novels illuminates how figures like the seeker, the mother, the goddess, and the storyteller recur and are reshaped in Indian women's narratives.

II. THE SEEKER ARCHETYPE AND THE INCOMPLETE QUEST

In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati yearns for education and selfhood. As she declares, "She wanted to study, to do something with her life, not be caught in the circle of household duties" (Kapur 15). Her refusal of early marriage—"Why should she marry now, when her books had just begun to open new worlds for her?" (Kapur 23)—reflects the seeker's archetypal rejection of conformity in favor of self-discovery. Yet her pursuit of autonomy leads her into a relationship with Professor Harish. What begins as rebellion against domestic confinement turns into another form of bondage, for "her education, her ideals, everything had been bartered for a love that chained her more than tradition ever had" (Kapur 142).

Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* both represent the seeker archetype. Virmati defies her mother's expectations and yearns for independence and education. Devi also longs for independence and wonders about the purpose of her arranged marriage. Similarly, in *The Thousand Faces of*

Night, Devi too emerges as a seeker shaped by myth and memory. She recalls, "All the stories my grandmother told me came back, but now they seemed to bind me more than free me" (Hariharan 34). Like Virmati, Devi resists being reduced to a submissive wife, confessing, "I could not be the docile wife, waiting for scraps of affection" (Hariharan 67). Their experiences are similar to the romance hero's pursuit of self-actualization. However, both women's quests are left unfinished, in contrast to male heroes who succeed. Devi is caught between tradition and independence, while Virmati is estranged in a loveless marriage to Professor Harish. Their tales reinterpret the seeker archetype by demonstrating how female quests are thwarted by patriarchal norms.

III. THE GREAT MOTHER ARCHETYPE IN RESTRICTIVE FORMS

Jung's idea of the Great Mother archetype has both caring and devouring parts. In these novels, the maternal figures predominantly exhibit its restrictive aspect. Kasturi insists on duty and obedience in *Difficult Daughters*, which goes against Virmati's dreams. She represents what Adrienne Rich calls "the institution of motherhood" instead of the experience of mothering (Rich 13). She becomes the cultural transmitter of patriarchy. In the same way, Sita in *The Thousand Faces of Night*—whose name comes from the mythological figure of chastity and obedience—stands for endurance and conformity. These mothers perpetuate patriarchal norms, confining their daughters to inherited roles. In this context, the maternal archetype transforms into a locus of repression rather than nurturing.

IV. MYTHIC GODDESSES AND ARCHETYPAL REPETITION

Hariharan's novel makes direct references to goddesses and epic archetypes. Devi's life is told through the stories of Draupadi, Gandhari, Amba, Sita, and Kali. These characters are examples of the suffering wife, the dutiful mother, the avenger, and the ascetic. Their stories serve as cultural narratives that imply Devi's destiny. But Hariharan also shows how these myths can be told again: the grandmother's oral storytelling changes them from stories of submission to stories of resistance. Kapur's novel, on the other hand, doesn't use mythic goddesses directly. Instead, it uses archetypes of wife, daughter, and widow that come from history and family. The novels collectively illustrate the influence of archetypes on women's lives through both mythology and lived experiences.

V. THE STORYTELLER ARCHETYPE: RECLAIMING NARRATIVE POWER

In both novels, narration itself becomes archetypal. Ida in *Difficult Daughters* reconstructs her mother's narrative, assuming the role of the remembrancer or archivist. In the same way, Devi's grandmother is a trickster-narrator who uses stories to pass on memories and give new meaning to cultural myths. Gilbert and Gubar contend that storytelling empowers women to resist oppression by reclaiming linguistic and narrative authority (Gilbert and Gubar 51). Through these narrators, both texts suggest that archetypes are not fixed but can be reshaped through retelling. The act of storytelling becomes an archetypal form of resistance, enabling women to re-vision inherited roles.

VI. CONCLUSION

The application of archetypal theory to *Difficult Daughters* and *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals how Indian women's fiction engages with symbolic patterns of female identity. Virmati and Devi embody the seeker archetype, yet their incomplete quests expose the constraints of patriarchy. The maternal figures represent restrictive forms of the Great Mother archetype, while mythic goddesses in Hariharan's text reveal the persistence of cultural scripts that bind women to submission or suffering. Yet, both novels disrupt these patterns through the storyteller archetype, suggesting that re-narration offers possibilities for transformation. Archetypes, therefore, function as both constraints and openings—symbols of continuity but also of resistance. Kapur and Hariharan use archetypes not merely to reproduce cultural memory but to interrogate and reimagine it, contributing to a feminist revision of symbolic roles in literature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beauvoir, S. de. (1989). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage.
- [2] Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering*. University of California Press.
- [3] Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays*. Princeton University Press.
- [4] Gilbert, S., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
- [5] Hariharan, G. (1992). *The thousand faces of night*. Penguin.
- [6] Jung, C. G. (1968). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- [7] Kapur, M. (1998). *Difficult daughters*. Penguin.
- [8] Moi, T. (1985). *Sexual/textual politics: Feminist literary theory*. Routledge.

- [9] Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Rich, A. (1979). *On lies, secrets, and silence: Selected prose 1966–1978*. Norton.



Luxury Dreams, Patriotic Memes: Digital Fandom and Chinese Cult Cinema

Qi Liu

Department of Film, University of Southampton, UK

Email: ql8n24@soton.ac.uk

Received: 01 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Aug 2025; Accepted: 04 Sep 2025; Available online: 08 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article investigates how participatory digital fandom redefines the concept of cult film within contemporary Chinese cinema, using two contrasting yet highly influential film franchises as case studies: *Tiny Times* (2013–2015) and *Wolf Warrior* (2015–2017). Employing discourse analysis of fan interactions on social media and close textual analysis of the films themselves, this study examines how online fan practices convert mainstream films into cult texts. Despite their distinct ideological positions—one emphasising aspirational neoliberal consumerism, the other showcasing assertive nationalism—both franchises are subjected to similar paracinematic rituals by online communities. Fans appropriate, critique, and ironically celebrate these films, thus creating a new form of digital cult status distinct from traditional Western definitions centred on marginality and subversion. This paper argues that digital participatory cultures, supported by social media platforms, reshape cult cinema into an expansive, ritualised practice that merges consumerist and nationalist discourses. The findings challenge established Anglophone-centric cult film theories by highlighting the role of digital platforms and fan-generated content in redefining cinematic value and audience engagement in China's evolving media landscape. This analysis contributes to global cult-film scholarship by showing how digital platforms shape cinematic reception beyond Western contexts.



Keywords— Chinese cinema, cult cinema, digital fandom, memes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cult films have traditionally been defined in film studies by their marginal status, dedicated fan communities, and distinctive viewing rituals. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008) note, a cult film typically inspires passionate, ritualistic consumption and often embodies an ironic or transgressive sensibility distinct from mainstream cinema.[1] Central to understanding contemporary cult phenomena is Henry Jenkins's (2006) idea of participatory culture, which stresses that audiences do not merely watch a film but collectively re-author it by adding their performances, artefacts and readings.[2] Western cult classics demonstrate this pattern aptly: the midnight sing-along screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), where viewers shout scripted call-backs and throw rice, all show how fans transform passive reception into

community-building performance. In these spaces, cult films serve as important sites for communal identity-making, enabling audiences to form shared identities and cultural bonds through collective interpretation and ritualised viewing practices.

This article compares two apparently dissimilar Chinese blockbusters whose afterlives illustrate that process: Guo Jingming's *Tiny Times* series (2013–15) and Wu Jing's *Wolf Warriors* diptych (2015, 2017). *Tiny Times* adapts Guo's best-selling urban-youth novels and follows four female friends exploring the themes of love, career and friendship amid Shanghai's luxury skylines and designer boutiques. Guo, as China's most commercially successful "post-80s" writer-director, embodies the era's consumerist ethos; while Shanghai, as the nation's financial hub, provides the mise-en-scène where capital

and aspiration visibly converge. In contrast, *Wolf Warriors* is a state-sponsored action franchise centred on Leng Feng, a special-forces sniper who defeats foreign mercenaries at the Chinese border and rescues expatriates in a fictional African conflict. Funded through state studios and marketed as part of China's soft-power diplomacy, the films double as patriotic propaganda at home. Following their export to over forty countries, they became international symbols of so-called "wolf-warrior diplomacy". While *Tiny Times* has gained notoriety for its excessive visual style and overt consumerism, which has attracted young audiences who participate actively through digital practices such as memes and fan edits; *Wolf Warriors* has built a devoted following around themes of nationalism and patriotism, generating collective emotional engagement and ritualistic viewing behaviours.

By analysing these two cases, this article aims to investigate how digital cinephilia and fandom in the Chinese context structure particular fan behaviours and articulate distinct sets of values, thereby significantly shaping contemporary definitions of "cult" cinema. This study specifically examines how participatory digital fandom reshapes Chinese mainstream films into contemporary cult cinema.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cult film scholarship such as Mathijs and Mendik (2008) emphasizes that cult status is defined more by fan activities and rituals than by a film's initial production intent.[1] Fans do not passively consume films; instead, as Jenkins (2006) argues through his concept of participatory culture, audiences actively re-author texts through practices such as meme-making, remixing, and collective interpretation.[3] Cult films thus enter a "shadow cultural economy", in John Fiske's (1992) terms, where fan-generated meanings and pleasures become the dominant currency, surpassing original commercial intentions.[4] Through digital platforms, fans collectively produce an expansive and dynamic archive of memes, edits, and interpretations that reshape mainstream cinema into participatory cultural texts.

The same fan-driven circulation gives rise to two sharply different modes of nostalgia and self-identification: *Tiny Times* channels longing for luxury and urban ascent, whereas *Wolf Warriors* channels patriotic remembrance and collective strength. *Tiny Times* converts Shanghai's glossy mise-en-scène into what Bourdieu would call an aspirational horizon. An "horizon of aspirations" (1984) is the imagined upper edge of one's social world—the array of lifestyles, tastes and status a viewer can see and therefore aim for, even if not yet

possessed. It frames desire by making certain markers of class or success appear both visible and attainable.[5] By contrast, *Wolf Warriors* mobilises a backward-looking nationalist longing through slow-motion flag reveals, parade-ground symmetry and stylised close-ups that turn tanks, missiles and fighter jets into gleaming icons of national pride. Alison Landsberg (2003) argues that mass media can implant "prosthetic memory": memories of events a person never lived but nonetheless feels as if personally experienced. Like an artificial limb grafted onto the body, these mediated memories become integrated into one's identity and can shape ethical or political attitudes.[6] Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory helps explain why viewers who never fought a war nonetheless feel an inherited combat pride when they chant the on-screen slogan "Anyone who offends China will be hunted down". Here fandom functions as a ritual of emotional investment: reposting the trailer on National Day or inserting battle clips into family chat groups lets ordinary citizens perform "everyday patriotism" and thereby assert a morally charged subjectivity.

Both franchises also accrue cult prestige by deliberately courting excess and transgression. Jeffrey Sconce (1995) locates these films under the umbrella of paracinema, texts that flaunt excess: too much style, too many explosions, so that violation of sober classical norms itself becomes a source of pleasure.[7] *Tiny Times* overloads the screen with product close-ups, pop-video editing rhythms and melodramatic zooms; *Wolf Warriors* escalates ballistic spectacle until narrative plausibility collapses under rocket fire. Their very lack of restraint produces what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls subcultural capital: recognising, quoting and defending scenes mainstream critics dismiss as "trashy" marks subculture and cult film viewers as insiders who get it.[8] Online, this dynamic is visible in fan behaviour such as ironically rating *Tiny Times* five stars on Douban, a China's user-driven rating platform akin to Rotten Tomatoes. On Douban, five stars typically signal enthusiastic endorsement, but fans often award this rating "for the drama", signalling their insider awareness and ironic detachment. Similarly, *Wolf Warriors* scenes are remixed with K-pop soundtracks on meme pages, creating a hybrid space where mockery and admiration blur into a shared badge of cultural participation. In each case the cult film works as a symbolic toolkit: its stylistic deviations allow audiences to signal rebellious taste positions without abandoning the pleasures of spectacle.

Taken together, these three dimensions: participatory co-production, affective nostalgia, and stylistic transgression explain how *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors*, while ideologically divergent, converge within

the same cult framework. Fans sew consumerist dreams or patriotic myths onto the textual fabric, accumulate subcultural capital by celebrating excess, and thereby keep the films alive as fluid, communal sites of meaning rather than static industrial products.

III. *TINY TIMES*: DIGITAL LUXURY AND ASPIRATIONAL YOUTH

Released at the height of China's consumer boom, the film franchise embeds luxury brands diegetically and turns celebrity fandom into built-in publicity.[9] Fashion synergy is built into the narrative diegesis, the heroine edits a Vogue-like magazine, thus allowing luxury brands such as Chanel, Dior and Louis Vuitton appear diegetically as props and extra-diegetically as product placement. Casting idol actors like Yang Mi, Amber Kuo and Kai Ko etc, folds celebrity culture into the film's marketing loop, using their social-media followings as de-facto publicity labor. As Bourdieu (1980) would suggest, the franchise generates both economic capital (box-office returns, brand tie-ins) and symbolic capital (youthful chic, celebrity aura) to maintain visibility beyond the cinema window.[10]

Visibility alone, however, does not make a cult, but digital fandom practices do. On China's microblogging platform Weibo, the hashtag "#TinyTimesQuotes" archives thousands of stills captioned with lines such as "Love without money is just loose sand". Users redeploy these quotes as meme-ready reaction images, turning dialogue into what Fiske calls social currency that circulates in the "shadow cultural economy".[4] Social currency refers to the non-monetary value: status, recognition, insider credibility, that people earn by sharing, remixing, or being first to supply desirable information within a group. In Fiske's "shadow cultural economy", the more a fan can contribute quotable lines, rare GIFs, or clever memes, the richer they become in this symbolic currency, even though no actual money changes hands. Douban "interest groups" organise offline cosplay meet-ups where participants reconstruct protagonist Lin Xia's pastel wardrobe; smartphone photos of these events are then fed back into the online loop, illustrating Jenkins's collective-intelligence circuit in which knowledge (e.g., specific fashion labels or lipstick shades) is crowdsourced, verified and disseminated within the community.[3] Even negative commentary sustains the circuit: fans proudly screenshot one-star (the poorest) reviews to prove they "love the trash", thereby displaying what Sconce names paracinematic excess, which is the pleasure of embracing texts the critical mainstream disavows.[7]

The film's material aspirations and critiques explain why these practices matter to Chinese millennials and

"post-00s" viewers. Most fans come from second- and third-tier cities, where luxury is visible yet inaccessible. For these viewers, Shanghai's neon skyline and brand-logo overload become a fantasy mirror: objects to mock for their blatant excess yet eagerly mimic online as markers of a cosmopolitan self they hope to inhabit. Stylistically, *Tiny Times* saturates the frame with boutique interiors, luminous food photography, and slow-motion handbag reveals—visual codes of neoliberal consumer culture that promise self-improvement through purchase. Fans who splice film stills with commodity links perform what Banet-Weiser calls commodity activism which is shopping is reframed as an empowering act.[11] Yet the same imagery exposes generational anxieties. For instance, in *Tiny Times 1.0* Lin Xiao (one of the main characters) pulls an all-night shift at the glossy fashion magazine *M.E.*, frantically retouching layouts after the editor's last-minute tirade. Her tear-streaked face, framed by racks of couture she will never afford, highlights the precarious internship behind the glamour. Meme culture, therefore, works both as an aspiration and as a coping mechanism: joking about Lin Xiao's credit-card debt lets users articulate their own fears without overt political speech.

This tension between glamour and stress also plays out in representations of female friendship. Academic critiques underscore the ambivalence embedded in these portrayals. Feminist scholars argue that the franchise instrumentalises female friendship as a vehicle for brand loyalty, re-inscribing patriarchal norms under a post-feminist gloss.[12] A vivid example appears in *Tiny Times 2.0*, when Gu Li confronts Nan Xiang at her birthday party over a betrayal and hurls red wine in her face. The moment, framed by luxury interiors and couture gowns, became a viral template on Douyin, where fans recreated the scene in slow motion with music filters and fashion hashtags. Female friendship here becomes a branded performance of rivalry and status: emotional intimacy is aestheticised, stylised, and turned into a commodity. Through such recirculation, fans rehearse loyalty and jealousy not as private feelings but as spectacle, thereby reinforcing patriarchal scripts beneath a surface of glamour and empowerment. Critical readings note that the franchise repackages structural inequality as 'pretty suffering'.

These critiques of cult-film show how *Tiny Times* reshapes subcultural capital, using Thornton's term for insider prestige.[8] To call the series "trashy" on Douban yet attend a cosplay ball in its honour is to signal double consciousness: the fan recognises the text's ideological flaws but also leverages its *excess* to craft a distinctive personal brand. In other words, *Tiny Times* enables young urbanites to perform symbolic distinction without abandoning the pleasures of pop spectacle. The film's

paracinematic style offers just enough deviation from realist norms, hyper-stylised lighting, music-video montage to let viewers mark themselves off from “serious” cinephiles while still indulging in glossy fantasy.

Taken together, the franchise’s commercial design, participatory fan labor and ideologically charged iconography explain its dual status: a mainstream box-office juggernaut and a cult object. Fans co-produce meanings that oscillate between aspiration and satire, thereby keeping *Tiny Times* alive as a flexible cultural resource through which contemporary Chinese youth negotiate consumer desire, socio-economic precarity and identity performance.

IV. *WOLF WARRIOR: MEME NATIONALISM AND HYPER-MASCULINE SPECTACLE*

Wolf Warrior (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) are hyper-nationalist action films written, directed, and headlined by martial-arts star Wu Jing (also known as Jacky Wu). Both films recast the PLA as an almost superheroic brand. The sequel earned 5.6 billion RMB on first release, briefly standing as China’s highest-grossing film.[13] Outside China, commentators adopted the phrase ‘Wolf-Warrior diplomacy’ to describe a new, combative style of PRC foreign policy.[14] Memes using the film’s poster, title font, or trailer music spread on Twitter and Weibo as shorthand for aggressive nationalism.[15] In contrast, on Chinese social media platforms like Weibo and Douyin, similar meme formats are often used to express patriotic sentiment or support for national strength, reflecting a more affirmative and emotionally invested mode of engagement. This mix of official sponsorship, record box office, and ironic global afterlife positions *Wolf Warriors* at the edge of cult territory: it is mainstream at home yet functions internationally as a provocative symbol open to remix.

Reception of the *Wolf Warriors* series is polarised. On Chinese platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, patriotic viewers quote the catch-phrase ‘Whoever offends China will be hunted down’ in birthday videos, wedding montages, even pet clips, turning the line into what John Fiske calls a shadow cultural currency: value lies in how often a fragment is re-used rather than in its original narrative weight.[4] This is because each reuse transforms the fragment into a shared cultural sign, the more it circulates, the more socially recognisable and meaningful it becomes, regardless of its original narrative role. Fans reskin shooter games with Leng Feng uniforms, extending the film into playable space. These activities exemplify Henry Jenkins’s idea of collective intelligence: users pool labour to maintain a living archive of slogans, GIFs, and military trivia that buttress a shared national story.[3]

Internationally, however, the same excess: whether slow-motion flag reveals, rocket-launcher ballet, sermon-like speeches, invites mocking memes. On Reddit, for example, the film’s climactic rescue scene, in which Leng Feng waves the Chinese flag through a war zone and leads civilians to a naval vessel, is re-edited within K-pop soundtracks; YouTube super-cuts compare his slow-motion knife fights and impossible bullet-dodging to 1980s Chuck Norris action clichés. Jeffrey Sconce would place such over-the-top style under the umbrella of *paracinema*, where exaggerated spectacle breaks classical rules and thus attracts both sincere fans and playful detractors who celebrate “trash” as insider humour.[12] By making ideological intensity as its selling point, *Wolf Warriors* shows how a state-backed blockbuster can still generate cult-like devotion: viewers bond by debating, re-editing, or parodying scenes whose very loudness demands a response.

Although the polarity between domestic admiration and overseas mockery seems clear-cut, closer inspection shows that audience affect often oscillates between sincere belief and playful distance within the *same* platform. Matt Hills (2002) labels this condition “ironic sincerity”, where fans can be emotionally invested yet still acknowledge the text’s absurdity.[16] On TikTok, for instance, users post hyper-edited battle scenes with dub-over comedy sound effects but pin patriotic hashtags like #ProtectTheMotherland. The joke signals media-savvy sophistication: a nod to paracinema excess, yet the hashtag reinscribes national loyalty. This dual stance echoes what Fiske calls *double encoding*: a text carries “official” and “expropriated” meanings simultaneously, allowing consumers to slide between resistance and endorsement without cognitive dissonance.[4] Such elasticity is amplified by digital affordances; remix tools let a single clip be re-framed as heroic, comic, or simply by altering music cues or caption fonts. Jenkins argues that participatory culture thrives precisely on this semantic openness, because fans derive social capital from showing how many readings they can juggle at once.[3] Consequently, *Wolf Warriors* functions less as a fixed ideological message and more as a polymorphic resource: a database of images that users adapt to negotiate everyday identity dilemmas: affirming patriotism during diplomatic spats, venting frustration through parody when nationalism feels overbearing, or flaunting media literacy by toggling between those moods in quick succession. Recognising this flexible affective economy complicates any simple binary of “propaganda success” versus “global ridicule” and sets the stage for analysing how masculinity becomes the stabilising core that holds the film’s shifting meanings together.

Underlying these memes is a hyper-masculine nationalism: Wu Jing's chiselled body packages state power into a commodity image. The films project a hyper-masculine nationalism in which ideal manhood equals with symbols of hard muscles, tactical skill, and unquestioned loyalty to the flag. This echoes with Richard Dyer's star theory: a star persona packages social values in bodily form.[17] Wu Jing's chiselled physique, battlefield scars, and stoic one-liners are not mere character traits; they stand in for a state narrative that frames China as disciplined, righteous and physically unstoppable. Fan pages label him *China's Captain America*, collapsing actor, role, and nation into a single heroic brand. When viewers post gym selfies tagged #WolfWarriorSpirit, they perform what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital, which the body becomes proof of moral alignment with the strong nation.[5]

The emotional charge runs deep. Lawrence Grossberg argues that fandom turns cultural texts into affective investments; the more one feels, the more the text anchors identity.[18] *Wolf Warriors* primes this investment through recurring close-ups of shrapnel wounds, swelling patriotic scores, and on-screen crowds chanting in unison. Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory (2003) explains why such scenes work: even viewers with no military background may remember sacrifice because the film supplies vivid sense data: blood, explosions, anthem-like choruses that plug directly into personal memory circuits.[6] Reposting these clips on National Day or during diplomatic stand-offs lets fans perform an imagined veteran status, tightening the knot between screen emotion and civic selfhood. Although approved by censors and boosted by the state, *Wolf Warriors* still satisfies core cult criteria: stylistic excess, subcultural capital, and participatory remix collectively secure the film's cult status.

In short, *Wolf Warriors* shows that cult status is not limited to low-budget exploitation or midnight screenings. A state-sponsored blockbuster can become cult by pushing ideological emotion to operatic heights, encouraging audiences to pick up the fragments, and turning the star's body into a vessel of national fantasy. The franchise demonstrates how contemporary Chinese cinephilia merges digital remix practices with an older politicised spectatorship, producing a hybrid fan culture that is at once patriotic, playful, and globally visible.

V. CONCLUSION

Using the films *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* as case studies, this article has sought to answer the questions: what makes a twenty-first-century Chinese blockbuster

"cult" when its budgets are high, its release patterns mainstream and its politics either consumer-friendly or openly nationalist. The answer is deeply tied to fan participation and interpretive practices. The cult status of *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* cult can be largely attributed to viewers actively re-authoring: through clipping, quoting, remixing and ritualizing, such that the original theatrical text becomes just one layer in a larger, fan-built lattice of meanings. In the process, each franchise crystallises as a different affective project. *Tiny Times* offers a fantasy of upward mobility where handbags, skylines and pastel filters stand in for the self-one hopes to become; fandom here operates as a curated mood-board that turns luxury style into personal aspiration. *Wolf Warriors*, in contrast, functions as a patriotic touchstone: slow-motion flag reveals, combat scars, and Wu Jing's chiselled frame invite audiences to anchor their own identity in narratives of collective strength. Both cases confirm that cult energy travels on the back of fan labour and cultural resonance, not textual marginality or production scale.

Tiny Times and *Wolf Warriors* embody different forms of transgression. Jeffrey Sconce's category of *paracinema* highlights deliberate stylistic overkill.[7] In *Tiny Times*, the overkill is *gloss*, rack-focus reveals of jewel-tone macaroons, circular crane shots around weeping heroines, and costume changes every thirty seconds. Such visual surplus breaks the realist restraint prized by Chinese art cinema and by moral-education dramas on state TV. It also troubles gender norms through a form of gender inversion: male characters appear in stylised, delicate fashion—eyeliner, pastel suits, carefully styled hair—while female leads occupy positions of commercial and emotional authority. The fandom, largely composed of young women and queer viewers, engages with fandom activity to contest patriarchal values of masculinity and feminine passivity. The subversion, therefore, lies in blurring class and gender codes, a soft rebellion inside a sentimental package. *Wolf Warriors'* transgression works on a geopolitical axis. By casting Western mercenaries as one-dimensional villains, the films flip Hollywood's long-standing portrayal of Chinese characters as secondary or exotic threats. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) argue that reversing filmic stereotypes can feel liberating to historically marginalised audiences.[19] Here liberation arrives via bazookas and flag slow-motions an "aesthetics of payback". The subversion is less about sexual politics than about cinematic hierarchy: China writes itself as centre, the West as disposable background.

These findings carry two key implications for cult-film scholarship. First, the field must move beyond its

traditional focus on the Anglo-American film industries. While concepts such as *paracinema*, *subcultural capital*, and *participatory culture* remain analytically productive, their application to non-Western contexts reveals new emphases: consumer aspiration, state-sponsored nationalism, and algorithmic spreadability. Recognising these dynamics allows for a more global and differentiated understanding of what cult. Treating *Tiny Times* and *Wolf Warriors* simply as outliers to a Western norm would miss how they expand the very definition of cult by infusing it with post-socialist market desire and geopolitically charged spectacle. Second, the cases complicate the received view that cult fandom is automatically resistant or counter-hegemonic. Digital platforms enable ambivalent modes of engagement in which the same clip is hailed sincerely, laughed at ironically and recycled commercially, sometimes by the same user in the same feed. This plastic form of fandom blurs the line between subversion and endorsement: a parody remix can go viral yet still bolster the parent film's visibility and symbolic power. Scholars must therefore treat irony, satire and meme-culture not just as tools of dissent but also as potential multipliers of dominant ideologies.

Methodologically, the article also shows the value of analysing circulation and context alongside textual style. Box-office data, state marketing, platform affordances and informal peer-to-peer networks all co-produce cult meanings. Future research might trace how these meanings mutate when the films travel—how *Tiny Times* memes play out among Chinese diasporic fashion influencers, or how *Wolf Warriors* imagery is redeployed in African or Southeast Asian social-media spaces where the sequels were shot and partially set. Comparative work of this kind would refine cult theory to account for the uneven geographies of digital distribution and the multiple publics who attach competing values to the same set of images.

To sum up, what links branded macaroons in *Tiny Times* to bazookas in *Wolf Warriors* is not a shared theme but a shared participatory logic: both spectacles invite audiences to project their own desires, whether personal success or national power, onto an excess of style. Recognising that logic helps us see cult fandom not as a niche subculture sealed off from the mainstream, but as a dynamic process through which mainstream products are continually re-sorted, re-valued and re-purposed in line with changing social dreams. In twenty-first-century China that process can produce designer cosmopolitanism and muscular nationalism within the same digital ecosystem, proving that cult cinema is alive, thriving and more ideologically plural than ever.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mathijs, E., & Mendik, X. (Eds.). (2008). *The Cult Film Reader*. Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education, pp. 22-31.
- [2] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, pp.131-140.
- [3] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*. NYU Press, pp. 134-139.
- [4] Fiske, J. (1992). The Cultural Economy of Fandom. In Lewis, L. A. (Eds.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Routledge, pp. 40-57.
- [5] Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press, pp. 110–111.
- [6] Landsberg, A. (2003). Prosthetic Memory. In Grainge, P. (Eds.), *Memory and Popular Film*. Manchester University Press, pp. 144-161.
- [7] Sconce, J. *Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style*. Screen, 36.4, pp. 371–375.
- [8] Thornton, S. (1995). *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Polity Press.
- [9] Cai, S. (2017). *Guo Jingming and His Tiny Times Film Series*. In *Contemporary Chinese Films and Celebrity Directors* (Eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41-63.
- [10] Bourdieu, P. (1980). The Aristocracy of Culture. *Media, Culture & Society*, 2.
- [11] Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture. NYU Press. pp. 113–115.
- [12] Davis, Amy M. (2013). Post-Feminism and Disney Princess Consumers. *Feminist Media Studies*.13.
- [13] “‘Wolf Warrior 2’ Flies Flag for China in Oscar Bid”, *People’s Daily Online*, 8 October 2017. Retrieved from <https://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1008/c90000-9277144.html>.
- [14] Martin, p. (2021). Understanding Chinese “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”. *The National Bureau of Asian Research*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy>.
- [15] Brandt, Jessica, and others, ‘How China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats Use and Abuse Twitter’, *Brookings Institution*, 30 November 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter>.
- [16] Hills, M. (2002). *Fan Cultures*. Routledge. pp. 115-119.
- [17] Dyer, R. (1986). *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. BFI. pp. 30-35.
- [18] Grossberg, L. (1992). ‘Is There a Fan in the House?’, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. by Lisa A. Lewis. London: Routledge, pp. 50–65.
- [19] Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. Routledge. pp. 183-185.



Spiritual Despair and Femininity: The Absence of Redemptive Agency in Graham Greene's Women

Dharmendra Kumar Rana

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, Government Degree College Mehroni, Lalitpur, UP, India
Email: dkrgdc@gmail.com

Received: 04 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 31 Aug 2025; Accepted: 02 Sep 2025; Available online: 08 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the intersection of spiritual despair and femininity in Graham Greene's fiction, specifically focusing on the marginalization and lack of redemptive agency among female characters. Drawing upon Greene's major works, including *The Heart of the Matter*, *Brighton Rock*, and *The End of the Affair*, the study demonstrates how women's spiritual suffering is frequently rendered subordinate to male narrative arcs, often reduced to symbolic elements of sacrifice, temptation, or victimhood. Through close textual analysis and engagement with feminist and theological criticism, the paper uncovers how Greene's portrayal of women aligns with broader patriarchal frameworks found in mid-twentieth-century English literature, wherein feminine spiritual experience is depicted as passive, voiceless, and rarely afforded the complexity of moral transformation or autonomy. Philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and theologians like Elizabeth Johnson provide critical tools for examining how literary and religious traditions have constructed gendered hierarchies of suffering and salvation. By examining the absence of redemptive agency in Greene's female characters, this paper underscores the need for feminist revisions of the literary canon and spiritual narratives. The research argues that Greene's fiction, while renowned for its psychological realism and moral ambiguity, ultimately perpetuates the absence of female spiritual redemption, prompting a call for more inclusive and transformative models of feminine agency in literature.



Keywords— *Spiritual Despair, Self Discovery, Femininity, Redemptive Agency, Patriarchy. Power, Sacrifice, Silence, Virtue, Suffering, Voicelessness.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's narrative landscapes are marked by their relentless scrutiny of spiritual crisis, moral ambiguity, and existential despair. Yet, one recurrent and troubling motif in Greene's fiction is the portrayal of women whose spiritual destinies unfold in the margins of male-centered drama. Female characters such as Louise in *The Heart of the Matter*, Rose in *Brighton Rock*, and Sarah in *The End of the Affair* are rendered with emotional detail but rarely granted narrative sovereignty or redemptive transformation. Their spiritual suffering typically serves to illuminate the complexities and failures of Greene's male protagonists rather than to chart their own journey toward agency or salvation.

Louise's character is emblematic of this dynamic. Her inner life is shaped by longing and emotional abandonment: "Louise wanted to be loved with a passion, but it was a thing impossible to ask of Scobie now" (Greene 65). Greene's prose captures her pain, yet simultaneously confines her to the periphery of Scobie's spiritual struggle, denying her any substantial role in her own redemption. Rose, likewise, is depicted as "a small frightened girl deserted in a strange place," her innocence and suffering deliberately juxtaposed to Pinkie's capacity for spiritual and moral action (Greene 55). Such narrative strategies ensure that feminine despair remains a backdrop to masculine crisis rather than the subject of its own redemptive arc.

Critics have recognized the pattern. Mark Bosco identifies that "Greene's women are rarely the architects of their own salvation," serving instead as emotional and spiritual catalysts for male protagonists (Bosco 123). These critical perspectives echo Simone de Beauvoir's observation that literature often constructs "woman... as the Other," limiting her possibility for self-determination and existential fulfillment (Beauvoir 16).

Examining Greene's female characters through feminist and existential lenses reveals not just a lack of redemptive agency, but a larger pattern in English literature where women's spiritual experience is systematically marginalized. The implications reach beyond the literary sphere, illuminating how cultural and religious narratives continue to police the boundaries of feminine autonomy and transformation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The motif of spiritual despair and absence of redemptive agency in Greene's women has attracted considerable scholarly attention, leading to a broad and nuanced survey of critical literature. Feminist critics, theologians, and literary scholars have highlighted how Greene's fiction perpetuates deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, confining female characters to roles of submission, silence, and suffering.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her influential feminist theology, identifies the limitations placed on women's spiritual expression: "For centuries, the Christian tradition has cast women as vessels of submission, their capacity for grace and redemption mediated through silence and suffering" (Johnson 32). Johnson's analysis underscores a cultural tendency, not unique to Greene but pervasive in English literature, where feminine spiritual experiences are rarely sites of agency or transformative power.

Mark Bosco's study of Greene's Catholic imagination similarly foregrounds gendered hierarchies in the spiritual trajectories of Greene's characters: "Female suffering calibrates the spiritual atmosphere, but the journey toward redemption is almost exclusively a masculine prerogative" (Bosco 123). Bosco traces this pattern across Greene's major novels, including *The End of the Affair*, where Sarah's spiritual evolution remains circumscribed by religious guilt and her relationship to Bendrix.

Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical critique further illuminates how literature often relegates women's spiritual narratives to secondary status. De Beauvoir writes, "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man... She is the Other" (Beauvoir 16). This relational positioning, according to de Beauvoir, denies

women authentic existential agency and frames their suffering in relation to male journeys of salvation.

Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Judith Butler extend these arguments into theological and ethical domains, critiquing inherited patriarchal models that circumscribe women's spiritual possibilities. Ruether posits, "Patriarchal religion does not simply reflect social inequality; it actively reproduces it through doctrines that restrict feminine agency and valorize male spiritual leadership" (Ruether 110).

The surveyed literature thus converges on the observation that Greene's women, emblematic of broader literary traditions, are limited in accessing redemptive agency due to persistent patriarchal motifs. Their spiritual despair illuminates, and frequently intensifies, the drama of male protagonists, rather than enabling their own transformation or autonomy. This critical consensus urges a reevaluation of spiritual narratives and calls for literary models that affirm feminine agency and complexity.

III. GREENE'S WOMEN AND THE DENIAL OF REDEMPTIVE AGENCY

Graham Greene's female characters consistently embody spiritual despair yet encounter profound limitations in achieving redemptive agency, a dynamic that reflects patriarchal constrictions within both literary and theological domains. This section explores key textual moments illustrating how Greene's women are portrayed as passive witnesses to spiritual struggle rather than active agents of redemption.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Louise is emblematic of this marginalization. Her inner suffering is poignantly captured in the line, "Louise wanted to be loved with a passion, but it was a thing impossible to ask of Scobie now" (Greene 65), revealing her emotional isolation and desire for recognition in a narrative dominated by her husband's moral crisis. This encapsulates feminist scholar Elizabeth Johnson's critique that "women's spiritual experiences are often subsumed beneath male-centered narratives of sacrifice and redemption, limiting female possibility" (Johnson 32). Louise's silence and invisibility affirm Johnson's claim that women's suffering, while present, remains marginalized and framed primarily in relation to male spiritual journeys.

Rose in *Brighton Rock* further exemplifies this dynamic of denied agency. Greene describes her as "a small frightened girl deserted in a strange place" (Greene 55), emphasizing her vulnerability and powerlessness. Literary critic Mark Bosco notes, "Rose's innocence and victimhood are symbolically significant but deny her the complexity of spiritual transformation" (Bosco 124). Her fate is tethered

to Pinkie's narrative, reinforcing Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that "woman's spiritual destiny is largely defined through her relation to man, not through autonomous selfhood" (Beauvoir 17). Rose's lack of self-determination illustrates the persistent "Othering" and negation of feminine spiritual subjectivity.

Sarah in *The End of the Affair* experiences profound spiritual turmoil, yet her redemptive potential is filtered through male perspectives and religious guilt. Greene's portrayal of her confession, "Sometimes I wonder whether those who say they believe really believe..." (Greene 118), reveals internal struggle but remains framed primarily by Bendrix's narrative gaze.

From a philosophical standpoint, Beauvoir's existentialist ethics highlights the systemic denial of feminine spiritual freedom: "Freedom is denied when the Other is confined to predefined roles that foreclose authentic existence" (Beauvoir 78). Greene's women are thus emblematic of this existential confinement, their spiritual despair marked by the absence of self-authored redemptive agency.

Moreover, Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge elucidates how these narratives function within broader regimes of control. He asserts, "Power produces knowledge and frameworks of truth that enforce normalization and marginalize deviance" (Foucault 27). The portrayal of Greene's women as spiritually despairing yet inert aligns with such disciplinary power, where female autonomy challenges entrenched social and religious orders.

In sum, textual analysis combined with feminist and philosophical critiques reveals how Greene's women are trapped within dialectic of despair without agency. Their suffering, while authentically rendered, serves to highlight male protagonists' spiritual dilemmas rather than allowing for their own transformative redemption, perpetuating literary and cultural patterns of feminine marginalization.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Philosophical and feminist critiques offer vital insights into the persistent absence of redemptive agency afforded to female characters like those in Graham Greene's oeuvre. These perspectives challenge traditional moral and theological frameworks that have historically constrained women's spiritual autonomy and complex ethical subjectivity.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy forms a cornerstone of feminist critique, emphasizing the situated freedom of the subject and the denial thereof in patriarchal structures. Beauvoir explains, "Freedom is the foundation of all values; yet women's freedom is continually

circumscribed by social roles imposed by the Other" (Beauvoir 78). This observation powerfully intersects with Greene's portrayals, where women's spiritual lives are shaped not primarily by their own freedom but by the expectations and struggles of men. Beauvoir's analysis of "woman as the Other" — "defined solely in relation to man, who remains the subject and the absolute" (Beauvoir 16)—illuminates how female characters are relegated to relational roles that preclude autonomous redemptive journeys.

Judith Butler's contributions deepen this critique by interrogating the normative ethics that constrain marginalized identities. Butler argues, "Ethics that privilege fixed identities and binaries deny the fluidity necessary for ethical life and perpetuate exclusion" (Butler 96). Her call for an "ethics of vulnerability" resonates with the lack of agency in Greene's women, who are rendered vulnerable yet voiceless, caught in patriarchal moral economies that prevent self-authorship or spiritual transformation.

Michel Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge structures further explicates how normative moral categories are products of socio-cultural institutions that discipline subjects. He asserts, "Power is not only repressive but productive; it produces the 'truths' that govern bodies and souls, regulating morality through normalization" (Foucault 27). In the context of Greene's female characters, this power shapes not only their social roles but also the parameters of their spiritual suffering and redemption, sustaining patriarchal religious discourses that marginalize female spiritual agency.

Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theological work highlights how Christian dogma historically aligns sin with femininity, thus restricting women's access to grace and redemptive power. Johnson writes, "The language of sin and virtue often functions to control women's bodies and moral behavior, limiting their spiritual subjectivity" (Johnson 57). This theological gendering of sin aligns with Greene's literary pattern of denying women autonomous spiritual redemption, instead casting them as objects within male-centered salvation narratives.

Together, these philosophical and feminist perspectives reveal that the absence of redemptive agency in Greene's women is not accidental but symptomatic of systemic patriarchal frameworks. They call for ethical, literary, and theological revisions that recognize and restore feminine spiritual autonomy and complexity.

V. CONCLUSION

The examination of spiritual despair and femininity in Graham Greene's fiction reveals a persistent denial of redemptive agency to female characters—a pattern deeply enmeshed within patriarchal literary, religious, and cultural frameworks. Women such as Louise, Rose, and Sarah are portrayed with nuanced emotional and spiritual depth, yet their narratives invariably remain subordinate to male trajectories of faith, guilt, and salvation. This relegation reflects Simone de Beauvoir's critical insight that women are constructed as "the Other," confined to relational identities that deny autonomous freedom and self-authorship (Beauvoir 16). Greene's depiction aligns with Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theological critique, which highlights the historical constriction of women's spiritual capacities within doctrines that valorize male authority and marginalize female agency (Johnson 57).

Philosophical perspectives, especially those of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, further illuminate how moral and spiritual binaries operate as instruments of power that produce normative truths limiting women's participation in redemptive narratives (Butler 96; Foucault 27).

This paper underscores the urgent need to reimagine feminine spirituality and literary representation beyond paradigms of sacrifice and silence. It advocates for transformative frameworks that affirm women's complex moral and spiritual autonomy, challenging canonical narratives that sustain patriarchal hierarchies. Such reconfigurations offer not only richer literary analysis but also contribute to broader movements for gender justice within religious and cultural discourses.

In conclusion, Graham Greene's works, while psychologically insightful, reflect and reproduce the absence of redemptive agency for women—a condition emblematic of wider patriarchal structures. Rectifying this absence requires sustained feminist engagement across scholarship and creative expression, ensuring that female characters constitute active agents in their spiritual and existential destinies.

REFERENCES

- [1] De Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books.
- [2] Bosco, M. (2005). *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press.
- [4] Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- [5] Greene, G. (1938). *Brighton Rock*. Vintage Books.
- [6] Greene, G. (2010). *The Heart of the Matter*. Vintage Books.
- [7] Greene, G. (2019). *The End of the Affair*. Vintage Books.
- [8] Johnson, Elizabeth A. (1992). *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse*. Crossroad.
- [9] Ruether, Rosemary R. (1983). *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Beacon Press.



A Study on the Foreign Publicity Translation of Chinese Silk Culture from the Perspective of Linguistic Adaptation Theory--A Case Study of C-E Translation of Exhibits in China National Silk Museum

Li Jiayi

School of Foreign Languages, Shihezi University, China

Received: 03 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 31 Aug 2025; Accepted: 03 Sep 2025; Available online: 08 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Chinese National Silk Museum stands as one of China's cultural landmarks, attracting numerous domestic and foreign visitors for exploration and learning. This study aims to provide a comprehensive research perspective on the translation of silk relics by showcasing the choices translators may make during the translation process. It has summarized the linguistic characteristics of silk exhibition texts, explored the types of translation techniques applicable to English texts under the Adaptation Theory, and identified issues and solutions in silk translation. The goal is to offer a certain degree of reference and guidance for future research in artifact translation.*



Keywords— *Chinese Silk; Linguistic Adaptation Theory; Translation Techniques*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Cultural relics have been preserved through the baptism of time and hold significance for collection. Museums, as institutions dedicated to preservation, exhibition, and research, serve as mediums for transmitting cultural connotations and the best places for people to appreciate ancient civilizations. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Central Committee has prioritized the dissemination of Chinese culture, promoting museums as important avenues for China to share its culture with the world. Therefore, one of the most effective ways for museums to increase their visibility and spread Chinese culture is to translate introductions of cultural relics into one of the world's most commonly used languages, English.

Since ancient times, Chinese silk has been a bridge between China and the world. It is a significant symbol of China's culture, promoting cultural exchanges between East and West. Therefore, English version of silk relics serves as a window for foreigners to understand Chinese

culture and history. Compared to other English materials on cultural relics, the silk exhibition texts in Chinese National Silk Museum (CNSM) are the most representative. This is because they are not only more accurate, concise, and expressive in language, but also easier for foreigners to accept due to the translator's awareness of adaptation during the translation process. Therefore, the English translations in CNSM are of significant research value, which is beneficial for not only enhancing global understanding of Chinese culture but also increasing recognition of China's history and cultural heritage worldwide.

1.2 RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND METHODS

In the book *Pragmatics as a theory of linguistic adaptation*, Verschueren (1987) introduced the concept of inter-adaptation. Then, he (1999) elaborated on and developed the Linguistic Adaptation Theory (LAT) in detail in understanding pragmatics, which inspires translators to pay more attention to the language habits of readers when translating silk exhibits. In this regard, Ma Hui (2012) ingeniously employs techniques of

foreignization, believing that selective adaptation should be used in various communicative contexts to broaden the cognitive scope of target language readers and thus promote the culture of the source language.

Within the framework of LAT, Silk Relics Translation (SRT) is a dynamic process of adaptation between the context and linguistic structures of the source language. The reason is that human cognitive structures and environments are dynamic. Translators can only identify the intentions of the communicators based on language structures and context, and convey them to the recipients (Ge Lingling, 2002).

In CNSM, there is a lack of consistency and standardization in the English translations of silk relics, which causes misunderstandings for foreign visitors. The names of silk exhibits vary greatly, often involving complex noun stacking. Therefore, when presenting different categories of artifacts, it is important to keep uniformity and adhere as closely as possible to the original meaning. However, it's crucial not to be too rigid and to make adjustments based on the linguistic conventions of the target language (Li Qing, 2013).

The previous research on the translation of silk relics has primarily approached from the perspectives of Ecological Translation Theory (Tang, 2023) and Skopos Theory (Zhou, 2022) while the study under the three characteristics and four dimensions of LAT has not yet been conducted. Literature that demonstrates the principle of dynamic adaptation can provide a different and comprehensive perspective for the English translation of silk relics. The application can reduce the loss of meaning in the Silk Relics Translation, thereby maximizing adaptation to visitors and enabling them to fully understand the text's meaning.

Based on LAT and linguistic features of English translation of silk texts. This paper aims to analyze the methods and techniques used in translating silk texts by exploring the possible choices that may be made during the process of C-E silk relics translation, attempting to present some practical suggestions for translating silk-related texts and countermeasures to solve mistakes existing in English exhibits text. The literature review method is employed to define adaptation patterns in the translation process and applies them to the C-E translation of silk relics.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 KEY NOTIONS OF LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION THEORY

This section briefly introduces the basic concepts of adaptation within the framework of LAT, mainly including the notion of choice and three properties of language.

2.1.1 MAKING CHOICES

About how language is used and what people do when using language, Verschueren answered that "using language must consist continuously making linguistic choices, consciously and unconsciously, for language-internal and language-external reasons" (Verschueren, 1999, pp.55-56). According to him, these choices should be suited for any linguistic forms, in which the theory of language used should reflect this "making of choice". Therefore, it is evident that the process of making choices in language use possesses the following characteristics.

Firstly, choices can occur at any level of structure from micro levels such as words and sentences to macro levels such as language type and code. Secondly, language users also choose strategies beyond form. Thirdly, choices can be either conscious or unconscious. Fourthly, choices are made both in producing and interpreting an utterance, and both of them are equal in the process of communicative activities and meaning formation. Fifthly, Language users inevitably have to make choices regardless of whether the communicative purpose is fully achieved unless the language user can decide whether or not to use language. Sixthly, choices that the same language users adopt are not equivalent because they are naturally influenced by specific social, cultural, and cognitive factors. Seventhly, choices are mutually interfering because the different choices that language users make regarding linguistic means and strategies lead to corresponding changes in other related linguistic or non-linguistic factors (Verschueren, 1999, pp.55-58).

2.1.2 VARIABILITY, NEGOTIABILITY, AND ADAPTABILITY

Three hierarchically related properties are needed to understand the process of "making choice" when using language. They are variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Therefore, Variability defines the range of constantly changing choices that can be made. Negotiability determines that language users can make choices based on highly flexible principles and strategies rather than mechanical or strict rules or form-function relationships. Adaptability enables language users to make negotiable choices from a wide range of changing possibilities to meet communicative needs and should be interpreted directionally (Verschueren, 1999, pp. 59-61).

Those three notions are inseparable and closely linked with each other, which require us to achieve language use based on variability and negotiability with the purpose of adaptability (Liu Zhengguang & Wu Zhigao, 2000). We should keep in mind that adaptability has no content without variability and negotiability (Verschueren, 1999, p. 62). In short, these three properties are not the topics of investigation; they merely serve as conceptual tools for

explaining the complexity of linguistic phenomena. This is because they help us start from a higher-level concept, adaptability, to develop LAT, and further apply it to empirical research (Verschuere, 1999, pp. 63-64).

2.2 LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF SRT

The translation of Chinese silk culture falls within the category of external publicity translation. This involves translating a vast array of information about China into foreign languages. This characteristic determines that in addition to adhering to the translation standards of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" that all translation work must follow, translation for external publicity specifically requires translators to be well-acquainted with and apply three principles: closely aligning with the realities of China's development, closely meeting the foreign audience's needs for information about China, and closely conforming to the foreign audience's thinking habits (Huang Youyi, 2004).

2.1.1 CONTENT FEATURES

The content features of SRT include two parts: specialized vocabulary, and richness in cultural information.

Firstly, In the process of translating cultural relics, it is inevitable to encounter a large number of terms that are highly characteristic of a specific nation's culture. These terms are often unique to that culture and difficult to find exact equivalents in other

Secondly, according to Li Kairong (2001), Cultural information can be divided into three types: surface-level cultural information, mid-level cultural information, and deep-level cultural information. The surface cultural information is based on the cognition of the appearance of cultural relics. The middle cultural information is more comprehensive and provides a detailed explanation of what a particular cultural relic is like. It involves people's aesthetic consciousness and the cultural and artistic value of the relic itself. Deep cultural information is the "implied meaning beyond the words" of the relic, representing culture's unique concepts, religious awareness, social customs, and other psychological associations conveyed. As a type of cultural relic text, SRT also contains rich cultural information.

2.1.2 STRUCTURAL FEATURES

Except for the content features, linguistic features of SRT are also manifested in language structure, mainly including two parts: deductive expressing way, diverse sentence patterns.

Firstly, the most important difference between Chinese and English is the emphasis on hypotaxis and parataxis. Therefore, Chinese typically follows a chronological order of expression, with the main idea usually summarized at the end of the sentence, and less emphasis on logical form.

This differs from English, where important information often appears at the beginning. English texts generally start with an introduction, followed by detailed points (Qiu Daping, 2018).

Secondly, Chinese sentences often use serial verb constructions. Without using conjunctions, the logical relationships between them are implicit, relying on context and situational understanding. In contrast, English sentences frequently contain complex structures with multiple clauses, prepositional phrases, infinitives, or participial forms, exhibiting diverse structures and disfavoring repetition (Chen Na, 2009). Silk exhibits of CNSM also reflect this characteristic.

III. APPLICATION OF THE LAT IN C-E TRANSLATION OF CHINESE SILK RELICS TEXTS

This chapter aims to explore the translator's choice of translation techniques in the process of translating Chinese silk exhibits into English based on these four aspects, and according to the principle of adaptability, to analyze the English texts in CNSM and the translation concepts used therein so as to propose a more integrated and systematic translation model for silk relics.

3.1 CULTURAL CONTEXT ADAPTATION

People's linguistic actions are often constrained by various factors such as time, space, social rules, and cultural norms (Shaw, R. D, 1987). Therefore, when discussing silk translation, it is essential to consider all these factors and use necessary translation techniques flexibly according to the dynamically changing context so that accurate translation results can be achieved.

3.1.1 PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase is a translation technique in which the translator rewrites the original text in the target language and conveys the meaning with different words and possibly different sentence structures. It includes three stages: understanding, detaching from the original language shell, and re-expressing (Liu Heping, 2006). Considering the broader context in which the silk text appears, including cultural nuances and the expected knowledge level of the audience and helping improve clarity and readability, translators tend to use the technique of paraphrase when it comes to Chinese unique expression."

Example 3.1

可谓“工巧百数，不可尽名”。

It was really “you name it; they have it”.

凡工匠结花本者，心计最精巧”。

A joiner's calculation is the most delicate when he made a pattern harness.

From the above examples, it can be seen that silk translations involve many expressions in ancient Chinese, typically structured and concise. Firstly, “工巧百数” translated literally in English is “Hundreds of skilled craftsmen”, which simply refers to a vast number of craftsmen while “工巧百数, 不可尽名” actually indicates, in addition to the large number of silk workers, the Jin silk industry run by government in North China was very developed. In English, there's no direct equivalent, so it's translated as “you name it; they have it”, which means that whatever item or thing you can think of or mention, they possess or offer it. This translation avoids the word-for-word expression that bloats the translation to be long and cumbersome. Instead, it uses explanatory language to elucidate the dual meanings of the original text regarding the abundance of craftsmen and the prosperity of the silk industry, conveying the gist of the original meaning in a simple and straightforward manner that English readers can easily understand.

Secondly, “凡工匠结花本者, 心计最精巧” translated literally in English is “those craftsmen skilled in making patterns without exception have the most intricate techniques”, among which the expressions “凡” and “最” are unique expressions in Chinese, implying that among all craftsmen who are skilled in making patterns, their ingenuity or cunning is the most outstanding. In silk translation, it's crucial to ensure that tourists can accurately grasp the central meaning of the original text. Since the beauty of Chinese rhythm is challenging to achieve in English, the translator chooses to use the conjunction “when” to rearrange and explain the meaning of the original text, clarifying that A joiner's calculation will be most delicate when he made a pattern harness. This translation abandons literal expression and poetic rhythm, opting for straightforward elucidation of the original meaning to aid the understanding of foreign tourists, thus avoiding potential ambiguity that may arise from the need for the elegant translation.

3.1.2 CONDENSATION

Condensation is primarily used in literary translation, but it can also be relevant in other forms of translation where space or stylistic conciseness is essential, especially SRT. The technique involves reducing the repetitive expression of the original text while attempting to preserve its essential meaning, nuances, and impact. As mentioned above, Chinese often uses repetition for emphasis, while English focuses on logical consistency (Chen Na, 2009). Therefore, in the process of silk translation, synonyms in the original context can be combined in the translation. This method can accurately convey the original meaning and make it comprehensible to foreign readers.

Example 3.2

数千年来, 中国熟练丝织技术。中国丝绸与中华文明相伴相生, 以其独有的魅力、绚丽的色彩、浓郁的文化内涵, 为人类历史谱写了灿烂篇章。

Sericulture, or silk making, was practiced in China thousands of years ago. The prosperity of Chinese silk has long played a major role in human civilization.

Firstly, the phrase “熟练丝织技术” refers to China's profound expertise in silk production. Whereas “中国丝绸和中华文明相生相伴” suggests that silk and civilization have developed together over thousands of years. Silk represents civilization, and the advancement of silk technology accompanies the prosperity of civilization. Therefore, translator combines these two meaning into “sericulture was practiced in China thousands of times,” which conveys that silk technology has undergone thousands of years of development in China. The use of “practiced” conveys mastery of silk technology, while “thousands of years” highlights the vast timespan of silk development. As time passes, civilization thrives alongside the development of silk. Hence, “相生相伴”, meaning coexistence and mutual growth, is embedded in the translation.

Secondly, “独有的魅力、绚丽的色彩、浓郁的文化内涵” constitutes a parallel structure in Chinese. They consist of three sets of adjectives and nouns, meaning unique charm, magnificent colors, and rich culture. These three terms summarize the characteristics of the development of Chinese silk. The final phrase “为人类历史谱写灿烂篇章” refers to the significance of silk, further highlighting the brilliance of silk development and its indelible contribution to human history. Although there are three parallel structure phrases preceding it, they can be considered redundant in English because they express only one meaning, which is the brilliance of silk development. The translation accurately encompasses the meaning of these three phrases with “prosperity”. The phrase “谱写灿烂篇章” can be translated directly as “writing a splendid chapter”, but the translator did not translate the word “灿烂” because this meaning is already reflected in “prosperity”. Instead, the phrase “play a major role” is used to accurately express the significant role silk has played in human history. The translator did not translate literally but used condensation method to avoid verbosity, straightforwardly reproducing the original meaning and enabling foreign readers to understand the meaning of unique Chinese combinations like “谱写灿烂篇章”.

3.2 STRUCTURAL ADAPTATION

Structural objects of adaptability refers to adhering to the principles of structure and structural composition at all levels of language (Al-Gublan, B. K, 2015). In the process

of linguistic communication, it is necessary to analyze the specific structures of the source language. Then, the appropriate translation techniques should be chosen to accurately reproduce the original meaning using suitable target language structures.

3.2.1 DIVISION

Division is a translation technique, aiming to separating longer or more complex sentence structures, or components that are difficult to arrange in the English source text for separate treatment (Ouyang Zhiying, 2019). Generally speaking, the introduction of silk cultural relics is quite formal, so the information is dense and the sentence structures are very compact. Often, there is no equivalent expression in English. Therefore, it requires a flexible handling of the English expressions, based on a faithful adherence to the original text and a proficient understanding of both Chinese and English language structures to translate the Chinese original into an expression that conforms to English.

Example 3.3

宋锦机沿袭了大花楼织机的形式，是一种以线制花本为特征的提花机。由两人配合操作，一人按照花本编制的程序，坐在花楼上牵拉提沉循线以完成开口动作，另一人投梭打纬。

Song lampas drawloom is similar to the drawlooms for Yun brocade, satin damask or patterned gauze but it has a set of harnesses that are specific for lampas weave structure. In lampas weave, the pattern wefts are bound by an extra set of warps, called the binding warps. The ground weave is normally warp-faced, while the pattern is weft-faced.

The commentary on the Song lampas drawloom is highly intricate and difficult to understand. Even Chinese people unfamiliar with the construction of weaving machines may struggle to comprehend this passage, let alone foreign tourists. Therefore, the translation separates the complex operational principles of the exhibition text from the sentence structure of the original text for translation. The phrase “牵拉提沉循线，投梭打纬” in the original text refers to the operating steps of weaving fabric on the Song lampas drawloom. In silk weaving, the number of warp threads in a repeat of a design is called the warp repeat, while the number of weft threads is called the weft repeat. It requires the interlacing of warp and weft threads to complete a repeat pattern. The original introductions blend this meaning with the explanation of two people weaving fabric, while the translator adopts division technique, specifically introducing the principle of coordinating warp and weft threads on the Song lampas drawloom as “In lampas weave, the pattern wefts are bound by the binding warps. The ground weave is normally warp-faced, while the pattern is weft-faced”. This

conveys that the ground weave is typically dominated by warp threads, while the pattern is dominated by weft threads, and the coordination of these two directions creates the final Song lampas.

3.2.2 ADDITION

Addition refers to the process where a translator introduces extra words or phrases in the target language that do not have direct equivalents in the source language. We know that the differences between Chinese and English are immutable. Chinese sentences have a complex structure and a rich vocabulary, so during the process of translating from Chinese to English, it is necessary to appropriately adjust the central meaning of the sentence, add the subject and predicate that may be missing in Chinese (Li Li, 2019), and ensure the accuracy of the structure and the completeness of the meaning expression to enhance the readability and produce a satisfactory effect.

Example 3.4

织造技术从最初的“手经指挂”，到具备开口、引纬、打纬、送经、卷取五大运动和杼、轴、综、蹀、支架等部件的综蹀织机。

Weaving comprises five basic processes: shedding, or the separation of warp threads into groups; picking, or passing the weft threads through the warp via a bobbin or shuttle; beating-in or battening, or pressing the weft threads into the warp to form the cloth; letting off, or advancing the warp, to make room for additional weft threads to be woven; taking up, stretching the finished product with enough pressure to maintain the density of the cloth.

Indeed, even for Chinese individuals unfamiliar with the principles of looms, this introductory text can be challenging to understand. Therefore, it is necessary to add translated words that provide explanatory details. Weaving technology consists of five basic steps, and the translation includes specific explanations of how each step is performed after summarizing each one. Take the term “开口(shedding)” as an example. In textile manufacturing, the motion on the loom that separates the warp threads up and down can be referred to as “shedding”. This is necessary to align the warp and weft yarns according to the fabric's structure. To weave warp and weft threads into fabric, the warp threads must first be separated into upper and lower layers to create a shed. With the shed formed, the shuttle can then pass through, interlacing the weft yarn with the warp yarn to form the fabric. Therefore, the translation adds “the separation of warp threads into groups” after “shedding” to help foreign tourists understand simply how “shedding” is operated in textile manufacturing. The translation of the remaining four major processes follows the same translation technique. Literally translating these

processes may make it difficult for foreign tourists to understand the intended meaning of the original text, thus defeating the purpose of spreading silk culture internationally.

3.3 ADAPTATION OF DYNAMIC PURPOSES

The dynamic adaptability perspective is the core of Verschueren's pragmatics. From a micro perspective, in order to adapt to different situations, communication parties need to repeatedly make corresponding choices, and previous choices may be overturned by later choices. From a macro perspective, the development and dynamic variations of language are notable phenomena in language use, which could eventually evolve into language norms (Verschueren, 1999, p148-149). Therefore, translators should also be keen to capture such changes and make quick decisions based on continuously changing factors.

3.3.1 IMITATION

Principles of imitation and innovation are included in this translation technique along with their cognitive operational mechanisms (Pan Guilin, 2013). This approach involves creatively crafting new words and phrases that do not exist in the target language. Therefore, English translations should also retain Chinese characteristics, as relying solely on existing English words often results in expressions that fail to convey the intended meaning.

Example 3.5

诰命是明清皇帝封赠五品以上官员的专用文书。

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, imperial edicts of this type were issued by the imperial court to officials of the fifth rank and above.

The term “诰命” is a vocabulary item with distinct Chinese characteristics, referred to as “圣旨” or “御旨”, a direct command from the emperor and was to be followed and respected. there is no equivalent expression in English. In order for foreign tourists to understand this term with Chinese characteristics, the translator renders “诰命” as “imperial edict,” meaning a formal command written by the emperor. “Imperial” refers to something related to an empire, particularly the ruling authority or monarch. An “edict” is a formal proclamation issued by a government or ruler, carrying the force of law and binding on those subject to the authority of the issuer. Combining these two words, “imperial edict” is a coined term that not only translates the inherent inviolability of “诰命” itself but, more importantly, conveys its faithful meaning to foreign tourists, enabling them to absorb it, and gain a deeper understanding of Chinese cultural terms.

3.3.2 CONVERSION

Conversion can convert part of Chinese vocabulary into different English parts and also transform the original Chinese sentences into different types of English sentences. (Ouyang Zhiying, 2017). Driven by dynamic

adaptability, translators of silk relics can fully utilize the method of conversion to achieve the transformation of words and sentence structures, thereby enabling readers to better understand Chinese silk culture.

Example 3.6

明清丝绸业在前代生产基础上达到极盛，其中民间丝绸业成为主力。缂、绒、妆花等丝织品种推陈出新，丝绸图案饱含吉祥。

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the silk industry reached a zenith, with private workshops rather than state workshops accounting for the majority of production. Satin, velvet and brocaded silk with discontinuous supplementary wefts broadened the repertory of weave types, and auspicious motifs auguring good fortune, long life and large families predominated.

In the first sentence, the author emphasizes the prosperity of the silk industry during the Ming and Qing dynasties by stating “丝绸业达到极盛” (the silk industry reached its peak). Subsequently, “民间丝绸业成为主力” (folk silk industry became the main force) supplements this statement, indicating that within this developed silk industry, the private workshops played a significant role. Therefore, the translator renders the phrase containing “主力” as accompanying phrase by using “with” to connect, highlighting the prosperity of the silk industry during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Treating the meaning here as a parallel state would blur the distinction between primary and secondary points and result in ambiguity in the relationship. Secondly, “推成出新” implies continuous innovation. The translation transforms this verb into an adjective-noun combination, “discontinuous supplementary wefts”, to denote accompanying action. Meanwhile, the connotation of “吉祥” suggests good luck and fulfillment of wishes. The translator directly uses “吉祥” as an adjective to modify the pattern, and expresses the connotation of auspiciousness through the “-ing” non-finite verb form as a postpositional modifier. Both of these adjustments, from a content perspective, underscore the innovation and auspicious meaning of Ming and Qing silk varieties. From a structural perspective, retaining only one predicate ensures a more compact and coherent structure in the translated text. Opting for a word-for-word translation for every sentence would result in excessive verbosity, which doesn't align with English expression norms and logical thinking patterns, making it difficult for foreign readers to understand and accept.

3.4 ACCEPTED SALIENCE IN THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION

In the process of language use, communicators are influenced not only by cultural and social factors but also

by cognitive factors. It is believed that no serious theory of pragmatics should endorse any strict opposition between social and cognitive aspects (Simon Kirby, 2001). Therefore, in the translation process of silk relics, translators should make choices among many interfering factors, fully consider the relationships between these factors to determine priorities, and employ appropriate translation techniques to handle the original text, thus producing high-quality English expressions.

3.4.1 TRANSLITERATION PLUS EXPLANATION

Transliteration alone cannot convey any meaning and it is merely the addition of phonetic syllables. To ensure that foreign readers understand the content, adding explanations is essential. Silk artifact introductions often contain a large number of specialized terms that cannot be easily translated or adapted into English vocabulary. Thus, this translation method is indispensable in the context of silk translations.

Example 3.7

缙丝采用通经断结法以平纹组织织成。

In kesi, or tapestry weave, one set of undyed warps is woven with discontinuous wefts of different colours only at the point where the particular colour is required.

出土的纺织品以丝绸居多，包括“五星出东方利中国”锦在内的织锦及绮、绢、绣等品种，织造工艺上乘，反映了汉晋时期尼雅与中原地区间密切的经济文化交流。

Most of the textiles are silk, including jin silk, damask on cabby, silk tabby and embroidery, including the important jin silk fragment inscribed “Wu xing chu dong fang” (five stars rise in the east, for the benefit of the Central States).

From this, it can be seen that transliteration preserves many distinctive features and carries the essence of Chinese culture, while the subsequent interpretation enhances the readability of the translation. Whether it is “缙丝” or “五星出东方锦”, both are silk relics with Chinese characteristics. For these two translations, the translator adopts a method of providing phonetic annotations first, followed by explanations. This is because foreign tourists may not be able to understand the meaning solely from the transliteration. They can't tell that “Kesi” refers to a traditional Chinese silk weaving technique known for its intricate patterns and texture that resembles fine tapestry, while “Wu xing chu dong fang” symbolically represents prosperity and auspiciousness in Chinese culture, indicating economic and cultural exchanges between Niya and the Central Plains during the Han and Jin dynasties. Therefore, the subsequent explanation is extremely crucial that can effectively help foreign tourists

understand the original meaning and create the wonderful and fantastical nature of Chinese silk for foreign visitors.

3.4.2 OMISSION

Omission refers to omit words that are already implied in the meaning, or that may seem redundant or inconsistent with English expression habits. Due to different historical cultures and traditional customs among nations, there naturally exist some differences in language expression (Yuan Qing, 2002). Particularly in the translation of silk-related materials, it is common to omit Chinese scopes, rhetorical devices, and words with repetitive meanings.

Example 3.8

敦煌位于丝绸之路要冲，是中西交通的“咽喉锁钥”，也是中西方贸易的中心和中转站。

Dunhuang, located at a strategic point on the Silk Road, was a major transshipment point for goods moving between East and West.

下摆为海水江崖纹，海水波涛汹涌，如意头随波飘荡，气势极其壮观。

The hem bears a pattern of waves and mountains, with the surging waves and flying ruyi decorated.

In Chinese, it is common to use different expressions to repeatedly emphasize a central idea. Firstly, “要冲” refers to a strategic pass or a crucial position in a military context, and “咽喉锁钥” literally translates to “the key to the throat,” where “throat” metaphorically represents a crucial point or passageway. From this, it can be seen that both terms aim to convey the meaning of Dunhuang being a strategic transportation hub. Therefore, the translator omitted the translation of “咽喉锁钥” to make the translation appear more concise and clearer.

In the second example, “海水的波涛汹涌” means the powerful and turbulent movement of waves in the sea, while “如意头” refers to a decorative element in traditional Chinese architecture, symbolizing good fortune and wishes fulfilled. The translator chooses not to translate “气势极其壮观”, which implies impressive and powerful. Because the meaning of this phrase is already encompassed in the “surging waves” and “flying ruyi”. By omitting repeated meaning, this translated version highlights the original author's emphasis on the pattern style on the hem and makes it easier for foreign tourists to grasp the key points, avoiding redundant meanings.

IV. THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN SRT AND COUNTERMEASURES

The fundamental gap between Chinese and English lies in cultural differences, which in turn affect language structure and context (Nida, 2001). Within the framework of Adaptation Theory, the adaptability of context and

structure delineates the scope of adaptation, while dynamism and salience vividly illustrate the conscious state during the process of context and structure adaptability. Therefore, many C-E translation versions may exhibit various phenomena of inadequacy in conveying meaning. This chapter addresses three common issues and tries to provide sort of suggestions.

4.1 CULTURAL LOSS PHENOMENON

The phenomenon of cultural loss refers to the inability of some traditional and symbolically rich Chinese expressions to be fully conveyed in English translations. To address this, translators need to thoroughly understand the original text, actively research, and acquire as many cultural nuances as possible to produce accurate translations.

In the Silk Museum, there is an item called “长葆子孙锦”, translated as “jin silk with the inscription, ‘nurture children and grandchildren’”. In Chinese culture, “长葆子孙” is a distinctive term, embodying the concept frequently held by patriarchs in traditional large Chinese families. They aspire to maintain the family's wealth for generations, ensuring a prosperous and flourishing future for their descendants. However, in this translation, the word “nurture” does not fully capture the cultural meaning of “长葆”. “Nurture children” only conveys the sense of raising, meaning to care for and foster the growth, development, and well-being of children. It involves providing them with love, support, guidance, and opportunities for learning and exploration. while “长葆” emphasizes the desire for perpetual prosperity and carefree life. Therefore, translating this idiom as “maintain the prosperity of offspring” would be more appropriate, emphasizing the heartfelt expectations of the elders in Chinese culture for their future generations.

4.2 IMPROPER LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

Language, as an adaptable tool, enables people to cope with various communication situations (Tujia Virtanen, 2017). Improper structure means the way a language is constructed or organized in a manner that deviates from accepted standards of the original texts. Language structure encompasses various elements such as grammar, syntax, semantics, and morphology. In foreign publicity translation, translators should strive to choose appropriate language structures, clarify the order of importance, to convey real information succinctly and clearly.

The Silk Museum specifically describes the appearance and decorations of the fan cases, “硬胎衬里, 套口呈圆弧, 上端绣如意云, 套口端系数丝带” is translated into “The case is padded with a hard lining, and its mouth takes the shape of a circular arc; the upper end was embroidered with a motif of auspicious clouds, and the case mouth was

sewn with ribbons.” As we can see, although there isn't a linking word in the Chinese expression, it's evident that the author progressively introduces the details from the inside out, culminating in the specific style of the cover's mouth. Hence, translating all four elements with “and” as conjunctions might obscure the hierarchy. It would be more appropriate to treat the last two elements as accompanying states, straightforwardly emphasizing the style of the fan cases, as follows: “The mouth of the pot forms a circular arc, adorned with auspicious clouds and ribbons”.

4.3 LACK OF CONSISTENCY

Due to the specialized and often complex nature of silk museum exhibit descriptions, there can be inconsistencies and lack of uniformity in the understanding among translators. Therefore, translators need to put more effort into standardizing the expressions of specific terms to avoid confusion among foreign visitors, thus ensuring a pleasant visit experience.

For instance, this phenomenon exists in the translation of “花卉纹”, which refers to patterns or designs featuring flowers and plants, commonly found on fabrics. In the introduction of “清代的花卉外销绸” that refers to a piece of material featuring a light green tabby, the translation “floral motif” was utilized, while “floral scrolls” was used in the translation of “18 世纪的花卉纹床罩” which decorated with red silk tassets. Although both motifs and scrolls are elements used in design and decoration, motifs denote recurring elements within a composition, whereas scrolls specifically represent a type of decorative element resembling rolled-up paper. Since these two flower patterns recur frequently in satin ground, it's more appropriate to consistently use “motif”, which would enable foreign visitors to gain a more thorough and detailed understanding.

V. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the textual features of artifact translation and translators' choices and grasp of translation techniques under the guidance of the theory of LAT by comparing the Chinese and English exhibition texts in the CNSM. Finally, suggestions to common translation issues are proposed. In this process, the following discoveries were presented.

Firstly, the textual and structural characteristics of silk relics are distinct, with numerous specialized terms and rich cultural information. Through comparative analysis, it was found that the structure of exhibition texts for silk relics is diverse, with English translations often employing a deductive approach, starting with a summary before providing detailed points, which enhances clarity. Secondly, based on Verschueren's four major types of

adaptation, including cultural context adaptation, structural adaptation, dynamic adaptation for dynamic purposes, and accepted salience, the adoption of translation techniques in English translations of silk relics is well-founded. Under different adaptation models, translators should choose methods such as interpretation, condensation, addition, imitation, omission, and transliteration to effectively engage visitors and achieve the goals of cultural promotion. Thirdly, concerning the translation process mentioned above, it was found that there are common phenomena of cultural loss, improper sentence structures, and inconsistent translation of names in SRT. As the root of these differences and common issues lies in context, structure, dynamics, and salience, this article identifies some problems that SRT needs to avoid under the guidance of LAT and proposes suggestions to make translation more faithful and expressive.

Currently, research on the foreign publicity translation of silk culture is limited, and many interdisciplinary studies on silk translation have not been addressed, among which various research directions are worthy of deep consideration and exploration. Therefore, may more researchers will engage in the translation of silk cultural relics. Although this path is challenging, it holds significant meaning for increasing the recognition and reputation of Chinese silk culture, thus enhancing China's cultural soft power.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Gublan B.K. A pragmatic study of a political discourse from the perspective of the linguistic adaptation theory[J]. International Journal of English Linguistics, 2015(02):151-164.
- [2] Nida E.A. Language and Culture: Context in Translating[M]. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
- [3] Shaw R.D. The translation context: Cultural factors in translation[J]. Translation Review, 1987(1):25-29.
- [4] Simon K., Kenny S., Henry B. From UG to Universals: Linguistic adaptation through iterated learning [J]. Studies in Language, 2001:587-607.
- [5] Tujia V. Adaptability in new idea[J]. Journal of Pragmatics, 2017:21-26.
- [6] Verschueren J. Understanding Pragmatics[M]. London and New York: Arnold, 1999.
- [7] Verschueren J. Pragmatics as A Theory of Linguistic Adaptation[M]. Antwerp: International Pragmatics Association, 1987.
- [8] 戈玲玲. 顺应论对翻译研究的启示——兼论语用翻译标准[J]. 外语学刊, 2002 (03):7-11.
- [9] 何自然, 于国栋. 《语用学的理解》—— Verschueren 的新作评价[J]. 现代外语, 1999.
- [10] 黄友义. 坚持“外宣三贴近”原则, 处理好外宣翻译中的难点问题[J]. 中国翻译, 2004(06):29-30.
- [11] 刘和平. 法国释意理论: 质疑与探讨[J]. 中国翻译, 2006, 27(04):20-26.
- [12] 李开荣. 试论文物名称英译文化信息的处理[J]. 中国科技翻译, 2001(04):10-13.
- [13] 李莉. 论英语笔译中增译法和省译法的意义[J]. 黑龙江教育学院学报, 2019, 38(09):129-131.
- [14] 郇青, 张生祥, 俞愉. 丝绸文物展品英译研究[J]. 中国科技翻译, 2013, 26(03):32-34+42.
- [15] 马慧. 顺应理论对异化翻译的解释[J]. 文学界(理论版), 2012(05):95+100.
- [16] 钱冠连. 论维索尔伦的元语用选择[J]. 上海外国语学院学报, 1990(04):25-30+65.
- [17] 欧阳智英. 浅谈英汉翻译中分译法的运用[J]. 文教资料, 2019(21):43-44.
- [18] 邱大平. 大英博物馆文物解说词对中国文物英译的启示[J]. 中国翻译, 2018, 39(03):108-112.
- [19] 陈娜. 中西文化差异对中英文语言表达的影响[J]. 长江师范学院学报, 2009, 25(06):128-130.
- [20] 朱安博, 杨艺. 国家博物馆文物翻译实证研究[J]. 中国科技翻译, 2017, 30(03):45-48.



Balancing Determination for Attaining Personal and Professional Fulfilments of Women with Reference to Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*

Dr. Upender Gundala¹, Dr. P. V. Rajlakshmi²

¹ Department of Literatures in English, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, Telangana, India, Email:

² Department of English, Kongu Engineering College, Erode, Tamilnadu, India

Received: 09 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 03 Sep 2025; Accepted: 05 Sep 2025; Available online: 09 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study examines the relationship between determination and fulfilment in women's personal and professional lives through Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions'. Reimagining Draupadi's story, the narrative highlights her struggles with societal expectations, power, and ambition, reflecting modern women's challenges in balancing career, growth, and responsibility. Focusing on dharma (duty), Shakti (feminine power), and autonomy, the analysis argues that ancient Indian wisdom offers strategies for resilience, integrity, and work-life balance. Instead of emphasizing suffering, the study reveals women's inner potential, showing how Panchaali's determination inspires contemporary women to integrate traditional values with leadership, success, and personal fulfilment.



Keywords— Personal Fulfillment, Professional Success, Work-Life Balance, Autonomy and Agency, Contemporary Feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Women today often juggle professional goals, personal growth, and societal pressures—challenges rooted in historical and cultural narratives. In contemporary discussions on gender, empowerment, and personal growth, the intersection of determination, self-discovery, and cultural heritage offers a rich field for academic exploration. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* provides a compelling literary lens to explore these themes, reimagining Draupadi's life and highlighting her struggles with identity, duty, and agency in a patriarchal society. Draupadi's story in the Mahabharata is a powerful symbol of shakti, illustrating how determination aligned with purpose can challenge empires and alter destinies. Divakaruni's story resonates with the experiences of contemporary women who aim to define success on their own terms while navigating, negotiating, or redefining societal expectations by highlighting Panchaali's solid resolve and her quest for justice and self-fulfilment. The integrated themes of *dharma* (duty), *shakti*

(divine feminine power), and autonomy encourage a revaluation of how traditional Indian wisdom can act as a guiding framework for women striving for balance in their personal and professional lives. This research spaces Panchaali's journey within the larger conversation about gender and leadership, contending that ancient stories, rather than being mere artifacts of history, can motivate comprehensive strategies for achieving work-life balance grounded in resilience, personal integrity, and the harmonious integration of societal and individual obligations.

Background Study

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reinterprets the iconic Mahabharata—one of India's most significant epics—through the perspective of Draupadi (Panchaali), providing a voice to a character frequently eclipsed by male-dominated stories. Narrated in the first person, the novel draws readers into Panchaali's personal realm, detailing her journey from her extraordinary birth from fire, her childhood characterized

by prophecy and isolation, to her rise as the wife of five Pandava princes and queen of an enchanting palace.

Divakaruni's narrative emphasizes Panchaali's internal struggles, aspirations, desires, and unwavering strength, delving into the psychological and emotional aspects of a woman contending with power, responsibility, and self-identity in a predominantly patriarchal culture, in contrast to conventional retellings. Significant occurrences—like her marriage, which prioritizes political motives over personal choice, the notorious dice game that results in disgrace and banishment, and her unyielding pursuit of justice—are reinterpreted to underscore Panchaali's resolve and independence in the face of challenges.

The novel weaves in Indian ideas such as *dharma* (duty) and *shakti* (feminine power), utilizing Panchaali's journey to reflect the persistent challenges women encounter today in harmonizing their professional goals, personal development, and societal pressures. Through vivid imagery and a feminist perspective, Divakaruni presents a story that connects ancient wisdom with modern dilemmas, illustrating how historical and mythological narratives can inspire women's current quests for fulfillment, integrity, and resilience.

It provides a literary and cultural framework for examining how perseverance and traditional values can influence strategies for achieving work-life balance and personal satisfaction, presenting Draupadi's story as a powerful model for modern women striving to shape their futures both within and beyond societal boundaries.

Objectives of the Study

1. To focus on how Draupadi's character in *The Palace of Illusions* illustrates the tension between individual aspirations and societal norms, emphasizing the difficulties women encounter in juggling various roles.
2. To delve into the depiction of feminine resolve and autonomy in balancing career goals with traditional family responsibilities within the narrative.
3. To consider how Divakaruni's reinterpretation of Draupadi confronts patriarchal standards and presents a feminist framework for women's empowerment in both personal and professional realms.
4. To look into the psychological intricacies and resilience shown in Draupadi's character, reflecting the modern struggles women face in their quest for identity and fulfillment.

5. To evaluate the novel's interaction with cultural ideas such as dharma and shakti in influencing women's approaches to empowerment and equilibrium in contemporary settings.
6. To emphasize the significance of solidarity and sisterhood among women as depicted in the novel, serving as a vital source of strength for achieving comprehensive personal and professional success.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shruti and Kumar (2023) in their study "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Interweaved Mythology as Central Theme in Her Novel 'The Palace of Illusions'" highlight how Divakaruni amplifies Draupadi's voice, who has been historically marginalized in the Mahabharata, by illustrating her challenges and strength. The story uncovers Draupadi's delicate equilibrium between her individual aspirations and the stringent societal norms, mirroring the persistent challenges women encounter in reconciling emotional and social obligations with their own autonomy and empowerment. This analysis supports the research by positioning Draupadi's narrative as a feminist perspective pertinent to contemporary women managing various roles within patriarchal frameworks. In "The Palace of Illusions: A Feminist Reimagining of the Mahabharata in Contemporary Literature," Devi and Vats (2025) examines how Divakaruni challenges male-centered norms by depicting Draupadi as a woman who asserts her independence within a patriarchal framework. Their study highlights Draupadi's psychological depth and tactical agency, reinterpreting traditional ideas such as dharma and feminine strength (shakti) within modern contexts of work-life balance and self-determination. This aligns with the research goal of investigating feminine resolve for comprehensive fulfillment. A critical paper from the *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* (Kumar, 2024) explores Draupadi's transformation from a state of victimhood to that of a visionary strategist. It highlights her resilience in restoring her dignity in the face of male dominance, serving as a model for contemporary women who assert their agency in both personal and professional spheres. This reinforces the idea that Draupadi's story provides a framework for navigating the various aspects of women's identities.

Literary reviews such as those by *Darker Fables* (2023) highlights Divakaruni's nuanced feminist critique, recognizing the novel's strengths as well as its weaknesses in terms of pacing and character development. It underscores how Draupadi's narrative embodies universal themes of female empowerment, emotional labor, and self-

assertion in male-dominated historical settings, thereby making the story relevant for comprehending the challenges faced by contemporary women in both personal and professional spheres. Reviews from platforms like *Priya's Fictionvilla* and *Vedic Story* commend Divakaruni's depiction of the emotional intricacies that Draupadi encounters—a woman navigating love, duty, and revenge while establishing her own identity. These insights validate the title's emphasis on achieving balance, as they demonstrate how Draupadi's character embodies both the challenges and the strength involved in handling the complex interplay of personal and societal demands. An article in the *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* (2022) evaluates *The Palace of Illusions* as a feminist work that confronts patriarchal narratives by depicting Draupadi as a cunning and influential character. It highlights her mental strength and self-assertion as models for women facing oppression in both traditional and contemporary contexts, thereby directly aligning with research goals focused on female determination and empowerment for comprehensive fulfillment.

Priya's *Fictionvilla* book review (2025) praises the novel's innovative narrative viewpoint, presenting the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. The review explores how Draupadi challenges outdated gender norms and navigates emotional struggles, feelings of isolation, and societal scrutiny, emphasizing the importance of themes such as determination and resilience that are crucial for balancing personal and professional identities in contemporary society. A product review on *Vedic Story* (2025) portrays *The Palace of Illusions* as a compelling narrative that depicts a woman's journey through adversity, societal shame, and self-realization. It highlights Draupadi's internal and external struggles as representative of women's struggles for dignity and autonomy, showcasing the novel's role in elucidating the balance between individual aspirations and societal expectations—an essential rationale for the focus of this study.

Research Gap

There remains a considerable research void in thoroughly examining how the novel frames the interplay between determination and the pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment in women's lives, despite significant academic focus on *The Palace of Illusions* as a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata that emphasizes Draupadi's perspective. Previous research has largely concentrated on feminist analyses of patriarchal systems, Draupadi's agency, and her psychological depth, yet few studies delve into the intricate negotiation Draupadi engages in between societal pressures and her personal aspirations—an engagement that mirrors the complex identity challenges faced by modern women.

Furthermore, although the novel's interaction with cultural ideas such as dharma and shakti is recognized, there is a scarcity of investigation into how these concepts influence contemporary understandings of work-life balance. The existing body of literature often highlights Draupadi's defiance and strength but frequently neglects to consider how these traits can be transformed into strategies for women to reconcile their personal ambitions with their professional duties. This oversight underscores the necessity for targeted research that connects Draupadi's story of determination to current frameworks of feminine fulfillment, thereby linking mythological reinterpretation with modern gender discussions on managing multiple roles and achieving comprehensive empowerment.

Hypothesis

This research posits that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* depicts Draupadi as a multifaceted feminist archetype, whose tenacity and strength symbolize the continuous negotiation women face in balancing their personal aspirations with their career goals. By illustrating Draupadi's confrontations with societal norms, emotional dilemmas, and claims of autonomy, the narrative provides a sophisticated lens that mirrors the modern challenges women encounter in harmonizing various roles to attain comprehensive fulfillment and empowerment in both their personal and professional lives.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this research is found in its examination of *The Palace of Illusions* as a vital feminist intervention that reclaims Draupadi's voice and agency—an archetypal woman who has been traditionally marginalized in the Mahabharata and historical accounts. By concentrating on Draupadi's resolve to reconcile her personal aspirations with societal and professional obligations, the research highlights current gender dynamics and the complex challenges women encounter in balancing various roles. The feminist reimagining presented in the novel confronts patriarchal systems and brings to light themes of resilience, identity, solidarity, and empowerment that extend beyond literary boundaries into real-world socio-cultural situations. This study adds to feminist literary criticism by connecting ancient mythology with contemporary feminist dialogue, underscoring how Draupadi's story provides both symbolic and practical insights into women's pursuits for comprehensive fulfillment in their personal and professional lives. Such an analysis not only deepens the understanding of Indian epic literature but also contributes to ongoing conversations regarding gender equity, work-life balance, and empowerment in today's society.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a **qualitative methodology** rooted in feminist literary analysis, which is well-suited for examining the intricate themes of **gender, identity, and empowerment** found in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Through detailed textual examination and thematic coding, the study reveals Draupadi's complex navigation of her personal and professional aspirations, highlighting her psychological complexity and socio-cultural background. Methods such as discourse analysis and narrative inquiry facilitate an interpretation that is attuned to the interplay of cultural norms, feminist theory, and individual agency. The research is informed by feminist epistemologies that emphasize situated knowledge, reflexivity, and the critique of patriarchal systems, ensuring that women's experiences are authentically and critically represented. Relevant management theories for this study include role theory, which focuses on the juggling of various social roles, and resilience theory, which describes the adaptive strategies individuals use to navigate systemic obstacles. By combining these methodologies and theories, the research offers a detailed understanding of how individuals achieve determination and balance in the face of conflicting personal and professional demands within a patriarchal context.

Limitations of the Study

The research focuses on a feminist literary analysis of *The Palace of Illusions*, providing valuable insights into Draupadi's character and agency. However, it may overlook broader socio-cultural and historical factors affecting women's lives. This study is limited to one literary work and lacks comparative analyses with other Mahabharata versions or empirical data on women's experiences. Additionally, the novel's blend of myth and contemporary feminist thought complicates the distinction between historical accuracy and modern interpretation. The narrative techniques used may not fully capture all aspects of women's empowerment or work-life balance. Thus, while the study offers important feminist insights, further interdisciplinary research incorporating sociological, psychological, and cross-cultural perspectives would deepen the understanding of the themes discussed.

IV. DISCUSSION

1. Personal Aspirations with Societal and Professional Demands

The Palace of Illusions vividly depicts Draupadi's unwavering determination to align her personal goals with the societal and professional expectations imposed on her

through compelling, evocative storytelling and introspective thoughts. Throughout the novel, Draupadi contends with the limitations of her positions as wife, queen, and political leader, persistently working to establish her independence within a patriarchal structure. As she emotionally echoes, "What did I learn that day in the sabha? ... They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day" (Divakaruni). This underscores her increasing awareness of the constraints placed upon her, while also reinforcing her determination to protect her autonomy instead of depending exclusively on male guardians.

Draupadi's vow, "I will not comb it, I said, until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood," symbolizes her strong dedication to personal justice and resolve when confronted with challenges, as literary critics highlight this as a depiction of feminine power interwoven with the consequences of revenge (Shruti & Kumar, 2023). Scholars like Devi and Vats (2025) argue that Divakaruni's depiction reinterprets Draupadi, presenting her not merely as a victim but as a strategic player who skillfully navigates her complex identity—juggling her aspirations for love, independence, and political power within the confines of societal norms. Her internal conflict and emotional challenges mirror the difficulties faced by contemporary women in balancing various roles. The novel employs a feminist narrative style through first-person interiority, allowing readers to engage with the complex experience of navigating vulnerability and strength, as well as personal satisfaction and responsibility (Kumar, 2024).

Literary critics highlight that Draupadi's narrative goes beyond mythology, acting as a paradigm for women's empowerment, where individual strength serves as a fundamental element in navigating both professional and social environments (Darker Fables, 2023). This multifaceted depiction corresponds with role theory and resilience theory within management research, emphasizing how individuals navigate conflicting social roles and cultivate adaptive strategies to preserve their agency in challenging situations. Divakaruni's story emphasizes Draupadi's determination in upholding her identity and negotiating power, showcasing the complex challenges women encounter in their pursuit of comprehensive fulfillment.

2. Psychological and Emotional Hurdles for Satisfaction

The Palace of Illusions emphasizes the psychological and emotional challenges that women encounter while trying to balance their personal ambitions with societal and professional expectations, as illustrated through Draupadi's reflective narrative and pivotal moments of both vulnerability and resilience. Draupadi's awareness of her multifaceted role becomes clear when she states, "When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different," demonstrating her desire for independence and authority in the face of limiting situations (Divakaruni). This highlights the inner struggle that numerous women face—the conflict between aspirations and the constraints dictated by tradition and obligation. Her willingness to prioritize duty over desire is captured in the phrase, "I finally began to see what the wily Kunti had in mind when she'd insisted that I was to be married to all of them, and though they never made my heartbeat wildly, the way I'd hoped as a girl, I committed myself totally to the welfare of the Pandavas," showcasing emotional compromise and the emphasis on responsibility (Divakaruni). These sacrifices reflect the psychological strain women face as they navigate their personal aspirations in contrast to societal demands.

Draupadi's confidence also uncovers the emotional effort hidden behind her strength: "It's never a good idea to let one's husbands grow too complacent. My displays of temper ensured that the Pandavas continued to regard me with a healthy respect," highlighting the ways in which women maneuver through power dynamics via ongoing negotiation and self-assertion (Divakaruni). Literary critics view this as a representation of resilience, where emotional expression acts as a tactical instrument in power relations (Devi & Vats, 2025). Moreover, the spiritual and philosophical struggles that Draupadi faces are mirrored in Krishna's guidance, "A situation in itself is neither happy nor unhappy. It's only your response to it that causes your sorrow," articulating the emotional complexity of managing internal and external pressures (Divakaruni). Researchers note that this conversation places Draupadi's psychological challenges within larger existential inquiries regarding agency and acceptance, reflecting the broader female experience in navigating identities amidst competing demands (Kumar, 2024).

3. Dharma and Shakti Redefined in Work-Life Integration

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Cultural concepts like *dharma* and *shakti* are redefined to align with contemporary views on women's empowerment and the blending of personal and professional identities.

Divakaruni reinterprets *dharma*—historically seen as duty and righteousness—not as a strict, divine command but as a nuanced, negotiated strategy for survival that confronts patriarchal power. Draupadi takes charge of her life and the terms of her marriage, stating, "I would belong to only one brother at a time," imposing a "penalty" for violations, this represents her rejection of being a passive entity within male-dominated power structures. This redefinition is in line with modern feminist perspectives that emphasize agency and consent rather than enforced social roles. (Rachena Devi & Vats, 2025). In a similar vein, *shakti*—the divine feminine energy—is reflected in Draupadi's intricate psychological depth and strength. Divakaruni's depiction presents *shakti* not merely as an external divine force but as an internal source of emotional and political power. As Chakravarti (2003) notes, Draupadi's "anger, desires, and agency" are pivotal, deconstructing the epic's depiction of women as mere representations of patriarchal fear and reinterpreting them as insightful strategists who influence their own fates. This internalized *shakti* embodies the contemporary feminist focus on empowerment via self-awareness and tactical negotiation in both personal and professional realms.

The feminist narrative approach of the novel resonates with Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory by amplifying the voices of historically silenced female figures, redefining *dharma* and *shakti* in manners that motivate modern women to challenge socio-cultural limitations while pursuing comprehensive fulfilment (Showalter, 1977; Spivak, 1988). The novel skillfully combines mythological symbolism with postcolonial and feminist themes, transforming these ancient ideas into powerful instruments for women's empowerment and the integration of work and life in the present day.

4. Autonomy in Various Roles and Identities

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni utilizes various narrative techniques to highlight Draupadi's independence as she maneuvers through numerous roles and identities in *The Palace of Illusions*. A key element of this is the implementation of first-person narration, which provides readers with close insight into Draupadi's thoughts, feelings, and tactical reasoning. As Draupadi asserts, "This is my story. Not the story of the sons of Pandu, though they are part of it—just as I am part of theirs" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 1), the claim of narrative control highlights her subjectivity and agency, altering the conventional male-centric perspective of the Mahabharata.

Divakaruni employs **interior monologue** and psychological depth to uncover Draupadi's intricate emotional landscape, illustrating her ambitions, fears, and defiance. The novel showcases her unwillingness to

passively accept assigned roles; for instance, she actively negotiates the terms of her polyandrous marriage, stating, "I do not meekly accept" the arrangement but "demand conditions," emphasizing her role as an active participant instead of a passive entity (Rachena Devi & Vats, 2025). Utilizing **feminist narratology**, the text counters patriarchal suppression by highlighting Draupadi's fury, aspirations, and tactical intellect. Researchers Chakravarti (2003) and Showalter (1977) observe that Divakaruni deconstructs the epic's depiction of women as mere representations of patriarchal fears, instead portraying Draupadi as a protagonist who is both emotionally intricate and politically savvy, thereby defying traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Divakaruni's reinterpretation of significant events — including Draupadi's vocal resistance to her disrobing and her proactive role in shaping war strategies — establishes her as more than just a victim; she emerges as a visionary strategist. This challenge to conventional roles critiques the marginalization of women's voices in epic tales and underscores their essential involvement in societal matters (Bhattacharji, 2004).

5. Feminist Framework for Contemporary Women

Draupadi's story in *The Palace of Illusions* presents a powerful feminist perspective that illustrates the delicate balance modern women navigate while juggling competing personal and professional responsibilities. Divakaruni amplifies Draupadi's voice through reflective storytelling that uncovers her complex identity and sense of agency. Draupadi declares, "I would not be a mere story of loss and humiliation... I fought, I loved, I dictated terms," asserting her strong reclamation of her narrative and autonomy, instead of being a passive victim of patriarchal destiny (Divakaruni). This declaration embodies the feminist principle of self-definition and defiance against roles imposed by society.

Literary critics emphasize that Draupadi's emotional intricacies—her aspirations, ambitions, and vulnerabilities—reflect the journeys of contemporary women who balance professional goals with personal sacrifices. According to Shruti and Kumar (2023), Draupadi's "resilience, agency, and refusal to conform" offer a framework for women who need to assert their presence in male-dominated environments while respecting their unique identities. The feminist perspective of the novel delves into her dealings with polyandry, political power, and emotional requirements, highlighting the conflict between personal satisfaction and societal demands.

Research conducted by Devi and Vats (2025) contends that Divakaruni's use of first-person narration

and interior monologue articulates the inner conflicts of women, reflecting Ruth Vanita's insight that Draupadi represents "the complex psychological and social dilemmas facing women balancing duty and desire." This approach utilizes feminist narratology to challenge conventional representations of women as mere objects or symbols, instead depicting Draupadi as a strategic and dynamic character who takes charge of her own narrative. Moreover, the novel emphasizes the importance of female solidarity as a crucial support network, demonstrating how Draupadi's connections with other women foster strength and resilience in the face of societal obstacles. Feminist critics highlight that this sisterhood confronts patriarchal divides and establishes avenues for empowerment (Feminism in *The Palace of Illusions*, 2025).

6. Female Camaraderie

The bond among women is vital to Draupadi's fulfillment in *The Palace of Illusions*. The narrative highlights how her relationships with other women offer emotional support against patriarchal oppression. After the trauma in the Kaurava court, Draupadi reflects on the men's silence and powerlessness, realizing the importance of female empowerment, "I was alone in a world that was no longer mine" (Divakaruni). However, she later creates a space, "a separate court... a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women," highlighting the significance of unity and collective experience for recovery and empowerment (Divakaruni).

Scholars argue that this solidarity among women challenges the patriarchal notions of isolation and competition, instead emphasizing their collective strength. Hema S. notes that Draupadi's "struggles as a woman in a patriarchal society", her relationships with female figures such as her mother-in-law Kunti and the counsel of Krishna help to alleviate her challenges, offering both guidance and strength (Hema, 2022). The novel highlights female camaraderie as a source of empowerment and resistance, dispelling the notion of women as mere isolated victims.

The profound emotional connections in Draupadi's friendships are revealed when she confesses her hidden desires and vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to Karna and her intricate feelings of love and loss, which are often shared among women in intimate spaces. This candid emotional expression among women stands in stark contrast to the public personas they uphold, underscoring feminist critiques of the emotional labor associated with gender (Shruti & Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, feminist literary analyses highlight that Draupadi's establishment of a women's court following the war represents a significant act of reclaiming narrative

and social space, enabling women to express their stories, concerns, and ambitions (Devi & Vats, 2025). This collective effort embodies contemporary feminist principles where sisterhood plays a crucial role in navigating identity, agency, and work-life issues.

V. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The results and conclusions drawn from the analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* indicate that the novel offers a compelling feminist perspective by emphasizing Draupadi's agency, resilience, and multifaceted identity within a profoundly patriarchal context. Draupadi is depicted not merely as a passive victim but as an active and strategic figure who confronts conventional gender roles and societal norms. The narrative delves into her challenges in navigating power relations with male figures, particularly the Pandavas, shedding light on the restrictions placed on women while also highlighting Draupadi's steadfast loyalty, intellect, and defiance.

The study reveals that Draupadi's narrative critiques patriarchal systems through poignant illustrations of her coerced polyandrous marriage, public disgrace, exile, and emotional estrangement, reflecting the wider societal injustices experienced by women. Nonetheless, it also underscores the strength and unity found in female bonds, such as those with her friends and Krishna's sister-in-law Subhadra, emphasizing women's collective resilience against oppression. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that Divakaruni brings depth to Draupadi by depicting her aspirations, ambitions, jealousy, and vulnerabilities, thus challenging the clichéd representations of women in traditional epics. Through this nuanced portrayal, the novel highlights the persistent feminist themes of identity, empowerment, and the ramifications of power relations.

III. Conclusion

The research study concludes that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a powerful feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata through Draupadi's perspective, who exemplifies the delicate balancing act women undertake between their personal goals and societal as well as professional expectations. The novel emphasizes Draupadi's resolve, resilience, and strategic agency as she maneuvers through intricate patriarchal systems, challenging conventional roles assigned to women while asserting her independence and identity. By reinterpreting cultural concepts like *dharma* and *shakti*, Divakaruni links ancient mythology with modern feminist ideals of empowerment and work-life balance. Additionally, the study highlights the essential

role of female solidarity and emotional support in Draupadi's quest for holistic fulfillment. In summary, this research confirms that *The Palace of Illusions* enhances feminist literary discourse by illustrating women's psychological and social challenges, providing valuable perspectives on contemporary gender dynamics and the ongoing pursuit of equitable personal and professional fulfillment.

Future research could explore comparative studies of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* with other feminist reinterpretations of mythological figures, like Sita in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, and modern reimagining across cultures. This analysis would enhance understanding of women's agency in patriarchal contexts through diverse narratives.

REFERENCES

- [1] Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). *The palace of illusions*. Doubleday.
- [2] Anonymous. (n.d.). *The Palace of Illusions and Yajnaseni: A feminist reading. Modern Studies in English and Aesthetics*.
- [3] Bewitchingly Paranoid. (2016, October 24). Book review: *The Palace of Illusion*. *Bewitchingly Paranoid*.
- [4] Chakravarti, U. (2003). Gendering caste through a feminist lens. *Gender & Society*, 17(4), 465–486.
- [5] Darker Fables. (2023, July 20). Review: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Darker Fables*.
- [6] Daschaudhuri, A. (2020). Rewriting the myth of Draupadi in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions: A comparative study*. *Athens Journal of Philology*, 7(3), 243–266.
- [7] Devi, R., & Vats, S. (2025). *The Palace of Illusions: A feminist reimagining of the Mahabharata in contemporary literature*. *South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature*, 7(3), 75–79.
- [8] Hema, S. (2022). Draupadi's struggles as a woman in a patriarchal society. *Journal of Feminist Studies*, 12(1), 34–45.
- [9] Imperium Publications. (2024). What did the author fail to understand about *The Palace of Illusions*? *Imperium Publications*.
- [10] Jeeta. (2024). Draupadi in different forms: Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, *Jagyasenī* and *The Palace of Illusions*. *Jeeta's Blog*.
- [11] Kumar, M. (2024). A feminist exegesis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Expression Journal*.
- [12] Kumar, M. (2024). Exploring feminist agency in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Expression Journal*.
- [13] Maitra, P., & Sharma, R. (2023). Reinterpreting Draupadi: Feminist perspective in *The Palace of Illusions*. *RAIJMR: Research and Applications International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(4).

- [14] Nath, S. (2024). A feminist perspective on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *International Education and Research Journal*, 9(5).
- [15] Patel, J. (2024). Feminist reinterpretation of *The Palace of Illusions*: Draupadi's agency and resistance. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 12(4).
- [16] Priya's Fictionvilla. (2025). Book review: *The Palace of Illusions*. Fictionvilla.
- [17] Raj, M., & Kaur, R. (2023). Draupadi: The modern woman voice in *The Palace of Illusions*. *RAIJMR: Research and Applications International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(4).
- [18] Sapkale, K. (2024). A study of Draupadi's portrayal in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Creative Saplings*, 1
- [19] Sayed, I. S. (2023). Feminist narrative analysis of Draupadi's character in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Creative Saplings*, 1
- [20] Shinde, P., & Phartale, P. (2023). Feminist reading of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*. *Creative Saplings*, 1.
- [21] Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- [22] Shruti, & Kumar, R. (2023). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni interweaved mythology as central theme in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 10(11), 97–100.
- [23] Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- [24] Srivastava, H. A. (2025). Draupadi speaks: A feminist re-visioning of the *Mahabharata* in *The Palace of Illusions*. *Research Guru: Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Subjects*, 19(1), 24–30.
- [25] Tripathy, A. (2019). Queen of the *Palace of Illusions*: Rewriting the story of Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Research Guru: Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Subjects*, 12(4), 196–203.
- [26] Vanita, R. (1994). *En-gendering India: Woman and nation in colonial and postcolonial narratives*. Duke University Press.
- [27] Vedic Story. (2025, January 15). Review: *The Palace of Illusions*—A magical narrative by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Vedic Story*.
- [28] Verma, P. (2024). Female empowerment and agency in *The Palace of Illusions*. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, 3(1).
- [29] Unknown author. (n.d.). Review of *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee. *International Journal of Digital Literature*.



Twilight Tide: Narrative of Aging in *Olive Kitteridge*

Ma Chaofan

School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Received: 10 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 01 Sep 2025; Accepted: 04 Sep 2025; Available online: 10 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Olive Kitteridge*, the third masterpiece by contemporary American writer Elizabeth Strout, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for its exquisitely detailed depiction of the daily lives of small-town residents. Against the backdrop of the increasingly prominent trend of global aging, the portrayal of the elderly in this book appropriately carries real-world implications. This paper uses narrative gerontology theory to analyze the loneliness experience of the elderly and its narrative presentation in the novel. In terms of narrative, the author uses the shift between an omniscient perspective and an internal perspective, combined with the characters' inner monologues and dialogues, to deeply bind the theme of loneliness with the physical and psychological experiences of aging. This highlights the role of "Narratives of Life" in narrative gerontology in constructing the existential meaning of the elderly, revealing the universality and complexity of loneliness among the elderly in modern society.



Keywords— *Olive Kitteridge*, narrative of ageing, loneliness, aging, family relationships

I. INTRODUCTION

Olive Kitteridge, penned by the contemporary American female writer Elizabeth Strout, is a critically acclaimed novel that intricately weaves together thirteen short stories to depict the life of small-town residents, especially focusing on the protagonist Olive Kitteridge, a complex and often prickly retired schoolteacher residing in the small coastal town of Crosby, Maine. Through a series of episodic narratives spanning decades, Strout portrays Olive's relationships—her strained yet loving marriage with Henry Kitteridge, her complicated bond with their son Christopher Kitteridge, and her interactions with the diverse townspeople. The novel uses Crosby as a microcosm to explore universal themes of human connection, loneliness, aging, and the inevitable passage of time. Strout employs plain narration and simple language to depict the townsfolk's lives, reflecting the anguish of urban dwellers, the alienation between individuals, and other contemporary realities. The novel has won widespread acclaim for its intense focus on modern life's realities and themes of self-redemption, with its characters' lives serving as a mirror to society. *Olive Kitteridge* has not only won numerous awards, including the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction but also presented the spiritual

crises and familial conflicts confronting modern people and resonated widely with readers, offering a deep meditation on the complexities of the human condition.

Researches on *Olive Kitteridge* also abound in various topics. Studies of overseas mainly focus on miniseries adaptation and comparative literature studies. Scriptwriter Jane Anderson and filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko adapted this book into a television miniseries. In Delphine Letort's article, how the critical power of an adaptation that draws on the conventions of the woman's film for challenging social and cultural constructs of gender and age is explored(86). For Jelena Šesnić, she made a comparison between *Olive Kitteridge* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* to distinguish differences between the two novels in the respect of "the different temporal and cultural context in which they strive to represent age and ageing"(444). In recent years, Chinese scholars like Qiu Minghui has analyzed the psychological trauma of the protagonist Olive Kitteridge from the perspectives of "the manifestation, the causes, and the recovery methods"(166). Gao Weihong and Lu Shuang, based on Tönnies' community theory, have delved into "the community of blood", "the community of place", and "the community of spirit" underlying *Olive Kitteridge*.

Other Chinese scholars also have interpreted this novel from the standpoints such as Lacan's mirror-stage theory, family system theory, Sartre's existentialism, ecofeminism, and so forth. However, scholarly exploration into the narrative of *Olive Kitteridge* remains underexplored in the field of narrative gerontology. Thus, this paper will analyze the novel through the lens of narrative gerontology.

The origin of narrative gerontology can be traced back to the late 20th century. Early scholars such as Jim Birren and Hans Schroots initiated research on metaphors of aging in the 1990s (Kenyon et al xi). They laid the groundwork for interpreting aging not merely as a biological process, but as a symbolic construct embedded within cultural narratives. Narrative gerontology has emerged as a groundbreaking framework in gerontological studies. According to Li Jing, Narrative gerontology primarily focuses on the aesthetic expression of aging issues, taking life experiences in late-life stages such as senescence, death, and aging as aesthetic objects, and examining the periodic connections between age and literary creation in aesthetic perception(154). This literary research paradigm posits that the narration of life courses constitutes "Narratives of Life", which embodies the fictional and imaginative qualities of literature, while also fostering the narrator's reflection on life and cognition of self-existence. The process of older adults telling life stories is a dynamic and open-ended one interpreted collectively by "narratives of which we are simultaneously author and narrator, character and reader"(Randall and McKim 6). The textuality of narratives of life and the openness of the narrative and reading processes endow narrative subjects with multiple meanings of memory, time, and existence, and can reflect the subjective initiative of narrative subjects. This paper primarily analyzes the narrative themes in *Olive Kitteridge*, exploring the novel's characteristics of narrative gerontology by integrating narrative identity, point of view, and internal and external dialogue.

II. AGING REPRESENTED IN PSYCHOLOGY: LONELINESS AS NARRATIVE THEME

Loneliness in aged adults refers to the feeling of being disconnected or in disharmonious relationships with significant others, leading to a sense of estrangement and belittlement(Wu 984). By a close reading of the novel, what can be discerned is that the theme of loneliness runs throughout the text, accompanied by the development of the plot driven by three characters this paper will analyze. As Shen Dan put it, "The mode of point of view is not innate but formed according to conventions. In the omniscient mode, internal perspective shifts permitted by

conventions often occur"(55). In *Olive Kitteridge*, this theory of point of view and the theme of loneliness intersect in a profound manner. Through the omniscient mode with internal perspective shifts, the author Elizabeth Strout meticulously exposes the multi-faceted loneliness of the aged characters. Although Olive Kitteridge serves as the protagonist of the novel, threading through the entire narrative, the 13 stories focus on different characters' points of view, further reinforcing the theme of loneliness through narrative identity and internal or external dialogue. In the following, I will separately take Henry Kitteridge, Olive Kitteridge, and Jack Kennison as examples to illustrate how these narrative devices promote narrative gerontology.

III. LONELINESS INCURRED BY THE EXCLUSION OF FAMILY MEMBERS

Henry Kitteridge is the protagonist of the first chapter Pharmacy. This chapter recounts Henry Kitteridge's experiences as a pharmacist, his relationship with his wife Olive, and his interactions with employee Denise Thibodeau. The theme of loneliness is already revealed at the beginning of the novel when the daily routine of Henry Kitteridge is described. "Retired now, he still wakes early and remembers how mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were his secret"(Strout 3). Even after retiring, he still wakes up early, missing the solitude of driving to work in the morning. There is no doubt that going to work at the pharmacy is a delight for Henry. He loves the smell of pine trees, the saltiness in the air, and even the chill of winter. The pharmacy served as his haven, offering him temporary comfort. The wide array of things in the pharmacy became his companions which are "altogether steady and steadfast"(Strout 4). Things are his friends rather than humans. In other words, Henry would rather stay with things. In the pharmacy, Henry feels "cheerful" to help others, for "any unpleasantness that may have occurred back in his home...receded like a shoreline as he walked through the safety of his pharmacy"(Strout 4). Conventionally, what is universally acknowledged is that home is the cozy shelter for family members, but why does Henry prefer to stay in the pharmacy instead of home? What makes home unhomey? It is the loneliness and sense of not belonging in Henry's heart at home that are at play. According to Tong Ming, an important concept in Freudian psychoanalysis is the "return or recurrence of the repressed", or the "repetition compulsion". In his 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" (The Uncanny), Freud elaborated on "The Uncanny/Unheimlich" as another articulation of the "return of the repressed"(106). That is to say, some sudden experiences of panic are indescribable, abrupt, and strange, but their namelessness is not without

reason. The present panic can be traced back to a certain source in the history of psychological processes. Therefore, the unfamiliar is actually familiar, and the illusion of “non-home” always has the shadow of “home”, lingering and acting secretly. This antinomy of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the association between the non-home and the home, constitutes the “uncanny” in the sense of psychoanalysis. For Henry, his own home evokes a sense of the uncanny, and his “retreat” into the world of the pharmacy is a manifestation of his loneliness. Facing Olive’s sarcastic remarks and snubs like “Then that’s that, Mr. President...Give your order to the cook”(Strout 6) when Henry makes the suggestion to invite the young Henry couple to have a meal that day, and facing Christopher sitting sideways at the table and “slumped in adolescent gracelessness”(Strout 6), completely ignoring the guests’ caring greetings, Henry just feels like an unexpected fury sprout inside him because all of these as if will unveil “something unpleasant not expected to be found in the Kitteridge home”(Strout 6). It makes Henry feel like he “would find himself to be the odd man out”(Strout 5). On top of that, Olive’s taunts have never ceased. When Henry suggests that Olive accompany him to church, she bursts into curses and snaps: “Yes, it most certainly is too goddamn much to ask!”, “You, Mr. Head Deacon Claptrap Nice Guy, expect me to give up my Sunday mornings and go sit among a bunch of snot-wots!”(Strout 9). The external dialogue makes Henry feel “A darkness had rumbled through him; his soul was suffocating in tar.”(Strout 9) internally. This home for Henry is unhomey as if what Olive and Christopher did seems a public exposure of familial failure. His relationship with his wife and son lacks the emotional connection that could alleviate the sense of alienation, and the shifting narrative perspective underscores the contrast between his external behavior (leaving for work early and lingering at the pharmacy) and his internal sense of loneliness. In this sense, Henry is lonely because of the exclusion from family members.

The omniscient narrative mode allows readers to sense that the pharmacy, for Henry, functions as a heterotopia not only because he can fulfill his desire for order and the companionship of inanimate objects—such as the neatly arranged items and medicines, along with the familiar scents in the pharmacy, but because he can stay with Denise Thibodeau, representation of the vitality of youth. In the pharmacy, the author uses rhetoric devices of simile to describe how compatible the relationship between Henry and Denise is and the pharmacy is his paradise: “Denise nature attached itself to his as easily as aspirin attached itself to the enzyme COX-2”(Strout 13), which makes him move through his day pain-free, and during the happy days Henry sometimes deems that the

pharmacy is like “a healthy autonomic nervous system in a workable, quiet state”(Strout 13). However, happiness comes to an abrupt end in the following. The author first narrates in a humor tone that when the evening comes, adrenaline will pour through Henry for Olive’s complaint: “People just waiting for me to serve them, with their faces hanging out” (Strout 13), which is an “alarm” that makes Henry’s arm tingle. Such a sense of uncanny recurs when Henry stays at home. The home co-established by Henry and Olive has long lost its youth, and the aged couple has devolved from young lovers to middle-aged partners caught in endless bickering over daily trivialities. Yet Denise’s arrival breathes new life into Henry’s world, like a shot of youthful adrenaline to a stagnant routine. To escape from this loneliness, Henry began to look forward to the newlywed life of Henry Thibodeau and Denise Thibodeau, brimming with youth, vibrancy, and vitality. Henry imagines the young couple’s life over and over again, picturing them like the “overgrown puppies tumbling together”, and such a scene make him “could not have said why this gave him the particular kind of happiness it did, like liquid gold being poured through”(Strout 8). After the death of Henry Thibodeau, Henry Kitteridge finds out he has already fallen in love with Denise and desires to live together with her, which in essence stems from the fact that the old-age marriage between him and Olive has lost its freshness, and he seeks to escape loneliness in this way, much like when he realized Olive had somehow become an unapologetic atheist. It was not true when they were first married because they once discussed animal dissections during their college biology course, marveling at the miracle of the respiratory system, “a creation by a splendid power”(Strout 15). Their marriage has totally changed. However Henry’s interior monologue has shown the importance of maintaining an accepting mindset when faced with unchangeable facts. As he passed the site of the old pharmacy, a large chain drugstore now stood there. The once-standing trees had been cut down completely, and replaced by a newly built parking lot. Facing this scene of things changing and people departing, Henry’s state of mind appeared exceptionally open-minded. “You get used to things, he thinks, without getting used to things”(Strout 16). It is impossible for Henry to fantasize about a life with Denise. Perhaps the only way is to persuade himself to be open-minded, a compromise to face the unchangeable facts, although he has to rely on fantasies to dispel the loneliness in his heart.

IV. LONELINESS STEMMING FROM THE FEELING OF BEING UNNEEDED

When invited to New York to help her son, Olive is

undoubtedly expectant because Christopher, who has long been out of touch with his family, takes the initiative to contact Olive for help, which rekindles her hope. Although it is Olive's first time taking a plane, the scenery on the flight is quite enjoyable, which makes Olive feel something "she has not expected to feel again: a sudden surging greediness for life"(Strout 202). This results from the sense of being needed: "the way the plane was plowing forward to a place new, and where she was needed. She had been asked to be part of her son's life"(Strout 203). The loneliness of the elderly can be deeply devastating. In the twilight of life, offspring scatter here and there, leaving them as empty nesters. Days drag on like years, yet they cannot resist the advancing pace toward death. As Wu Jie pointed out that the more social support the elderly receive, the easier it is to reduce their experience of lonely emotions. The stronger the social support is, the more it can alleviate the emotional loneliness of the elderly(986). On the contrary, elderly people lacking social support feel isolated and at a loss when facing stressful events, which makes them prone to emotional loneliness. At the outset, Olive regains the hope to live because her son needs her help. However, the reality leaves Oliver deeply distressed in the following plots.

The warmth of anticipation dissipates the moment she steps out of the airport. Right after exiting the airport, she is scolded by Christopher for failing to find the correct exit. Christopher complains as he turns a blind eye to Olive pulling her luggage: " 'Godfrey', he said, not even reaching to take her bag. 'Why can't you just get a cell phone like everyone else?' "(Strout 203). This is the first remark he says to his 72-year-old mother, no words of greeting, no offer to help, just blame. It is not surprising that elderly people cannot use mobile phones but it is unimaginable that a person could be so indifferent. When Olive steps on the dog mess, Christopher does not care about his mother's condition at all but only complains. The contrast between Christopher's taciturnity since childhood and his current loquaciousness is utterly striking, rendering Olive confused. Christopher has already become the most familiar stranger to Olive. When the house Olive steps into is replete with "old dog hair" and the acrid stench of "soiled laundry", with even the walls exuding a "sourness" of mildew. These details deliver a dual sensory blow to Olive, olfactory and visual, to shape the home as a decaying vessel, which forms a startling contrast to Olive's own home, and makes Olive feel a great sense of estrangement, and the first unpalatable dinner intensifies Olive's sense of loneliness. When she steps down into the basement, Olive encounters her first mental breakdown, though the surrounding is as clean and tidy as her own home with the white-painting wall and a white telephone; she still "wanted to wail like a child"(Strout 208) because

she do not belong to this home. While walking with her son and daughter-in-law, Olive mentions to her son that she has called his father. Christopher pays no attention at all, only focusing on talking with Ann. The loneliness in her heart reminds her that "She'd never had a friend as loyal, as kind, as her husband"(Strout 224). As she stands behind her son and daughter-in-law waiting for the traffic light to alter, she suddenly feels "a loneliness so deep that once"(Strout 224), and a recent visit to the dentist where the gentle turn of her chin by the dentist's soft fingers had in that moment felt like a tenderness so acute it ached, causing her to swallow with a groan of longing and tears to spring to her eyes. This detail uncovers the loneliness pent up deeply within her: even besides family, her psychological world has become as barren as a wilderness, such that the touch of a stranger could shatter her defenses. This moment of treatment for emotional comfort acts like a mirror, reflecting the long-neglected emotional needs in her family relationships. The loneliness hidden in the folds of daily life has already hollowed out her ability to perceive intimate connection like a cavity, and it is only in the kindness of a stranger that she suddenly realizes how deep her yearning to be treated gently truly was. But apparently, Christopher does not realize what exactly her mom needs.

The final trigger is a stain. When Olive sees the prominent strip of sticky butterscotch sauce on her blouse in the basement bathroom mirror, she is abruptly thrust into a confrontation with aging and indignity. The stain evokes the memory of Aunt Ora, whom she once repulsed for spilling melted ice cream, forcing her to recognize she has become the very figure she once despised. Christopher and Ann's silence about the stain deepens her sense of being treated as a burdensome "baby", a stark contrast to her own habit of immediately pointing out such mishaps to her son. Her act of wrapping the stained blouse in a plastic bag instead of washing it becomes a silent rebellion—an attempt to shield herself from the humiliating reality of aging while clinging to the remained dignity. Her terror of becoming invisible and irrelevant, trapped in a cruel cycle where the repulsion she once felt for Aunt Ora now mirrors her own fear of being seen as pathetic and overlooked is present. Olive makes up her mind to leave. She has said "stink like fish" three times; one is before she comes to Christopher's house and the other two are when she is ready to depart. When Christopher and Ann begin to keep Olive to stay, Olive just says: "you needed help, but you weren't even honest enough to say that"(Strout 228). The escalating emotional conflicts between Olive and Christopher stem from the collision of unspoken needs and generational misunderstandings. Olive decides to leave because of the humiliation of being ignored while wearing a blouse stained with butterscotch sauce. She believes the

family would have been more attentive in cleaning such a mess for a child, a detail symbolizing the emotional indifference she experiences. Her anger arises not only from the stain itself but also from Christopher's "dishonesty" in masking his real need for help behind the pretense of an "invitation to visit", a deception that tears apart the fabric of trust. Christopher's defense, blaming her "extreme capriciousness" for her emotions, highlights the chasm in communication: he struggles to acknowledge her pain, while she interprets his interactions with Ann (such as stroking her hair or exchanging glances) as signals of a "conspiracy" to marginalize her. This confrontation reveals a tragic cycle: Olive's fear of loneliness fuels her aggression, while Christopher's resistance to her moods deepens her sense of rejection. Olive became an outsider in Christopher's family, feeling unneeded, which deepened her sense of loneliness.

V. LONELINESS TRIGGERED BY THE LACK OF COMPANIONSHIP

In the final chapter *River*, the motif of loneliness—already a narrative undercurrent—collides with the escalating weight of mortality. The opening lines reveal that Henry has died in a nursing home from a severe stroke, his passing coinciding with the birth of their grandson. This double-edged event, new life intersecting with death, rips the last thread of Olive's emotional straw: her husband, the "loyal and reliable" companion who had weathered decades of her tempests, is gone, leaving her adrift in a world where even familial bonds feel tenuous. "The emphasis on the life story itself may allow the person experiencing trauma" (Kenyon and Randall 3). One and a half years later after the demise of Henry, it "still squeezed Olive so hard she felt like a package of vacuum-packed coffee" (Strout 252). Since then, when walking by the river for daily exercise, she would always fall into a long period of deep thought. Her interior monologue uncovers her will to be alive is not that strong: "Let it be quick, she thought now, meaning her death, a thought she had several times a day" (Strout 253). Loneliness is not a transient emotion but a physical presence, as tangible as the stroke that felled Henry and also felled Olive in spirit. Olive's wish for a swift death is less a desire to die than a yearning to escape the constant tingle of loneliness, an ache that the river, where Olive does daily exercise and feels "such daily exercise might make her live longer" (Strout 253), with its relentless flow, seems to mock. Strout here elevates loneliness to a metaphor for the human condition: even in a town where everyone knows her name, Olive stands apart, a testament to the irreplaceable nature of true companionship and the fragility of the will to live when it vanishes. A similar case can be seen in Jack Kennison,

who has also been deprived of his wife's companionship. When he slumps on the path, Olive can only drive to seek help because she does not have a mobile phone. But Jack insists on stopping her from leaving. Even when Olive repeatedly stresses that he might die without prompt treatment, he still responds he does not care and Olive finds out that "A small smile seemed to come to his eyes" (Strout 254). On top of that, Jack says "I don't care if I die" and emphasizes twice "don't leave me here alone". This reflects Jack's ultimate fear of "loneliness" after losing companionship. He is indifferent to death itself, yet regards "being left alone" as a fate more terrible than death. Olive is also a fellow sufferer. She replies to Jack that she does also not care whether she dies or not. She would like to, in fact, "long as it's quick". Jack's response reinforces the theme of loneliness again that he does not "want to die alone". But Olive points out "We're always alone. Born alone. Die alone" (Strout 255). For Olive, loneliness is a compulsory course in life, and humans must learn to accept it. In the following dialogue, what can be revealed is that the group of the elderly are particularly afraid of loneliness.

"My wife died in December," he said. Olive watched the river. "Then, you're in hell," she said. "Then, I'm in hell." (Strout 255)

For Jack, the trauma of wife's passing has plunged him into an existential void, where his physical collapse is merely a physiological crisis, while the "loneliness of abandonment" represents his true existential dilemma. For Olive, this dialogue showcases her understanding of widowhood as an existential "hell" for the elderly, rooted in her own trauma of losing her husband. Olive's experience of her husband "shriveling for years in a nursing home" (Strout 255) has etched the image of old-age loneliness as a "hell" where companionship's absence transforms existence into a slow death of the soul. Jack's mention of his wife's decease triggers her empathy: both are survivors being lack of companionship, and their days now are replete with the silent torture of unheard thoughts and unshared moments. The "hell" she refers to is not a supernatural realm but the tangible reality of emotional starvation in old age. Knowing her friend Bunny often bickers and quarrels with her husband, Olive thinks Bunny "won a lottery", because her husband is still alive, and "Bunny could see what it was like, her friends losing their husbands and drowning in the emptiness" (Strout 257). In Olive's worldview, Bunny's "lottery win" isn't about marital happiness but about escaping the ultimate old-age penalty, surviving alone. While "the time spent in the waiting room while Jack Kennison saw the doctor had, for one brief moment, put her back into life" (Strout 257). For Olive, the sense of being needed and the desire for companionship are activated during the waiting room's

brief because it breaks the vicious cycle of “loneliness equals death” in old age. At the end of the novel, Olive and Jack lie side by side, a rare feeling of happiness washing over her. Jack’s love and companionship make her “did not want to leave it yet”(Strout 270). When Olive shifts from passively waiting for her own death to actively participating in another’s life, even the most ordinary act of companionship becomes a beam of hope piercing the darkness of loneliness. This light proves that the ultimate way aged people combat loneliness may lie in the moment of “I am here when you need me”.

VI. CONCLUSION

In *Olive Kitteridge*, this paper employs the framework of narrative gerontology as a lens to dissect the multifaceted loneliness of the elderly, using the coastal town of Crosby as a microcosm of human isolation. Through the interwoven stories of Henry, Olive, and Jack, the novel reveals that late-life loneliness stems from three interconnected voids: Henry’s estrangement within a family defined by emotional coldness, Olive’s marginalization as an unneeded mother in her son’s life, and Jack’s existential panic at facing death without companionship. Strout’s narrative strategy, alternating between omniscient perspectives and intimate interior monologues, exposes how aging is not merely a biological process but a cultural narrative fraught with societal invisibility and the erasure of emotional needs.

The study demonstrates that narrative gerontology offers a crucial framework for understanding how literature mirrors the elderly’s psychological struggles. By presenting aging not merely as a biological process but as a culturally constructed narrative, the novel challenges readers to confront the silent crisis of loneliness in late life. By the novel’s end, Olive’s fleeting moment of connection with Jack Kennison underscores a poignant truth: the antidote to elderly loneliness lies not in escaping its inevitability but in acknowledging shared vulnerability and seeking small, authentic human bonds. Strout’s work thus serves as both a critique of modern society’s neglect of the elderly and a manifestation of the redemptive power of narrative in giving voice to the overlooked experiences of aging.

REFERENCES

- [1] Letort, D. (2016). Age and gender in the miniseries adaptation of Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*. *Adaptation*. 9(1). 86-97.
- [2] Šesnić, J. (2019). The Past and Present of Age and Ageing in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *Olive Kitteridge*. *Anafora-časopis za znanost o književnosti*. 6(2). 443-468.
- [3] Qiu, M. (2023). Strout’s insight into the times: Trauma and recovery in *Olive Kitteridge*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*. 8(4). 166-173.
- [4] Kenyon, Gary, Clark, P & de Vries, B.(Eds.) (2001). *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Springer Publishing Company.
- [5] Strout, E. (2008). *Olive Kitteridge*. New York: Random House.
- [6] Randall, W. L., & McKim, E. (2008). *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old*. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Kenyon, G., & Randall, W. L. (1999). Narrative gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 13(1). 1-5.
- [8] 高卫红 & 卢爽. (2025). 《奥丽芙·基特里奇》中的共同体书写解读. *通化师范学院学报*. 46(05). 80-84.
- [9] 李晶. (2022). 爱德华·阿尔比《三个高个子女人》中的老年叙事. *外国文学研究*. 44(05). 153-164.
- [10] 童明. (2011). 暗恐/非家幻觉. *外国文学*. (04). 106-116+159.
- [11] 申丹. (2004). 视角. *外国文学*. (03). 52-61.
- [12] 吴捷. (2008). 老年人社会支持、孤独感与主观幸福感的关系. *心理科学*. (04). 984-986+1004.



Scriptotherapy as Resistance: Tracing Generational Trauma in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses

Hunufa Nasir

Master of Arts (English), Department of Languages, Integral University, Lucknow, India

Received: 06 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Sep 2025; Accepted: 05 Sep 2025; Available online: 10 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Israel-Palestine conflict emerges as one of the long-lasting and most divisive wars of the contemporary age, which is defined by continuing cycles of bloodshed, territorial disputes, and ingrained historical grudges. Amidst this intricate terrain, the Palestine resistance movement has surfaced as a pivotal agent championing equity, autonomy, and release for the Palestinian people. This study examines scriptotherapy as a form of resistance by analyzing Hala Alyan's Salt Houses in depth, tracking the deep patterns of intergenerational trauma and evaluating how writing becomes a location for negotiating identity and sustaining the Palestinian narrative. Moreover, the text provides a comprehensive overview of the state of Palestinian literature after the Al-Nakba conflict and the emergence of novel memoirs that became recognized as life stories. The study promotes a greater awareness of the human cost of the conflict and the aspirations for dignity and self-determination that drive the Palestinian struggle by elevating Palestinian voices and experiences.*



Keywords— *Displacement, Exile, Palestine, Resistance, Trauma*

I. INTRODUCTION

The protracted pain that inflicted upon Palestinians have caused a rupture within their collective memory—which simultaneously serves as a reminder of resistance and as a constant fight for their rights against colonial domination. The Israel-Palestine conflict is an enduring example of religious and ethnonationalist conflicts, demonstrating how the violent ‘othering’ of Jewish communities in Europe greatly exacerbated the unrest in the Middle East. Its origins can be seen in Mandatory Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Zionism and Arab nationalism, two rival nationalist organizations, arose under British rule. Despite having a strong desire for political power, cultural acceptance, and sovereign dominance over the area, both movements saw the other as a barrier to their goals. The idea of creating a haven for Jews was inextricably linked to Zionist leaders’ conviction that the Holy Land was their legitimate heritage (Pal, 2021, p. 48). Underlying the Palestinian Israeli conflict is a significant paradox: the state of Israel was established as a haven for the Jewish diaspora, but the diasporization and mass displacement of the

Palestinian Arab people was a direct consequence of its creation. After centuries of persecution, the Jewish people sought a homeland, which paradoxically led to another people experiencing the same statelessness and exile. As a result of displacement and forced migration, Palestinians became the epitome of a refugee country (Anvekar, 2024, p. 907). Al-Nakba, the tragedy that represents not only the loss of territory but also the suffering of exile, fragmentation, and the systematic denial of identity and home, is emblematic of the rise of Israel in Palestinian remembrance.

An Arab American writer Hala Alyan who was born in the United States to a Palestinian father and Lebanese mother experienced multiple displacements in her early childhood, moving across Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates before ultimately resettling in America. The tragic trauma of constant displacements is evident in her debut novel Salt Houses. Alyan carefully crafts an expansive story that delineates the persistent dislocation of the Yacoub family during decades of political turmoil and conflict.

In Greek, the term trauma initially signifies a bodily harm, but in psychological contexts, it refers to a mental injury (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). The Nablus family home serves as the focal point of Alyan's *Salt Houses*. Salma sits in the yard in silence on the eve of Alia's wedding, thinking about her own history while also contemplating her granddaughter's future. Her mind returns to Jaffa, to the hilltop home with its expansive Mediterranean view and its thriving orange orchards—a location that, before being lost to exile, represented security and a sense of belonging. In contrast, the Nablus home stands as both a reconstruction and a reminder of loss, for in its Salma dreams of returning to Jaffa, to “everything as she'd left it” (Alyan, 2017, p. 6). When the Yacoub family relocates from Jaffa to Nablus, they are left devastated, mourning the irretrievable loss of their cherished home in Jaffa. For Salma's husband, Hussam, this displacement is particularly unbearable, as his attachment to the house was profound. His anguish is captured in the lines: “More than once he cried out in the night, ‘they took my home, they took my lungs. Kill me, kill me.’ Hussam fiercely believed his illness was tied to occupation of Jaffa, the city with the peach-colored house they'd left behind” (Alyan, 2017, p. 3). This passage underscores the inseparable link Hussam perceives between personal well-being and the loss of homeland, illustrating how dispossession becomes both a physical and psychological affliction.

II. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THE INHERITANCE OF DISPLACEMENT

Given the ongoing and unrelenting nature of traumatic experience, Jabr contends that the idea of “post-traumatic stress disorder” is inappropriate for the Palestinian context (Jabr, 2019, p. 6). According to this observation, trauma is a chronic condition that becomes ingrained in the basic framework of Palestinian life rather than being a temporary effect of displacement. The suffering caused by leaving one's home doesn't only occur once in history; it recurs throughout generations, influencing identities, memories, and even physical health. In the novel, the forced removal from Jaffa in Hussam's instance shows up as both physical sickness and emotional sorrow, illustrating how the loss of one's hometown is internalized as an unhealing wound. Trauma thus becomes an unavoidable aspect of the Palestinian experience, embedded into everyday existence and perpetuated as a collective legacy of suffering and resiliency.

As Alyan's narrative demonstrates, the weight of exile is not only recalled but actively experienced, influencing the identities and decisions of future generations. This continuum places the grandmother at the center, serving as

a symbolic steward of cultural memory in addition to being an elder in the family. In their most personal form, grandmothers represent the motherland as a source of rootedness, tradition, and belonging. Their memories and voices heal historical wounds, guaranteeing that the past is not forgotten but rather strengthened.

Linah's and other characters' representations of the Palestinian experience in the narrative provide a striking example of how the persistent burden of trauma passed down through the generations may give rise to defiance and perseverance. Instead of existing as a remote or resolved history, the memory of occupation, war, and relocation throbs as a present reality that demands recognition and resolution. This persistent cycle of inherited pain turns memory itself into an act of resistance, transforming individual sorrow into a social demand for justice and acknowledgment. They impart more than just anecdotes to the younger generation through their storytelling, or what Toni Morrison refers to as “remembrance,” as they pass on an innate knowledge of resilience, identity, and motherland (Morrison, February 1974). Through this process, memory becomes a tool for resistance and survival, strengthening continuity in the face of loss.

By preserving history, identity, and optimism through her cultural role, Alyan elevates the grandmother's figure above a personal one, influencing the younger generation's self-perception and continuous fight for autonomy. Bayeh asserts that *Salt Houses*' concept of return defies the appearance of nostalgia. Return turns out to be a complex undertaking, weighed down by emotional baggage and historical disruption, rather than a simple restoration of the past. As it reveals how memory and displacement converge to make the process of going back more difficult, it creates a web of inconsistencies and associations (Bayeh, 2015, p. 7).

Salt Houses stand within a broader context of postcolonial and diaspora literature, where memory serves as both a burden and a weapon, thanks to this intricate web of memory, trauma, and resistance. Reconstructing the past is only one aspect of memory; it also forces people to balance their lived reality with their inherited sorrow, which undermines their present identities. Thus, Alyan's narrative is consistent with Marianne Hirsch's theory of “post-memory”, according to which the second generation inherits not only the stories of their ancestors but also their silences, scars, and unresolved sadness (Hirsch, 2012, p. 22). The recollections of displacement are not static; rather, they function as a haunting force that shapes the way in which younger people perceive their role in society.

Furthermore, Edward Said's thoughts on exile, in which he claims that displacement involves not only physical

separation but also a persistent condition of “in-betweenness,” are further supported by Alyan’s portrayal of memory (Said, 2000, p. 173). Characters in *Salt Houses* inhabit regions of transition—between memory and erasure, country and diaspora, past and present. This liminality serves as an example of how exile is a continuous state rather than a one-time occurrence. Alyan’s focus on memory as a source of identity and a location of unresolved trauma encapsulates the dichotomy of diasporic subjectivity: the need to flee and keep the burden of inherited loss at the same time.

III. RESISTANCE THROUGH WRITING: SCRIPTOTHERAPY AS SURVIVAL

The act of writing, particularly in settings of dispossession, exile, and displacement, goes beyond simple narration. It develops into a profound type of resistance, survival, and healing. Suzette Henke defined scriptotherapy as the therapeutic process in which traumatized individuals and groups participate in writing or textual production to process experiences of loss, sorrow, and rupture. “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Henke, 1998). Writing serves not just as a tool for self-expression in the Palestinian context, where trauma is collective and intergenerational, but also as a means of preserving memory against erasure.

Alyan’s *Salt Houses* incorporates scriptotherapy in its multigenerational narrative, where the act of narrating becomes a therapeutic reclamation of loss and displacement. The opening of the story where Salma foresees Alia’s tough future in Nablus. This scene introduces the notion of intergenerational trauma: Salma’s fear becomes ingrained in Alia’s life, and thus in future generations. Alyan transforms private anguish into collective memory by narrating such inherited worries, which resists forgetting. Scriptotherapy serves as Alyan’s means of instilling ancestral anxiety in language. The first split occurred with the 1967 Six-Day War and the loss of the family’s Palestinian home. Alyan’s portrayal of Alia and Atef’s relocation to Kuwait depicts the confusion of exile. As the novel switches to private monologues and fractured views, storytelling mediates the trauma of losing one’s physical birthplace. These broken voices highlight the impossibility of adequately ‘telling’ trauma, but their very articulation enacts the healing process of exposing scars. Riordan defines Scriptotherapy as “the deliberate use of writing to enhance therapeutic outcomes” (Riordan, 1996). When everything else fails, writing becomes the only escape.

The exile pattern is repeated when Riham, Souad, and the extended family are forced to migrate again during the Gulf War in 1990. Souad’s defiance of cultural norms, her quest for identification in Paris, and her battle to balance her history with a modern lifestyle are all examples of scriptotherapy in action in this scene. Through recounting Souad’s dissonance, Alyan examines how trauma transforms over time, manifesting merely as displacement but also as identity crisis, cultural fragmentation, and estrangement.

Manar’s trip to Palestine and Souad’s children in the post-9/11 era mark the novel’s climax. When physical reclamation is not possible, Manar’s journey to her grandparents’ homeland serves as an example of scriptotherapy’s ultimate purpose: using narrative to return to the site of loss. Alyan stitches together shattered identities by acknowledging rather than stifling displacement, and Manar’s experience with a region marred by erasure and occupation turns into a textual healing space. By ensuring that the tale of exile does not fade into obscurity, the act of chronicling Manar’s return is inherently resistant.

Throughout these pivotal periods—the Gulf War, the Nakba, and the exile following 9/11—Alyan employs scriptotherapy by transforming past tragedies into beautiful memories. The broken voices of all individuals are incorporated into a larger story that defies erasure. The therapeutic location is *The Salt Houses* themselves, a literary masterpiece where identity, belonging, and bereavement are permanently rewritten. In this way, Alyan shows how writing becomes a form of resistance and healing for Palestinians living abroad, enabling the respectful remembrance and transmission of intergenerational wounds.

IV. CONCLUSION

Palestinian identities are shaped by intergenerational trauma, exile, and relocation, as demonstrated in *Hala Alyan’s Salt Houses*. Loss is not a solitary or historical event, but rather a continuous, live reality. Alyan illustrates through the Yacoub family how trauma endures down the generations, impacting memory and self-perception. The younger generation’s inherited fears, Hussam’s physical and mental pain, and Salma’s longing for Jaffa all serve as examples of this continuity and are consistent with Jabr’s criticism of traditional PTSD frameworks.

Additionally, the novel reflects Said’s idea of exile as a continual state of ‘in-betweenness,’ emphasizing the liminality of diasporic identity, and post memory, in which descendants internalize ancestral suffering. Alyan’s story revolves around scriptotherapy, which uses writing as a

platform for healing and resistance. By turning inherited pain into a story, Alyan shows that storytelling can be a form of cultural rebellion as well as therapy, maintaining continuity, identity, and resilience.

Salt Houses is ultimately a prime example of how literature can turn acts of resistance and survival into collective pain. Comparative studies of scriptotherapy in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, the relationship between gender and intergenerational trauma, or modern narrative practices in digital media that defy erasure and retain memory could all be topics for future research.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alyan, H. (2017). *Salt Houses*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [2] Anvekar, D. Y. (2024). "Climax of Resistance in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 907–913.
- [3] Bayeh, J. (2015). *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- [4] Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [5] Gheytsi, S. (2024 Volume 46). *Echoes of Exile: Rememory and Resistance in Salt Houses*. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9-27.
- [6] Henke, S. A. (1998). *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-writing*. New York: St. Martin's.
- [7] Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [8] Jabr, S. (2019). *What Palestinians Experience Goes Beyond the PTSD Label*. *Middle East Eye*.
- [9] Morrison, T. (February 1974). *Behind the Making of The Black Book*. *Black World*, 89.
- [10] Pal, P. (2021). *Nostalgia, Identity, and Homeland: Reading the Narratives of the Diaspora in Susan Abulhawa's Fiction*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47–59.
- [11] Riordan, R. J. (1996). *Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic Writing as a Counseling Adjunct*. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol 74, no. 3, 263–269.
- [12] Said, E. W. (2000). *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press..

Living the Self: A Mirror of Modern Life in The Glass Menagerie

Shivani Pawar

Received: 05 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Sep 2025; Accepted: 06 Sep 2025; Available online: 10 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) shows a family stuck between family duties and personal dreams. Today, many people face the same struggle: choosing between helping their family and finding their own happiness. The rapidly shifting social fabric, marked by individualism and the decline of collective identity resonate even more deeply with the play's themes. In our life also, we often find ourselves playing certain roles or types. This play (Tennessee Williams' 'The Glass Menagerie') also shows us their truth: each character is not just an individual, but also a "type" that represents bigger ideas. Moreover, this paper looks at how the play's characters show this shift from "we" (family, society and togetherness) to "me" (individual needs and dreams) also how it exemplify the modern struggle between duty and self-assertion.

Keywords— dream, family, glass menagerie, individualism, society.

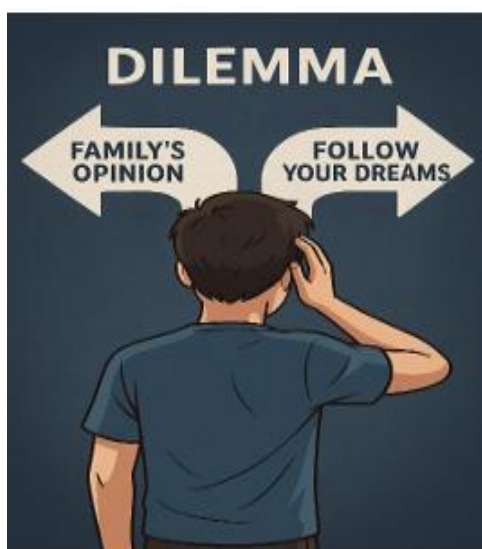


Fig.1: Representing the dilemma of an Individual

The 21st century has witnessed a dramatic shift from collective identity to individual autonomy – a move from “we” to “me”. The *Glass Menagerie* presents characters torn between personal aspirations and family obligations, reflecting this timeless tension. Although written in the mid -20th century, the play's resonance with today's

culture of self-realization and individualism is striking.

In Hindi, the word “jeevan” has a deep meaning. “Jee” means ‘to live’ and “van” means ‘an individual’. So, jeevan means to live as an individual. But in real life, living as an individual is not so simple because we are always tied to family, community and memories. This Play shows us how each character tries to live (jee) as their own self (van) – and how hard is it to balance “we” (family, society) with “me” (individualism).

One of the most significant American plays of the twentieth century, *The Glass Menagerie*, marked a turning point in modern drama, not only for its poetic and emotional style but also for its bold use of a memory play structure, which Williams helped to popularize. The play is semi-autobiographical – Williams' own life and family are deeply embedded in characters of Tom, Amanda and Laura. Tom represents Williams himself, Amanda represents his mom and Laura represents his sister. In the way, the play becomes not just a personal memory, but a universal meditation on family, duty, broken dreams and the struggle to live one's own life or jeevan i.e. “me” life of an individual.

“When a person's own voice gets lost in the noise of family and society, life becomes just a memory –

something they keep acting out in their mind, not something they truly lived."

This play is about the Wingfield family: Amanda, her son Tom and her daughter Laura. Amanda is a mother who keeps talking about her past when she had lots of "gentlemen callers". She wants Laura to have the same life once she had. Even she wants her son Tom to fulfill their American dream. Amanda's dreams are not just her own; she wants the whole family to live them. Amanda believes in family life – everything must be done for the family. Tom works in a shoe warehouse, a job he hates. But he does this to support his family.

This is the "we" life- everyone in the Wingfield family lives for each other, not for themselves.

Tom Wingfield serves as both the narrator and the central character in 'The Glass Menagerie', acting as

the emotional bridge between past and present. He informs the audience that the play is a 'memory play' shaped not by exact words but by feelings, regret and remembrance.

Tom is not happy with just working and living for his family. He wants adventure and to leave the boring life he has. Even his father also left them alone and escape his duties in order to live a life as an individual ('me' life). In the same manner Tom wants to follow his father's footsteps and find freedom.

He says:

"I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! Did you notice how he's grinning in his picture in there? And he's been absent going on sixteen years!" (Page No .46)

Laura, with her physical and emotional vulnerabilities, represents the casualties of the shifting identity. Amanda's dreams for Laura's future are driven by a collective "we", but Laura's own desires are muted and passive. Her retreat into the glass menagerie symbolizes a refusal or inability to fully embrace an individual.

In today's context, Laura's struggle mirrors how vulnerable individuals – those with disabilities or anxiety disorders – can find themselves caught in the crossfire of family expectations and the modern demand for self-assertion. The pressure to "perform" an individual identity in the modern world can be alienating for those who, like Laura, find strength in quiet, shared bonds.

The shift from "we" to "me" can be clearly seen, Tom primarily uses the pronoun "we" while referring to his family, indicating a sense of collective identity and shared

experience with in the wing-field household.

But as the play progress he increasingly uses "I" and "me", highlighting his growing alienation and desire to break free from his family's suffocating expectations. This shift is not a sudden event but a gradual process.

The society in which we live in has define roles based on gender. The way men and women are shown on stage results the expectations society has for them. Women are often shown as gentle, dependent and tied to the home, while men are shown as strong, independent and responsible for earning money. At first, this fits the idea of the American Dream. But as the story moves on, the display changes to show that these roles are not always

working. The men can not always succeed as providers and the women's dependence becomes a problem instead of a comfort.

The themes of The Glass Menagerie echo the present day cultural movement towards self reliance and personal fulfilment.

"Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." (Page No.9)

As Emerson states in his most powerful work 'Self-Reliance'.

Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and Emerson's essay self-Reliance both explore the journey from living for others to discovery one's true self. Tom's struggle to leave his family and follow his dreams reflects Emerson's idea and break free from society's expectations. While Amanda clings to the past and Laura hides from life shows Emerson's idea also.

In the play, the American Dream is shown as a distant hope that never becomes real. Amanda dreams of a rich future for her daughter Laura through marriage, while Tom dreams of escaping his boring life. Both dreams represent the American idea of success, freedom and a better life. But in reality none of these dreams come true. Laura stays in her small world, Amanda remains in her past and Tom leaves his home but feels guilty. Tennessee Williams shows that the American Dream can be beautiful, but also painful and unreachable for many people. Only Jim can be able to achieve his American Dream but he has to struggle a lot in order to achieve it.

Jim's character shows the shift from "we" to "me" by focusing on his own growth and future, but without cutting off all ties to others. He works hard, studies at night and plans for success, showing self-reliance. At the same time, he still cares about people, like when he

encourages Laura. Jim proves that moving from “we” to “me” doesn’t always mean leaving everything behind – it can mean building yourself while staying kind and connected.

Psychologists like Erik Erikson and Carl Jung studied the balance between individual desires (the “me”) and social roles (the “we”). Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development explains that during adolescence and young adulthood, individuals experience a conflict called “identity vs role confusion” – a perfect fit for Tom’s character.

The struggle between “we” and “me” is not just literary it is a developmental stage in human life and failure to resolve it can lead to emotional suffering and guilt, as we see in Tom.

Charles Dickens’ novel “Hard Times” deals with life during the industrial revolution. In this novel (Hard Time), like in *The Glass Menagerie*, we see characters who struggle to find their individual identity (me) while being controlled by social systems, family expectations, and utilitarian education (we). This shift from “we” to “me” is not just a theme – it becomes the very story of their life (jeevan), torn between duty and desire, facts and feelings, structure and soul.

This play also explores how escapism, whether through Amanda’s nostalgic memories, Laura’s glass collection, or Tom’s movie – going, contributes to this shift. These form of escapism provide temporary relief but ultimately fail to address the underlying issues, pushing the character further into their individual realities.

In the past, life was largely centered around family, tradition and shared responsibilities. People often sacrificed personal dreams to support the household, much like Tom working in a warehouse for his family, or Amanda holding onto old values. The individual was shaped by the “we”. In contrast, the present focused more on self-identity, freedom and personal success. Today, like Tom’s desire to become a poet, many choose to follow their own paths, even if it means emotional distance from family. This shift from togetherness to independence reflects a modern way of living where “me” often comes before “we”, sometimes at the cost of connection and money.

CONCLUSION

This reflects how, in today’s world, many people are moving away from family and society to focus on themselves and their goals. This shift from living for others to living for oneself is shown through Tom’s painful journey. Writers like Emerson also supported the idea of

trusting yourself and finding your true path. The play reminds us that while chasing personal freedom, it is important to remember that it often comes with emotional loss, guilt and memories that stay with us. Just like the glass, animals in the play, human feelings and relationships are fragile and easy to break when we move from ‘we’ to ‘me’.

REFERENCES

- [1] *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams (Double 9 Books) (Original work published in 1944)
- [2] *Self Reliance and Other Essays* by Ralph Waldo Emerson (A Living Life Fully Publication) (Copyright ©2005)
- [3] *Hard Times* (Full Title *Hard Times for These Times*) by Charles Dickens (Original work published in 1854) (Penguin Classics)
- [4] Erik Erikson Psychosocial Development Theory
- [5] Carl Jung Theory of Individuation



Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

Dr. Nabarun Ghosh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jagjiwan College, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara, Bhojpur, Bihar, India

Received: 11 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 04 Sep 2025; Accepted: 07 Sep 2025; Available online: 11 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Salman Rushdie's works often blend fact and fiction in a masterful way. By doing so, Rushdie's magical realist texts present the contradictions of contemporary India and Indianness. Rushdie's status as an immigrant to Britain but writing about the Indian sub-continent allows him to posit himself as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' of both cultures. Rushdie's hybrid identity as an Indian, now migrated to Britain, very well suits the technique of magic realism in order to raise voice for those who are marginalized because of their language, religion, caste, gender and nationality. This research paper attempts to analyze Salman Rushdie's use of magic realist technique in his novel Shame. By using this technique, Rushdie successfully blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. This technique enables him to question the dominance of patriarchy, corruption and power and at the same time put a resistance to them. There are several magical elements in the novel which make it incredible. But, the setting of the novel strongly resembles modern-day Pakistan. Thus, the blending of magic and history makes the novel a true example of magic realist novel.*



Keywords— *magic realism, history, fantastic, myth*

What is Magic Realism

The term 'magic realism' designates a mode of expression in which the realistic and the fantastic elements mingle together. In magic realist fictions magical things happen in a world of quotidian reality. And these inexplicable occurrences are treated by the writer as real as eating, drinking and other daily activities. Although the technique of magic realism is quite discernible in the earlier literary works like the 17th century work *Don Quixote* (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes, the early 20th century story "The Metamorphosis" (1915) by Franz Kafka etc., the Latin American authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino and others practiced it as a deliberate self-conscious technique. Other important writers of magic realism include Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, John Fowles, Gunter Grass, Angela Carter, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ben Okri, Andre Brink et al. They have incorporated the technique of magic realism in order to represent the world and life in which magic and realism coexist and are felt and experienced by marginalized communities.

Magic Realism in the Novels of Salman Rushdie

In Salman Rushdie's novels there are many instances where magical elements are merged with contemporary historical and socio-cultural realities. He deliberately used magic realist mode in order to depict the realities where magic occupies a significant position. Most of his novels are set in India where people believe in magic as naturally as they believe in history. Therefore, magic realism appropriately presents Indian people and their beliefs.

Rushdie's first use of magic realism occurs in his second novel *Midnight's Children*. Although in his first novel *Grimus* there are some magical elements, it does not qualify as a magic realist novel because of its fantastic setting. Rushdie himself, along with several other literary critics, has vigorously criticized this novel because of its escape from reality.

Rushdie [. . .] has spurned the first flowering of his talent as a work of artistic and intellectual cowardice. 'The thing that I disliked about my first novel' he told Rani Dharker in an interview in 1983, 'was that it's a complete fantasy. It's not

placed in a real place, some imaginary island [...]. (Teverson, 2010: 121)

However, this science fictional novel forms a ground beneath his feet which allows him to experiment on the sister technique of magic realism in the later part of his career. Interestingly, the very first lines of his next novel *Midnight's Children* suggest his rejection of the science fiction mode. I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there is no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. (Rushdie, 2008: 03)

Magic Realism in *Shame*

Shame presents an account of events in an unnamed country that strongly resembles Pakistan. The story of the novel circulates around three families, the Shakils, the Hyders and the Harappas, and around the love, hatred, rebellion, shame and shamelessness of their family members. The novel's storyline spans three generations and centres on the lives and families of two men—Raza Hyder, a celebrated general, and Iskander Harappa, a millionaire playboy. Their life-and-death struggle, played out against the political backdrop of their country, is based on the real life of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq and former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was deposed by Zia in 1977 and executed. Besides the so-called “political facts” of Pakistan's recent history, *Shame* also blends history, myth, everyday news, and fantasy which is at once serious and fairy-tale-like. “A sort of modern fairytale” (Rushdie, 1995: 70), as the author describes it, the novel is set in a country that “is not Pakistan, or not quite” (29); and it explores such issues as the uses and abuses of power and the relationship between shame and violence. On the one hand, Rushdie seems to try to depict a realistic world in *Shame* with accurate accounts of political revolutions. On the other hand, he builds the structure of *Shame* with fabulous figures (the three mothers, Sufiya), mythical locations (Nishapur, the Impossible Mountains), grotesque characteristics of the protagonists (Sufiya's blushes, Raza's bruises), and even metamorphoses of the characters (Sufiya's white panther and Babar's angel).

In order to make his reader acquainted with the “strangeness” and heterogeneity of his characters and the story, Rushdie weaves the fairy-tale-like elements and the everyday reality together. This juxtaposition magnifies the eccentricity of the events and characters in his novel, constantly reminding the reader of the conflicts in the story. In the text, the supernatural phenomenon is treated as “normal” and “real” by Rushdie or by the characters in the story.

The setting of the novel, i.e., Nishapur is located in the middle of Q, which is supposed to be a prosperous

city filled with heavy business and a large number of inhabitants day and night. Nishapur is a magnificent mansion, which has been owned by the Shakils for generations. This is a realistic building where the Shakils live their lives. Because of this strong connection between the mansion and the family members, Nishapur functions as a psychological reflection of the family members. However, things start becoming complicated when old Shakil dies and the three sisters, Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny, decide to hold a party. Violating the Muslim laws and the conservative social regulations, the sisters invite the Western sahibs to participate in drinking and dancing at the party. One of the sisters even makes love with a white sahib and gives birth to Omar Khayyam. Suffering from the shame of having a baby outside of marriage, the three sisters lock themselves in Nishapur forever. The sisters refuse to talk about the shame of their lust and pretend to ignore their sin by sharing their pregnancy. Though they refuse to face their shame, their spiritual suffering is also revealed through the building. It is depicted as an infinite place where there is no movement of time and no changes. Even though the mansion is located in the downtown, it is isolated from the ordinary life. This “hesitation” between the busy downtown and the spiritually isolated mansion amplifies the withdrawal of the three sisters from the society and the idleness of their minds. Moreover, Nishapur has become the image of the three sisters' mental condition. Omar Khayyam regards Nishapur as a “third world that was neither materialistic nor spiritual, but a sort of concentrated decrepitude made up of the decomposing remnants of those two more familiar types of cosmos” (30).

Shame revalues the postcolonial metaphor of marginality in the figure of Omar Khayyam, who as a child suffers from “the fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment”, and even after being successfully integrated into society is “sometimes plagued by that improbable vertigo, the sense of being a creature on the edge: a peripheral man” (21 and 24). In this choice of phrasing, the text shrewdly invokes contemporary theory and its vocabulary of margin and centre. The fact that the world has to be thought of as flat in order to even entertain the notion of living on or speaking from the edge only emphasizing how backward and artificial the unfortunately very real social division into margin and centre is.

In Omar's mind, Nishapur turns out to be a wasteland of his mind, a prison of his body, a call of death from his family history. Nishapur functions as a fantastic place which Omar Khayyam tries to escape but in which he is imprisoned. Moreover, Nishapur is mythologized in Omar's mind as a labyrinth, which is used to imprison the forbidden child, the hybrid. “Omar dreamed of exits,

feeling that in the claustrophobia of 'Nishapur' his very life was at stake. He was, after all, something new in that infertile and time-eroded labyrinth" (30).

Besides Nishapur, there is another fantastic place that is inserted in the empirical setting of the novel—the Impossible Mountains. Unlike Nishapur, the Impossible Mountains do not transform from an empirical realistic object to a fantastic one. The specific status of the Impossible Mountains comes from that it is all over a fantastic locale misplaced in the realistic world. The name "Impossible Mountains" itself is very fairy-tale-like, and ironically, many magical happenings seem to be "possible" in this mountainous area. In the Impossible Mountains, Rushdie observes, "you will not find that name in your atlases, no matter how large-scale" (23). Rushdie probes that these mountains do not exist in the real world because they cannot be found in the atlas; however, the mountains lie near the town Q and are detected by Omar Khayyam through his telescope, so the Impossible Mountains do exist in the world of *Shame*. This ambiguity suggests that the definitions between the possible and the impossible can be re-examined. In the Impossible Mountains, the impossible things will be possible. As Nishapur is the reflection of Omar Khayyam's mind, the Impossible Mountains are the place of salvation for Babar Shakil.

On the one hand, the Impossible Mountains are the place filled with legends and miracles; on the other, the mountains are abundant with oil wells and military conflicts. On the realistic way, the mountains are the place of death and blood; on the fantastic way, they are the place of Babar's pleasure and salvation. As the second son of the three mothers without knowing who the father is, Babar also suffers the same shame as Omar Khayyam does. Finally, Babar decides to leave Nishapur and to go to the Impossible Mountains to join the guerrillas. From the guerrillas, he hears of a story of the angels, the earthquakes, and subterranean Paradises. In the Impossible Mountains, he learns, things are inverted. Heaven is underground and when earthquakes occur, angels will come out of fissures in the ground. In this place of legends and fairytales, all things are impossible and against the common sense. It is also the place where the earthly shame can be inverted. In this fairyland, the mundane values will be forsaken. That means Babar will not be judged as shameful just because he does not know who his father is. In these mountains, Babar gets rid of the earthly shame and is transformed from a mortal into an Angel (132). In the mountains, Babar gets his salvation: "The earthquake, Babar Shakil wrote in this notebook, shook something loose inside me. A minor tremor, but maybe it also shook something into the place" (129). In these mythical Mountains, the empirical realities happen like the militant conflicts and the death of Babar;

however, the fantastic things also occur there. The fantastic metamorphosis of the gold angel still projects the hidden pureness in Babar's soul, which cannot be convinced in the empirical world in the novel.

Besides these mythical locales, Rushdie also narrates several mythical characters or characters with fantastic characteristics to magnify the hidden shame which they dare not to speak out, or which they try to neglect in their minds. Through the mythologization of fantastic metamorphosis, the hidden truth is revealed and enlarged. For example, the three Shakil sisters, Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny, seem like fairy-tale-like characters because of their caricatured names and their mysterious trinity. "...there once lived three lovely, and loving sisters. Their names...but their real names were never used..." (11). The tone the narrator uses to describe the sisters is like the tone used to tell a fairy tale. But the three sisters are still like normal characters thus far. When one of the sisters (no one knows which) discovers that she is pregnant after the party, they withdraw from society and seclude themselves in Nishapur. They know that they are bankrupt and they will not have any respectable status in the society. What is more, one of the sisters is pregnant with a white sahib. What a shame it is! However, the sisters never reveal which sister has committed the crime and they even refuse to talk about the shame. They deny the shame by sharing the characteristics of pregnancy:

Now the three of them began, simultaneously, to thicken at the waist and in the breast; when one was sick in the morning, the other two began to puke in such perfectly synchronized sympathy that it was impossible to tell which stomach had heaved first. Identically, their wombs ballooned towards the pregnancy's full term. It is naturally possible that all this was achieved with the help of physical contrivances, cushions and padding and even faint-inducing vapours; but it is my unshakeable opinion that such an analysis grossly demeans the love that existed between the sisters. In spite of biological improbability, I am prepared to swear that so wholeheartedly did they wish to share the motherhood of their sibling—to transform the public shame of unwedlocked conception into the private triumph of the longed-for group baby—that, in short, twin phantom pregnancies accompanied the real one; while the simultaneity of their behavior suggests the operation of some form of communal mind. (20)

They try to delete any individual characteristics and become "one" person. Quite magically, they speak, sleep, and even think the same way at the same time. Their

individuality disappears, mythologizing as a “trinity”. This trinity presents their refusal to accept the mundane judgment and their denial to accept their shame. However, this trinity of their physical phenomenon also projects their hidden fear of shame. When the incarnation of their shame—Omar Khayyam decides to leave and to live in the empirical world outside Nishapur, the shame can't be hidden in their denial any more. The mythical trinity starts to decompose and disappears finally. They have to return to the real world without hiding in the fantastic world.

Another mythical figure is the novel's heroine, Sufiya Zinobia Shakil, who has been described by her mother as the personification of shame itself. Although Sufiya is a realistic character, she is treated as a mythical figure by Bilquis. Sufiya grows up in shame, already blushing at the moment after her birth because her father tries to disown her for not being the male heir he wanted. As a result of a brain fever, Sufiya grows up mental-retarded incapable of expressing her own ideas and attitudes. Later, as she absorbs the unfelt shame of others, Sufiya's blushes take on such intensity that they boil her bath water and burn the lips of those who kiss her. All of these specific characteristics show that Sufiya does not live as an individual identity; she just reflects other people's shame. Sufiya is thus not like a realistic figure but a “vessel” to receive the shame of her family members and the shame of the country (286). This emphasis on Sufiya as an incarnation of shame gradually transforms her from a human being into a mythical figure. With the increase of shame received from other people, she cannot take the burden as a vessel any more. She can't control the flames of shame and loses her own consciousness of Sufiya Zinobia Hyder. Finally, she becomes a ravening beast possessed and driven by her shame, taking to slaughtering human beings by tearing off their heads. Rushdie describes Sufiya as a “beast inside the beauty — the opposing elements of a fairy-tale combined in a single character” (139). Sufiya no longer exists as a person but as a concept finally. She is the symbol of shame and the beast lived in the beauty, but not the girl Sufiya in her parents' mind, or in Rushdie's narration.

Lurking inside Sufiya Zinobia there was a beast. We have already seen something of the growth of this unspeakable monster; we have seen how, feeding on certain emotions, it took possession of the girl from time to time. (197)

When she escapes from that her parents' house, she leaves “a hole in the bricked-up window. It had a head, arms, legs” (239). At the end of the novel, she returns in the form of a white panther to topple her father's regime and destroy her shameless husband with the heat of her rage. Again,

Sufiya transforms from a human to a white panther—not a human being, but a mythical animal. She finally disappears into the wildness, becoming a legend whispered in the wind.

She was not caught, nor killed, nor seen again in the part of the country. It was as if her hunger had been satisfied; or as though she had never been more than a rumour, a chimarea, the collective fantasy of a stifled people, a dream born of their rage; or even as if, sensing a change in the order of the world, she had retreated, and was prepared to wait a little longer, in that fifteenth century, for her time. (263)

Even at the end of the story, her appearance is also treated as a legend. Sufiya is spoken of as a revengeful tool of the acceptable shame of her family, or of the scandals of the country caused by her father Raza. She is an alternative being living between the realistic and the fantastic worlds. Her movement toward the fantastic world just shows that her existence is possessed by shame and rage gradually. The more fantastic she is, the more enormous the shame is. Moreover, the fabulation suggests the hidden truth that cannot be found in the real world of the novel. Even the mythification of the characters is also the reflections of their mental states. Moreover, Sufiya is also represented as a freakish and comes later to embody a hyper-sexualized exotic woman: she is overcome with “a fire beneath the skin, so that she began to flame all over, a golden blaze that dimmed the rouge on her cheeks and the paint on her fingers and toes” (170). Here she exaggeratedly embodies the image of the Orientalized woman, and her passion flames out of control; however, her unusual exotic flames lead her to destroy certain phallogocentric containment narratives as she takes to amputating men's heads, pulling off their neck by some immense force. This magic realist transformation provides her an oppositional space that functions as an alternative to the strict system to which most characters, especially female, are confined.

In the novel, the male characters try to emphasize their dominance over the women in their lives and over the feminine in general. Rushdie laments this treatment, saying that repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well. By destabilizing the identities of these characters of Chhunni, Munnee, Bunny and Sufia, Rushdie shows that all identities, whether national or personal, are variable and flexible, not rigidly pure or singular. Ultimately, as Rushdie shows in *Shame*, the true nature of things will show through, no matter how hard one works to cover it

up. The monster within Sufiya hunts down and destroys the men who had leaders of the nation.

CONCLUSION

Rushdie finds conventional narrative norms to fail in the face of this shattered reality. *Shame* not only presents a world out of joint, but picks up even more specifically on the notion of reality outstripping even the most gifted writer's imagination. The novel uses metafictional commentary to identify real-world Pakistan as a place far more outrageous and incredible even than its fictional analogue. Inverting the realist convention that defines the real as the probable and reasonable, the narrator paradoxically suggests that, the less believable something seems, the more likely it is actually to exist. He ironically describes his almost but not quite Pakistan as "Al-Lah's new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable it could almost exist" (61), thereby effectively characterizing the historical situation after Partition as absurd. Time and again, he counts himself lucky to be "only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale", for if he were indeed aiming at a true-to-life picture of Pakistan, he would have to include an enormous amount of material that would patently violate not only realism's stipulations of what is real, but also those of the Pakistani government, causing his novel to be banned (70). The narrator adequately manages to convey how much more fantastic than his "fairy-story" (71) a halfway accurate account would be by enumerating some of the things he fortunately will not have to mention, thereby mentioning them:

But suppose this were a realistic novel! Just think what else I might have to put in. The business, for instance, of the illegal installation, by the richest inhabitants of "Defence", of covert, subterranean water pumps that steal the water from their neighbours' mains – so that you can always tell the people with the most pull by the greenness of their lawns (such clues are not confined to the cantonment of Q.). – And would I also have to describe the Sind Club in Karachi, where there is still a sign reading "Women and Dogs Not Allowed Beyond This Point"? Or to analyse the subtle logic of an industrial programme that builds nuclear reactors but cannot develop a refrigerator? O dear – and the school text-books which say, "England is not an agricultural country", and the teacher who once docked two marks from my youngest sister's geography essay because it differed at two points from the exact

wording of this same text book ... how awkward, dear reader, all this could turn out to be. (69)

REFERENCES

- [1] Bowers, Maggie, Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. Routledge, 2007.
- [2] Brooks, David. "Interview with David Brooks." *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*. Edited by Michael R. Reder, University Press of Mississippi, 2000, pp. 57–71.
- [3] Faris, Wendy B.. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
- [4] Rushdie, Salman. *Grimus*. Vintage, 1996.
- [5] ---. *Midnight's Children*. Vintage, 2008.
- [6] ---. "Pakistan." *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992–2002*. Jonathan Cape, 2002. pp. 320–22.
- [7] ---. *Shame*. London: Vintage, 1995.
- [8] Teverson, Andrew. *Salman Rushdie*. Viva Books Pvt. Ltd, 2010.
- [9] Zamora, Lois, Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris. editors. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press, 1995.



Magic, Myth and Multilingualism: The Echo of the Indian Knowledge System in the Language and Style of Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor

Feroza Khatoon

Department of Comparative Languages and Culture, Barkatullah University, Bhopal, India

Received: 09 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 05 Sep 2025; Accepted: 09 Sep 2025; Available online: 12 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has long shaped the country's literary traditions, influencing storytelling structures, linguistic diversity, and stylistic choices. This paper explores how Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor incorporate magic, myth, and multilingualism into their works, reflecting the epistemological and narrative frameworks of IKS. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Riot* and *The Great Indian Novel* serve as primary texts, analyzed through the lens of oral traditions, intertextuality, mythological allegories, and code-switching. The study highlights how Rushdie's magical realism and Tharoor's historical intertextuality parallel ancient Indian storytelling, where myth and history intertwine seamlessly. Additionally, their extensive use of Indian languages, Sanskritized English, and cultural symbolism demonstrates the deep-rooted impact of IKS on their linguistic and stylistic innovations. By examining their narrative techniques, this paper argues that Rushdie and Tharoor do not merely write in English but rather "Indianize" the language, preserving indigenous literary traditions within global discourse.*



Keywords— *Chutnification, Heteroglossia, Indian Knowledge System, Intertextuality, Magic Realism, Midnight's Children, Multilingualism, Postcolonial Literature, Riot, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, The Great Novel.*

Indian Knowledge System (IKS): An Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is a vast and diverse intellectual tradition that has shaped India's literature, philosophy, and linguistic heritage for centuries. Rooted in ancient scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, IKS embraces a multidimensional approach to knowledge, integrating history, mythology, ethics, and linguistics.

India has always been a land of stories—where history and myth blend seamlessly, and where languages flow into one another like rivers meeting the sea. Language plays a vital role in IKS, as India has always been a multilingual civilization where Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil, Persian, and many regional languages have coexisted and influenced each other. This has led to a rich tradition of code-mixing, metaphorical storytelling, and poetic expression.

Stylistically, Indian literature is known for its non-linear narratives, symbolism, allegory, and oral storytelling techniques, which continue to influence modern writers.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* brings alive India's past through magical realism and a chaotic, non-linear narrative, much like the oral tales of the past. Similarly, Tharoor's *The Riot* reflects the multivocal nature of Indian storytelling, where different perspectives merge to create a larger truth.

By blending magic, myth, and multilingualism, contemporary authors like Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor carry forward the essence of IKS in their works, using language not just as a tool for communication but as a reflection of India's diverse cultural and intellectual heritage.

Salman Rushdie :

Salman Rushdie is a British-Indian novelist known for his postcolonial narratives, magical realism, and intricate storytelling, which often reflect the cultural and historical complexity of India. Born in 1947, the year of India's independence, Rushdie's works frequently explore themes of identity, myth, history, and linguistic hybridity.

His landmark novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), won the Booker Prize and is considered one of the greatest literary works of modern times. The novel interweaves myth, magic, and multilingualism, reflecting India's transition from colonial rule to independence through the protagonist's mystical connection with history. His controversial work, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), sparked global debates on freedom of expression and religious narratives, further highlighting his engagement with myth and reinterpretation of cultural texts.

Rushdie's unique style, influenced by Indian oral storytelling, Persian epics, and Western literary traditions, makes his works a powerful echo of the Indian Knowledge System. His novels often blur the lines between fact and fiction, past and present, realism and fantasy, embodying the essence of India's multilingual and mythic literary landscape.

Shashi Tharoor :

Shashi Tharoor is an Indian author, diplomat, and politician known for his erudite writing, historical reinterpretations, and postcolonial perspectives. A prolific writer, his works seamlessly blend myth, history, politics, and multilingualism, reflecting the deep intellectual traditions of the Indian Knowledge System.

His acclaimed novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), is a modern retelling of the Mahabharata, reimagining India's independence movement and postcolonial struggles through mythological allegory. Another notable work, *Riot* (2001), explores communal tensions, historical memory, and linguistic diversity, offering a nuanced portrayal of India's pluralistic identity.

Tharoor's literary style is characterized by linguistic hybridity, intertextual references to Indian epics, and a fusion of the mystical with the political. His works serve as a bridge between India's ancient knowledge traditions and contemporary socio-political realities, making him a significant voice in postcolonial literature.

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: A LINGUISTIC PATCHWORK -

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a literary masterpiece that blends magic, myth, and multilingualism, echoing the storytelling traditions of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). Through its non-linear narrative, historical

allegory, and linguistic hybridity, the novel recreates an "Indianized" version of the English language, reflecting the cultural and epistemological depth of Indian literature.

1. Magic: The Intersection of History and Fantasy

Midnight's Children is a quintessential example of magical realism, a literary style where supernatural elements coexist seamlessly with everyday reality, blurring the line between the reality and the fantasy. Unlike traditional fantasy, magical realism presents extraordinary events as part of normal life, making the impossible seem natural.

Rushdie employs magical realism not just as a stylistic choice but as a symbolic device to depict the chaotic, fragmented nature of postcolonial India. Saleem Sinai, the novel's protagonist, is born at the exact moment of India's independence linking his fate to the nation's destiny. He possesses telepathic abilities that connect him to 1,000 other "midnight's children." His heightened sense of smell, his ability to hear voices in his head, and his eventual disintegration into 600 million pieces shows India's transformation, both politically and culturally. Saleem is convinced that the events in his life, whether caused by him or not, are always intertwined with the key events in the history of the nation.

Among 1000 "midnight's children" is Tai Bibi, a 512-year-old woman who claims the ability to assume the body odor of any person, a feat that defies rational explanation, which is a surreal element. The novel also introduces Saleem's mother's irrational fear of giving birth to a baby with a cauliflower instead of a brain, further blurring the line between reality and fantasy.

Perhaps the most notable magical realist element is Saleem Sinai's telepathic power and later, his unique ability to "smell" people's emotions. This extraordinary gift, inherited from his grandfather Aadam Aziz and symbolized by the family's large, magical noses, plays a pivotal role in the plot. Notably, Aadam Aziz's prominent nose saves him from death during the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, again intertwining personal history with national events in a magical yet meaningful way.

Magic in *Midnight's Children* is not merely a fantastical element but a symbolic representation of India's chaotic and diverse reality. This use of magical realism, inspired by the oral traditions of Indian storytelling, allows Rushdie to depict history through a lens that merges the real and the surreal, much like the mythological narratives in the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

2. Myth: Rewriting Indian History Through Storytelling

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie constructs a mythic retelling of India's history, blending personal memory, national history, and fantastical elements to create a narrative style deeply influenced by Indian epics and oral storytelling traditions. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, emerges as a modern mythic hero, much like Karna from the *Mahabharata*, whose destiny is intertwined with larger cosmic and historical forces. His life is governed by fate, coincidence, and supernatural abilities, mirroring the structure of Indian mythology, where individuals are often seen as instruments of divine will rather than independent agents.

Another striking parallel to Indian mythology is Rushdie's use of cyclical time and narrative repetition. In the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, history is often presented in recurring cycles, where past events shape the present and future. Similarly, Saleem's life mirrors the history of India, reinforcing the idea that personal and national destinies are intertwined and repetitive. His eventual fragmentation into 600 million pieces symbolizes the disintegration of a once-unified India, much like how the epics narrate the inevitable fall of dynasties and the cycle of rebirth and renewal.

Furthermore, Rushdie mythologizes political events, transforming historical figures into larger-than-life characters. Indira Gandhi is depicted as the Widow, a figure reminiscent of mythological villains—powerful yet shadowy, much like the Surpanakha in the *Ramayana*. This mythological representation turns history into legend, reinforcing the fluid boundary between fact and fiction in Indian storytelling traditions.

3. Multilingualism: The Indianization of English and Chutnification of Language

Rushdie's linguistic style in *Midnight's Children* is a prime example of chutnification, a term he coined to describe the spicing up and transformation of the English language with Indian influences. His writing is infused with Hinglish (Hindi + English), Urdu, and regional dialects, making English a vessel for Indian linguistic and cultural expression.

Some key examples of multilingualism and chutnification in the novel include:

Hinglish and Code-Switching: Code-switching is when a person switches between two or more languages or language varieties in a conversation. Rushdie frequently mixes Hindi, Urdu, and English, forcing readers into an Indian linguistic landscape. For instance:

- "Arrey baba, don't be mad!" (*Arrey* is a Hindi exclamation, and *baba* is an affectionate or respectful address.)
- "What to do, yaar?" (Common Indian English phrase, blending Hinglish syntax and vocabulary.)
- 'ekdum' (at once)
- 'angrez' (Englishman)
- 'phut-aphut' (in no time)
- 'nasbandi' (sterilization)
- 'dhoban' (washerwoman)
- 'feringee' (foreigner)
- 'garam masala' (hot spices)
- 'rakshasas' (demons)
- 'fauj' (army)
- 'badmaas' (rogues)
- 'jailkhana' (prison)
- 'baap-re-baap' (oh, my father)
- 'jalebis' (a type of sweet)
- 'barfi' (a milk-based sweet)
- 'bhel-puri' (a popular savory snack).

Literal Translations of Indian Idioms: Instead of using traditional English phrases, Rushdie directly translates Indian expressions, maintaining their cultural essence:

- "Jungle of noises" (from the Hindi phrase *shor ka jungle*).
- "Eating one's own words" (inspired by *apne shabd kha jaanain* Hindi).

Use of Indian Honorifics and Speech Patterns:

- Saleem's grandmother uses phrases like "Allah re Allah!", a direct borrowing from Urdu expressions of shock or prayer.
- Words like "chhi-chhi" (a sound of disapproval in Hindi) are sprinkled naturally into the English prose.

Oral Storytelling Rhythm and Repetition:

Rushdie's prose mirrors Indian oral storytelling, where repetition and exaggerated descriptions create a musical rhythm:

- ..'Ra-pist! Ra-pist! Ray-ray-ray-pist!" (99)
- "I hope you are com-for-table! Or are you come-for-tea? Oh, joke-joke, ladies and ladahs..." (135)
- "Look, baap-re-baap! Look, Madam!" (171)
- The eyes were too blue: Kashmiri-blue, changeling blue, blue with the weight of unspilled tears, too blue to blink." (171)
- "O feeble excuse of telephonic voice! O transparent flummery of ghosts! (220)

- “The voice on the phone was no truck-renter’s voice; it was soft, a little fleshy, the voice of a poet...” (220)

The Chutney Metaphor:

Saleem, in the latter part of the novel, becomes obsessed with making and eating chutney, a metaphor for his own act of storytelling. Just as chutney is made by grinding together various ingredients, his narrative blends languages, myths, and histories into one composite whole. He even states:

“Chutney and oratory, theology and curiosity : these are the things that saved me...” (124)

This culinary metaphor perfectly captures how Rushdie remixes language, myth, and history into a rich, flavorful, and distinctly Indian storytelling style.

RIOT & THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL : A RICH TAPESTRY

Shashi Tharoor, known for his eloquent prose and deep engagement with Indian history and culture, weaves together magic, myth, and multilingualism in his novels *Riot* and *The Great Indian Novel*. While his works do not employ magical realism in the same way as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, they contain metaphorical magic, where history, politics, and myth merge to create a richly layered narrative. His use of mythological structures and multilingual storytelling reinforces the influence of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) on his literary style.

1. Magic: The Symbolic and Metaphorical Magic of Storytelling

Unlike Rushdie’s supernatural elements, Tharoor’s “magic” lies in his narrative technique, where history and fiction are blended seamlessly, making real events feel mythical and mythical elements feel real.

In *Riot*, the “magic” is in the fragmented storytelling, where the same event—the mysterious murder of an American woman, Priscilla Hart—is seen from multiple perspectives. Each version is subjective, creating an illusion of multiple truths, much like how different Puranas offer varying interpretations of the same mythological stories. The novel’s non-linear narrative and shifts between newspaper articles, diary entries, and official reports distort time and reality, creating a sense of historical ambiguity—a technique reminiscent of Indian oral traditions.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor recreates the Indian epic *Mahabharata* in the form of a political satire, turning historical figures from India’s independence movement into mythic heroes. Here, the “magic” lies in reimagining

contemporary history as an epic, where real-life leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi are cast as mythological characters. For example:

- Dhritarashtra = Jawaharlal Nehru (A blind king leading a blind nation)
- Duryodhana = Indira Gandhi (A ruler with absolute control)
- Ved Vyas = Shashi Tharoor himself, playing the narrator, much like the sage Vyasa in the *Mahabharata*

This “epicization” of history mirrors the way Indian myth-making transforms historical events into legendary tales, reflecting the deep interplay between history and mythology in IKS.

2. Myth: Retelling the Past Through Epic and Legend

Tharoor’s works are deeply mythological, both in their narrative structure and characterization.

The Great Indian Novel is the most explicit example of mythological storytelling, where Indian history from British colonial rule to post-independence politics is narrated in the form of the *Mahabharata*. By using this mythic framework, Tharoor suggests that India’s political history is a repeating cycle of power struggles, conflicts, and betrayals—just like in epics.

Riot follows a different mythological approach, where the theme of fate and karma plays a crucial role. The riots and communal violence are portrayed as part of a larger cosmic cycle, reflecting the deterministic view of history seen in Hindu philosophy. The death of Priscilla Hart is not just a random event—it is deeply tied to the political and religious tensions of the town, much like how individual destinies in Hindu epics are shaped by larger cosmic and social forces.

Other Mythological Elements in Tharoor’s Works:

Intertextual References to Epics and Scriptures

- *The Great Indian Novel* directly adapts characters and events from the *Mahabharata*, making Indian mythology a lens through which modern history is reinterpreted.
- In *Riot*, characters frequently refer to Hindu scriptures and mythic archetypes, reinforcing the idea that past and present are deeply intertwined.

Repetitive Patterns of History as a Mythic Cycle

The idea that history repeats itself, seen in both books, is inspired by the cyclical nature of time in Hindu philosophy (Yugas and Kalpas).

Just as the *Mahabharata* tells of dynastic struggles that shape civilizations, *The Great Indian Novel* suggests that

Indian politics is destined to repeat the same power struggles, betrayals, and ideological battles.

Tharoor's writing reflects India's linguistic diversity, making his novels a perfect example of the Indian Knowledge System's multilingual heritage. His characters seamlessly switch between English, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Urdu, mirroring how language functions in Indian society. Unlike Rushdie's experimental and playful English, Tharoor's prose carries a sophisticated, historical, and political depth, shaped by both colonial and indigenous influences.

3. Multilingualism : Voices in Harmony

Mixing Hindi, English, and Sanskrit to Reflect Indian Speech Patterns

Riot is set in Uttar Pradesh, where people naturally mix Hindi and English. Tharoor captures this through code-switching, making dialogues feel authentic.

Examples:

- Use of the phrase "Satyamev Jayate" along with its English translation "Truth Alone Triumphs"
- Use of the words "dharma" (moral duty) and "yudh" (war) are used without translation, assuming the reader will grasp their deeper Indian meanings.
- "tantra" (a set of spiritual practices)
- "tandava" (a divine dance performed by Hindu god Shiva)
- "special puja" (special worship/prayer)
- "Swamiji" (A religious teacher)
- "lassi" (A traditional yogurt drink)
- "nimbu-pani" (Lemonade/Fresh lime juice)
- "New York Journal-wallah" (The New York Journalist)
- "Foreign presswallahs" (Foreign press people)
- "Meetha Mohammad" and "Sweet Mohammad" (Name of a teaseller boy)

Indian lexis v/s West lexis

The novel highlights the linguistic divide between English-speaking elites and Hindi-speaking locals, showing how language reflects cultural differences.

Example:

- The contrast between the words like "Bharat" (India in Hindi/Sanskrit) and "Hindutva" (a political ideology) and "Sanatan" (a synonym for Hinduism) versus words like "English speakers", "Foreigner" reflects the theme of cultural differences between India and the West (America).

Use of Urdu and Persian Influence in Speech

Some characters in *Riot* speak with Urdu-inflected Hindi, adding another layer of linguistic richness.

Example:

- "Na samjhogey to mit jaogey aye Hindostan walon / Tumhari dastaan tak bhi na rahegi dastanon mein." (Urdu poet Iqbal's lines) along with its English translation "If you don't understand, O you Indian, you will be destroyed. Your story will not remain in the world's treasury of stories."

Blending Persian-Urdu with Sanskrit for Political Satire -

Tharoor merges Persian, Urdu, and Sanskrit words to highlight India's linguistic diversity in Example:

- Words like deshbhakti (patriotism), rashtra (nation), satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence), and nyaya (justice) are used instead of English equivalents, emphasizing India's indigenous philosophy.
- Use of the English-Hindi words together "Zero , shunya , bindu".
- Urdu Words like "pahelwans" , "jawans" , "Khidmatgar"
- Use of the symbol of Om "ॐ" in *The Great Indian Novel* before beginning the work shows his deeply rooted Indianness and reverence to Indian culture and tradition.
- In *Riot*, Lakshman says –
"My own father taught me the Vedic sloka "Aa no bhadrah kratvo yantu vishwatah" – "Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions of the universe." (146)
- Also the sloka "Ekam sad viprah bahuda vadanti" – "Truth is one , the sages give it various names." (147)

The Chutney Effect: Mixing Cultures, Languages, and Ideas -

- Tharoor doesn't just translate languages—he blends them into one fluid, hybrid form of Indianized English.
- This "chutnification" of English creates a unique textual "thali" (platter) of words from multiple traditions.

CONCLUSION

The novels of Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor show how India's rich knowledge, culture, and languages shape

storytelling. By using magic, myth, and multilingualism, they create a unique style that blends history with imagination, making their stories feel both real and magical at the same time.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie brings together magic, myth, and multilingualism to create a unique storytelling style deeply connected to India's literary traditions. His use of magical realism blends fantasy with real historical events, making the past feel alive in a new way. By retelling history like a myth, he shows how personal and national stories are closely linked. Through these techniques, *Midnight's Children* reflects the rich and diverse nature of Indian storytelling, proving that history, myth, and language are always connected.

While Tharoor's *Riot* and *The Great Indian Novel* mix historical facts, Sanskrit traditions, and multiple languages to retell India's past in a fresh way. Both authors break away from Western styles and make English their own by adding Indian words, expressions, and storytelling traditions. Their writing proves that language is more than just words—it carries identity, history, and knowledge. By using India's many languages and myths, Rushdie and Tharoor give voice to India's deep cultural heritage in modern literature. Their work ensures that India's stories and wisdom continue to be heard worldwide, in a style that is truly Indian, echoing the essence of Indian Knowledge System.

REFERENCES

- [1] Rushdie, S. (1981). *Midnight's children*. Jonathan Cape.
- [2] Tharoor, S. (1989). *The great Indian novel*. Viking.
- [3] Tharoor, S. (2001). *The riot*. Arcade Publishing.
- [4] Pollock, S. (2006). *The language of the gods in the world of men: Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India*. University of California Press.
- [5] Krishnaswamy, N. (2006). *The politics of Indian English: Linguistic colonialism and the expanding English empire*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Kak, S. (2019). The Indian knowledge system: Its nature and importance. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*. <https://trp.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ICMAS-Special-Issue-February-2019-pp.10-12.pdf>
- [7] Ministry of Education, India. (n.d.). *Sanskrit and Indian knowledge systems*. <https://www.iksindia.org>
- [8] The Dispatch. (n.d.). *Dr. Shashi Tharoor writes on Ambedkar the constitutionalist*. <https://www.thedispatch.in/dr-shashi-tharoor-writes-on-ambedkar-the-constitutionalist/>
- [9] Publishing Perspectives. (2023, June). *The 2023 German book trade's peace prize: Salman Rushdie*. <https://publishingperspectives.com/2023/06/the-2023-german-book-trades-peace-prize-salman-rushdie/>
- [10] The Dispatch. (n.d.). *Dr. Shashi Tharoor writes on Ambedkar the constitutionalist*. <https://www.thedispatch.in/dr-shashi-tharoor-writes-on-ambedkar-the-constitutionalist/>
- [11] Rupkatha Journal. (n.d.). *Shashi Tharoor's The riot*. <https://rupkatha.com/shashitharoorsriot.php>
- [12] OAJI. (2017). [PDF]. <https://oaji.net/articles/2017/1948-1514040814.pdf>
- [13] International Journal of Management Research Academy. (2019). [PDF]. https://www.ijmra.us/project%20doc/2019/IJMIE_MARCH_2019/IJMIEMar2019-SF.pdf
- [14] IJCRT. (2022). [PDF]. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2205088.pdf>



Unattainable Infinity: The Divorce Between Art and Life in Robert Browning's Three Renaissance Poems

Yifan Wang

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University, China

Received: 08 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 04 Sep 2025; Accepted: 08 Sep 2025; Available online: 12 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Robert Browning is celebrated not only for his refinement of the dramatic monologue, which unveils the complexity of human psychology, but also as a poet of art who explores the role of art in life. For him, art and life are inseparable, forming a union through which humanity pursues the infinite. This infinity rests on the idea of “perfection in imperfection”: only by confronting imperfection with passion can human life approach the divine. In “My Last Duchess” (1842), “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” (1845), and “Andrea del Sarto” (1855), Browning dramatizes characters whose attachment to art is reduced to materialism or vanity, exposing the limits of their finite existence. Their finitude is mirrored in the form of the dramatic monologue, underscoring isolation and rigidity. By revisiting the Renaissance—a moment of artistic and humanistic liberation—Browning articulates his philosophy of art and life, perfection and imperfection, the finite and the infinite.

Keywords— Robert Browning, art, life, dramatic monologue, infinity



I. INTRODUCTION

Before perfecting dramatic monologue as his most known achievement, Robert Browning experienced the failure to be a playwright, which appropriately opened up his path to be an influential poet. He seemed not to be endowed with dramatic talent that mostly emphasizes the plot, and after writing several plays lack of success, Browning was remarked by his patron William Macready as having persistent difficulties in creating theatrical plots. Though he was frustrated by his unrealized ambition for stage, his brilliant power in the representation of human souls made him one “the most like Shakespeare” (Corson 47) who fully explored human nature by “creating

characters of much greater subtlety and complexity” (Roberts 57) in his poetry that demonstrates various slices of humanity. Dramatic monologue as a poetic type suits to Browning very well, which is a “substitute” for those whose main interest or skill is in the character rather than the plot (Sinfield 3).

The concentration on character makes Browning a scholar who has a theory of human life to be the foundation of his poetry that profoundly studies humanity, supporting his conception of human nature. The tension between perfection and imperfection of humanity constitutes what Browning views as an infinite life, which has no destination in the journey for freedom. In “An

Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley" (1851), Browning reflects on the poet's vocation as the capacity to discern what he calls the "perfection in imperfection" of the universe, of nature, and of humankind (Browning 71). For Browning, mortals—by virtue of their corruptibility and finitude—can never possess the "absolute vision" of ultimate truth, a privilege belonging only to the infinite and divine. What they can attain, however, is a continual approximation to the perfection. This very impossibility of final attainment becomes the cornerstone of Browning's moral philosophy: value lies not in the terminus, but in the endless movement toward it. As Stopford A. Brooke points out, this theory might be derived from more ancient thoughts, yet Browning's integrated understanding is original amongst the English poets (84). He believes that we are born to engage in others' life, but the limitations in us impede our way to connect with others. Only by conquering those limitations, which refer to the imperfection of humanity, can we live a useful and meaningful life as an awakening man. Whereas the state of perfection is impossible as no one can be absolutely perfect, hence the process of conquering our limitations definitely entails misery and failure, which exactly demonstrates the divine soul.

This kind of infinity is exactly what those speakers in Browning's three Renaissance poems, "My Last Duchess" (1842) "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845) and "Andrea Del Sarto" (1855), did not and will never possess. In these three poems concerned with art, the poet subtly creates a collision between their love for art and their real life, for morality which is contained as an implied function in art per se did not work. Though sharing the passion for artistic beauty, the three unconsciously revealed themselves as morally defective, far away from the core of art, which according to Browning is to be invested into the real life. It is the failed moral function in art that gives rise to the divorce between art and life, making them contradictory to what Browning eulogizes as Divine and infinite life. For they paused and

immersed themselves in the perfection of art, yet not confronted the imperfection in their personality. Thus in the three poems, art is not the manifestation of infinite life, but of a pathetic finitude.

II. BROWNING AS A POET OF ART

Browning is viewed as a poet of art. Many of his poems are concerned with art or artists. His mother's talent in painting and music might enlighten his interest in art, and his father who was driven by a scholarly zest to build a personal library of six thousand volumes that cover many legends and anecdotes in various languages helped him cultivate a keen sensibility for life and art. "[Browning] speaks of [the arts], not as a critic from the outside, but out of the soul of them, as an artist" (Brooke 104). Thus the subject of art in his poetry is not only a special way to express himself but also a formation of his subtle observation on the world and human, for art is deeply connected with human nature as a media of human's mind to be voiced to the world.

Browning has a special obsession with Renaissance, a period when human's value began to be mostly praised and art began to shine the light of humanity. It is his three visits and then stay in Italy for about fifteen years that made him find the "the heart of Renaissance" by recognizing its intellect, art, music, literature, and feel the fullness of its life (Black 10). In this period, people did not look up to the mysterious God all the time with their palms devoutly being put together; rather, they looked down at the earth and found a flourishing world in amaze that they overlooked all along. That moved Browning a lot, touched by the dawn of humanity which signifies the daylight, freedom and infinity.

Liberated from the repression of the Middle Ages when artists were at the service of theology primarily representing the abstract saints that emphasizes the soul, the Renaissance art adopted a more scientific and bold

approach to represent the flesh. The natural beauty of the body, which Browning values as divine in humanity, marks the new age of art full of vividness and passion for human life. However, that is not to say that preference to the body will definitely impair the soul, which is the case of Andrea del Sarto who went to the extremes and pursued a perfection of scientific drawing. What Browning attempts to quest is not “either/or”, but a harmonious combination of the two: using the body to illuminate the soul.

Browning's view on art, especially on painting, actually demonstrates his theory of human life, which, according to one of his letters to Ruskin in 1855, is “a putting the infinite within the finite” (Collins 148). For Browning, art and life is meaningfully interrelated as “a perfect union”: the purpose of art is “to help careless humans to comprehend beauty – the daily beauty of their own harried lives” (De Baun 388+393). He regards art as an approach to lightening a passionate life, within which whether the artists or ordinary men must pursue the infinite, like Andrea confided in his monologue: “Ah, but man's reach should exceed his grasp. / Or what's a heaven for?” Browning's another conviction that explains the necessary link between art and life is what L. Robert Stevens points out, that art for its own sake is “not enough to redeem a human spirit otherwise deficient” (20). That is, only containing an ethical will can art be complete and sufficient to make men gain spiritual salvation. In the following analysis of the three Renaissance poems concerned with art, we will see how Browning subtly clarifies his dialectic idea of finite and infinite in his poetic discussion about art and life.

III. FALSE ART WITHOUT THE SOUL

When reading the three poems, we might be fascinated by an aesthetic charm in the three speakers for whom art is an obsession. What they demonstrate in the pursuit of art seems to make a shield that averts any judgment on their personality as beauty is tended to be

related to *fineness*. Robert Langbaum perceives an “immense attractiveness” in the Duke who has power, freedom, and artistic appreciation (77). Indeed, he showed the portrait and the sculpture with enthusiasm, which demonstrates his taste of art, making his aristocratic identity more remarkable. In the Bishop's design of his luxurious tomb, we can also find his mastery of sculpture and art of ancient Greek, and even acclaim that visual exquisiteness composed of “the rare” stones. Andrea del Sarto, the faultless painter who could “do what many dream of” with his pencil and possesses a nearly pious attitude towards beauty, reveals an insistent pursuit of perfect technique to represent the beauty, almost touching us. However, if posing the question “what does art mean for them?”, we have to face up with that suspended judgment which tears up the phantasmic shield formed by their love for art. Behind that shield we will see the huge crack in their personality that cannot be filled up by art. Their love for art is not affectedly pretended, yet what they recognize in art is false. For it is the material things that motivate their obsession, rather than the spiritual which can get them genuinely involved into art.

In “My Last Duchess”, the egotism demonstrated by the Duke comes from his obsession with absolute power that made art an appendage to manifest and expand his power. That the Duke mentioned the two artists' name “by design” is out of vanity to show off his special appreciation of art that can be a symbol of his social status. Though the two artists Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck are made up by the poet, they are likely to possess good reputation in that time, whose works represent an admirable taste of art. When the Duchess showed her lively love for other things and people, he thought it a neglect of his aristocratic family reputation, “a nine-hundred-years-old name” which should have been her great honor that disallowed her to look elsewhere. Yet he never stooped to “blame / This sort of trifling”, as what he wanted is an absolute obedience and a strong sense of

control. In spite of his aristocratic identity and property, he still coveted his fiancée's dowry, repeating that the "master's known munificence" will warrant his requirement. The nature of his obsession in art is exactly an obsession in power and money, the material things that brought him a great enjoyment of control. Just as he used rhetoric to cover up his real intention, art for him was but a tool to decorate his hypocritic nature. This point can be demonstrated by his inability to appreciate the two artworks. He called "That piece a wonder" not for "The depth and passion of its earnest glance" that attracted many strangers, but for its verisimilitude.

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave
commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she
stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The Duchess' smile, "that spot of joy", is a manifestation of her lively soul which shows her vitality, kindness, and longing for other lives. Yet in the jealous Duke's view, that proves her flirtatiousness, evoking his anger and thus causing her final death. Though Pandolf possessed the ability to represent both the body and the soul, the Duke was totally blind to what art should reveal profoundly, only seeing the former and taking this portrait as the result of his untold "commands". His praise for that sculpture Neptune which is called as "a rarity", was as well due to the power demonstrated by it through "Taming a sea-horse", of which he narcissistically identified himself as an ideal incarnation.

In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church", the poet portrays a more complicated and ironic character who faced up with his miserable past in desperation at the end of his life. The Bishop ordered his "nephews" who were actually his illegal sons to build him a magnificent tomb like a piece of artwork to be

remembered and admired. That is to say, he was not a pious adherent to Christianity, according to which one can get into the heaven to enjoy an eternal life after death. The woman he mentioned in the beginning and the end, "so fair she was", was his mistress, and their illegal marriage reveals his hedonism and weak resistance to the temptation of beauty. His great effort, "With tooth and nail to save my niche" not only demonstrates an obsession in material things, but reveals his multiple defectiveness: blasphemy to God, fear of death, and vanity of comparing with old Gandolf. The hollowness of his heart after losing the faith further grew his extreme materialism, bringing him an insatiability. As a result, despite the fact that he had ability to appreciate the sculpture art and perceive the beauty, art was but an externalization of his bottomless desire. In his monologue, he ceaselessly made sure that his sons would use the rare stones to build his tomb, raising the requirement for materials from "slab of basalt" to the most valuable "lapis". His worship to art did not cover up his misbehavior of stealing some lump of "lapis lazuli" in the conflagration of his church, from which we can see that his obsession in art was abnormal and even allowed him to transgress morality. Art, in the Bishop's circumstance, is a traumatic reaction to the loss of the faith, through which he intended to make up for his voidness but failed. Even if he could lie in the tomb made of rare stones and exquisite artistry, it could never be a piece of artwork fertilized by the soul, but a reminder of his obsessiveness of being an immortal flesh without the soul.

The poem "Andrea del Sarto" is the most essential revelation of Browning's view on the nature of art, in which the painter Andrea, unlike the Duke and the Bishop who lacked the ability of appreciation, suffered his lack of creation. Andrea is known as an artist without errors, yet his reputation is covered up by his contemporaries da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. His career climaxed during the time in France when he was invited by François I to paint for the king whose favor brought him "kingly

days". Yet in the poem, that glory time of "painting proudly" was Andrea's reminiscence, sharply contrasting to his situation at present: a person in eclipse. The end of his "kingly days" was due to his wife Lucrezia's restlessness, making him come back "to [her] heart". Andrea, in his nature, could not resist the temptation of beauty, just like the Bishop. He embezzled the king's funds, "was tempted and complied", to build the house for his wife, who was viewed by Andrea as his "serpentine beauty". Thus his career went into "a twilight": "My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down/ To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole." He was trapped in a struggle which was not solely caused by the lost glory, but moreover his problem in painting that impeded his artistic representation. Although he captured Lucrezia's smile as "what we painters call our harmony", he was unable to represent what he perceived as beauty. For he blindly pursued the correctness that veiled his insight into those beyond lines, composition and technique.

But had you – oh, with the same perfect brow,
 And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
 And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
 The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare –
 Had you, with these the same, but brought a
 mind!

That Andrea attributed his failure to Lucrezia's lack of mind unconsciously reveals his own deficiency in art: what he saw and painted is such a perfect beauty that causes a voidness in his work. He was clearly aware of this fatal flaw, though claiming that he could draw whatever he saw "easily" and "perfectly".

There burns a truer light of God in them,
 In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up
 brain,
 Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
 This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of

mine.

He admitted that he was but a craftsman who was not shined by the burning light of God. His contemporaries' work might not be perfect like his, but it is in the imperfect representation that the trace of true art can be found. For art, as Browning's theory of human life reveals, only through the imperfection can it be connected with the soul. What behind that imperfection is the artist's struggle to make it perfect, which was exactly despised by Andrea. He pointed out Raphael's "wrongly put" arm and yet realized that "its soul is right". That is why others could reach the heaven yet it was shut to him: "My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here." That perfection in his work separated him from the true art where there is the soul and the way to heaven.

In the three cases, the real art is seemingly manifested by their extreme pursuit of beauty and yet connected with invalid motivations in various degrees. That might be caused by a preference to materialism, which means ceaselessly seeking for things from the physical world. Hence art is taken as an object lack of agency, without the function of filling up the hole of void in their heart. What they recognized in art is not the combination of body and soul, but only the perfect body which is fascinating yet sterile. Within that, there is nothing but endless darkness, doomed not to be illuminated by the divine infinity of real art.

IV. IMPRISONED SELF IN THE MONOLOGUE

What the attitude of Browning's three characters towards art reveals is not a dynamic pursuit of perfection as they showed a narcissistic satisfaction in art, which made them indulge in an art of perfection by the absolute standard of themselves. That narcissistic satisfaction in art is profoundly connected with their stagnant self, exactly manifesting the essential moral deficiency in their personalities: an inability to get themselves engaged in

others' life. Hence in the three poems their broken human relations are exposed to various degrees.

Andrea was obviously suffering from his precarious marriage, showing his ambivalent feelings towards his wife: on the one hand, he was fascinated by Lucrezia's beauty and endeavored to detain her from leaving; on the other, he viewed his wife as one of the reasons for his failure who as his model had not "given [him] soul", and complained that "You don't understand / Nor care to understand about my art". His narcissism seemed to be partially transformed into an attack on others as a way of furthest protecting his self. He treaded on others' struggle to "paint a little thing" that he could do "easily" and "perfectly", greatly showing his privilege of possessing unique talent and technique. At the same time, he was aware that he was "something underrated here" and despised by others, which dragged him into the conflict between superiority and inferiority, isolating him from his peers and the Paris lords. Whether his marriage or social relations, Andrea was unable to take any effort in restoring it: at last, he failed in detaining his wife and let her leave with her cousin who might be her lover; facing up with others' gossips or ironical remarks, he "must bear it all" without any refutation or change in act.

The moral deficiency of the Bishop primarily lies in his absent link with the God, as what he did and believed were divorced from his identity as a priest of the Church. He covered up his guilt by means of hypocritic rhetoric: "ah God, I know not!" That lost faith brought him a deep fear, which was demonstrated by his rivalry against the old Gandolf. Only through the illusionary victory in this kind of imaginary relationship could he gain a sense of satisfaction and security, which were used to feebly support his frail nature. The relationship with his illegal sons were also problematic. Facing up with their dying father, they seemed not to demonstrate any grief: when the Bishop called them to gather round his bed, his favorite son Anselm was "keeping back", reluctant to show the

final care. The Bishop was conscious of the truth that his sons were not reliable to do what he asked, so he induced them with his legacy and blessings from Saint Praxed. Yet he failed in persuading himself that "boys, ye love me", and confided the ruthless fact: "For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude / To death – ye wish it – God, ye wish it!" This disharmonious father-son relationships indirectly caused his death in the spiritual level, by ultimately collapsing his broke relations with other lives and showing him the emptiness under his sterile self.

The Duke is the only one full of enjoyment amongst the three, an existence of jouissance who was totally blind to his moral deficiency. Unlike Andrea and the Bishop, he was not in any painful struggle and thus demonstrated the seemingly perfection of being, which exactly manifests his absolute closure to others. Though using interrogative sentences that could demonstrate his politeness, "Will't please you sit and look at her?", he intended to show off and thus manipulated his guest to satisfy his vanity. Under the oppressive commands, his guest had no choice but to coordinate in their imbalance relationship. The way he dealt with his relationship with the Duchess also proves his absolute closure caused by his abnormal egotism. "Never to stoop" is an intense rejection to get himself engaged into any interaction with others; the expansion of his self muffled all other voices that attempted to dialogue with him but failed. Turning the Duchess' "that spot of joy" into a still painting, the Duke revealed his morbid tendency to materialization: treating other lives as objects like those lifeless artworks which could be played with at his will.

Browning intended to show us what he disdained as finite life by revealing the three characters who were imprisoned by their stagnant self and could not enrich life experience by engaging with others. The poet's voice is contained in Andrea's and the Bishop's words when they confided the truth of their unattainable infinity. The images and atmosphere in "Andrea del Sarto" implied the painter's bleak future and withered vitality as he already

perceived that "All in a twilight".

A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.

How strange now, looks the life he makes us
lead;

So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!

I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!

The fetter put on him is actually the flaw of human nature that makes men be imperfect "half-men". Despite telling the "strange" truth of destiny, Andrea did not realize that there was no absolute freedom of being a man, which means only through conquering those limitations would he glimpse the impossible perfection in humanity. He knew that his art was problematic, "Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!" Yet he was not willing to change, saying "Since my past life lies, why alter it?" He gave up another choice to fight against destiny, attributing his failure to God's "over-rules": "At the end, / God, I conclude, compensates, punishes." Finally, he would always put on the fetter and no matter his art or life was forever confined in that "melancholy little house". The Bishop to the most extent displayed the disastrous result of the finite life as he literally had no time to compensate for his defects. Like all the dying people who looked back their life and felt illusory, he sighed that "the world's a dream" and could not perceive the border between live and death when lying "in the dead night". Whereas he still attempted to capture the last chance to fill up his restless desire, which was conflictive to what he said: "Peace, peace seems all." That he repeated asking "Do I live, am I dead" demonstrated his reluctant feeling to leave in the last lingering moment. In the end, all the magnificent ornaments and rare stones vanished, and he ordered his sons to leave him alone in the church. Perhaps he was aware of that "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!", yet he had no possibility to approach the infinity as he already became a haunting ghost who was rejected by the God to enter into the heaven and eternally confined in his shabby tomb. The finite life of the

Duke is demonstrated in the contrast with the Duchess who had a heart "too soon made glad". What he thought as disgraceful behaviors exactly show an openness of the Duchess' life. That she was "Too easily impressed" implied her talent for empathy and vitality of spreading love and friendliness, which precisely reflects the aura of Renaissance a period of divine humanity. Yet the Duke with his closure in personality strangled that openness because he could not understand that the Duchess' open love to everything embodied the potential infinity of life. Though he was still indulging in the joy of narcissism and egotism, he would someday confront his broken and sterile life like the Bishop did before dying.

Browning's superb poetic art lies in that he integrates the characters' twisted psychology with dramatic monologue the specific form. In the monologue that displays only "one end of the conversation" (Sessions 503), the speaker in certain situation seems like having an impulse to speak, unconsciously revealing his fatal defect. In Andrea's monologue he demonstrated an urgency to time as his wife was going to leave. Ceaselessly outpouring his thoughts and feelings was not only for detaining Lucrezia to keep being his model so that he could finish another painting, but also for easing the anxiety and loneliness caused by his failure. In face of the imminent death, the Bishop urgently attempted to be remembered by building a luxurious tomb, and to cover his fear and regret by means of speaking. In "My Last Duchess", enjambment is adopted to form a driving force behind the Duke's revelations, showing his compelling desire to control others and self-obsessed nature. In the three poems, the dramatic monologue is connected with the loneliness of paranoia; the speakers' voice and their stagnant self are imprisoned in the monologue without any response, consuming the residue of their finite life.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Browning's return to Renaissance

settings in the three poems reveals how the unity of art and life is fractured by self-absorption, material desire, and the will to power. The Duke reduces art to an instrument of domination; the Bishop treats it as a substitute for the faith he has lost; Andrea conceals the absence of inner vitality beneath the sheen of flawless technique. All three figures remain trapped within the illusion of a finite perfection, unable to realize the transcendent potential that art promises. In Browning's view, art and life should be a harmonious union like soul and body: one can illuminate another without being superior to it. Featured with its self-discipline, art is a manifestation of human spirit and thus can be invested into a zealous life which is demonstrated as men's struggle to pursue the perfection of humanity. In the cases of the three problematic characters, their passionate pursuit for art seemingly makes them stand by the side of perfection, yet what they demonstrated as aestheticism is untenable. For their link with art is in essence motivated by the materialism that detached them from the soul of art. The divorce between art and life is fundamentally caused by their insufficient morality, the agency that makes art and life mutually interrelate.

Browning's choice of the dramatic monologue is itself ethically charged: by allowing each speaker to unfold within a closed circuit of self-address, the form highlights the failure of relationship, the collapse of dialogue, and the diminishment of spiritual growth. Art, for Browning, cannot remain a self-enclosed ornament or an emblem of personal vanity. Rather, it becomes a mode of living that places the infinite within the finite—a dynamic practice animated by the tension of imperfection, by engagement with others, and by the ethical responsibilities that accompany creation. Only when art is illuminated by love, humility, and responsibility does it reenter life as a vital force, capable of guiding the human soul beyond limitation toward something akin to the divine. In their narcissistic satisfaction with art, they are revealed not as men in act but as still and stagnant men whose personalities were not

nourished by the human spirit in art. Their narcissism is accompanied by their failure in living a possible infinite life which can be realized in the dynamic process of engaging with others and pursuing the perfection of humanity. Demonstrated by their stagnant self and broken human relations, the three figures have no possibilities in getting themselves involved in whether art or life, only being ironically presented as lingering bodies without the soul.

Seen in this light, Browning's Renaissance is not merely a historical reconstruction but a poetic arena in which the dangers of art's misdirection are laid bare. His portraits of corrupted beauty and hollow magnificence remind us that art, when severed from humanistic and ethical concerns, turns sterile: it is collected, displayed, and perfected, yet loses its generative relation to the world. The very notion of "perfection" is recast as an illusion of closure, which, far from elevating the human spirit, imprisons it in finitude. By contrast, Browning insists on a vision of "perfection in imperfection": a paradoxical condition in which human limitation is not denied but embraced as the ground for striving, revision, and growth. Failure, incompleteness, and the ceaseless reaching beyond the self are not marks of deficiency but signs of vitality. It is in these processes—painful, unstable, and unfinished—that art and life mutually authenticate each other. Thus, Browning's Renaissance monologues do not merely lament the corruption of art but open a deeper meditation: true art is inseparable from ethical being, and it is through the very fractures of imperfection that both artist and humanity may find their way toward transcendence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Black, Ruth. *Renaissance themes and figures in Browning's poetry*. Texas Technological College, 1937.
- [2] Brooke, Stopford A. *The Poetry of Robert Browning*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2007.
- [3] Browning, Robert. *My Last Duchess and Other Poems*.

Dover Publications, 1993.

- [4] Browning, Robert. "An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley". *Essays on Poetry*, H. F. B. Brett-Smith eds. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921.
- [5] Collins, Thomas J. *Robert Browning's Aesthetic-Moral Theory: 1833-1855*. University of Nebraska Press, 1967.
- [6] Corson, Hiram. "The Idea of Personality, as Embodied in Robert Browning's Poetry". *Browning Studies*, Edward Berdoe ed, Routledge, 2014.
- [7] De Baun, Vincent C. "BROWNING: ART IS LIFE IS THOUGHT." *CLA Journal*, 14.4 (1971):387-401.
- [8] Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. London, 1957.
- [9] Roberts, Adam. *Robert Browning Revisited*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.
- [10] Sessions, Ina Beth. "The Dramatic Monologue". *PMLA* 62.2 (1947): 503-516.
- [11] Sinfield, Alan. *Dramatic Monologue*. Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977.
- [12] Stevens, L. Robert. "Aestheticism in Browning's Early Renaissance Monologues." *Victorian Poetry*, 3.1(1965): 19-24.



Anthropocene Aquariums: Eco-critical Resistance in the Confined Voices of Duffy's "The Dolphins"

Prosenjit Adhikary

Faculty, Department of English, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya (Affiliated to University of Kalyani), Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

Received: 09 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 05 Sep 2025; Accepted: 10 Sep 2025; Available online: 12 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Carol Ann Duffy's poem "The Dolphins" dramatizes the plight of marine life constrained within human-made enclosures. Written in the first-person plural, the poem grants dolphins a voice to articulate their alienation, captivity, and displacement from their ecological habitat. This paper examines "The Dolphins" through the dual theoretical lenses of anthropocene and eco-criticism, situating Duffy's poetic voice as a form of ecological resistance against human domination and exploitation of non-human species. The aquarium here becomes a metaphorical and literal emblem of the anthropocene: a site where human intervention reshapes ecological existence into spectacle, consumption, and confinement. Drawing upon eco-critical thinkers such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Timothy Clark, as well as scholarship on animal studies and green poetics, the paper argues that Duffy's dolphins function as submerged witnesses to the violence of the anthropocene. Through a close textual analysis of the poem, this essay demonstrates how Duffy's dolphins resist erasure by articulating memory, loss, and ecological consciousness within their imprisoned waters, transforming poetic form into a site of resistance against ecological degradation.



Keywords— Anthropocene, eco-criticism, captivity, Carol Ann Duffy, marine poetics, animal voice, green poetics, ecological resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's first female Poet Laureate, is widely recognized for her ability to combine lyricism with sharp socio-political critique. Her poem "The Dolphins" (first published in *Standing Female Nude*, 1985) exemplifies her ecological consciousness by granting voice to dolphins living in an aquarium. Unlike the traditional human-centered lyric, this poem foregrounds the non-human perspective, compelling readers to confront the ethical implications of animal confinement.

The poem opens with the haunting lines:

"World is what you swim in, or dance, it is simple.

We are in our element but we are not free" (Duffy 35).

Immediately, the dolphins' voice juxtaposes natural belonging with human-imposed captivity. The oceanic freedom intrinsic to their being has been replaced by a limited, artificial "world" within the aquarium. This

displacement dramatizes the broader conditions of the anthropocene—a geological epoch defined by human dominance over ecological systems.

This paper situates Duffy's "The Dolphins" as a poetic site where the anthropocene is resisted from within the very structures of confinement. By analyzing the dolphins' voices through the lens of eco-critical thought, the study reveals how the poem becomes a critique of ecological exploitation, animal subjugation, and human-centered spectacle.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ANTHROPOCENE AND ECO-CRITICISM

i) The Anthropocene

The concept of the anthropocene, first popularized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, refers to a new geological epoch where human activity has become the dominant

influence on climate and ecosystems (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). In literary studies, the anthropocene has been explored as a cultural paradigm that redefines how humans understand their relationship with the non-human world. Timothy Clark notes that the anthropocene involves "an unthinkable scale of human agency" that destabilizes older ecological categories (Clark 7).

In this framework, aquariums epitomize the anthropocene. They are artificial ecosystems where human control is absolute, shaping marine life into spectacle. Dolphins in aquariums represent the reduction of ecological beings into anthropocentric entertainment. Duffy's dolphins, however, disrupt this reduction by voicing the trauma of confinement.

ii) Eco-criticism and Green Poetics

Eco-criticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Lawrence Buell expands this view by emphasizing that eco-critical texts should recognize nonhuman interests, foreground ecological interconnectedness, and resist anthropocentric reduction (Buell 7–8).

Carol Ann Duffy's poem participates in what may be called 'green poetics', a poetic practice that restores ecological subjectivities and articulates environmental resistance. By adopting the dolphins' perspective, Duffy resists anthropocentrism and invites readers to empathize with non-human suffering. The dolphins become subjects rather than objects, narrators rather than exhibits.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: THE DOLPHINS AS CONFINED VOICES

i) Captivity and Alienation

The dolphins declare:

*"There is a man and there are hoops,
there is a constant flowing guilt"* (Duffy 35).

The imagery of "hoops" signifies the artificial tricks imposed by trainers, transforming dolphins into circus performers. The presence of "a man" embodies anthropocentric authority, dictating the terms of their existence.

The phrase "constant flowing guilt" reflects both the imposed routines and the unceasing exploitation that underlies captivity. Guilt flows like water, becoming part of the very environment the dolphins inhabit. This demonstrates how the Anthropocene creates spaces of

ecological alienation where natural agency is curtailed by spectacle.

ii) Memory and Displacement

The dolphins lament:

"We were blessed and now we are not blessed.

It was the same space. It is

the same place always and above it is the man" (Duffy 36).

The shift from blessing to deprivation dramatizes the dislocation from their natural habitat. Though water remains constant ("the same space"), its meaning has changed under human control. This captures what eco-critics call ecological displacement: the transformation of natural environments into sites of confinement.

The dolphins' memories of the ocean function as a form of resistance. Memory preserves ecological continuity against anthropogenic rupture. By voicing remembrance, the dolphins resist the erasure of their natural lives.

iii) Anthropocene Aquariums

The aquarium in the poem becomes a metaphor for the anthropocene: a world reshaped entirely by human hands. The dolphins explain:

"The world we have is small.

For us the world is flat and round, it has no end" (Duffy 36).

The paradox of a "flat and round" world reflects the contradiction of confinement—it mimics natural infinity but is inherently limited. This recalls Clark's notion of "anthropocene irony," where human-created environments simulate natural worlds while destroying the originals (Clark 18). The aquarium, thus, embodies both mimicry and violence: a reduced anthropocene version of the ocean.

iv) Eco-critical Resistance and Submerged Witnessing

Despite captivity, the dolphins continue to speak:

*"There is a coloured ball we have to balance till the
whistle blows.*

We have no hope. There is no hope.

We sink to the limits of this pool" (Duffy 36).

The repeated negation—"no hope"—marks the existential despair of confined life. Yet the act of speaking itself constitutes eco-critical resistance.

By testifying to their suffering, the dolphins become submerged witnesses of ecological violence. Their poetic voice disrupts the silence imposed by captivity. Duffy's choice of first-person plural ("we") emphasizes collective

identity and solidarity, transforming individual despair into a shared ecological testimony.

IV. DISCUSSION: POETICS OF RESISTANCE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Carol Ann Duffy's "The Dolphins" is not merely a lament of captivity but a carefully constructed 'poetics of resistance', where language itself becomes an ecological weapon against the silencing force of human domination. The poem operates within the anthropocene, a time in which human agency reshapes ecosystems to such an extent that even the natural habitats of dolphins become commodified spaces of entertainment. The aquarium, as depicted in the poem, is both a literal site of ecological control and a metaphor for the broader planetary condition of ecological confinement.

By choosing the dolphins' collective voice ("we"), Duffy disrupts the human-centered lyric tradition. The dolphins narrate their own alienation:

"The world we have is small.

For us the world is flat and round, it has no end" (Duffy 36).

The paradox of their "flat and round" world testifies to a simulated infinity that masks real limitation. What humans perceive as harmless containment—a circular pool—becomes, for the dolphins, an existential reduction of their lived oceanic world. This paradox is central to the anthropocene: environments designed by humans to mimic nature, but which in fact erase ecological authenticity (Clark 18).

Resistance emerges in Duffy's poetics through three interrelated strategies: voice, memory, and testimony. First, the act of granting voice to dolphins resists the anthropocentric silencing of non-human creatures. Scholars in animal studies such as Cary Wolfe have argued that the human/animal divide persists because animals are denied subjectivity (Wolfe 102). Duffy counters this divide by giving dolphins consciousness, perception, and language. Their words reclaim agency, destabilizing the human monopoly on voice.

Second, memory functions as a form of resistance. The dolphins recall the oceanic past:

"We were blessed and now we are not blessed.

It was the same space. It is different" (Duffy 36).

These lines express ecological trauma—where continuity of space (water) is disrupted by transformation of meaning (freedom replaced by confinement). Memory resists the flattening of history that captivity enforces; it insists on an

alternative narrative, one that remembers the ocean as a site of belonging rather than spectacle.

Third, testimony transforms suffering into critique. The dolphins' declaration, "*We have no hope. There is no hope*" (Duffy 36), while seemingly a cry of despair, functions as an ecological indictment. It directs ethical responsibility toward human readers, implicating them in the system of captivity. This recalls Lawrence Buell's insistence that literature must generate an "environmental accountability" that challenges readers' moral complacency (Buell 11). The dolphins' hopelessness becomes an ethical provocation for the human audience.

Importantly, Duffy's poetics does not romanticize nature in the traditional pastoral sense. Instead, it stages the Anthropocene condition as one of fractured belonging and ecological violence. As Ursula Heise notes, contemporary ecocriticism must move beyond nostalgia for untouched nature and engage with the global realities of ecological circulation and exploitation (Heise 59). Duffy's aquarium is not a pastoral but an anti-pastoral—a deliberately artificial ecosystem where resistance must be articulated from within confinement.

Thus, the poem's eco-critical resistance lies in its capacity to hold contradiction: to articulate despair while producing voice, to reveal alienation while invoking memory, and to transform captivity into testimony. The dolphins, though imprisoned, are not silent. Their voices disturb the spectacle, transforming the aquarium into a site of ecological critique. In doing so, Duffy reimagines lyric poetry as a vehicle for environmental resistance in the anthropocene.

V. CONCLUSION

Carol Ann Duffy's "The Dolphins" emerges as a powerful eco-critical text that situates marine life at the center of poetic expression. By voicing the dolphins' experiences of captivity, the poem critiques the ecological violence of the anthropocene and resists anthropocentric spectacle.

The aquarium becomes a metaphor for a world reshaped by human control—simultaneously mimicking and destroying natural habitats. Yet within this confinement, the dolphins articulate memory, loss, and resistance, transforming poetic voice into ecological testimony.

In doing so, Duffy demonstrates the capacity of green poetics to challenge the anthropocene, to amplify non-human voices, and to compel readers toward ecological consciousness. "The Dolphins" resists silence by transforming suffering into speech, captivity into critique, and confinement into poetic resistance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Duffy, Carol Ann. *Standing Female Nude*. Anvil Press, 1985.
- [2] Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- [3] Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, U of Georgia P, 1996, pp. xv–xxxvii.
- [4] Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- [5] Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The 'Anthropocene.'" *IGBP Newsletter*, vol. 41, 2000, pp. 17–18.
- [6] Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford UP, 2008.
- [7] Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.



Subtitling Chinese Animated Films under Functional Equivalence: A Case Study of *Nobody*

Wang Xuyuan¹, Chen Shuangyu^{2*}

¹School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

²Associate Professor and Master's Supervisor, School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

*Corresponding author

Received: 15 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Sep 2025; Accepted: 12 Sep 2025; Available online: 16 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Chinese animated films are increasingly visible on the global stage, yet their cross-cultural communication depends heavily on effective subtitle translation. This study examines the English subtitles of the 2025 animated film *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪), analyzing idioms and proverbs, metaphors and figurative language, comic effects and culture-bound terms. Guided by Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, the research highlights how unidiomatic renderings and inadequate cultural transfer weaken communicative impact. The findings suggest that adaptive strategies are essential for achieving equivalence in audience response and enhancing the global dissemination of Chinese animation.



Keywords— Subtitling; Functional Equivalence; Chinese animation; *Nobody*; Cross-cultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese animated films have recently gained wider global recognition, reflecting both artistic creativity and cultural influence. Yet their international reach depends not only on visuals but also on the quality of subtitle translation. Subtitles act as a bridge between languages and cultures but face strict time and space constraints, often leading to loss of nuance. This study analyzes the English subtitles of *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪), focusing on strategies, effectiveness, and how they shape audience understanding and reception.

II. CURRENT SITUATION AND CONSTRAINTS OF SUBTITLE TRANSLATION FOR *NOBODY*

In China, subtitle translation studies have focused on strategies, norms, and cultural transfer. Zhao (2005) stressed that subtitles must adapt to strict temporal and spatial limits, while Li Y. (2001) outlined strategies such as omission, paraphrase, and substitution. Li H. (2005) emphasized the balance between adequacy and acceptability, showing how norms shape subtitling choices. Wang (2019) found that Chinese audiovisual translation has expanded significantly but remains largely theoretical. From an international view, Dong (2007) noted that Western research prioritizes audience reception, and Abdelaal (2019) showed that literal translations of

culture-bound terms often mislead audiences.

Constraints are particularly evident in animated films, which rely on humor, wordplay, and cultural allusions. Zhao (2005) observed that reduction often leads to loss of nuance, while Zheng highlighted the dual demands of intralingual clarity and interlingual transfer. Li Y.'s strategies may ease technical pressure but risk weakening cultural resonance, and Li H. (2005) warned that prioritizing acceptability can dilute authenticity. Abdelaal's (2019) findings reinforce the need for adaptive approaches. Together, these insights show that subtitling animated films requires balancing readability, cultural fidelity, and audience engagement.

III. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE AND ITS MEANS

Nida first introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence in *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), later refined as functional equivalence in *Language, Culture, and Translating* (2001). The theory emphasizes that translation should not be judged only by its formal accuracy but by the extent to which target audiences experience responses similar to those of source audiences. This orientation shifts attention from literal transfer to communicative effectiveness, making the theory especially relevant in audiovisual contexts where space and time are restricted.

Applied to subtitle translation, functional equivalence suggests that strategies must adapt to technical limits while preserving cultural meaning and audience engagement. Shao (2009) argued that this framework provides practical guidance for handling humor, colloquial expressions, and culture-bound terms in film subtitles. Means such as omission, paraphrase, explicitation, and cultural substitution are often necessary to achieve equivalence in effect. For animated films, functional equivalence ensures that subtitles remain concise yet effective, balancing readability with cultural resonance.

IV. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE USED IN SUBTITLE TRANSLATION FOR *NOBODY*

Based on Functional Equivalence, this chapter

analyzes subtitles from *Nobody* through six strategies—omission, paraphrase, literal translation, explicitation, cultural substitution, and adaptive idioms—to assess how effectively they reproduce the audience response of the source text.

1. Omission

Example 1: “他就是个狐朋狗友，成天游手好闲。”

Subtitle: He is just a bad friend, idle all day.

The vivid metaphor “狐朋狗友” is reduced to bad friend, which simplifies reading but erases humor and imagery. Li Yunxing (2001) noted omission can save space, yet it often sacrifices cultural color. Functional equivalence (Nida, 2001) fails here because Chinese audiences sense ridicule, while English audiences perceive only a neutral label. A phrase like worthless crony would retain brevity and evaluative tone.

Example 2: “人各有命，天命难违。”

Subtitle: Everyone has a fate, and it cannot be resisted.

While accurate, the solemn cadence of a proverb is lost. Zhao (2005) observed that time-space constraints push subtitlers to simplify, but such reduction diminishes rhetorical impact. A more rhythmic alternative could align better with Nida's (2001) principle of functional effect.

2. Paraphrase

Example 1: “他在家是个窝里横，在外面却唯唯诺诺。”

Subtitle: He is a bully at home but timid outside.

Paraphrase clarifies meaning, but the satirical sting of “窝里横” disappears. Shao (2009) stressed that subtitles should preserve communicative function; in this case, functional equivalence is weakened.

Example 2: “神仙打架，凡人遭殃。”

Subtitle: When gods fight, people suffer.

The paraphrase delivers content but flattens proverbial rhythm. Wang (2019) noted that Chinese subtitling research often prioritizes strategies over audience reception, which explains why rhetorical force is neglected. According to Nida (1964), functional equivalence requires not only semantic but also stylistic effect, which here is compromised.

3. Literal Translation

Example 1: “别去打架了，你就是去送人头的。”

Subtitle: Don't fight, you are just going to give away

heads.

The literal rendering misleads audiences, since “送人头” in colloquial and gaming contexts means “to die pointlessly.” Abdelaal (2019) argued that culture-bound terms cannot be handled through literal transfer without risking misinterpretation. This example illustrates his concern: instead of evoking humorous fatalism, the English evokes grotesque imagery. Nida (1964) emphasized that translation should secure equivalent audience response rather than verbal correspondence, which here clearly fails. A functional equivalent such as you’ll just be cannon fodder would better match the source’s pragmatic effect.

Example 2: “他只是个无名小卒，没人会记得他。”

Subtitle: He is just a nobody, no one will remember him.

Although it is accurate, “nobody” flattens nuance, since “无名小卒” implies rank insignificance. Zhao (2005) noted that reductions often erode cultural depth. Functional equivalence (Nida, 2001) requires preserving evaluative tone. A version like a mere foot soldier would better convey the sense of lowly obscurity.

4. Explicitation

Example: “小心，那是个妖怪！”

Subtitle: Be careful, that’s a Yao, a supernatural creature!

If rendered only as “Yao”, many foreign audiences may mistake it for a personal name or leave it uninterpreted, losing the tension the scene builds. Explicitation—a Yao, a supernatural creature—ensures comprehension by briefly defining the culturally loaded term. Nida (2001) emphasized that functional equivalence relies on audience response, while Shao (2009) noted that concise interpretation helps bridge cultural gaps in audiovisual translation. Here, the gloss allows international audiences to experience the same shock and fear as Chinese audiences, while keeping the subtitle within spatial limits.

5. Cultural Substitution

Example 1: “你这样的人，简直就是费鞋。”

Subtitle: You are just dead weight.

Literally “waste shoes” would puzzle audiences. Substituting “dead weight” conveys contempt naturally. Li H. (2005) stressed the conflict between adequacy and

acceptability; here substitution favors acceptability and fulfills functional equivalence by eliciting the same disdainful response as the source.

Example 2: “大王来了，大家快跪下！”

Subtitle: The chief is here, kneel down!

Translating “大王” as king would exaggerate authority. Using “chief” captures the comic image of a local strongman. Dong (2007) noted that Western subtitling studies focus on audience reception, which supports this register adjustment. It aligns target audiences’ perception with the humorous awe intended by the source.

6. Adaptive Idioms

Example: “你去打仗，不就是送人头吗？”

Subtitle: You’re just cannon fodder in the fight.

The original uses gaming slang, “送人头”, to mock someone as doomed to die meaninglessly. A literal version like “give away heads” would confuse or even horrify target audiences, creating the wrong effect. By adapting it to the English idiom cannon fodder, the subtitle captures both the derisive humor and the sense of futility. Abdelaal (2019) observed that idiomatic adaptation prevents cultural distortion, and Nida (1964) stressed that equivalence rests on audience response. Here, the English viewer, like the Chinese viewer, perceives the speaker’s mocking fatalism, showing successful functional equivalence.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the English subtitles of *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪) through the lens of Functional Equivalence. The analysis showed that omission, paraphrase, and literal translation often weakened cultural nuance, while explicitation, substitution, and adaptive idioms improved clarity and preserved humor. As Nida (1964, 2001) emphasized, effective translation must secure comparable audience response. For animated films rich in culture-bound terms, functional equivalence provides practical guidance to balance brevity, readability, and cultural resonance in subtitle translation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdelaal, N. M. (2019). Subtitling of culture-bound terms:

- Strategies and quality assessment. *Heliyon*, 5(4).
- [2] Dong, H. (2007). An overview of audiovisual translation studies in the Western context. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 28(6), 59–64.
- [3] Li, H. (2005). Norms and audiovisual translation: A study on subtitle translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 26(2), 34–38.
- [4] Li, Y. (2001). On strategies of subtitle translation. *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, 14(1), 38–40.
- [5] Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating*. Leiden: Brill.
- [6] Nida, E. A. (2001). *Language, culture, and translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [7] Shao, W. (2009). Enlightenment of Functional Equivalence Theory on translation of film subtitles. *Journal of Mudanjiang University*, 18(4), 93–96.
- [8] Wang, J. (2019). Thirty years of Chinese audiovisual translation studies: A CiteSpace-based visualization analysis (1989–2018). *Chinese Translators Journal*, 40(1), 24–30.
- [9] Zhao, N. (2005). Constraints and strategies in subtitle translation of films. *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, 18(4), 38–40.

Research on the Value of Ice and Snow Sports Culture Construction to Its High-Quality Development and Its Promotion Strategies

Jintao You, Guanqiang Yang*, Jiaqi Song

Shihezi University, Shihezi, Xinjiang, China

*Corresponding Author

Received: 13 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Sep 2025; Accepted: 12 Sep 2025; Available online: 16 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— By means of literature review and logical analysis, this study explores the value and strategies of ice and snow sports culture construction for its high-quality development. Ice and snow sports culture endows high-quality development with core driving capacity by shaping value identity, activating industrial innovation, and enhancing international popularity. However, at present, there are problems such as lack of public awareness, single communication form, and fragmented industrial development. Strategies such as in-depth excavation of connotation, innovation of communication mode, promotion of integration of industry and culture, and improvement of policy support are proposed to create a positive cycle between culture and development and boost the high-level development of China's ice and snow sports.



Keywords— Ice and Snow Sports; Cultural Construction; High-Quality Development

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of the in-depth implementation of the "Ice and Snow Power" strategy, China's ice and snow sports have encountered unprecedented opportunities. Since the successful hosting of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the goal of "encouraging 300 million people to participate in ice and snow sports" has been successfully achieved. The acceleration of ice and snow sports infrastructure construction and the gradual expansion of industrial scale indicate that China's ice and snow sports have entered a new stage of high-quality development^[1]. Compared with ice and snow sports powers in Europe and America, China still has obvious gaps in cultural heritage, public recognition, and brand influence, and the contradiction that cultural construction lags behind

industrial development has become increasingly prominent.

From the national strategic level, culture is the soul foundation for the development of sports. The "Opinions on Vigorously Developing Ice and Snow Sports Taking the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as an Opportunity" clearly proposes to strengthen the construction of ice and snow sports culture and enhance the cultural soft power of ice and snow sports^[2]. From the perspective of practical needs, currently, China's ice and snow sports culture is faced with fragmented public cognition, single communication forms, and superficial industrial integration, resulting in the failure to fully demonstrate the spiritual value of ice and snow sports, the failure to fully release the enabling role of culture in industrial development, insufficient social

recognition of the spirit of ice and snow sports, prominent homogenization of ice and snow cultural tourism products, and poor communication power of cultural symbols internationally.

The global competition in ice and snow sports has expanded from simple competitive competition to the competition of cultural influence. Against this background, comprehensively studying the internal logical relationship between ice and snow sports culture construction and high-quality development, and exploring effective ways of cultural empowerment are not only an inevitable requirement for implementing national strategic deployment, but also a key measure to improve China's competitiveness in international ice and snow sports and promote the sustainable development of the ice and snow industry.

1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

1.2.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to systematically reveal the internal logical relationship between ice and snow sports culture construction and high-quality development through the combing of literature and logical analysis, comprehensively analyze the current situation, problems and constraints of China's ice and snow sports culture construction, and on this basis, put forward targeted and operable cultural construction promotion measures, construct a positive interactive relationship between ice and snow sports culture and high-quality development, so as to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for China's leap from a "big country of ice and snow sports" to a "powerful country of ice and snow sports" [3].

1.2.2 Research Significance

This study has both theoretical and practical values. Theoretically, by exploring the relationship between ice and snow sports culture construction and high-quality development, it expands the research scope of sports culture, fills the theoretical gap in the coordinated development of ice and snow sports culture and industry, and improves the theoretical system of ice and snow sports development. Practically, the research results can provide evidence for the government to formulate special plans for cultural construction and optimize industrial policies, provide practical paths for cultural development and industrial integration for enterprises and social

organizations, help build famous ice and snow cultural products, enhance industrial competitiveness, and at the same time enhance public recognition of the value of ice and snow sports, drive the coordinated implementation of sports power and cultural power construction, and help ice and snow sports culture deeply integrate into people's lives [4].

II. CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 Definition of Core Concepts

2.1.1 Ice and Snow Sports Culture

Ice and snow sports culture takes ice and snow sports as the core carrier and covers a value system including material, institutional and spiritual levels [5]. Material culture consists of physical elements such as ice and snow venues, sports equipment, and landscape facilities; institutional culture involves normative systems such as event rules, management systems, and policies and regulations; spiritual culture is reflected in the spirit of challenging limits and teamwork contained in ice and snow sports, as well as folk traditions and values with distinct regional characteristics. This cultural system undertakes the historical inheritance of ice and snow sports, also reflects the value desire of contemporary society, and is the core driving force for the progress of ice and snow sports.

2.1.2 High-Quality Development of Ice and Snow Sports

Promoting the high-quality development of ice and snow sports under the guidance of innovation, coordination, green, openness and sharing emphasizes not only popularizing sports but also improving competitive level, not only expanding industrial scale but also optimizing development benefits, not only cultivating domestic market but also enhancing international competitiveness. Its connotation includes: the enthusiasm of the masses to participate in ice and snow sports has greatly increased, the level of ice and snow competition has ranked among the international leading ranks, the structure of the ice and snow industry has been optimized and upgraded, the efficiency and sustainability of resource utilization have been enhanced, a development pattern jointly promoted by the government, market and society has been built, and finally the dual improvement of social and economic

benefits of ice and snow sports has been achieved [6].

2.2 Theoretical Basis

2.2.1 Cultural Soft Power Theory

The concept of "soft power" proposed by Joseph Nye emphasizes the important role of culture, values and ideology in international competition [7]. Applied to the field of ice and snow sports, ice and snow sports culture, as a main part of soft power, enhances the country's right to speak and influence in the global ice and snow sports field by spreading the spirit, values and cultural symbols of ice and snow sports, and provides spiritual support and cultural identity for the high-quality development of ice and snow sports.

2.2.2 System Theory

System theory emphasizes the integrity, relevance and dynamic characteristics of things. The construction of ice and snow sports culture and high-quality development form an organic structure: the material, institutional and spiritual elements in cultural construction interact with each other, and at the same time are closely connected with the improvement of ice and snow sports' competitive level, industrial expansion, policy support and other links. By optimizing the cooperative relationship between various elements in the system, the overall efficiency of ice and snow sports development can be maximized.

2.2.3 Sports Communication Theory

This theory pays attention to the laws and effects of sports culture communication. In the scene created by ice and snow sports, by studying the coding of ice and snow cultural symbols, the selection of communication channels and the audience decoding process, it can reveal the mechanism of cultural communication in improving the awareness of ice and snow sports, enhancing participation willingness and expanding industrial market, and provide theoretical basis for the planning of ice and snow cultural communication strategies.

2.2.4 Industrial Integration Theory

Industrial integration theory holds that different industries can achieve coordinated development through technology penetration and business intersection. Applied to the field of ice and snow sports, it can clarify the integration path of ice and snow sports culture with tourism, education, science and technology and other industries, provide theoretical support for the development of ice and snow

cultural tourism products, the cultivation of ice and snow education and training market, and the innovation of ice and snow technology application, and promote the ice and snow industry to enter the stage of high-quality development.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE CONNOTATION AND FUNCTION OF ICE AND SNOW SPORTS CULTURE

3.1 Constituent Elements of Ice and Snow Sports Culture

3.1.1 Material Culture: The Physical Carrier of Ice and Snow Sports

The material culture of ice and snow sports is the basic layer of the cultural system, covering various physical elements that directly serve ice and snow sports.

Sports facilities and equipment: including ski resorts, ice rinks, skating halls and other professional venues, as well as ski boards, ice skates, cold-proof clothing, snow-making equipment and other sports equipment [8]. These facilities and equipment not only meet sports needs, but also their design styles and technical levels reflect regional characteristics and scientific and technological strength.

Landscapes and buildings: Ice and snow landscapes and characteristic buildings combine ice and snow sports with aesthetics and regional culture through artistic and functional design, becoming key carriers to attract public participation and promote cultural communication.

Derivatives: Cultural and creative products and souvenirs with ice and snow sports as the theme convey the connotation of ice and snow culture through symbolic design, and expand the scope of cultural communication and industrial value.

3.1.2 Institutional Culture:

The Normative System of Ice and Snow Sports Institutional culture is the rules and mechanisms to ensure the orderly development of ice and snow sports, reflecting the organizational and restrictive nature of culture.

Event rules and competitive systems: International events, competition rules and referee regulations ensure the fairness of competitions and promote the improvement of sports technology standardization.

Management system and policies and regulations: The

planning and management policies implemented by government departments for ice and snow sports, as well as the self-discipline mechanism implemented by industry associations, guide resource allocation, industrial layout and market standardization.

Training and certification system: The qualification certification system for ice and snow sports coaches, referees and service personnel, as well as the ice and snow education curriculum standards for teenagers, provide institutional guarantee for sports popularization and talent cultivation.

3.1.3 Spiritual Culture: The Value Core of Ice and Snow Sports

Spiritual culture is the core of ice and snow sports culture, embodying cultural identity and value pursuit.

Sports spirit: The unique spirit of challenging limits, perseverance and teamwork in ice and snow sports, together with the Olympic spirit of "Faster, Higher, Stronger", inspires participants to break through their own barriers and achieve cultural resonance.

Regional culture and folk traditions: The ice and snow folk customs in northern China combine historical traditions with modern sports, endowing ice and snow culture with unique regional colors.

Cultural identity and values: The healthy life concept and environmental protection awareness conveyed by ice and snow sports, as well as the national image and national pride displayed through events, enhance the public's recognition of the value of ice and snow culture.

3.2 Core Functions of Ice and Snow Sports Culture

3.2.1 Value Guidance Function

Ice and snow sports culture establishes the public's positive attitude towards life and collective identity by spreading sports spirit and values. International events such as the Winter Olympics arouse national pride. The entry of ice and snow sports into campuses promotes the dual improvement of teenagers' physical fitness and will quality, leading the whole society to form a common demand for healthy life and hard work spirit.

3.2.2 Industrial Empowerment Function

The deep integration of culture and industry enhances the added value of ice and snow economy^[9]. Ice and snow cultural IP (such as mascots) creates economic value through derivative development; cultural theme tourism

and ice and snow festivals attract consumers to spend, promote the development of new industrial forms such as "ice and snow + tourism" and "ice and snow + education", and expand the scope of industrial chain.

3.2.3 Social Cohesion Function

Ice and snow sports culture breaks regional and professional boundaries and becomes a link for social interaction. Community ice and snow activities and amateur events Promote interpersonal communication. Public activities such as ice and snow cultural festivals enhance residents' sense of belonging to the city and help build harmonious social relations.

3.2.4 International Communication Function

As a carrier of cultural exchange, ice and snow sports spread Chinese stories and cultural characteristics to the world through events, cultural performances and other forms. The Chinese-style romance presented at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics and the international promotion of ice and snow folk culture have improved China's right to speak and influence in the global ice and snow culture field.

3.3 Theoretical Logic of Ice and Snow Sports Culture Driving High-Quality Development

There is a deep logical relationship between ice and snow sports culture construction and high-quality development. Theoretically, culture is a kind of soft power. Through value affirmation, innovation drive and brand building, it provides core power for the sustainable development of ice and snow sports. Ice and snow sports culture can enhance the public's understanding of sports value, arouse participation enthusiasm and build a large mass foundation; drive the upgrading of ice and snow industry formats through the integration and innovation of culture, science and technology, and art; unique cultural symbols and spiritual connotations help shape differentiated brand images and enhance competitiveness in international competition. This logical progressive chain of "culture - identity - innovation - development" constitutes the endogenous power pattern for the high-quality development of ice and snow sports.

3.4 Specific Value Dimensions of Ice and Snow Sports Culture

3.4.1 Spiritual Value: Shaping National Cohesion and Cultural Confidence

The fighting spirit, teamwork awareness and Olympic values contained in ice and snow sports culture can arouse national pride and cultural identity. The outstanding performance of Chinese athletes in international competitions such as the Winter Olympics is transformed into national spiritual encouragement through cultural communication, enhancing national cohesion. Exploring traditional folk culture in ice and snow sports and combining traditional culture with modern sports spirit is conducive to improving cultural confidence and inputting spiritual energy for high-quality development ^[10].

3.4.2 Industrial Value: Promoting Industrial Upgrading and Economic Growth

Cultural construction is a key engine for the quality and efficiency improvement of the ice and snow industry ^[11]. On the one hand, by developing ice and snow cultural IP (such as event mascots) and holding cultural festivals (such as ice and snow tourism festivals), the industrial chain can be extended and diversified consumption scenarios can be created ^[12]; the integration of culture and technology gives birth to new formats such as smart ice and snow venues and virtual ice and snow experience, increasing industrial added value; the international communication of ice and snow cultural brands can attract international capital and tourists, helping the ice and snow economy achieve global development.

3.4.3 Social Value: Promoting National Fitness and Social Harmony

Popularizing ice and snow sports culture can promote the implementation of the national fitness strategy. Through cultural publicity and education, the threshold of public cognition of ice and snow sports is lowered, attracting more people to participate. The social attributes of ice and snow sports (such as team events) can promote interpersonal interaction, ease social contradictions and promote social harmony. The entry of ice and snow culture into campuses and communities can also guide teenagers to develop sports habits and will quality, accumulating talent strength for high-quality development.

3.4.4 International Value: Enhancing National Image and Global Discourse Power

Ice and snow sports culture is an important display window of national soft power ^[13]. By holding international events and spreading Chinese characteristic

ice and snow culture (such as the "24 Solar Terms" opening ceremony design), Chinese wisdom and cultural charm can be transmitted to the world, and the international image can be enhanced ^[14]. Participating in the formulation of global ice and snow culture rules and promoting the export of ice and snow culture standards can enhance China's voice in the international ice and snow field and create a favorable international environment for high-quality development.

IV. CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBLEMS OF CHINA'S ICE AND SNOW SPORTS CULTURE CONSTRUCTION

4.1 Development Status

4.1.1 Gradual Improvement of Infrastructure Driven by Policies

The state has successively issued a series of policies such as the "Ice and Snow Sports Development Plan (2016-2025)" and the "Implementation Outline for "Encouraging 300 Million People to Participate in Ice and Snow Sports" (2022-2025)" to promote the construction of ice and snow sports culture ^[15]. Driven by policies, the number of ice and snow venues nationwide has increased significantly. By 2023, the number of ski resorts nationwide has exceeded 800, and the coverage rate of indoor ice rinks has increased significantly. The "Southward Expansion, Westward Extension and Eastward Advancement" strategy for ice and snow sports has achieved remarkable results. Large ice and snow complexes have been built in southern cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai, and the scope of ice and snow culture communication is constantly expanding.

4.1.2 Initial Achievements of Cultural Activities and Event Brands

Taking the opportunity of the Beijing Winter Olympics, China has successfully created a number of ice and snow cultural activities and event brands with international influence. Traditional festivals such as the Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival and the Changchun Vasa International Ski Festival have been continuously upgraded, deeply integrating ice and snow art, folk culture and sports competitions; the National Mass Ice and Snow Season and the "Building Dreams for Ice and Snow, Meeting at the Winter Olympics" series of activities have

covered more than 100 million people, effectively improving the social awareness of ice and snow culture. The successful holding of the Winter Olympics and Paralympics has further enhanced China's right to speak in the global ice and snow culture field.

4.1.3 Preliminary Construction of Cultural Communication and Education System

In terms of cultural communication, new media platforms have become an important position for ice and snow culture promotion [16]. Short videos, live broadcasts and other forms have widely spread ice and snow sports knowledge, exciting event moments and athletes' stories, attracting the attention of young groups. In the field of education, the "Ice and Snow Sports Entering Campus" program has been fully implemented in 10 northern provinces. Some southern cities have set up ice and snow courses by means of simulated ice rinks and roller skating substitution, and the ice and snow culture education system is gradually improving.

4.2 Existing Problems

4.2.1 Fragmented Cultural Cognition and Lack of In-depth Connotation Excavation

The public's cognition of ice and snow sports culture mostly stays in the scope of "entertainment" and "commercialization", and their understanding of the fighting spirit, Olympic values and regional folk culture contained in ice and snow sports is not comprehensive. Some ice and snow tourism projects only take "playing with snow" as a selling point, ignoring the integration of cultural stories and spiritual core, resulting in prominent homogenization of cultural experience. The research and inheritance of ice and snow sports history and traditional skills are insufficient, and cultural resources cannot be fully converted into development momentum.

4.2.2 Traditional Communication Forms and Insufficient Digital Innovation

At present, ice and snow culture communication still relies on offline activities and traditional media, and less uses emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and metaverse. Most ice and snow event broadcasts present from conventional perspectives, lacking immersive

4.2.3 Superficial Industrial Integration and Low Cultural Added Value

The integration of ice and snow culture and industry is still in its preliminary stage. Cultural and creative products are poorly designed and lack originality. Most ice and snow-themed tourism projects are centered on the "ticket economy" and have not yet formed a complete industrial development chain of "culture + tourism + consumption". Most ice and snow scenic spots only provide basic services such as skiing and ice sculpture viewing, lacking derivative formats such as cultural performances, themed accommodation, and characteristic catering. The fields of ice and snow equipment manufacturing and ice and snow training have not yet formed the influence of cultural brands, and the added value of the industry is relatively low [17].

4.2.4 Unbalanced Regional Development and Lack of Coordination Mechanisms

Relying on natural conditions and historical accumulation, northern regions dominate in ice and snow cultural construction. While the number of venues in southern regions has grown rapidly, the cultural atmosphere remains weak, with a phenomenon of "focusing on infrastructure construction while neglecting cultural cultivation". No resource sharing and cooperation mechanisms have been established between regions, and ice and snow cultural festivals and events are organized independently without forming linkage effects. There is also an imbalance in the distribution of ice and snow cultural resources between urban and rural areas, with insufficient popularization of ice and snow culture in rural areas.

4.2.5 Shortage of Professional Talents and Insufficient Motivation for Cultural Construction

The construction of ice and snow culture involves the intersection of sports, culture, communication, creativity and other fields, but the current reserve of interdisciplinary talents is seriously insufficient. The number of talents engaged in ice and snow culture research is scarce, and the theoretical system is incomplete. The number of professionals involved in ice and snow culture planning, communication and operation is limited, and they have not received systematic training. The industry's salary level and career development space are poor, resulting in weak talent attraction and hindering the innovative vitality of cultural construction.

V. PROMOTION STRATEGIES FOR ICE AND SNOW SPORTS CULTURE CONSTRUCTION TO DRIVE HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Deepen the Excavation of Ice and Snow Culture Connotation and Value Refinement

5.1.1 Systematically Sort Out Cultural Resources

Organize professional teams to conduct surveys and file-building on China's ice and snow sports history, regional folk customs, traditional skills and other cultural resources, and in-depth explore the historical heritage and spiritual essence of ice and snow culture, such as Manchu ice play and Hezhe ice and snow fishing culture, to form a systematic cultural resource database.

5.1.2 Innovate Cultural Expression Forms

Combine contemporary aesthetics and communication characteristics, integrate ice and snow cultural elements into cultural and creative products such as films, animations and games, and develop immersive performances and cultural research routes with ice and snow as the theme to enhance cultural experience and appeal.

5.1.3 Strengthen Value Guidance

Adopt media publicity, public service advertisements, school education and other methods to spread the fighting spirit and teamwork concept in ice and snow sports, and integrate ice and snow culture with socialist core values to build a positive social and cultural environment.

5.2 Innovate Ice and Snow Culture Communication Modes and Channels

5.2.1 Upgrade Digital Communication

Use VR/AR, metaverse, short videos and other technologies to build digital products such as virtual ice and snow events and online ice and snow museums to realize immersive promotion of ice and snow culture; carry out interactive marketing relying on social media platforms, guide users to create content, and expand the scope of communication coverage.

5.2.2 International Communication Strategies

Adapt to the characteristics of overseas audiences, optimize the translation and expression of ice and snow cultural symbols, and spread Chinese ice and snow stories through international cooperative media and overseas social platforms; rely on platforms such as the Winter Olympics and international ice and snow forums to

enhance China's voice in international ice and snow culture.

5.2.3 Precise Communication Positioning

Segment the audience groups and formulate different communication strategies for teenagers, middle-aged and elderly people, professional athletes and other groups, such as developing ice and snow-themed popular science animations for teenagers and promoting ice and snow culture for middle-aged and elderly groups.

5.3 Promote In-depth Integration of Ice and Snow Culture and Industry

5.3.1 Build Cultural IP and Brands

Develop a complete set of cultural and creative products and themed peripherals based on Winter Olympics mascots like Bing Dwen Dwen and classic ice and snow events; cultivate ice and snow cultural festival brands with international influence to increase industrial added value.

5.3.2 Expand "Ice and Snow +" Formats

Promote the integration of ice and snow culture with tourism, education, science and technology, health care and other industries, and launch new business models such as ice and snow-themed hotels, ice and snow research camps, and smart ice and snow venues; encourage enterprises to explore the "ice and snow culture + live e-commerce" model to promote the transformation of cultural consumption.

5.3.3 Improve Industrial Chain Coordination

Establish a coordinated linkage mechanism for industrial chains such as ice and snow equipment manufacturing, event operation, cultural communication, and education and training, assist small and medium-sized enterprises to participate in cultural creativity and service supporting links, and build a full-chain industrial ecological pattern.

5.4 Optimize Policies and Guarantee Mechanisms for Ice and Snow Culture Construction

5.4.1 Strengthen Policy Support

Issue special policies to promote the development of ice and snow cultural and creative industries, set up special funds for cultural construction, and provide financial subsidies and tax incentives for excellent cultural projects; accelerate the formulation of ice and snow culture standards to realize the standardized development of the industry.

5.4.2 Strengthen Regional Coordination

Establish a north-south regional ice and snow culture cooperation mechanism, with the north exporting technology and experience to the south, and the south giving play to its advantages in market and creativity to jointly create cross-regional ice and snow cultural brands; promote the rational allocation of urban and rural resources, and carry out ice and snow culture activities in rural areas.

5.4.3 Improve Talent Training System

Colleges and universities add majors related to ice and snow culture and industry to cultivate interdisciplinary talents; carry out vocational training together with enterprises and industry associations to improve practitioners' cultural creativity and operation and management capabilities; improve the talent incentive system to enhance the attractiveness of the industry.

5.5 Build a Coordinated Development Pattern with Multi-Subject Participation

5.5.1 Combine Government Guidance with Market Leadership

The government plays a leading role in planning, and coordinates infrastructure construction and policy resources; encourages social capital to invest in the investment and operation of ice and snow cultural projects.

5.5.2 Link Social Organizations with the Public

Support social organizations such as ice and snow culture associations and volunteer groups to carry out cultural popularization activities; organize activities such as national ice and snow cultural creativity competitions and ice and snow sports experience days to stimulate public participation enthusiasm and build a development pattern of co-construction and sharing.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through a systematic analysis of the internal relationship between ice and snow sports culture construction and high-quality development, this study clarifies the core driving role of cultural construction in the development of ice and snow sports. As an organic unity of material, system and spirit, ice and snow sports culture realizes its functions through value guidance, industrial support, social cohesion and international communication, providing spiritual support, economic impetus and cultural

foundation for high-quality development.

Although China's ice and snow sports culture construction has achieved phased results, there are still problems such as fragmented cognition, outdated communication forms, superficial industrial integration and unbalanced regional development. Efforts should be made to deepen connotation excavation, innovate communication modes, promote the integration of industry and culture, optimize policy guarantees, and build a multi-subject collaborative pattern, so as to construct a positive interaction model between cultural construction and high-quality development and push China's ice and snow sports into a higher stage of development.

REFERENCES

- [1] Liu, Y., Liu, C., Jiang, K., et al. (2022). Constraints and pathways: A study on the promotion of dryland adaptation of ice and snow sports courses in universities. *Journal of Harbin Institute of Physical Education*, 40(06), 47–54.
- [2] Tang, Y., & Jing, L. (2022). Research on the development path of ice and snow sports in Chinese universities from the perspective of the AGIL theoretical model. *Ice and Snow Sports*, 30(03), 181–184+202. <https://doi.org/10.19379/j.cnki.issn.1005-0256.2022.03.048>
- [3] Zhen, B., & Zhou, Z. (2020). Countermeasure research on the development of China's ice and snow industry during the Beijing Winter Olympics cycle. *Ice and Snow Sports*, 42(03), 81–85. <https://doi.org/10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2020.03.016>
- [4] Li, H., & Dong, X. (2020). Content design and communication value of the "China Ice and Snow" app under the background of the Winter Olympics. *Ice and Snow Sports*, 42(02), 87–90. <https://doi.org/10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2020.02.016>
- [5] Zhou, L. (2021). Imagination of the educational model of the 2022 Winter Olympics from the perspective of the new era. *Contemporary Sports Technology*, 11(34), 5–8. <https://doi.org/10.16655/j.cnki.2095-2813.2109-1579-8719>
- [6] Wang, Z. (2008). An analysis of several issues and countermeasures in the development of Heilongjiang's ice and snow industry. In General Administration of Sport of China, Chinese Sports Science Society & Organizing Committee of the 11th National Winter Games (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Scientific Conference of the 11th National*

- Winter Games* (pp. 359–361). Harbin Institute of Physical Education.
- [7] Jin, X., & Wang, J. (2019). The background and reflections on the formation of Joseph Nye's soft power theory. *Cultural Soft Power Studies*, 4(04), 84–92. <https://doi.org/10.19468/j.cnki.2096-1987.2019.04.010>
- [8] Zhang, M., Li, M., & Zhang, H. (2022). "Technology Winter Olympics": Technological empowerment of the high-quality development of the ice and snow industry—From the perspective of ice and snow equipment. *Science Think Tank*, (05), 2–7. <https://doi.org/10.19881/j.cnki.1006-3676.2022.05.01>
- [9] Wu, Y., Wang, N., Liu, Y., et al. (2019). A study on the development strategy of Hebei's ice and snow economy based on SWOT analysis. *Modern Marketing (Late Edition)*, (03), 117–118.
- [10] Zhang, Z., & Kan, J. (2023). Interpretation and transformation path of the spiritual legacy of the Beijing Winter Olympics. *Ice and Snow Sports*, 45(06), 77–82. <https://doi.org/10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2023.06.016>
- [11] Chen, Z., & Zhu, J. (2024). The connotation, value significance, and realization path of new productive forces empowering the construction of a strong ice and snow sports nation. *Journal of Harbin Institute of Physical Education*, 42(03), 14–21.
- [12] Wang, Y., Yang, B., & Jia, S. (2023). High-quality development strategies for China's digital ice and snow sports tourism industry in the "Intelligent+" era. *Hubei Sports Science and Technology*, 42(09), 758–763.
- [13] Ye, H., Zhao, Y., & Bao, M. (2022). The value and role of sports in the political construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. *Journal of Wuhan Institute of Physical Education*, 56(12), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.15930/j.cnki.wtxb.2022.12.003>
- [14] Tang, S. (2023). The value significance and path selection of empowering college students' confidence and self-improvement through telling China's story. *Journal of Dalian University*, 44(05), 110–114.
- [15] Qiu, H. (2022). The ice and snow economy riding the "high-speed train" of the times. *China Report*, (01), 45–47.
- [16] Li, H., & Zhao, J. (2023). Research on the shaping and communication strategy of urban cultural image in Jilin Province under the influence of public opinion. *Exhibition Economy*, (01), 120–122. <https://doi.org/10.19995/j.cnki.CN10-1617/F7.2023.01.120>
- [17] Zhang, Y., Wang, Z., Li, C., et al. (2023). Integration and driving of the ice and snow sports industry chain in Heilongjiang Province under the background of high-quality development. *Ice and Snow Sports*, 45(06), 68–72. <https://doi.org/10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2023.06.014>

参考

- [1] 刘姚成,刘春,姜科,等.桎梏与进路:高校冰雪运动课程早地化的推广研究[J].哈尔滨体育学院学报,2022,40(06):47-54.
- [2] 唐怡伟,敬龙军.基于 AGIL 理论模型视角下我国高校冰雪运动发展路径研究[J].冰雪运动,2022,30(03):181-184+202.DOI:10.19379/j.cnki.issn.1005-0256.2022.03.048.
- [3] 甄棒,周子健.北京冬奥会周期中国冰雪产业发展对策研究[J].冰雪运动,2020,42(03):81-85.DOI:10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2020.03.016.
- [4] 李洪春,董欣.冬奥会背景下“中国冰雪”APP 内容设计与传播价值[J].冰雪运动,2020,42(02):87-90.DOI:10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2020.02.016.
- [5] 周丽萍.新时代视域下 2022 冬奥会教育模式畅想[J].当代体育科技,2021,11(34):5-8.DOI:10.16655/j.cnki.2095-2813.2109-1579-8719.
- [6] 王钊.浅析黑龙江省冰雪产业发展中的若干问题及对策[C]//国家体育总局,中国体育科学学会,第十一届全国冬运会组委会.第十一届全国冬季运动会科学大会论文集.哈尔滨体育学院,2008:359-361.
- [7] 金筱萍,王佳怡.约瑟夫·奈软实力理论的形成背景及思考[J].文化软实力研究,2019,4(04):84-92.DOI:10.19468/j.cnki.2096-1987.2019.04.010.
- [8] 张敏,李梅,张红.“科技冬奥”技术赋能冰雪产业高质量发展——基于冰雪装备器材视角[J].科技智囊,2022,(05):2-7.DOI:10.19881/j.cnki.1006-3676.2022.05.01.
- [9] 吴永立,王楠,刘雨萌,等.基于 SWOT 分析模型的河北省冰雪经济发展策略研究[J].现代营销(下旬刊),2019,(03):117-118.
- [10] 张知越,阚军常.北京冬奥会精神遗产的价值阐释与转化

- 路 径 研 究 [J]. 冰 雪 运 动,2023,45(06):77-82.DOI:10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2023.06.016.
- [11] 陈志远,朱佳滨.新质生产力赋能冰雪体育强国建设的内涵特征、价值意蕴与实现路径[J].哈尔滨体育学院学报,2024,42(03):14-21.
- [12] 王盈,杨波,贾树波.智能+时代中国式数字冰雪体育旅游产业高质量发展策略[J].湖北体育科技,2023,42(09):758-763.
- [13] 叶海波,赵铁龙,鲍明晓.体育在中国特色社会主义政治建设中的价值与作用[J].武汉体育学院学报,2022,56(12):17-28.DOI:10.15930/j.cnki.wtxb.2022.12.003.
- [14] 唐沙.中国故事赋能大学生自信自强的价值意蕴与路径选择[J].大连大学学报,2023,44(05):110-114.
- [15] 邱慧.冰雪经济搭上时代发展的“高速列车”[J].中国报道,2022,(01):45-47.
- [16] 李赫,赵晶晶.舆论影响下吉林省城市文化形象塑造与传播策略研究[J].商展经济,2023,(01):120-122.DOI:10.19995/j.cnki.CN10-1617/F7.2023.01.120.
- [17] 张瑶,王紫娟,李创,等.高质量发展背景下黑龙江省冰雪体育产业链的整合与驱动[J].冰雪运动,2023,45(06):68-72.DOI:10.16741/j.cnki.bxyd.2023.06.014.



The Predicament and Countermeasures of Legal Supervision of Off-Campus Training under the “Double Reduction” Policy

Wei Yuhua

Institute of China Rule of Law Strategy; East China University of Political Science and Law; Shanghai 201620, China

Received: 14 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Sep 2025; Accepted: 14 Sep 2025; Available online: 17 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Since the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy in 2021, remarkable achievements have been made in the standardized management of off-campus training institutions in China. Law-based governance has become a key path to regulating the development of off-campus training institutions. However, at present, the legal supervision of off-campus training in our country still faces many difficulties. In specific governance, various difficulties in the legalized supervision of off-campus training can be overcome from four aspects: collaborative supervision between educational supervision and educational administrative law enforcement, establishing a “responsibility - interest - system” framework for the supervision and governance of off-campus training, improving the legal and regulatory system for off-campus training, and giving full play to the regulatory and guiding role of industry associations, to ensure the sound operation of off-campus training institutions.



Keywords— Off-Campus Education and Training, Rule of Law Supervision, Double Reduction

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the “Double Reduction” policy was promulgated and implemented, effectively curbing the number of off-campus training institutions. However, some institutions have turned to more covert online training, especially in the case of subject-based training, where there are prominent issues of hidden and variant forms. In response to these issues, the Ministry of Education and other departments have issued a series of policy documents in recent years. In 2024, at the national “Double Reduction” work video scheduling meeting held in Beijing by the Ministry of Education, it was pointed out that the heat of off-campus training institutions has significantly decreased, and the level and quality of school services have continuously improved. However, there are still many problems.^[1] The main problems are that the total number of off-campus training institutions is still huge, the hidden and variant problems of off-campus training are still prominent, online non-compliant training still exists, and the situation controlled by capital is still obvious. This industry chaos

not only disrupts the normal educational ecology and triggers problems such as “reducing burden in school but increasing burden outside school,” but also, under the excessive intervention of capital, off-campus training will exacerbate the current unfair development of basic education in China and increase educational inequality.

Further strengthening the “promotion of the rule of law in the supervision of off-campus training” is an inevitable requirement for the supervision of off-campus education and training.^[2] At present, in the literature related to the supervision of off-campus training institutions, some focus on sorting out the supervision history of off-campus training institutions,^[3] some focus on evaluating the effectiveness of off-campus training governance,^[4] and some focus on the significance of foreign governance experience to China.^[5] For research involving the rule of law in supervision, although many scholars have put forward many suggestions, they are only superficial and not comprehensive.^[6] Therefore, this paper combs the difficulties faced by the rule of law supervision of off-

campus training institutions in China, analyzes their deep-seated causes, and puts forward feasible suggestions for their governance, based on the definition and punishment of off-campus training institutions and combining existing cases.

II. DEFINITION OF OFF-CAMPUS TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

2.1 Legal Status of Off-Campus Training Institutions

There is no consensus in academia on the legal status of off-campus training institutions. Hu Tianyou (2013), based on the relevant provisions of the “Promotion Law of Private Education” (2016 revised edition), argues that such institutions are private schools of the nature of non-enterprise units. Luo Zeyi and Ning Fangyan (2022), on the other hand, argue from the perspective of market entities that off-campus training institutions are profit-oriented companies. The former positioning can provide a legal basis for the special governance of off-campus training, but it ignores the personalized characteristics of off-campus education, because off-campus education should be a supplement to school education. The “Opinions on Regulating the Development of Off-Campus Training Institutions” clearly pointed out that non-degree off-campus training for students in compulsory education should be a supplement to school education. Therefore, off-campus training institutions should be given certain autonomy to promote their healthy development under the premise of following reasonable teaching methods. The second view that the legal status of off-campus training institutions is that of a corporate legal person has certain limitations. On the one hand, off-campus training institutions have educational attributes and provide educational products with public welfare nature, so even if they have a profit nature, they cannot be simply identified as corporate legal persons. On the other hand, from the perspective of civil legal relations, the legal status of off-campus training institutions is diverse, and corporate legal person is only one of them. Yu Zhonggen (2017) believes that even if off-campus training institutions are included in the category of profit-making private schools, their legal status still has duality. They meet the requirements of corporate legal persons and at the same time have the characteristics of schools defined by the “Education Law.” This dual legal status does not conflict.

2.2 Functional Positioning of Off-Campus Training Institutions

The concept of off-campus training was first proposed by foreign scholars Stevenson and Becker in a paper on after-school tutoring for Japanese high school students.^[7] In China, for a long time, off-campus training was called

“remedial education” and was divided into two categories: one aimed at improving students’ academic performance and the other aimed at cultivating students’ interests and hobbies. At the same time, as a form of off-campus education, off-campus training has clear teaching objectives, systematic teaching plans, and a standardized organizational system.^[8] Its functional positioning should be to play a complementary role to school education. In 2018, the General Office of the State Council first defined the nature of off-campus training institutions from a policy level, clearly pointing out that the core function of off-campus training institutions is to provide students with a variety of learning choices, promote the cultivation of their individual talents, and the comprehensive development of their quality. This policy definition provides an important basis for accurately grasping the functional positioning of off-campus training institutions.

III. CURRENT DILEMMAS IN THE SUPERVISION OF OFF-CAMPUS TRAINING IN CHINA

3.1 Inefficient Market Access Regulation Process

The administrative approval of the off-campus training market is the first link in the regulatory process. According to the relevant provisions of the “Administrative Licensing Law,” providers of off-campus training services should obtain administrative approval before conducting educational activities. At the same time, the “Promotion Law of Private Education” also clearly stipulates that the establishment of private schools at all levels should obtain the relevant administrative department’s school-running permit. In terms of training content, there are obvious differences between non-subject training and subject training in terms of functional positioning, training objectives,^[9] and educational concepts. This difference requires regulatory authorities to implement differentiated management strategies when formulating access standards. At present, the policies issued by the Ministry of Education and 12 other departments only put forward clear requirements for primary and secondary school students in terms of setting standards, approval procedures, and daily management, but there are no relevant opinions for high school students. Other policy documents and laws and regulations are mostly based on principled judgments, and the main targets of implementation are private schools.^[10] In the implementation process, most local governments lack detailed operational provisions. In this case, where specific provisions are not clear, it will cause ambiguity in regulatory behavior between the government and the regulated institutions, triggering a series of legal issues. For

example, in the case of Li vs. Qin and Tang for art training¹, Li believed that the art off-campus training held by Qin and Tang did not obtain a school-running permit and constituted consumer fraud. However, the defendants argued that when the contract was signed, there was no mandatory provision in the province that non-subject training institutions should obtain a school-running permit, and the training institution had a regular business license. Eventually, the court ruled that the plaintiff's evidence was insufficient and did not support Li's belief that the training institution had fraudulent behavior. This case is a dispute caused by the lack of local policy implementation and insufficient connection with central policy provisions.

3.2 Insufficient Supervision of Off-Campus Training Personnel

The supervision of the teaching staff of off-campus training institutions mainly involves two issues: whether teaching personnel need to obtain the corresponding qualification certificates in accordance with the provisions of the “Teachers Law” and how to define and regulate their rights and obligations. For example, in the case of Ruixiang Office vs². Sun and others, Deng was injured during an outdoor touch-feeling writing course. The office appealed that in addition to believing that Sun and others had gross negligence in the course of the course, Sun and others did not have teacher qualifications. However, Sun and others argued that obtaining teacher qualifications was not required for the involved course. This case involves the issue of qualification standards for non-subject off-campus training teachers. The current teacher qualification certification system is mainly based on school education subjects, which is difficult to fully cover a variety of subject areas. This contradiction between the current system's lack and real demand objectively creates a dilemma in the application of teacher qualification standards. Eventually, the court ruled that Sun and Gao should bear certain responsibilities because they had gross negligence in their work. At the same time, the recognition of teacher qualifications will also lead to issues of teacher ethics and conduct. The quality of off-campus training. The current teacher qualification certification system is mainly based on school education subjects, which makes it difficult to fully cover a variety of subject areas. This contradiction between the current system's lack and real demand objectively creates a dilemma in the application of teacher qualification standards. The court eventually ruled that Sun and Gao

should bear certain responsibilities because they had gross negligence in their work. At the same time, the recognition of teacher qualifications will also lead to issues of teacher ethics and conduct. The quality of off-campus training teachers is uneven, mostly because the threshold for teachers in training institutions is low. In the case of Lin³, who raped a minor girl by taking advantage of his position, Lin, taking advantage of his special responsibilities and work convenience as a part-time teacher in a training institution in a certain city, selected and approached girls under the age of 14, and forced sexual relations with the victims, Qin and Zhang, under the pretext of “biological testing” and “Mandarin testing.” The court eventually sentenced Lin to 12 years in prison, deprived him of his political rights for two years, and banned him from engaging in any professions related to the education, training, and tutoring of minors for five years. This case is a criminal case caused by the weak supervision of the personnel of off-campus training institutions by the education authorities.

3.3 The safeguard mechanism of off-campus training institutions is not sound.

The business operations of off-campus training institutions mainly include aspects such as student recruitment, fee collection and payment, and fund-raising. The main cause of the current judicial disputes is the lack of complete and supporting emergency measures at the national level and within off-campus training institutions. This has led to a series of problems regarding student fee refunds and staff placement when the institutions suddenly shut down and are unable to continue providing educational services. At present, the public welfare assistance implemented through the peer mutual aid mechanism in various regions across the country has certain limitations in practical effects. This traditional assistance model can no longer effectively deal with the series of problems caused by the sudden exit of training institutions from the market. Specifically, regarding the placement of students, the “Promotion Law of Private Education” only generally requires that students in school be properly placed when a private school is terminated. Local implementation details also mostly adopt this general expression without establishing an operable safeguard mechanism. In terms of training fee supervision, although China's policy clearly stipulates that the prepayment period for off-campus training institutions shall not exceed three months at a time, the phenomenon of

¹ Li v. Qin and Tang for Educational Contract Dispute, Civil Judgment No. 2270 of 2024, Hunan Provincial Changsha Intermediate People's Court (2024) Xiang 01 Min Zhong 2270.

² Ruixiang Office v. Sun Ying and Gao Haiyan for Labor Contract Dispute, Civil Judgment No. 51232 of 2021, Haidian

District People's Court of Beijing Municipality (2021) Jing 0108 Min Chu 51232.

³ Lin's rape case, a typical case of protection of minors' rights and interests by the Jiangxi Provincial Higher People's Court (2023).

collecting long-term training fees in advance is still widespread in practice. This means that when an off-campus training institution suddenly goes bankrupt and closes down, students who have prepaid cannot enjoy educational services or get their prepaid fees back. This has even given rise to new scams related to off-campus training fee refunds. For example, Liang claimed that he could assist in course withdrawal and fee refunds, taking advantage of students' and parents' worries about being unable to withdraw from courses or get refunds. After gaining the trust of the victims, he asked them for money on the pretext of needing to pay a difference or a deposit for the refund. The court eventually found Liang guilty of fraud and sentenced him to eight months in prison⁴. While giving rise to new crimes, the failure to promptly deal with the situation of large amounts of tuition fees that cannot be refunded also causes dissatisfaction among students and parents, posing a threat to social stability.

3.4 Inappropriate Content Settings in the Off-Campus Training System

In order to cater to parents' psychological needs of “alleviating anxiety” and “comparing academic achievements,” some off-campus training institutions have set up, implemented, evaluated, and managed their programs in a way that contradicts national educational standards, severely disrupting the normal educational ecosystem. In terms of textbook selection, the majority of training institutions lack a systematic quality assessment of their self-compiled materials, leading to frequent issues such as knowledge errors and content deviations in teaching aids. Alternatively, the textbooks selected by subject-based off-campus training institutions may have problems such as low quality and poor connection with the school curriculum, and in severe cases, even pirated books may appear. For example, in the copyright infringement case involving Yang and others⁵, the suspects profited from the illegal printing of legitimate books. They printed a large number of textbooks without authorization, including about 1 million copies of pirated children's reading materials, which were widely distributed to off-campus training institutions. These publications not only have content errors, poor print quality, and infringe upon the legitimate rights and interests of copyright holders, but also mislead the young people who use these textbooks, and the negative social impact they generate cannot be ignored. Regarding specific training

content, the 2021 “Opinion” pointed out that capital is not allowed to participate in the operation of subject-based training institutions.^[11] Some training institutions either attempt to transform into specialized characteristics or choose to deregister. However, some have evaded administrative supervision, continued to conduct training in violation of regulations, and persisted in operating under the guise of “high-end domestic services” or “educational study tours.” In judicial practice, the legal characterization of specific training programs directly affects their regulatory requirements. For example, in the case of *Lv v. Jining Mengyuan Education Consulting Co., Ltd.*⁶, the court held that the “Children's Concentration Training Course” organized by the company does not fall within the category of academic education or cultural education training that requires approval as stipulated by law, and therefore, no school-running permit is required. In fact, there is controversy over this point because Article 12 of the Promotion Law of Private Education does not explicitly specify which “cultural education” schools need to obtain a school-running permit. This has led to divergences in local administrative approval standards and is reflected in judicial cases as inconsistent rulings in similar cases.

IV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE DILEMMA OF LEGALIZED SUPERVISION OF OFF-CAMPUS TRAINING IN CHINA

To establish a long-term governance mechanism for off-campus training institutions, it is necessary to consolidate existing governance achievements and conduct an in-depth analysis of the causes of the current regulatory dilemmas. Since the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, the central government and local governments have issued a series of regulatory documents, which fully reflect the policy orientation of strengthening the supervision of the off-campus training market by educational administrative departments and local governments. However, practice has shown that the legalization of supervision and governance of off-campus training institutions faces multiple challenges, and the reasons are as follows.

4.1 The legal basis for the supervision of off-campus training is not sufficient

By sorting out the existing legal system, it can be found that there is still a clear lack of legal norms specifically targeting

⁴ Liang's fraud case, a typical case of telecommunications and internet fraud by the Guangzhou Intermediate People's Court of Guangdong Province (2022).

⁵ The fraud case of Liang (a certain individual), a typical case of telecommunications and internet fraud by the Guangzhou Intermediate People's Court of Guangdong Province (2022).

⁶ *Lv v. Jining Mengyuan Company*, Civil Judgment No. 13338 of 2018, Rensheng District People's Court of Jining City, Shandong Province (2018) Lu 0811 Min Chu 13338.

the supervision of off-campus training institutions. The main legal documents currently involved are the “Promotion Law of Private Education,” the “Regulations for the Implementation of the Promotion Law of Private Education,” and relevant provisions in the “Law on the Protection of Minors.” Existing regulations define the targets of regulation as private schools implementing academic education, early childhood education, and other cultural education, which objectively excludes off-campus training institutions from the scope of application. Moreover, current laws do not implement differentiated supervision based on the type of training institution but uniformly manage them according to the standards of private schools, a method that is apparently contradictory to the particularity of off-campus training institutions. Laws such as the “Education Law” and the “Compulsory Education Law” mainly regulate school education. Although the former has expanded its regulatory targets to “schools and other educational institutions,” the specific definition of “other educational institutions” is extremely limited. After the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, although the “Law on the Protection of Minors” and the “Law on Promoting Family Education” have been further revised to add principled provisions for the supervision of off-campus training, they still lack specific details and are difficult to meet the regulatory needs in practice. Provisions related to off-campus training institutions can also be found in the “Price Law” and the “Advertising Law,” but they cannot form a complete legal system. Due to subject limitations, the supervision of off-campus training mostly remains at the policy level. Scholars such as Zhang Haipeng have pointed out that the regulatory activities of off-campus training institutions in China mainly rely on administrative regulatory documents for implementation, showing a distinct “policy-oriented” feature.^[12] Scholar Zhu Jun also believes that only through legalized supervision can the limitations of the traditional regulatory path of off-campus training be broken to ensure the sound operation of off-campus training institutions.^[13]

4.2 The policies regarding the supervision of off-campus training are not clear

Although China has established a relatively comprehensive policy system for the supervision of off-campus training, there is inevitably some ambiguity in the content, which to a certain extent affects the regulatory effect on off-campus training institutions. There is currently no clear answer to what the regulatory target of off-campus training is and how to distinguish between subject-based and non-subject-based training. Although the Office of the Ministry of Education has issued relevant policies to define the scope of subject-based and non-subject-based training, there are still disputes in the academic circle about the classification

attributes of some projects such as “Chinese traditional studies courses,” “English drama performance,” and “picture-book reading.” In practice, off-campus training institutions tend to classify these as non-subject-based training, but regulatory authorities may consider that these courses have certain characteristics of subject-based teaching, especially when it comes to training in subjects such as Chinese and English.^[14]

As for the regulatory body of off-campus training, it is still unclear whether the education department is the regulatory body of off-campus training institutions and whether it has the right to law enforcement. In the actual regulatory process, several departments, including education, civil affairs, and industry and commerce, are involved in the supervision of the operation, premises, and personnel of off-campus training institutions for primary and secondary schools. This ambiguity leads to vague regulatory authority and weakens the regulatory strength. Moreover, the current regulatory policies still have the problem of vague standards in the specific implementation. For example, although the “Double Reduction” policy requires the management of subject-based training institutions for ordinary high schools to follow relevant policy requirements, it does not clearly define the specific standards and scope of implementation. These principled provisions make it difficult for regulatory bodies at all levels to grasp the specific measures in the law enforcement process, directly affecting the consistency and effectiveness of policy implementation. Scholars such as Chong Qi and Wu Peng have pointed out that law enforcement methods that do not take into account the differences between subject-based and non-subject-based supervision in terms of legal basis, main body, and content are not feasible.^[15]

4.3 The nature of the regulatory actions in off-campus training is ambiguous

The “Interim Regulations on the Implementation of Educational Administrative Penalties” is an important basis for the administrative penalties imposed on off-campus training and is formulated by the Ministry of Education. However, precisely because the formulating body of these regulations is the education department, its binding force on other administrative law enforcement departments is relatively weak. As a result, in administrative practice, some administrative agencies, in order to evade the constraints of the “Administrative Penalties Law,” have resorted to using the guise of regulation as a substitute for the application of the administrative penalty system.^[16] Moreover, it has been observed in practice that, due to the absence of relevant local policies, certain principal departments only possess the power to conduct administrative inspections but lack the authority to impose

administrative penalties. Additionally, since its implementation in 1998, these regulations have not been revised and have revealed several issues in both institutional design and practical application. These include the lag of regulatory content behind actual needs, gaps in the scope of regulation, and insufficient coordination with other legal norms.^[17] At present, some local education administrative authorities have adopted the regulatory measure of listing non-compliant off-campus training institutions on a “blacklist” and publicly exposing them. The legal nature of this practice is yet to be examined. Furthermore, it is necessary to clarify from the perspective of administrative law the legal differences between this regulatory measure and the “reputational penalty” of public censure stipulated in the “Administrative Penalties Law”.^[18] This ambiguity not only reduces the efficiency of supervision over off-campus training but also, against the backdrop of educational administrative penalties becoming a major trend, has an adverse impact on the delegation of powers and the allocation of functions among departments.

V. COUNTERMEASURES FOR THE LEGALIZED SUPERVISION OF OFF-CAMPUS TRAINING

5.1 Collaborative Supervision between Educational Oversight and Educational Administrative Law Enforcement

In the modern educational governance system, the collaborative operation of educational supervision and educational administrative law enforcement forms a complete regulatory closed loop, jointly ensuring the implementation of educational laws, regulations, and policy documents.^[19] In China, the focus of educational supervision has traditionally been on national education, with little involvement in other educational training institutions. However, with the increase in the number of off-campus training institutions in China, the administrative law enforcement of education has become overwhelmed due to the lack of staff and external policy constraints. At this time, the advantages of the educational supervision system, such as abundant human resources and a more complete professional structure, can be fully utilized to establish a linkage mechanism between supervisors and administrative law enforcement officers to improve the overall regulatory efficiency. At present, Huangpu District of Shanghai Municipality has innovatively established a three-stage collaborative regulatory mechanism of “inspection - investigation and punishment - reporting.” The core of this system is that educational supervision institutions first conduct supervision and inspection of off-campus training institutions and promptly report any

violations found to the education administrative departments. Based on the transferred materials, the education administrative departments initiate administrative law enforcement procedures against the non-compliant operation of the training institutions. On this basis, Shanghai has also formulated the “Directory List of Overlapping and Connecting Matters between Educational Supervision and Educational Administrative Law Enforcement”,^[20] which systematically combs the boundaries of responsibilities and points of cooperation between the two types of regulatory bodies. This practice provides a template for localities to establish standardized and normalized joint regulatory systems. Localities can follow the principle of simplicity, clarify the joint inspection procedures and discretionary standards, and achieve comprehensive coverage of the supervision of off-campus training institutions.

5.2 Constructing a “Responsibility-Interest-Institution” Framework for the Supervision and Governance of Off-Campus Training

According to the governance theory of Kooiman and Van Vliet, governance relies on the interaction and cooperation among multiple entities. These entities jointly construct a kind of order or structure through their interactions. Such order or structure cannot be imposed from the outside, but is naturally generated through inter-entity process consultation, equal dialogue, and interest coordination.^[21] Specifically, off-campus training institutions need to fulfill their social responsibilities as providers of educational services. At the same time, as market entities, they will also pursue their own interests. When such profit-seeking behavior becomes excessively inflated, the government must intervene through institutional means, such as administrative supervision, to correct market failures.

Modern public governance emphasizes the core concept of multi-party co-governance, that is, the management of public affairs should be jointly undertaken by multiple decision-making entities.^[22] This concept has also become a new requirement for the governance practice of off-campus training in China. For “responsibility,” government departments should fully play the role of value guidance. While cultivating a scientific sense of educational responsibility through policy guidance, they should also clarify the responsibilities of off-campus training and other related entities through legislation. For “interests,” if off-campus training is to achieve long-term effective governance, it must form a self-governing network when coordinating various interest conflicts. It is necessary to pay attention to the demands of different social entities in off-

campus training and provide a stable environment for long-term regulatory governance.^[23]

For “institutions,” the construction of institutions should revolve around the interest demands of all parties. It is necessary to systematically define the specific content and implementation methods of regulatory matters, set clear identification standards for improper behavior of all parties, and provide corresponding incentive and restraint measures.

5.3 Improve the legal and regulatory system for off-campus training supervision.

According to the “Key Points of Work for the Ministry of Education in 2022,” the construction of legalized supervision of off-campus education and training should follow the principles of legality and optimality. In specific work, the work objectives are achieved through the logical framework of “basis - behavior - procedure”.^[24] On one hand, the formulation of a unified national special regulation for off-campus training should be accelerated. This regulation should be based on the “Education Law” and be coordinated with existing laws such as the “Promotion Law of Private Education” and the “Law on the Protection of Minors.” In terms of classified legislation, off-campus training institutions should be categorized by training content into subject-based and non-subject-based, distinguished by service targets into different academic stages, and regulated differentially according to the size of the institutions. On the other hand, based on the latest provisions of the “Administrative Penalties Law,” a systematic revision of the “Interim Measures for Educational Administrative Penalties” should be carried out, focusing on improving the penalty procedures and refining the standards of discretion to provide a sufficient legal basis for educational administrative law enforcement. Local governments should also be encouraged to develop local regulations for the supervision of off-campus training in accordance with local realities, and to establish routine law enforcement mechanisms such as regular inspections and special checks.^[25] By building a collaborative mechanism led by the central government and supported by localities, the needs of local governance can be met while ensuring the unity of the legal system. At present, China’s legislative

work on the supervision of off-campus training has entered a stage of substantive advancement. Marked by the document jointly issued by multiple departments of the Zhejiang Provincial Department of Education at the beginning of 2023, China’s process of legalizing the supervision of off-campus training is showing characteristics of local pilot implementation. Local legislative practices are accumulating important experience for national legislation.

5.4 Give full play to the regulatory and guiding role of industry associations.

The “Notice on Issuing the Plan for Deepening the Reform of Standardization Work” released by the State Council explicitly proposes that, in order to meet the demands of market innovation and development, social organizations such as social groups and industry associations with corresponding qualifications and capabilities should be actively guided to play a collaborative role. These organizations should mobilize relevant market entities to jointly participate in the formulation of standards that meet market demands, and such standards should be available for voluntary adoption by market participants. Therefore, in the governance of the private education and training industry, promoting self-discipline of industry associations and establishing industry standards is a crucial step. In improving the teacher qualification access for off-campus training institutions in China, international and regional practical experience can be drawn upon to establish a third-party teacher qualification certification system through social organizations. Japan⁷ and Taiwan⁸ region have developed relatively comprehensive certification models, which have certain reference value. At present, domestic relevant industry organizations, such as the China Education Association and the China Association of Private Education, have launched pilot projects. Regarding the quality of off-campus training, a third-party professional evaluation mechanism can be introduced. Qualified education industry organizations can establish a unified certification standard system and conduct periodic quality assessments of training institutions. To address the unclear boundaries between subject-based and non-subject-based

⁷ The Japan National Association of Learning Tutors has established a “Learning Tutor Certification System,” which divides the qualification certification of learning tutors into “group instruction” and “individual instruction.” “Group instruction” refers to classroom teaching and is divided from low to high into “Group Instruction Level Three,” “Group Instruction Level Two,” and “Group Instruction Level One,” which have become the industry-wide teacher certification standards that are jointly followed and recognized.

⁸ The “National Institute for Education Research” in Taiwan region released a report titled “Feasibility Study on the Tutoring

Teacher Certification System: Taking Tutoring Classes for Students Below High School as an Example,” which began to recommend the certification of qualifications for tutoring education teachers. The “Education and Culture Committee” of Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan also urged the education administrative department to conduct unified certification of teaching staff in the tutoring education market, expecting to establish a tutoring education teacher certification system and a regular evaluation system. Currently, Taipei City has already started the certification of qualifications for tutoring education teachers.

training, industry associations can be relied upon to develop methods for classification and identification, and to coordinate the difficulties encountered during the transformation of training institutions. Self-discipline management of training institutions should be encouraged, and a gradual shift towards an integrated management model should be made, with the participation of industry associations, training institutions, parents, and students, under the leadership of the government and in collaboration with industry associations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Setting a Three-Year Target, Overcoming Difficulties, and Ensuring the Timely Completion of the Central Government's "Double Reduction" Task—The Ministry of Education Convenes a National Video Conference on "Double Reduction" Work [EB/OL]. (2024-01-05) [2025-04-21] http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202401/t20240105_1098374.html
- [2] China Education News. Promoting the Legalization and Normalization of Off-Campus Training Supervision [EB/OL]. (2025-04-23) http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzcg/xwy/wzxw/202203/t20220304_682235.html
http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzcg/xwy/wzxw/202203/t20220304_682235.html
- [3] Qi Zhan-yong, Li Qing-yu, Wang Shu-qin. The Evolution and Rational Choice of Governance Policies for Off-Campus Training Institutions in China Since the 21st Century [J]. Chinese Education Review, 2019, (06): 37-43.
- [4] Song Hai-sheng, Xue Hai-ping. The Regulation and Governance of Shadow Education Institutions in China—A Perspective Based on Game Theory [J]. Contemporary Education Forum, 2018, (01): 79-87.
- [5] Ma Zao-ming, Hu Ya-ting. International Governance of Off-Campus Training: Policy Logic and Functional Positioning [J]. Educational Research and Experiment, 2021, (06): 69-75.
- [6] Zhang Wei. The Standardized Governance of Off-Campus Training in China: Unified Policies and Diverse Responses [J]. Global Education Outlook, 2020, 49(02): 62-82.
- [7] Stevenson, D. L., & Baker, D. P. (1992). Shadow Education and Allocation of Informal Schooling: Transition to University in Japan [J]. American Journal of Sociology, 97, 1639—1657.
- [8] Wang Jing-bo. Three Basic Issues in the Legislation of Off-Campus Training [J]. Exploration and Controversy, 2022, (09): 87-95+1.
- [9] Fu Wei-dong, Guo San-wei. The Theoretical Logic and Practical Approach to the Governance of Non-Subject Off-Campus Training Institutions Under the "Double Reduction" Policy [J]. Chinese Education Review, 2022, (09): 76-82.
- [10] [13] Zhu Jun. The Legalized Supervision of Off-Campus Education and Training [J]. Journal of Educational Science, Hunan Normal University, 2022, 21(05): 12-22.
- [11] Liu Dong-dong. The Specialized Transformation of Subject-Based Off-Campus Training Institutions Under the "Double Reduction" Policy [J]. Journal of Chengdu Normal University, 2022, 38(05): 16-21.
- [12] Zhang Hai-peng, Zhang Xin-min. The Supervision of Off-Campus Training Institutions Under the "Double Reduction" Policy: Conceptual Transition and System Optimization [J]. Journal of Henan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2022, 49(03): 150-156.
- [14] Song Xiaoxin. The Realistic Needs and Promotion Strategies for the Categorized Management of Off-Campus Training Institutions—From the Perspective of Subject and Non-Subject [J]. Education Science Forum, 2022, (14): 3-8.
- [15] [25] Li Man, Liu Xi. The Governance Dilemma and Policy Response of Private Education and Training Institutions [J]. Chinese Education Review, 2018, (07): 26-31.
- [16] Liu Dong-dong. Non-Subject Off-Campus Training Administrative Law Enforcement: Value, Dilemma, and Countermeasures [J]. China Off-Campus Education, 2024, (06): 35-46.
- [17] Zhou You-yong. Research on the Basic Principles of Administrative Law (2nd Edition) [M]. Beijing: Law Press, 2019: 143. [29] Lu Xiao-jing, Luo Peng-cheng.
- [18] Liu Hong, Zhang Duan-hong. "A Normative Study on the List of National Education Administrative Powers—Taking the Administrative Powers of the Ministry of Education as the Research Object," Fudan Education Forum, 2016, Issue 1.
- [19] Gao Hang, Wang Si-zhen. How to Improve Quality and Efficiency through Synergistic Supervision between Educational Oversight and Educational Administrative Law Enforcement [J]. Chinese Education Review, 2023, (08): 52-58.
- [20] Fan Ping-jun. China Education Supervision Report (2021) [M]. Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House, 2021: 207-213.
- [21] Jan Kooiman. Modern Governance: New Government Society Interactions [M]. London: Sage Publications, 1993.
- [22] Zhou Zheng-xiang, Zhang Xiu-fang, Zhang Ping. Problems and Countermeasures in the Application of PPP Model under the New Normal [J]. Chinese Soft Science, 2015 (9): 82-95.
- [23] Fang Fang, Li Jian-ping. The Logical Evolution and Realistic Challenges of Governance Policies for Off-Campus Training Institutions—An Empirical Analysis of 146 Educational Training Dispute Judicial Cases [J]. Fudan Education Review.
- [24] Liu Dong-dong, Fang Fang. New Dilemmas and Alleviation Paths for Off-Campus Training Governance under the "Double Reduction" Policy [J]. Exploration in Educational Science, 2023, 41(03): 49-56.



“When the Goods Get Together”: Luce Irigaray and the Critique of Exchange, Desire and Female Subjectivity

Dr. Girija Suri

Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana, India

Email: girijasuri131989@gmail.com

Received: 17 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Sep 2025; Accepted: 15 Sep 2025; Available online: 18 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Luce Irigaray’s essay “When the Goods Get Together”, included in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), performs a trenchant and imaginative critique of the ways patriarchal discourse, whether anthropological, psychoanalytic, or economic, reduces women to objects of circulation and thereby forecloses alternative modes of desire and community. Through a deliberately satirical scenario in which women (the “goods”) attempt to speak among themselves, Irigaray exposes the structural necessity of women’s silence for the reproduction of male alliances and homosocial bonds. She braids Lévi-Straussian kinship theory, Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, Freud’s pathologizing of female sexuality, and Lacanian accounts of the symbolic, and she twists these inherited frameworks with mimicry and parody so as to reveal their absurdity and exclusions. Crucially, Irigaray does not only unmask; she gestures toward a utopian economy of plenitude, a community of women characterized by reciprocity, embodied speech, and material connectedness beyond circuits of scarcity and exchange. This essay situates “When the Goods Get Together” within feminist theoretical developments, tracing how Irigaray’s method anticipates debates by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and later feminist ethicists, while also considering critical objections about essentialism. Ultimately, the piece argues that Irigaray’s parodic dismantling of patriarchal exchange remains a powerful provocation for rethinking subjectivity, relationality, and feminist praxis.



Keywords—feminist theory, female desire, kinship, Luce Irigaray, parody, psychoanalysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Luce Irigaray’s contribution to feminist theory is both conceptual and stylistic. She interrogates the categories that organize gendered thought while modeling an alternative mode of critical speech. Writing in the wake of structuralist anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis, and in dialogue with contemporaneous French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, Irigaray insisted that language, law, and symbolic representation were saturated with phallogocentric assumptions that occluded female subjectivity. Among the essays collected in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), “When the Goods Get Together” stands out for its deceptively simple rhetorical gambit viz. imagining women as “goods” who might refuse circulation because that provocation both exposes and unsettles several deeply entrenched theoretical and social formations.

Irigaray’s text is built upon a dense intertextuality. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist account in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) argues that the rotation and exchange of marriageable women are central mechanisms by which social alliances are constituted; women therefore function as the medium through which men form bonds and reproduce social order. Gayle Rubin’s influential essay “The Traffic in Women” (1975) dramatizes how such exchange systems objectify female bodies and sexualities, embedding them within a political economy of gender (Rubin 174). Irigaray takes up these observations and translates them into a litmus test: if women were to refuse their assigned role as objects in a system of male exchange, what structural instability would follow? This rhetorical hypothesis produces a mirror that reflects the violence and incoherence of the patriarchal imaginary.

Simultaneously, Irigaray engages psychoanalysis as both target and resource. Freud's formulations of female development with the girl's supposed discovery of "lack" and "penis envy" naturalize heterosexuality and render women's desire logically derivative. Freud's 1920 case study, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" exemplifies this bias by treating female same-sex desire as pathological and reflective of arrested development (Freud 149). Jacques Lacan's reformulation of Freudian categories makes language and the symbolic central. Entrance into the symbolic order is mediated by the Law of the Father and the phallus operates as a central signifier that organizes subjectivity (Lacan 287). Irigaray's strategy is not simply to refute these frameworks on their own terms but rather to parody and occupy them so as to reveal their contradictions. In doing so, she creates a mode of feminist critique that is simultaneously analytic and performative; her rhetorical mimicry enacts what she describes, i.e. the absurdity of treating women as goods, and thereby creates the possibility of an alternative discourse.

The stakes of Irigaray's essay are theoretical and ethical. The exchange model does not only structure marriage and kinship; it informs law, religion, and the symbolic economies that sanction gendered inequality. By recovering the materiality of female relationality, the "red blood" of women's ties, to borrow her imagery, Irigaray aims to restore a vital set of relations that patriarchy obscures. The essay's provocative closing fantasy, that women might compose social worlds "without exchange," in which reciprocity and abundance replace scarcity and commodification (Irigaray 198) should not be read as a nostalgic essentialism but rather as a strategic reimagining. It is a demand that feminist theory take seriously not merely as a representational critique but in terms of the invention of new forms of sociality and speech.

This study provides a sustained reading of "When the Goods Get Together", showing how Irigaray's parodic method exposes the ideological premises of anthropology and psychoanalysis, reveals the disavowed logics of male homosocial desire, and gestures toward practical and theoretical alternatives. It also addresses important objections, notably Judith Butler's reservations about the risks of essentialism and Elizabeth Grosz's critique of sexual difference, thereby situating Irigaray within a dialectic of performance, identity, and feminist praxis.

II. PATRIARCHAL EXCHANGE, FEMALE DESIRE, AND IRIGARAY'S PARODIC CRITIQUE

At the center of Irigaray's essay is a dramatization of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist insight, i.e.

kinship systems are constituted through the exchange of women. In those systems, women are objectified as the medium of male alliances; their personhood is subordinated to the social currency they furnish. Irigaray seizes this analytic frame but transposes it into a deliberately grotesque economy, in which the marketplace of exchange is made literal and the "goods" are human beings. Her rhetorical question—"What would happen if the goods refused to go to market? If they began to speak to each other outside the exchanges organized by men?"—serves as both a thought experiment and an epistemic instrument (Irigaray 196). It forces readers to imagine the contingency of a system that appears natural because its terms have been normalized through repetition and ideology.

The thought experiment accomplishes several interlocking aims. First, it reveals that patriarchal order depends upon the depoliticization of women: to be effective, exchange requires that women be rendered mute, available, and transferable. Second, it exposes the underlying conflicts and contradictions in social theory: accounts that treat women as mere objects inadvertently make women's interiority and capacity for speech disappear from analytic view. Third, and most provocatively, it renders visible the possibility, empirically denied by patriarchal discourse, of women's agency and solidarity beyond male networks.

Irigaray's engagement with psychoanalysis intensifies the critique. Freud's early twentieth-century model constructs female sexuality as a deficiency narrative: the girl's trajectory is described as a process of discovering the absence of the phallus and orienting herself toward men as objects of desire or as replacements for the lost organ. This narrative both hierarchizes desire and marginalizes non-heteronormative expressions. Freud's clinical rendering of a woman's attachment to another woman in the 1920 case study offers in Irigaray's view a paradigmatic illustration of this exclusionary logic. Same-sex female desire is read diagnostically as failure rather than recognized as an intelligible mode of subjectivity (Freud 149).

Lacan's symbolic elaboration further locks subjectivity into the binary of presence/absence and into phallic regulation. In Lacanian terms, the phallus is the privileged signifier around which desire and law cohere. The subject's position is always an effect of entry into the symbolic network, mediated by the paternal law (Lacan 287). Here again, Irigaray's mimicry proves illuminating. If the phallus is the master signifier, and women are defined negatively in relation to it, then women's speech is rendered suspect or unintelligible within the symbolic. Irigaray's parody thus performs a double move. It shows that the logic of symbolic intelligibility depends upon

women's exclusion, and it reclaims a form of speech that has been rendered foreign to the symbolic register.

Irigaray's parodic strategy intersects productively with Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. Cixous insists that women must "write the body" and inscribe modes of speaking that represent the feminine differently (Cixous 882). Irigaray, while not identical to Cixous, advances a kindred project. She uses mimicry to reveal that patriarchal languages are contingent and reversible. By inhabiting the language of anthropology and psychoanalysis and then exaggerating its premises, Irigaray opens a fissure in discourse that allows other modes of signification to emerge. Her satirical tone, at once comic and disquieting, is thus a methodological weapon wherein laughter is enlisted as critical exposure.

Perhaps the most unsettling implication of Irigaray's satire is its revelation of male homosocial desire as both foundational and disavowed within patriarchal economies. The circulation of women, she suggests, does not only create ties between women and men but also creates and sustains male alliances. Men bind themselves to one another using women as the medium of affiliation. Eve Sedgwick's later work in *Between Men* expands on this notion, showing how male homosociality often conceals erotic dynamics that are structured through but not reducible to heterosexuality (Sedgwick 25). Irigaray's parodic scenario exposes the degree to which the prohibition of direct female solidarity functions to hide male-to-male desire. If men's exchanges are predicated on denial of certain impulses, then the restriction upon women's speech and association serves a crucial ideological purpose that obviates the need to acknowledge those disavowed bonds.

This argument about disavowal also helps explain why women's same-sex desire has historically been pathologized not only because of patriarchal phobias about sexual difference, but because female solidarity threatens the social architecture that relies upon women as tokens of male alliance. If women were to form autonomous networks and their speech were legible outside patriarchal scripts, then the ideological apparatus that justifies their circulation would be exposed as contingent rather than necessary.

However, Irigaray does not limit herself to exposing problems but also envisions alternatives. Her provocative assertion that "women among themselves are already outside the commerce of men. They are already a community without exchange, a world of abundance rather than scarcity" (Irigaray 198) introduces a normative vision of sociality that runs counter to exchange logic. This imagined economy of plenitude is not a naïve retreat into essentialism but a strategic reframing. By modeling a

different economy of relationships, Irigaray suggests that feminist theory must account for forms of reciprocity and material connection that are occluded by capitalist and patriarchal conceptions of scarcity.

Irigaray's "red blood" imagery which privileges embodied specificity is instructive here. It insists that women's ties are not merely symbolic tokens but have material force: nursing, touch, caregiving, and mutual aid. Marx's critique of commodity fetishism provides a useful comparison. Just as commodities hide the labor that produced them under layers of market value, so too do patriarchal exchanges hide the lived relations and labors of women behind the sign of transferable value. Recovering the material dimension of women's relations therefore becomes a critical project i.e. to make visible the labor and life that exchange systems obscure.

Scholars have criticized Irigaray on several fronts. Elizabeth Grosz expresses concern that Irigaray's privileging of sexual difference could inadvertently reify the categories (man/woman) she seeks to destabilize, thereby constructing a new essentialist opposition (Grosz 107). Judith Butler also registers suspicion that by positing a recoverable feminine subjectivity, Irigaray might risk fixing identities that feminist performative theory attempts to show as constructed and iteratively produced (*Gender Trouble* 19, 33). These critiques are important and must be taken seriously because feminist theory must avoid reproducing exclusionary taxonomies.

Nevertheless, Butler's and Grosz's critiques do not render Irigaray's project obsolete. Instead, they set up a productive tension. Irigaray's insistence on difference is a corrective to earlier universalist tendencies that effaced sexual asymmetries and material disparities. At the same time, Butler's performative account insists on the contingency of categories and the political efficacy of disrupting repeated scripts. Read together, these perspectives offer a dialectical field. Irigaray insists on the significance of gendered lived experience and the symbolic rearrangements needed to render women audible. Butler warns against treating such rearrangements as metaphysical essences. Irigaray's mimicry can thus be read as a performative intervention, not a metaphysical claim. She enacts the destabilization of categories while refusing to relinquish the material particularities of gendered life. The ethical dimension of Irigaray's imagination is also crucial. If speech and solidarity among women can generate a new economy of relations, then feminist praxis must attend to modes of everyday interaction such as forms of care, accountability, and mutual recognition that constitute political life as much as law and policy do. Irigaray's emphasis on communal abundance challenges feminists to think about praxis not only as critique but as invention posing questions such as how might scholars and

activists cultivate institutions and everyday practices that approximate reciprocity rather than exchange? How might feminist pedagogy, community-building, and cultural production instantiate the kinds of speech and relation Irigaray evokes?

Practically, this could involve foregrounding grassroots networks, cooperative models of labor, and cultural practices that valorize mutual care. It also suggests a hermeneutic shift in scholarship whereby rather than only reading patriarchal texts against the grain, feminist criticism must also produce affirmative accounts of female relationality that are sensitive to embodiment and difference. Irigaray’s satire thus offers both a diagnostic instrument and a programmatic impetus.

III. CONCLUSION

“When the Goods Get Together” remains a bracing intervention in feminist theory because it combines analytic rigor with rhetorical inventiveness. Irigaray’s strategic parody of anthropology and psychoanalysis unmask the ways in which women are treated as objects of circulation and in doing so she opens up the conceptual space to imagine alternative economies of relation. Her insistence that women’s speech and embodied ties be reclaimed from the obscuring logics of exchange is not a retreat to essentialism but a performative provocation. Speech and solidarity, she suggests, can remake what counts as intelligible and valuable.

Critiques from Butler and others raise indispensable cautions about the risks of reifying difference, but those critiques can coexist with an appreciation of Irigaray’s program. Feminist theory benefits when it holds opposite imperatives together such as interrogating the constructedness of gender categories while also attending to the material, embodied experiences that those categories mediate. Irigaray’s work compels exactly this double movement. She asks us both to dismantle the discursive machinery that sustains domination and to imagine and enact new modes of relation that remap desires and responsibilities.

The rhetorical question that animates the essay i.e. what happens “when the goods get together?” is therefore still an urgent challenge. It asks scholars, activists, and readers to imagine social worlds in which the exchange logic that underwrites gendered domination is no longer operative, where women’s voices are audible, and where relationality is measured not by scarcity and transfer but by reciprocity, care, and abundance. If such an imagination is difficult, precisely because patriarchy has made alternative speech difficult to recognize, then Irigaray’s parody is all the more necessary. By making the absurdities of the present visible, she enables the work of inventive transformation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- [2] Cixous, H. (1976). The laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- [3] Freud, S. (1955). The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality in a woman (1920). In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 18, pp. 145–172). Hogarth Press.
- [4] Grosz, E. (1989). *Sexual subversions: Three French feminists*. Allen & Unwin.
- [5] Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one* (C. Porter & C. Burke, Trans.). Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1977)
- [6] Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1966)
- [7] Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in women: Notes on the “political economy” of sex. In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an anthropology of women* (pp. 157–210). Monthly Review Press.
- [8] Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire*. Columbia University Press.
- [9] Suri, G. (2025). Rediscovering the “lost continent”: Elaine Showalter, feminist criticism, and the global female literary tradition. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 13(9), 61–65. <https://doi.org/10.35629/9467-13096165>



Tribal Voices in Translation: Negotiating Cultural Spaces in Narayan's *Kocharethi*

Suresh Kurapati

Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima, India

Received: 14 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Sep 2025; Accepted: 15 Sep 2025; Available online: 19 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores how *Kocharethi*, the first tribal novel in Malayalam by Narayan an Araya tribal man, participates in a cultural dialogue through its English translation by Catherine Thankamma. As a narrative rooted in the lived experiences, oral traditions, and ecological consciousness of the Malayar tribal community in Kerala, the text offers a unique insight into indigenous worldviews. The study examines how the act of translation becomes a site of cultural negotiation, mediating between marginalized tribal voices and the mainstream literary discourse. Drawing on postcolonial translation theory and cultural studies, the paper undertakes a close textual analysis of key elements like language, idioms, customs, and narrative style to trace the tensions between fidelity to tribal specificity and the imperatives of accessibility. While the translation enables wider visibility and recognition for tribal literature, it also involves inevitable shifts, losses, and transformations. The paper argues that *Kocharethi* in translation functions as a dialogic space, where tribal identity is both asserted and adapted. Ultimately, the study affirms the potential of translation not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a powerful tool for intercultural understanding and literary inclusion in India's pluralistic narrative landscape.



Keywords—Cultural Dialogue, Indigenous Identity, Malayalam Literature, Postcolonial Theory, Tribal Literature, Translation Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the *dialogue of cultures* has become increasingly significant in literary and cultural studies as it emphasizes mutual understanding and negotiation between diverse cultural systems. Mona Abousenna (2004) suggests that such dialogue fosters a “cultural consensus,” enabling civilizational unity without erasing cultural difference. Literature, in this sense, serves as a vital space for intercultural exchange where voices from the margins can be heard and validated. Within this framework, translation emerges not as a neutral linguistic act but as a powerful form of *cultural mediation*, particularly when it involves texts rooted in indigenous or tribal traditions (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990; Venuti, 1995). One such text that invites critical attention is Narayan's *Kocharethi* (1998), widely recognized as the first tribal novel in Malayalam from South India. Narrating the life, customs, and struggles of the Malayar community in Kerala, the

novel offers an insider's view into a culturally rich yet historically marginalized tribal society. Its English translation by Catherine Thankamma, titled *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, significantly expanded its readership and impact. However, the translation also raises complex questions regarding the representation of tribal identity within dominant literary and linguistic frameworks. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) argues, translating subaltern voices demands ethical responsibility, as the act inevitably involves choices that affect how the Other is represented. Similarly, Venuti (1995) emphasizes the translator's “invisibility” in mainstream discourse, suggesting that translation can either domesticate or preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the original. In the case of *Kocharethi*, the translation serves as a dialogic site where tribal oral traditions, ecological sensibilities, and community values interact with global literary norms resulting in both cultural preservation and negotiation.

This paper draws on postcolonial translation theory and cultural studies to critically examine how the English translation of *Kocharethi* negotiates tribal identity, cultural meaning, and accessibility within mainstream discourse. It argues that the translation operates as a dialogic process, mediating between indigenous specificity and broader readership expectations.

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

- i. How does the translation of *Kocharethi* function as a dialogue between tribal and mainstream cultures?
- ii. What is lost, adapted, or transformed in this process of cultural mediation?

Through close textual analysis, this study explores the ethical and epistemological dimensions of translating tribal literature, ultimately highlighting the role of translation in advancing inclusivity in India's multilingual literary landscape.

II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Narayan, the author of *Kocharethi*, occupies a significant position in the emergence of tribal voices in Indian literature. Born in 1940 in Idukki district of Kerala, Narayan belonged to the Malayar tribe, an Adivasi (indigenous) community residing predominantly in the Western Ghats. A first-generation literate from his community, Narayan worked as a government official-postman and writer, but his literary legacy lies in his role as a cultural chronicler who gave voice to tribal experiences from an insider's perspective. His novel *Kocharethi*, published in 1998, is widely recognized as the first tribal novel in Malayalam, and by extension, one of the earliest tribal novels in Indian vernacular literature. It portrays the life of Kunjipennu, a tribal woman, and spans decades of sociopolitical transformation in the Malayar community, reflecting broader issues of land alienation, caste like tribal oppression, displacement, and resistance. The Malayar tribe, classified as a Scheduled Tribe in India, traditionally practiced shifting cultivation and had a deep symbiotic relationship with nature. The tribe's oral traditions, folk rituals, and communal practices are central to its identity but have long been marginalized within the dominant literary and cultural frameworks of the region. Like many indigenous communities, the Malayars have faced social exclusion, economic marginalization, and cultural invisibility. Narayan's novel, therefore, functions not merely as a narrative but as a form of cultural documentation and resistance preserving a worldview often erased in mainstream discourse. The emergence of *Kocharethi* must be situated within the larger movement of tribal literature in India, which has gained critical attention

in recent decades. Tribal literature unlike postcolonial or Dalit literature has historically been excluded from institutional recognition and has struggled to find space in national literary canons. This is partly due to its strong reliance on oral forms and the reluctance of mainstream publishers to accommodate narratives seen as peripheral. Scholars like G.N. Devy and Mahasweta Devi have emphasized the need to legitimize tribal voices, recognizing them as repositories of alternative knowledge systems, ecological ethics, and community-based epistemologies. In this context, *Kocharethi* plays a pioneering role in bridging the gap between oral culture and written literary form, while also challenging the linguistic hegemony of dominant castes and classes.

The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma in 2011 significantly contributed to the novel's reception beyond Malayalam readership. Thankamma, a seasoned translator and academic, approached the translation with an acute awareness of the linguistic and cultural challenges posed by rendering tribal experiences into English. In her own commentary in the introduction to the book, she acknowledges the limitations of English in capturing the emotive nuances and contextual embeddedness of tribal expressions. Her translation attempts to maintain fidelity to the original while also negotiating readability for non-Malayali audiences. This act of translation is politically significant as it participates in a broader process of cultural mediation, bringing indigenous narratives into transregional and global conversations. However, it also opens up questions about representational authority, translational loss, and the risk of co-optation within dominant discourses. Thus, *Kocharethi* as authored by Narayan and translated by Thankamma embodies a complex literary and cultural movement. It represents a critical intervention in India's multilingual and multicultural literary landscape, enabling tribal voices to engage in a dialogue with both national and global readers.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Translation, particularly in postcolonial contexts, is not merely a technical or linguistic task but a politically charged process involving asymmetrical power relations, cultural representation, and ethical responsibility. Postcolonial Translation Theory foregrounds these issues, especially when dealing with texts by or about marginalized groups. In the case of Narayan's *Kocharethi*, the English translation by Catherine Thankamma raises critical questions about the translation of tribal experiences from a non-hegemonic language (Malayalam) to a global language (English) with embedded colonial histories.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "The Politics of Translation" (1993) is foundational to postcolonial translation discourse. Spivak emphasizes that the translation of texts produced by subaltern or marginalized subjects must be handled with extreme sensitivity, as such texts carry the burden of representing voices historically silenced or misrepresented. For Spivak, translation is an ethical act of "intimate reading," in which the translator must inhabit the text and its socio-cultural context rather than simply transfer its surface meanings. She warns against the homogenizing tendencies of global English, which often flattens linguistic and cultural diversity in the name of accessibility. This is especially relevant to *Kocharethi*, a novel deeply embedded in the oral traditions, ecological consciousness, and socio-religious customs of the Malayar tribe. Any attempt to translate this into English runs the risk of diluting or misrepresenting the community's distinct worldview. Lawrence Venuti's concept of "domestication" and "foreignization" offers another key theoretical tool for analysing literary translation. In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), Venuti critiques the dominant tendency in English-language translation practices to "domesticate" foreign texts i.e., to render them fluent, readable, and culturally familiar to target audiences. This practice, he argues, makes the translator invisible and erases the cultural alterity of the source text. Conversely, "foreignization" resists such assimilation by deliberately retaining the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the original, thus confronting readers with its foreignness. In the context of *Kocharethi*, the translator's choices whether to retain tribal idioms, rituals, and ecological references or to adapt them to suit English-speaking readers become central to how the tribal community is represented in translation.

Catherine Thankamma's translation of *Kocharethi* appears to straddle this tension. While she attempts to maintain fidelity to Narayan's original expressions and cultural specificity, she also must negotiate readability for an audience unfamiliar with the Malayar way of life. This balancing act reflects the broader challenge that postcolonial translation theory identifies: the translator must navigate between cultural preservation and communicative effectiveness, often under conditions shaped by linguistic inequality and market pressures. Thus, postcolonial translation theory provides a critical framework to examine the cultural politics embedded in the translation of *Kocharethi*. It helps foreground issues of representational ethics, linguistic agency, and the unavoidable asymmetries in translating indigenous literature into a global literary system.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF KOCHARETHI

IJELS-2025, 10(5), (ISSN: 2456-7620) (Int. J of Eng. Lit. and Soc. Sci.)

<https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.105.20>

The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma plays a pivotal role in mediating tribal narratives for wider audiences. This analysis focuses on four major areas where the dynamics of cultural negotiation are most evident: language and orality, representation of tribal life, narrative voice and agency, and reader accessibility.

(a) Language, Style, and Orality

One of the defining features of *Kocharethi* is its deep grounding in the oral traditions of the Malayar community. Narayan's original Malayalam text draws heavily on tribal idioms, proverbs, and speech patterns that reflect the collective memory and ecological wisdom of the community. In translating these into English, Thankamma faces the challenge of conveying meanings that are highly localized and culturally embedded. While some expressions retain their tribal flavour, many are neutralized or generalized to maintain readability. For example, specific terms related to rituals or flora/fauna are sometimes translated into generic equivalents or explained through footnotes or contextualization. This reflects what Venuti (1995) terms "domestication," where foreign elements are adapted to suit the linguistic norms of the target language. The storytelling rhythm marked by pauses, repetitions, and oral commentary in the original is often flattened in the translation, leading to a loss of the performative quality of tribal narration. Nonetheless, Thankamma makes a conscious effort to preserve some idiomatic expressions and avoids over-sanitizing the narrative, thus maintaining a semblance of the original orality.

(b) Representation of Tribal Life

Kocharethi vividly portrays the marriage customs, healing practices, forest rituals, and agricultural life of the Malayar tribe. These are essential elements not only of plot but also of cultural worldview. In the English translation, many of these are retained through descriptive detail, especially scenes involving childbirth rituals, folk medicine, and communal gatherings. However, the translation occasionally simplifies complex cultural references, either by omitting detailed explanations or substituting them with more familiar concepts. For instance, healing chants or spirit-invocation rituals may be briefly described without conveying their cosmological significance. This simplification risks reducing indigenous knowledge systems to ethnographic curiosities rather than living epistemologies. Yet, the translation also creates space for cultural preservation by including tribal names for plants, spiritual beings, and kinship terms, thereby resisting complete assimilation into dominant cultural codes.

(c) Voice and Agency

A critical concern in translating indigenous literature is whether the voice of the community is preserved. Narayan's *Kocharethi* is notable for its use of an insider's voice that foregrounds the experiences of Kunjipennu and other tribal characters with dignity and complexity. The translation largely succeeds in maintaining this narrative integrity. Kunjipennu's agency, resistance to patriarchal and caste structures, and emotional depth are effectively conveyed in English, although some nuances of internal dialogue and cultural subtext are inevitably diminished. Spivak (1993) warns against the risk of erasing the subaltern voice in translation; in this case, the translator avoids overt interpretation or editorialization, allowing the characters' voices to emerge organically. However, some tonal shifts especially in emotionally intense scenes may reflect the translator's need to balance fidelity with linguistic clarity.

(d) Reader Reception and Accessibility

The translation of *Kocharethi* has made the text accessible to national and international audiences, including scholars of Dalit and tribal studies, postcolonial literature, and translation theory. This expanded reception is a major success in terms of visibility for tribal narratives. However, accessibility is achieved through a series of compromises. Certain culturally dense segments are abridged, while unfamiliar tribal concepts are explained in simplified terms or glossed over entirely. These strategies may help readers unfamiliar with tribal life but also risk diluting the very difference the text aims to present. This tension reflects what Venuti (1995) describes as the dilemma of the translator: whether to estrange the reader to preserve the text's cultural specificity, or to adapt the text for easier consumption. Thankamma's translation walks a fine line between these poles, at times achieving a delicate balance and at other times leaning toward domestication.

Overall, the English translation of *Kocharethi* emerges as a site of layered cultural negotiation. It opens up a rich tribal narrative to wider publics while grappling with the inevitable tensions of representation, fidelity, and reception. The translation does not merely bridge languages it mediates between distinct cultural epistemologies, thereby functioning as a dialogic space in the broader discourse of indigenous literature in India.

V. DISCUSSION

The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma offers more than a linguistic rendering of Narayan's original Malayalam text it exemplifies the complex process of cultural dialogue wherein tribal

identity encounters the conventions of dominant literary systems. As the textual analysis has shown, the translation negotiates multiple cultural codes, navigating between fidelity to the Malayar community's oral, ecological, and ritual traditions and the demands of a mainstream, primarily Anglophone readership. Drawing on postcolonial translation theory, this paper views translation as a dynamic site of negotiation rather than a passive conduit of meaning. In Spivak's (1993) terms, the act of translating a subaltern voice demands "ethical intimacy," a recognition that cultural particularities cannot be easily transposed without interpretive violence. Thankamma's translation of *Kocharethi* reflects this tension: while it strives to preserve tribal worldviews and linguistic patterns, it is also shaped by the implicit need to domesticate unfamiliar concepts for accessibility. This dual imperative to retain cultural distinctiveness while ensuring readability exemplifies the translator's dilemma in a postcolonial multilingual context.

Kocharethi as a translated text becomes a site of encounter between marginalized indigenous identity and hegemonic literary traditions. The narrative structure, tribal idioms, and oral storytelling modes carry the weight of a culture that has long been excluded from the mainstream literary canon. Through translation, these elements enter a broader discursive space, where they challenge the dominant narrative frameworks that have historically rendered tribal lives invisible or folkloric. At the same time, the very act of translation subjects the tribal narrative to new forms of mediation, often shaped by aesthetic expectations and cultural norms external to the community it represents. This brings us to the core tension of visibility versus assimilation. On the one hand, the translation of *Kocharethi* has significantly enhanced the visibility of tribal literature, offering scholars, students, and general readers access to a previously overlooked narrative world. On the other hand, the price of this visibility is often assimilation through linguistic simplification, explanatory glosses, or narrative restructuring that risks flattening the cultural complexity of the original. Venuti's (1995) critique of the "invisible translator" finds resonance here, as the translation walks a fine line between preserving the 'foreignness' of the source text and making it palatable for broader consumption. Nonetheless, *Kocharethi* in translation does not surrender entirely to this pressure. It retains enough linguistic and cultural markers to signal its tribal origins and to assert a distinct identity within the Indian-English literary space. This hybrid position neither fully tribal nor fully mainstream constitutes what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as a "third space" of cultural hybridity, where meaning is continuously negotiated and identities are re-articulated.

VI. CONCLUSION

The English translation of Narayan's *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma stands as a compelling example of how translation can function as a dialogue of cultures mediating between the indigenous worldviews of a tribal community and the interpretive frameworks of national and global readerships. Far from being a neutral linguistic act, the translation emerges as a space of negotiation that engages with cultural, political, and ethical complexities. It brings the oral, ecological, and ritual knowledge of the Malayar tribe into conversation with dominant literary norms, thereby expanding the boundaries of what constitutes Indian literature in the postcolonial context. This paper has argued that while translation opens up important opportunities for cultural visibility and recognition, it also entails inherent limitations. The act of translating tribal literature often involves compromise linguistic flattening, simplification of cultural nuances, or partial assimilation into mainstream narrative conventions. These transformations, though sometimes necessary for accessibility, raise critical concerns about the integrity of indigenous representation and the preservation of epistemological difference. Yet, despite these challenges, the translation of *Kocharethi* marks a significant intervention in India's multilingual literary landscape. It not only amplifies a historically marginalized voice but also invites critical reflection on the ethics and politics of cross-cultural representation. By foregrounding the tribal as a legitimate subject of literary inquiry and aesthetic expression, the text in translation makes a strong case for including tribal narratives in curricula, public discourse, and literary studies. Ultimately, *Kocharethi* in translation affirms the potential of literature to serve as a bridge between cultures, fostering empathy, understanding, and critical engagement across linguistic and cultural divides. It reminds us that translation, when ethically and thoughtfully practiced, can be a powerful tool of both cultural preservation and transformation.

REFERENCES

- [1] *A saga of loss: Representing native ethos in Narayan's Kocharethi*. (2016). *Pesquisa Online*, 110–114.
- [2] Abousenna, M. (2004). Dialogue of cultures: The key to understanding. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 24, 7–15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4047429>
- [3] Abousenna, M. (2004). Reason and peace in the Middle East. *Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy*, 4(1).
- [4] Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (Eds.). (1990). *Translation, history and culture*. Pinter Publishers.
- [5] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- [6] Devy, G. N. (1992). *After amnesia: Tradition and change in Indian literary criticism*. Orient Blackswan.
- [7] Narayan. (2011). *Kocharethi: The Araya woman* (C. Thankamma, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- [8] Spivak, G. C. (1993). The politics of translation. In *Outside in the teaching machine* (pp. 179–200). Routledge.
- [9] Thankamma, C. (2011). Translating the 'tribal': The case of *Kocharethi*. In G. N. Devy (Ed.), *Translation: The Indian tradition* (pp. 121–132). Orient Blackswan.
- [10] Udeshi, H., & Joshi, P. (2018). Narayan's *Kocharethi* in the light of post-colonialism. *An International Multidisciplinary Research eJournal*, 3(6), 1–7.
- [11] Varma, S. (2018). The clan deity. *Postcolonial Text*, 13(2).
- [12] Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.
- [13] Zecchini, L. (2019). Dalit literature, Indian literature, world literature: Between archive and canon. *Interventions*, 21(5), 734–752. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1585914>



Refiguring the Other: A Critique on the Politics of Teaching Literatures of the Marginalised

Mr. Abdul Samad K¹, Dr. Basheer Kotta²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Advanced Studies and Research in English Language and Literature, Farook College (Autonomous), University of Calicut, Kerala, India. salampanan@gmail.com

²Research Supervisor, Centre for Advanced Studies and Research in English Language and Literature, Farook College (Autonomous), University of Calicut, Kerala, India.

Received: 16 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Sep 2025; Accepted: 17 Sep 2025; Available online: 20 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract – Introduction of courses on literatures of the marginalised in colleges and universities is a significant step in the democratisation process of the country. These courses facilitate discussion on the socio-political conditions of the marginalised people in the country and enables learners to reflect on their own social position and the role of power in constructing hierarchies in the society. Following the insights of Paulo Freire, the study examines the effectiveness of the courses in developing a critical pedagogy in which a new social consciousness is formed. The study problematises the absence of texts of Ambedkar in the curriculum and argues that the education process has not developed an inclusive system and privileged groups control the decision making in the Universities. The study foregrounds the need of placing Ambedkar thoughts at the centre of a liberating education system.



Keywords – Literature of the marginalised, Dalit literature, critical pedagogy, university education, Dalit consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

The combined political activism of Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and B R Ambedkar (1891-1956) have shaped Dalit liberation movement in Maharashtra and Dalit literature is a literary manifestation of this thinking. The term 'Dalit' was first used by Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar reintroduced the term with new vigour fusing the oppressed state of Dalits with the rebellion against caste norms and values. Though there were literary works from the early 1960s, the publication of *When I Concealed My Caste* (1963) by Baburao Bagul stormed the Marathi literary world and there has been a steady flow of Dalit literary productions ever since. The emergence of the new literature challenged the established literary standards and sought to refigure a new aesthetics which would incorporate the values of the liberation movement. The English translation of *The Poisoned Bread* in 1992 offered a new dimension to the movement as it contributed in consolidating Dalit literary productions in other states of India including Tamil

Nadu and Kerala. The English translations of Dalit writings and their wide acceptance offered a new lease of life to vernacular literary productions which were not able to gain attention from the regional literary world. The presence of postcolonial discourses in the academy helped to recognise these literary productions as part of the democratisation and liberation of the oppressed groups and gradually they became a part of Indian academic programmes. At present, most of the universities in India offer core/optional courses on Dalit literature and they have brought the issues represented in these literary works a serious concern of academic discussions. This paper analyses how universities with their socio-political orientations have framed the curriculum and pedagogy of the courses and how the subjectivity of the learners influences the classroom transactions of the courses. Unlike other courses offered by India academy, these courses require introspection from the members of the academic community as it discusses issues internal Indian society and the political positions is reflected

in the framework of curriculum and pedagogy and the dynamics of classrooms where active participation of non-Dalit students is essential in the effective implementation of the curriculum.

II. THEORETICAL FORMULATIONS

Dalit writers and critics have foregrounded the need of a historical framework to understand the dynamics of Dalit literature. Since Dalit literature is written to bring about social transformation, these texts are to be understood in its historical/sociological context. In his definition of Dalit literature, Limbale underscores the role of Dalit consciousness in conceptualising literature.

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system recognising the human being as its focus. Ambedkar thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. (Limbale, 2004, p-54)

In this context, it is imperative that a theoretical formulation is required to understand the dynamics of Dalit writing. These literatures are written to expose the socio-political conditions of Dalits in India; subjugation, miseries and aspirations of a large group of people who are trapped in the old and new systems of discrimination. These new literatures require the curriculum designers to offer a comprehensive historical context within which they can be appreciated and a critical pedagogy which would consider the social experience of the learners. In addition, these courses needed to cater the aspirations of learners from different social backgrounds towards a democratic future. A review of the syllabus of the undergraduate and postgraduate courses of University of Calicut will illustrate some of the shortcomings in the curriculum and pedagogy of Dalit Literatures in India.

It is unfortunate to see that most of the courses on Dalit Literature do not offer any specific learning objectives and outcome. The syllabus of Dalit Literature of PG programme prepared by the University of Calicut in 2014 places Dalit Literature in the context of post structuralism. In the prose section of the syllabus, essays by Michel Foucault, Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, Raosaheb Kasbe and T M Yesudasan are included. Though the essays accommodate Dalit literature in the backdrop of critical theory in the academy, these texts do not address immediate social realities of the learners. No concerted attempts are

visible to offer the social and historical contexts of the literary productions.

The syllabus Dalit Literature in the undergraduate programme also does not include any specific objective or outcome. It is true that its selection of texts is much more politically sensitive but also does not offer any comprehensive socio, political and cultural context to the study of Dalit literature. Though literary works from various states of India have been incorporated into the syllabus, the everyday issues faced by Dalits in Kerala such as the issues do not come under the prescribed works.

The texts selected for Dalit Studies of postgraduate programme of the university (2017) includes texts by Sharan Kumar Limbale, Pradeepan Pampirikkunnu and Gopal Guru and offer insights on Dalit aesthetics, Dalit responses to the questions of nationality and modernity and the issue of Dalit women voices. These selections are largely drawn out of literary texts and responses to them but do not position the issue of caste at the centre of the syllabus.

In the 2019 revision of the undergraduate syllabus of the University of Calicut, Dalit studies is substituted by the Literatures of the Marginalised in which texts by writers who are marginalised in terms of class, caste, ethnicity and gender are included. This has effectively erased the presence of Dalit Literature from the undergraduate syllabus and the selections of texts present cultural distinctiveness of various social groups without exposing the dynamics of power relations and the construction of centre and marginality in cultural productions.

The syllabi prescribed above have offered various forms of Dalit writings such as prose, poetry, short story, novel and drama from different states of India. These texts discuss various aspects of Dalit life and are expected to prepare learners for a democratic and egalitarian future. Interestingly, studies conducted on students who have taken Dalit literature as part of university education often fail to imbibe the dynamics for socio-political transformation and often find reading them depressing. In a study conducted among the university students in Tamil Nadu, learners often complain that they do not read these texts because they reproduce their social inferiority. A Dalit postgraduate student from Chennai, Tamil Nadu is quoted saying “Reading Dalit literature has two effects. There might be people who change and there might be people who consider themselves superior because they are not Dalits. That thought made me feel that I was inferior.” (Geetha, 2011). In addition, a revamping of the pedagogy of dalit studies is also required. Dalit studies have been inducted to the curriculum of university education and Indian universities still maintain subtle forms of caste and creed as everyday

practices. This makes articulation of Dalit experiences difficult in the classroom and which eventually leads to the reproductions of existing caste relations. In his autoethnographic study on the pedagogy of Dalit studies, the researcher reports that students from Dalit communities do not find classroom interaction safe for them to narrate instances of discrimination.

While discussing the historical, social, economic and cultural aspects of caste, I

requested the students to reflect and analyse in their own way, the issues pertaining to

caste and what role, they thought, educational institutions played in such contexts. In

the introductory classes, I received very few responses. The next few classes, students

approached me personally and narrated incidents of discrimination. I asked for their

consent to anonymize and speak about these experiences to which they readily agreed

and suggested that they prefer this method instead of speaking out in class. (Das, 2023, p-7)

The results of these qualitative researches show that the curriculum and pedagogy of Dalit studies require restructuring as it often reproduces existing power relations and students from Dalit communities find it difficult to articulate discriminations, they are subject to in the universities as the non-Dalit members outrightly reject any possibility of practising caste-based discrimination.

III. CASTE AND AMBEDKAR THOUGHTS IN DALIT LITERATURE

Studies made among students as well as adults have shown that non-Dalits often refuse to admit any form of caste-based discrimination while subtle forms of discrimination do persist. The task of teaching Dalit literature is to create a situation where all participant learners feel safe to share their ideas. Unfortunately, discussion of Dalit experiences often create troubled moments in the classroom as Dalits fear being identified as inferior in the class. There are moments of admitting guilt and powerlessness to the educator as well as learners. In this context, the discussions are to be guided towards a democratic society in which all members enjoy liberty and fraternity. This requires a critical pedagogy which should systematically convince learners that caste is a reality and it is a system of discrimination which denies complete humanity to both the aggressor and the victim.

Dalit studies will serve its purpose only when caste is placed at the centre of Dalit pedagogy. This is to be

achieved by developing critical thoughts which recognise caste as a structure of oppression irrespective of the individuals performing it. In the context of anti-caste thoughts in India, Dr B R Ambedkar and his systematic criticism of caste is the most reliable resource. None of the syllabi discussed so far do not include any segment of Ambedkarite thought in it. It is ironic that while Dalit writers, critics and thinkers have acknowledged the role of Ambedkarite thought in the emergence of Dalit literature, curriculum designers of the university have kept his thought out of the syllabus.

The exclusion of texts by Ambedkar should be seen in the context of his contributions in Dalit articulations. A comprehensive review of modern dalit writings will testify the significance of Ambedkarite thought in evoking all forms of literary productions including autobiographies which were triggered by his ideological and political revolts. In the prefatory note to the path breaking text *Poisoned Bread*, Gail Omvedt observes "...it was Ambedkar's spirit of revolt, his modernism (identified in this speech with the French Revolution) and his rationalism which provided the philosophical context of the new Marathi Dalit literature" (Omvedt, 2014, p-x). In his introduction to the book, Arjun Dangle describes the role of Ambedkar as "Dr Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits" (p-xxiv). A cursory look at any anthology of Dalit writing would provide sufficient testimonies to understand the role of Ambedkar but most of the syllabi do not include his writings into the texts selected for study. This has seriously affected the development of a critical historical context against which most of these texts make meanings and serve its political purposes.

The integration of courses on Dalit writings into the structure of academic studies strengthens democratic processes and they prepare the younger generation to participate in affirmative actions required for the liberation of the oppressed. Universities are spaces of social interactions and the induction of socially relevant courses into the curriculum enables students' communities to empathise with the suffering of the marginalised communities and encourage them to stand for policy making towards a democratic future. At present, courses on Dalit literature/ literature of the marginalised are offered as optional courses and these need to be upgraded as core courses with a comprehensive socio-political framework.

IV. DESIGNING THE CURRICULUM AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Studies conducted among learners of Dalit literature have reported that the selection of texts prescribed

for study often do not address the social realities the participant learner faces in their life. Though the formation of national consciousness is significant, the pedagogy has to address the pressing demand of the learners. In the context of Kerala, Dalit studies often fail to select texts that have effectively problematised the issue of land ownership such as *Puliyathara* by Paul Chirakkilode and the subtle practices of caste discrimination such as “Ghost Speech” by C Ayyappan. Students are often alienated from the texts listed as they estrange them from non-Dalit members and the texts reproduce institutions of discrimination without any historical context.

The restructuring of the syllabus of Dalit Literature as Literature of the Marginalised also has adversely affected the pedagogy of the courses. This course includes works of art from various communities of the globe and provides various forms of marginalisation without providing any tools to reveal the mechanisms of marginality. Such conceptions often showcase marginalised representations as mere curiosities and positions marginalised communities as reproducing their own systems of marginalisation without offering any historical insights into the workings of systems of oppression. Such selections of texts do not strengthen the dialogues for the making of a democratic future. For example, the text “Annamma Teacher Ororomma” is selected to represent the exploitation of a female character by various institutions of power. Instead of revealing those institutions and their ideological underpinnings, the reader shares the male gaze of the narrator and presents the exploitation as an act without the involvement of gender connections. In a similar manner, many of the texts prescribed in the course place the marginalised community themselves as responsible for their own marginality. This effectively helps the dominating groups to conceal themselves and pose the victims responsible for their own exploitation.

V. CONCLUSION

Studies conducted among students of universities have reported that courses on Dalit Literature / Literature of the marginalised help them to understand the oppressed and enable them to play constructive roles in the planning and execution of affirmative actions but most of the syllabi fails to provide a comprehensive perspective to approach the works selected and the ideological priorities of academicians and educators spoil the designing of the curriculum and the execution of pedagogy in the classroom. In addition, the unwillingness of the universities to integrate the course into the core courses also create issues for the classroom transaction. A well-designed curriculum with

critical pedagogy can transform classrooms and lead towards a liberatory politics.

REFERENCES

- [1] Administrator. (n.d.). *Syllabus*. Department of English Calicut University. <https://english.uoc.ac.in/index.php/home/syllabus>
- [2] Ambedkar, B. R., Roy, A., & Anand, S. (2016). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition*. Verso.
- [3] Cīrakkarōṭi, P., & Krishnan, M. (2019). *Pulayathara*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Dangle, A. (1994). *Poisoned Bread: Translations from modern marathi dalit literature*; ed. by Arjun Dangle. Orient Longman.
- [5] Das, R. (2023). Brandeis University, Centre for Global Development and Sustainability. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. 4(No. 1), 154–166.
- [6] Geetha, K. A. (2011). Societal transformation through literature. *Interventions*, 13(3), 398–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801x.2011.597598>
- [7] Kumar, R. (2019). *Dalit literature and criticism*. Orient Blackswan.
- [8] Limbāle, S., & Mukherjee, A. K. (2004). *Towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature: History, controversies and considerations*. Orient Blackswan.



The Poetics of Understanding Mizo Pasts

Lalrinawmi Colvom Lulam

Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received: 15 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Sep 2025; Accepted: 17 Sep 2025; Available online: 21 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Mizoram is the hilly, southernmost state of India's North East. The Mizo are a people who in all they do, think or believe, like to celebrate and commemorate, or simply mark their experience in song. With the introduction of writing, many of these survive today in the written form and are considered the earliest Mizo poetry. Colonial interventions compelled rapid cultural, political, and social changes on the people of these hills. While writing is generally associated with civilization and progress, the project of literacy cannot be divorced from the imperialist agenda that brought literacy to oral communities. It also meant that their past was rendered invalid; for lack of any written archival record, they were considered a people with no history. This paper will attempt to explore how songs offer a space for memory and remembering, and allow access to the past that history writing has not.



Keywords— Mizo, Orature, Literacy, Writing, Songs, Memory, History Writing

Introduction

Mizoram is the hilly, southernmost state of India's North East, bordering the states of Assam, Tripura and Manipur, as well as international borders with Bangladesh in the South-West and Myanmar to the East. Mizo culture has primarily been an oral one. Mizo oral culture came before written forms and has survived into contemporary times where the written word seems to permeate all forms of communication. While the written word is generally associated with civilization and progress, the project of literacy has usually caused ruptures in the society it is introduced into. The transition from oracy to literacy comes with various concomitant disruptions in world view, cultural practices and access to new cultural tools, especially in the case of writing skills and technology. How did written technology impact an oral community? What effects did writing have on the poetic traditions of Mizo Orature? Thus, this paper will explore the ways in which writing impacted Mizo Orature and the poetics of an Oral Community.

From Orature to Literature

According to legend, the Mizo had a script in ancient times, but they lost it. In his essay "The Story of Lost Manuscript in South Asia", Lalhruaitluanga Ralte refers to

early Mizo writers and more contemporary researchers, who offer various versions of the legend,

Tradition says that the written script of the Mizos was written on a sun-dried animal skin, which was eaten by a hungry dog while unattended. One writer had it that the script was written on leather scroll which was lost while living a nomadic life. Others said that the leather scroll was used as a cover of a wooden mortar, used for pounding rice. Unfortunately, a hungry dog ate it while unattended. So, the precious script was lost long ago.¹

My point of departure for this paper is the rendering of a Mizo literature from existent orature, especially the conception of Mizo poetry, to understand how literate cultures inform and impact cultural practices of transmitting memory in oral communities. The discussion of impact also involves questions of reception, and whether Mizo society has managed to sufficiently recover enough from the rupture to renovate their poetic practices. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the terms 'songs' and 'poems' or 'poetry' interchangeably.

Mizos are a people who like to celebrate and commemorate, or simply mark their experience in song, in all they do, think or believe². Songs were created and passed on orally in pre-literate times through performance. From sometime in the 18th Century onwards, names of individual composers began to be acknowledged as a certain manner of “authorship” began to take shape. Originally created as two to four line songs, the form drew from folk songs that had been popular

and handed down through generations. Often tunes were borrowed from existent folk songs or even other song creators but what distinguished them was the lyrics.³

With the introduction of the alphabet and the arrival of the written technology under the colonial ‘civilising’ project, what were so far songs, transmitted across and down through performance, were rendered into the written form. Stripped of their performative forms and tunes, these renderings then came to be the earliest Mizo poetry. It must be mentioned that the rendering of these songs into literate forms were not done by the song creators themselves, many of who were women, but by those who were first introduced to writing by the British, and most likely men⁴. The original creators may not have even known that their works had been rendered literate, having died even before the colonisers arrived at their shores.

The Poetics of Community Memory

While it is safe to say that a significant number of songs created by women were rendered into literate forms, it is possible that many other creators were left out. The first known ‘author’ or creator was Pi Hmuaki, who lived and created much before the advent of the British. Oral tradition however, has it that she was buried alive by her village community for fear that she would have left no more songs for others to create.

Up until Pi Hmuaki was known to create her songs, the culture of song was a participatory community practice. Most songs of the time were made during community feasts and other festive events. Songs came out of a collective practice that focussed on the community experience which placed it in the public realm. When Pi Hmuaki began creating, she most likely adapted the same method used in community practice for her personal one. The common practice in creating new songs in community was any individual speaking a line then the gathering repeating it as a tune that was already being sung. In doing so at an individual level, she took public community practice and made the songs created thus her personal creations. For as long as her songs represented a community context, there was admiration and appreciation for the songs and her ability because they gave expression

to the community’s experience, even if it was from her perspective alone.

It is critical to mention here that it was not just songs that were rendered literate but also varied stories and accounts of past experiences and exploits that had been – until then – communicated orally. Once literacy set in, there were a number of early literate Mizos who understood the need to maintain a record of their own, and not depend on colonial records about them. They were the earliest oral historians who became scribes of Mizo memory⁵. While documents and dates are often one of the key points in the writing and study of History, gathering information on the past in a primarily oral community that is based largely on a combination of memory, recollections, and oral traditions does not always allow for the unearthing and verification of facts. For the Mizo, it is almost as if songs verify that an event or occurrence actually took place because the particular experience was memorialised in the form of song, and the mention of places, geographies, and events in song supported findings. It happened; therefore it has been commemorated in song and story to remember by the community. The memory arises out of lived reality. It is living memory for those up to two, perhaps even three generations of those who experienced that reality.

Unlike history, memory does not lay claim to factuality deduced through written documents as empirical evidence. Instead memory can only present “truth” arrived at through an inductive, hermeneutic process of meaning-making through which facts are transformed into values, and knowledge into wisdom that can shape the impending future. Hence the telling of it is essential, this transference is as close to the memory as it can get for succeeding generations who may have never lived the experience but share narrative lineage in it. This transference is how succeeding generation remember and share in the memory.

The Creative Subject and the Gendered Space

Legend says that Pi Hmuaki was buried alive with her great gong which could be heard for seven days after. Curiously, for someone reputed to be so prolific, only a handful of her songs remain with us today – and the only one that finds continual reference is the one she composed as the young men of her village buried her. This throws up some provocative questions, what else has been buried?

Pi Hmuaki was known to be a ‘*lungleng mi*’ – Mizos generally consider themselves to be *lungleng mi*, but even among them, Pi Hmuaki was considered to be especially so – a person of rare depth, feeling, and imagination. *Lungleng* or *lunglen* is an affect that is entrenched in existential longing. A longing for times, places and people long past, and an acute awareness of the transience of the

present into the imminent future. It bears both anxiety and hope. The Mizo experience is suffused in *Lunglen* and characterised by it. Pi Hmuaki was known to be so prolific that she had created songs for every person in her village, except two young men. This made the men of her village anxious that it was a threat to future song creators, and there would be nobody else left to compose about; even if somebody wished to create songs about their own father, Pi Hmuaki would have already done so. When she created a song for the last two men, it was decided that she should be put to death. Since she had neither harmed anybody in the community, nor endangered the safety of her community, there could be no real justification to kill her. Hence it was decided by the chief and his council of elders that she would be buried alive. To take care that she would not suffocate underground, they left a hole big enough to insert a large hollow bamboo through which air could enter the grave.

To Pi Hmuaki the decision was an insult to her and demeaning to the men themselves. She felt that the men dishonoured themselves and her, unable as they were to actually put her to death and justify their decision. The scathing quality of her most well known song to this day demonstrates that she considered it treachery. It is quite clear from the song that those who buried her were full grown adult men; in the vocabulary of tender support used to encourage children, her last song, and perhaps the most well remembered of them was an ironic call to the men to do the job well as she bade them to cover her properly:

Nauva te u, Nauhaiate u

Tha te te khan mi haichhilh rawh u.

(Little ones, dear young ones

Take care to cover me well)⁶

Realising that she continued to create songs about them below, they hurriedly covered the grave. In an attempt at irony, she was buried with one of her most prized possessions, a bronze gong⁷ that she brought out to accompany her songs on occasion. It is said that she could be heard playing the gong for seven days after.⁸

If what Mizo memory records is considered true⁹ and Pi Hmuaki was indeed the first “poet” among Mizo people, then the reason for why she was considered a threat to the future of Mizo song should not be passed off for mere lack of judgement. Exploring the times and events recorded in narrative through her songs explains the social circumstances she lived and negotiated in. When Pi Hmuaki began creating songs on her own, the practice was no longer limited to community gatherings alone, and therefore no more a male domain. The fact that a woman had claimed some kind of personal right over the public

practise of creating new songs, well-regarded as she might have been was unimaginable. The most unacceptable threat she presented was that she played her gong; the great gong *darkhuang* was the biggest of the Mizo instruments, and the most valued. Played in public only by men, the gong was usually used at ritual events in the community, and always at the death of a chief or an elder as a display of grandeur. Since there was no specific regulation on when it could be played, people who owned the *darkhuang*, usually men, were allowed play it when they saw fit. Pi Hmuaki played the gong she owned to accompany her own songs which implicated both male position and the value of the *darkhuang*. This was an overreach for a woman, a wrongdoing but one that had neither a precedent nor practice they could follow as punishment for such a wrong. She knew that she had the benefit of age and experience; when the men in her village resolved that she should be put to death, it was dishonourable to the community as a whole. The knowledge that Pi Hmuaki had was not mere understanding of the approved standard of behaviour and customs that subjected her to the confines of socially acceptable norms. Her knowledge came from a continual engagement with her community, and the invisible social structures that she was a subject of. The same forces shaped a subject that was capable of action that would threaten the status quo that she was subject to. Her knowledge also came with a body that had experienced danger, force, and disruption apart from the daily encounters of a Mizo woman living within those structures. This subjectivity that was actively aware of an inner self that refused to be defined by societal practises, and was conscious of a sense of self and identity, is precisely what threatened the men in Pi Hmuaki’s community; enough to put her to death.

When they decided to bury her alive with an air vent and her great gong - the insinuation was not lost on her as she continued to beat the gong for seven days in a superb inversion that both defied those who buried her gong with her, and lamented her own impending death, symbolically invoking the gong’s purpose of at funerals of chiefs and elders. Until today, Mizo people still beat the great gong seven times at the funerals of elders – whether women or men, in the community.

CONCLUSION

Whether history or legend, Pi Hmuaki is a metaphor; not just for Mizo poetry, but for Mizo pasts as well. History writing has rendered this significant past invalid, since they are based on oral tradition; for lack of any written archival record, Mizos were long considered a

people with no history. During colonial times, records were maintained by colonial masters, which additionally suggested that the history that was written was not their own, further alienating them from their actual lived experience and memory. It is these as well as other such songs, and the lore that surrounds them that keep the knowledge and memory of that past alive for the Mizo people. Pi Hmuaki's drum still beats a remembered tattoo from beneath the rubble of a past that History Writing cannot accommodate.

possibilities it generates, because information that is stored in memory is a process of constant recollection, interpretation, and reconstruction unlike information that is recorded in documents that can be accessed and pulled out unaltered.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dokhuma, James. 1992. *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*. (Aizawl: R. Lalrawna Gilzom Offset, 2011)
- [2] Lalruanga *Mizo Hla le a Phuachtute Chanchin* (Aizawl: Zomi Book Agency, 1982)
- [3] Lalthangliana B. *Mizo Chanchin: A Short Account of Mizo History* (Aizawl: Gilzom Offset, 2021)
- [4] Liangkhaia (1976). *Mizo Chanchin (Bu I & II hmun khatah)* (first published separately in 1938 and 1947. (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 2002)
- [5] McCall, A.G. (1949) *Lushai Chrysalis*. (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute 1977)
- [6] Panjabi Kavita *Unclaimed Harvest: An Oral History of the Tebagha Women's Movement* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016)
- [7] Kiangte Lalthangliana ed., *Writing in Mizo Manuscripts* (New Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts, 2017)
- [8] H.K.Bawichhuaka ed., *Mizo Ziarang*. (Aizawl: Mizoram Academy of Letters, 1975)
- [9] Zawla, K. (1964) *Mizo Pi Pute leh an Thlahte Chanchin*. (Aizawl: Gosen Press, 1981).

¹ R Lalhrualtuanga "The Story of Lost Manuscript in South Asia" in L.Kiangte ed., *Writing in Mizo Manuscripts* (New Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts, 2017), 55

² B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Hun HluiHlate* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1998), 358

³ R.L Thanmawia, *Mizo Poetry* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1998), 104

⁴ Among them was K.Zawla whose work I refer to across much of this article

⁵ Rev. Liangkhaia was the first of the pioneer Mizo writers who took up the task of putting Mizo memory of their pasts into writing.

⁶ All translations mine

⁷ She owned a *darkhuang*, the Mizo great brass gong; a status symbol and prized possession that only a privileged few in the community could own.

⁸ Zawla, K. 1981 (1964). *Mizo Pi Puteleh an ThlahteChanchin*. (Aizawl: Gosen Press, 1981), 268 and Thanmawia R.L. 2020(2012). *Mizo Hla Hlui (Mizo Folk Songs)* (Aizawl: Dindin Heaven, 2020), 228-229

⁹ As opposed to fact which limits discussion to what happened and how, rather than why and the hermeneutic



Informal Language Acquisition Among Moroccan Tourism Professionals: A Case Study of Chefchaouen and Marrakech

Ikrame Chibani¹, Khalil Hsouné²

Associate Professor of English. Laboratory of society and language. Faculty of Economics and Management, Ibn Tofail University.
Ph.D holder. Laboratory of society and language. Faculty of Language Letters and Arts, Ibn Tofail university.

Received: 19 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Sep 2025; Accepted: 19 Sep 2025; Available online: 22 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the acquisition of English and Spanish among Moroccan tourism professionals (waiters, tour guides, vendors, etc.) in popular tourist destinations like Chefchaouen and Marrakech. It examines the apparent paradox of high fluency levels in these languages despite limited formal language learning opportunities. Many individuals within this workforce demonstrate impressive communicative competence, suggesting the presence of effective, yet informal, acquisition strategies. This research investigates these strategies through semi-structured interviews with tourism professionals in the selected cities. The interviews aim to uncover the innovative and often self-directed techniques employed by these individuals, including exposure to authentic language through interactions with tourists, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices. By focusing on the lived experiences and learning practices of these individuals, this study seeks to understand the dynamics of informal language acquisition in a real-world context. The findings shed light on the effectiveness of non-formal language learning pathways and contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals can achieve fluency in a second or third language outside of traditional educational settings. Ultimately, this research aims to inform pedagogical approaches and potentially empower other language learners by highlighting the power of informal learning in achieving communicative competence.



Keywords— language, acquisition, communicative competence, non-formal language learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Morocco, a nation rich in cultural heritage, has become a prominent tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the globe. In cities like Chefchaouen and Marrakech, tourism professionals—waiters, tour guides, and vendors—play a crucial role in shaping the visitor experience. Remarkably, many of these individuals exhibit high levels of fluency in English and Spanish, despite limited access to formal language education. This phenomenon raises a compelling question: how do these professionals acquire such proficiency? This study aims to explore the informal language acquisition strategies employed by tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech, focusing on the lived experiences and self-

directed learning practices that contribute to their communicative competence.

The paradox of high fluency amidst limited formal education highlights the significance of informal language learning. Existing research often emphasizes formal instruction, overlooking the potential of real-world interactions and self-directed learning. This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the innovative techniques used by tourism professionals, including exposure to authentic language through interactions with tourists, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of communicative competence, as initially articulated by Hymes (1972), goes beyond grammatical knowledge to encompass the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in diverse social and cultural contexts. This includes not only linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, phonology) but also sociolinguistic competence (understanding and using language appropriate to the social situation), discourse competence (organizing and connecting utterances coherently), and strategic competence (using verbal and nonverbal strategies to overcome communication breakdowns). In the context of tourism, this multifaceted competence is paramount for tourism professionals to effectively interact with visitors from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ultimately facilitating smooth communication, building rapport, and enhancing the overall visitor experience. The work of Canale and Swain (1980) further elaborated on Hymes' framework, providing a more detailed model of communicative competence that is frequently cited in applied linguistics research.

Building upon the importance of interaction, Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis posits that language acquisition primarily occurs through exposure to comprehensible input ($i+1$), where learners are exposed to language slightly beyond their current level of understanding, aided by context and background knowledge. This aligns significantly with the experiences of tourism professionals who are constantly immersed in communicative situations with foreign-language speakers, often encountering new vocabulary and grammatical structures within meaningful contexts. Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis further refines this by emphasizing the crucial role of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language acquisition. Through asking for clarification, rephrasing, and confirming understanding, both tourism professionals and visitors actively participate in the learning process.

Informal language learning, in contrast to structured classroom instruction, is indeed characterized by its learner-centered, experiential, and context-dependent nature (Benson, 2011). This type of learning often takes place naturally through immersion and real-world interactions. The significance of exposure to authentic language and direct interaction with native or proficient speakers in fostering language acquisition has been consistently highlighted (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Van Lier (2004) emphasizes the concept of affordances in the learning environment, suggesting that the social and physical context provides opportunities for language learning that learners can either seize or overlook. In the

tourism sector, the constant interaction with diverse individuals and exposure to authentic communication situations provide rich affordances for informal language learning.

Furthermore, the integration of media and technology has revolutionized opportunities for self-directed language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Language learning apps, online resources, and digital platforms offer learners flexibility, autonomy, and access to a vast array of learning materials and authentic content. The concept of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) has evolved significantly, with researchers like Chapelle (2001) exploring the effectiveness of different technological tools and pedagogical approaches in language learning. In the context of tourism, technology can empower professionals to supplement their informal learning with structured practice, vocabulary building, and exposure to specific language needed for their roles. The rise of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) further enhances accessibility and allows for learning on the go (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009).

III. METHODOLOGY

In this part of the article, focus is going to be on the methodological choices made in order to conduct this study. The main question that this research sought to answer is the following:

Research question: how do tourism professionals achieves communicative competence?

Research objective: to explore the strategies used by tourism professionals to achieve communicative competence.

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data from 17 tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech. Participants were selected based on their roles in the tourism sector and their demonstrated fluency in English or Spanish. The interviews focused on exploring their language learning experiences, including their exposure to authentic language, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis, where recurring themes and patterns were identified from the interview transcripts. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences and learning practices.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings revealed that interactions with tourists were a primary source of language input for the participants. Many reported learning by listening and imitating the language used by visitors. Additionally, the utilization of media and technology, such as language learning apps and online resources, was common among the participants. Self-study practices, including watching foreign language movies and listening to music, were also reported as effective learning strategies.

Participants demonstrated a high level of motivation and autonomy in their language learning. They often sought opportunities to practice their language skills, such as engaging in conversations with tourists and seeking feedback on their language use.

Themes Derived from Semi-Structured Interviews:

1. Immersion and Authentic Interaction as Primary Language Input:

- **Sub-theme: Active Listening and Imitation:**
 - Participants consistently reported learning by actively listening to tourist interactions and imitating their speech patterns.
 - The need to understand and respond in real-time drove rapid acquisition of functional phrases.
- **Sub-theme: Negotiation and Correction:**
 - Participants actively sought clarification and correction from tourists, viewing them as valuable learning resources.
 - The willingness to ask for help and accept feedback was a key factor in their progress.
- **Sub-theme: Adaptation to Diverse Accents and Communication Styles:**
 - Exposure to a wide range of accents and communication styles forced participants to develop adaptability in their listening skills.
 - This constant exposure led to improved comprehension and fluency.
- **Sub-theme: Non-verbal communication:**
 - The use of body language to supplement verbal communication was very common.

2. Leveraging Technology and Media for Self-Directed Learning:

- **Sub-theme: Mobile Applications and Online Resources:**

- Participants utilized language learning apps, online dictionaries, and translation tools to expand their vocabulary and understanding.
- Mobile technology provided accessible and flexible learning opportunities.

- **Sub-theme: Audiovisual Media for Immersive Learning:**

- Participants engaged with English and Spanish music, films, and online videos to enhance their listening comprehension and pronunciation.
- Social media was also used to view real world language use.

- **Sub-theme: Online Language Exchange and Communities:**

- Some participants took advantage of online language exchange platforms to practice their skills with native speakers.

3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Driving Autonomous Learning:

- **Sub-theme: Instrumental Motivation for Economic Advancement:**

- Participants recognized the direct link between language proficiency and increased earning potential in the tourism sector.
- The desire to improve their socioeconomic status fueled their commitment to language learning.

- **Sub-theme: Personal Pride and Professional Identity:**

- Language acquisition contributed to a sense of personal accomplishment and enhanced their professional identity.
- The ability to communicate effectively with tourists boosted their confidence and self-esteem.

- **Sub-theme: Intrinsic Enjoyment and Cultural Curiosity:**

- Many participants expressed a genuine interest in learning languages and interacting with people from different cultures.

- The joy of communication and cultural exchange served as a powerful motivator.
- **Sub-theme: Goal Setting and Self-Monitoring:**
 - Participants actively set language learning goals and monitored their progress through note-taking and regular review.
 - They displayed a proactive and self-directed approach to their language development.

Discussion and interpretation

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of informal language acquisition strategies in achieving communicative competence. The findings support the notion that exposure to authentic language and self-directed learning can be powerful tools for language acquisition. The lived experiences of tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech demonstrate that fluency can be achieved outside of traditional educational settings.

The study also underscores the importance of motivation and autonomy in language learning. The participants' proactive approach to seeking language input and practicing their skills contributed to their success.

Expanding on the Input Hypothesis and Sociocultural Theory:

- **Beyond Comprehensible Input: The Role of Negotiation and Output:** While Krashen's input hypothesis is a foundational concept, a purely analytical approach must acknowledge its limitations. The professionals' acquisition isn't solely passive reception of input. It involves active negotiation of meaning. The "interaction hypothesis" (Long, 1996) suggests that negotiation for meaning, through clarification requests and confirmation checks, forces learners to process input more deeply. This active engagement likely accelerates their learning. Furthermore, the "output hypothesis" (Swain, 1985) posits that producing language, even with errors, forces learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and refine their linguistic systems. The tourism context provides constant opportunities for this output, making it a powerful learning environment.
- **Sociocultural Mediation:** Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. The professionals' language acquisition is deeply embedded in their sociocultural context. Interactions with tourists act as mediated learning experiences, where more proficient speakers (tourists) scaffold the learners' language

development. The "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) is constantly being challenged and expanded through these interactions. We can analyze how specific cultural norms and communication patterns within the tourism sector influence the acquisition process. For example, the need for politeness and customer service likely shapes the professionals' language use, leading to the rapid acquisition of specific phrases and communicative strategies.

Analyzing the Nature of "Fluency" in This Context:

- **Functional Fluency vs. Academic Proficiency:** It's crucial to distinguish between functional fluency and academic proficiency. The professionals' "fluency" is likely characterized by strong communicative competence in specific domains (e.g., ordering food, giving directions, negotiating prices). This functional fluency may not translate to academic proficiency, which requires a broader range of linguistic skills and knowledge. An analytical argument could examine the specific linguistic features of their speech, such as the use of formulaic expressions, simplified syntax, and context-dependent vocabulary. This analysis would shed light on the nature of their "fluency" and its limitations.
- **The Impact of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing:** In multilingual contexts like Morocco, code-switching and code-mixing are common phenomena. An analytical approach could examine how these practices contribute to or hinder language acquisition. Code-switching might provide learners with a cognitive break, allowing them to communicate effectively while still processing input. However, it could also limit their exposure to the target language. Analyzing the patterns of code-switching and code-mixing would provide insights into the learners' linguistic strategies and the interplay between their native languages and the target languages.

Exploring the Psychological and Motivational Factors:

- **Instrumental Motivation and Identity Formation:** The professionals' motivation is likely driven by instrumental factors, such as the need to earn a living and improve their socioeconomic status. However, we can go deeper and analyze how language acquisition contributes to their identity formation. Becoming proficient in English or Spanish may enhance their sense of professional identity and social status. An analytical argument could explore the psychological impact of language acquisition on the professionals' self-perception and social integration.

- **The Role of Anxiety and Self-Efficacy:** Language learning anxiety can significantly affect acquisition. However, the professionals' constant exposure to authentic language and their success in communicating with tourists may enhance their self-efficacy. An analytical approach could examine how the tourism context mitigates language learning anxiety and promotes a sense of confidence. We can analyze how the supportive environment created by frequent interaction with tourists helps build self-efficacy.

Implications for Language Pedagogy:

- **Moving Beyond the Classroom:** The professionals' success highlights the limitations of traditional classroom-based language instruction. An analytical argument could advocate for a more experiential and context-based approach to language teaching. This approach would involve creating opportunities for learners to interact with native speakers in real-world settings. We can analyze how educators can effectively integrate elements of informal learning into formal instruction.
- **Leveraging Technology for Authentic Input:** While the professionals utilize technology, an analytical approach could explore how digital tools can be more effectively leveraged to provide authentic language input. This could involve using virtual reality simulations, online language exchange platforms, and social media to create immersive learning experiences. We can analyze the strengths and weaknesses of different digital tools for language acquisition.
- **Fostering intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:** Fostering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation holds significant implications for language learning in tourism contexts. By creating engaging and relevant learning experiences that tap into learners' inherent interests and curiosity (intrinsic motivation), educators and trainers can cultivate a deeper and more sustainable commitment to language development. Simultaneously, strategically incorporating extrinsic motivators, such as recognition, opportunities for advancement, or tangible rewards linked to language proficiency, can provide immediate incentives and encourage active participation. A balanced approach that nurtures both internal drive and external encouragement is crucial for maximizing language acquisition outcomes and ensuring that tourism professionals are well-equipped linguistically to excel in their roles and contribute to positive visitor experiences

By focusing on these analytical arguments, we can move beyond a descriptive account of informal language acquisition and develop a deeper understanding of the underlying processes and implications.

V. CONCLUSION

This research provided insightful perspectives into the dynamics of informal language acquisition. The findings can inform pedagogical approaches by highlighting the potential of real-world interactions and self-directed learning. Educators can incorporate elements of informal learning, such as exposure to authentic language and opportunities for self-directed practice, into their teaching practices. Ultimately, this study aims to empower language learners by demonstrating that fluency can be achieved through diverse and innovative learning pathways. Future research could explore the long-term effects of informal language acquisition and examine the transferability of these strategies to other contexts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [2] Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.
- [3] Chapelle, C. A. (2001). *Computer applications in applied linguistics: Foundations for teaching, testing and research*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [4] Godwin-Jones, R. (2011). *Emerging technologies: Autonomous language learning*. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15(3), 4-11.
- [5] Hymes, D. (1972). *On communicative competence*. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings* (pp. 269-293). Penguin Books.
- [6] Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- [7] Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2009). *Will mobile learning change language learning?* *ReCALL*, 21(2), 157-165.
- [8] Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [9] Long, M. H. (1996). *The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition*. In W. C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 413-468). Academic Press.
- [10] Van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.



The Partition of Bengal: History, Migration, and Literary Reflections

Dr. Mamud Hassan

Assistant Professor, Humanities and Sciences, Malla Reddy College of Engineering, Telangana, India

mahmud3151@gmail.com

Received: 21 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 17 Sep 2025; Accepted: 21 Sep 2025; Available online: 24 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper attempts to present the history of the partition of Bengal and the literature produced on the theme of the Bengal partition. It presents the stories of the transformation of the socio-political scenario of Bengal province before partition, conflicts between various political and religious sections and the migration that took place because of the partition of the province. It would bring an account of the Hindu-Muslim relationship before partition and the lack of trust due to various political developments among the communities. The paper will also deal with the larger politics of India concerning the Bengal province and the reaction of various political agents in the province. Bengal province witnessed a movement for 'Sovereign Bengal' led by Sharat Bose, Sohrawardy, and others; the paper will briefly study this movement. The paper will introduce literary works written on the theme of the partition of Bengal by Bengali writers both in Bengali and English. It would also provide a brief study of films in the Bengali language on the theme of the partition of Bengal.



Keywords— Bengal Partition, Partition Literature, Indian Freedom Struggle, Partition and Migration, Refugee Issue and Rehabilitation, Sovereign Bengal Movement

Introduction

Partition, undoubtedly the most important determining factor in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh's destiny, is much more than a historical fact; it has served and continues to serve as a compelling literary theme that has engendered a substantial body of literature on the subcontinent. The partition of India took place in 1947. However, there was a long silence regarding the violence and trauma during and in the aftermath of the partition. Historians prefer the event of independence by sidelining the traumatic events of partition. They have come up with the official or nationalist version of the Indian partition where there is less account of partition violence being represented. The issue of violence, rape, abduction, and forceful conversion is the sub-marginal issue within the marginalised representation of partition history by historians. Gyanendra Pandey says that the absence of partition from the national historiography means that the partition of India is regarded

as something like a set of political incidents caused by the divide between Gandhi and Jinnah.

It was only after the 1980s that several communal violence started happening around the country. It started with the anti-Sikh riot in Delhi and its surroundings after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. This was followed by the 1989 Hindu-Muslim riot in Bhagalpur, the Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad in 1990, and the nationwide Hindu-Muslim violence after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992. After these incidents of communal violence in post-partition India, scholars seriously began to think about the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. The partition corpus began to take definitive shape in the milieu created by these unwanted incidents. Surpassing the nationalist version of the Indian Freedom Struggle, the partition scholars were compelled to reconsider the forgotten part of Indian Independence: the partition.

Who is responsible for the Partition of India?

Historians and critics have blamed various agents for the unfortunate event of partition. Historians belonging to the main current of Indian Nationalism blamed Imperialism for tearing the two major communities apart, disrupting the bonds that had joined them together for centuries. According to this perspective, the partition is the logical conclusion of the divide-and-rule policy of the British by which they had successfully created a rift between the communities. According to historians like A. K. Banerjee, Sumit Sarkar, and Bipin Chandra, the British attempted this political strategy of divide and rule first in the case of the partition of Bengal in 1905.

Indian nationalists more often raise fingers at Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the partition. In India, he was not seen as a father of Pakistan but as a collaborator of the British. A man who, in his capacity as the leader of the All-India Muslim League, instigated the division of India by not willing to accept "nothing sort of a sovereign state for Muslims" in the subcontinent.

Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has presented a counter-thesis on the partition. According to her, partition was forced upon Jinnah by the Congress High Command in the penultimate phase of the British rule in India. She believes that the main reason behind the partition of India was not the schemes of the British but the constitutional struggle for greater representational power in the government between Congress and the Muslim League.

For a group of historians, the most controversial figure is not any Indian or Pakistani but the British Viceroy Lord Louis Mountbatten himself. In his *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of The British Empire in India* (2006), Sir Stanley Wolpert declares, "Among all the important players of that time, none played as tragic or central role as Mountbatten". (2006, 2)

Joya Chatterjee, in her book *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947*, identifies the 1930s as the decade when the communalisation of politics reached a higher level in the Bengal province. Chatterjee demonstrates that the threat of enduring servitude to a Muslim majority convinced many Hindus that Bengal must be partitioned along religious lines. That is why the provincial congress committee strongly supported the plan of partition, which Nehru and Patel accepted. She argues- "Bengalis were not passive bystanders in the politics of their province; nor were they victims of circumstances entirely out of their control, forced reluctantly to accept the division of their 'motherland'. On the contrary, a large number of Hindus of Bengal, backed up by the provincial branches of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, campaigned intensively in 1947 for the partition of Bengal

and for the creation of a separate Hindu province that would remain inside an Indian union". (1994, 227)

Writing about the partition histories which both India and Pakistan have generated, Tai Yong Tan Gyanesh Kudaisya rightly notes in *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader* (2008) that 'often, the heroes in one national discourse, end up as the villains of another'. (pp-9)

Partition of Bengal

Bengal has witnessed three partitions to date. These are the partition of Bengal province in 1905, the partition of Bengal in 1947 and the separation of East Bengal from West Pakistan by giving birth to a new country called Bangladesh in 1971.

In 1905, Lord Curzon attempted to divide Bengal to curb the nationalist movement dominated by the Bengali Hindu middle classes. The British believed that if Bengal could be divided into East Bengal, Muslims would dominate, which would counteract the nationalist movement spearheaded by the Bengalis. The Bengali Hindus protested against the move, and due to the continued struggle, the British were forced to revoke the decision. The Muslims of Bengal felt alienated because of the Hindu agitation against the 1905 partition. The Bengali Muslims believed that the Swadeshi Movement was geared to prevent the emergence of a separate province of East Bengal where Muslim life and culture could flourish independently. Under the constitutional reforms of 1935, religious identity as a demographic category became the most important factor in determining the distribution of government in Bengal. Under the first Fazlul Haq Ministry (1937-41), the Bengali Muslims came into conflict with the privileged high-caste Bengali Hindus.

Joya Chatterjee extensively discussed the Bengali partition issue in her book *Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (2007). She has compared the first (1905) and second (1947) partitions. She argues, "On the first occasion Bengalis in Calcutta congregated at the feet of the monument and declared that they would 'unsettle the settle' fact but the same Bengalis in 1947 had accepted this with no regret what Sir Cyril Radcliffe had done to them".

Direct Action Day

Indian Union Muslim League demanded a separate homeland for the Muslims. They called for Direct Action Day on 16th August 1946 to pressurise the British. The Muslim League provincial government had declared 16th August as a public holiday. Though it was planned against the British, it was converted into a Hindu-Muslim riot. Yasmin Khan writes- "Three days later, at least 4000 of Calcutta's residents lay dead and over 10000 were injured" (Khan 2007, 63).

Movement for Divided Bengal

Following the incidents in Calcutta and Nokhali, the campaign for a partitioned Bengal gained traction. Even for the Bengali elite (Bhadralok), the partition of Bengal began to appear as a solution for both points of view- to resolve the ongoing crisis and to protect their business interest. Petitions and telegrams from landowners, merchants, businessmen, and tea planters were flooded into the Congress and government offices demanding the partition of Bengal, and under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Hindu Mahasabha had demanded the partition of Bengal even earlier.

When the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress leaders proposed the partition of Bengal and Punjab, Neither Jinnah nor Bengal League leaders were pleased. Jinnah requested Mountbatten not to play with the unity of Bengal and Punjab, which have "national characteristics in common: common history, common ways of life and where the Hindus have stronger feelings as Bengalis than they have as members of Congress." (Pandey 2001, 30) Even the Bengal Muslim League leader Hussain Suhrawardy asked the Viceroy to postpone the decision on partition till November 1947 in order to give their 'United Bengal' campaign more time. Joya Chatterjee presents the situation of Bengal during partition in her book *Bengal Divided*. She argues that the Bhadrakal Bengali Hindus, who thought of Bengal as their province, were not ready to live under the permanent domination of Muslims and were persuaded by the incidents that occurred during the first Muslim League Ministry in the province that partition was necessary. She says that once the pioneer of nationalism in India, they used every available 'stratagem and device' to demand that their province be divided. (Chatterjee pp 253)

Sovereign and United Bengal Movement

When the British government, Congress, and Muslim league discussed the partition of the subcontinent, Bengal province witnessed a movement for a 'sovereign and united Bengal'. Abul Hashim, the secretary of the provincial Muslim League, joined Husain Suhrawardy, the Muslim League chief Minister of pre-partition Bengal, Sarat Bose, and others started their campaigning for the demand of united Bengal.

The United Bengal plan was floated around April 1947 by certain Bengali politicians like Sarat Bose, K. S. Roy, H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim. Bidyut Chakrabarty's article "The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis without a Synthesis" brings a business angle to the discourse of partition of Bengal. Chakrabarty presents the role of GD Birla in accelerating the Bengal Partition. A separate West Bengal would be more conducive to Marwari business interests, which were facing competition

from the Muslim business interests of East Bengal. On the other hand, the Muslim businessmen pressurised Jinnah for the Suhrawardy plan. Patel and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee of Hindu Mahasabha also believed that Jinnah wanted to grab the whole of Bengal under the United Bengal plan. The United Bengal scheme faced opposition from the anti-Suhrawardy lobby in the Bengal Provincial Muslim League. Nehru believed that Bengal could remain united if it remained within independent India. Finally, the consequence of Direct Action Day under Suhrawardy's administration made Hindu-Muslim relations more bitter than ever. As a result, the Bengal assembly approved the decision to partition the province.

Migration in Post-Partition Bengal

The portrayal of partition favours the Punjab side in both literature and history. Historical researchers and writers are interested in the events that occurred in Punjab. Still, the partition reality differed significantly in the Punjab and Bengal regions. The Punjab situation was viewed as a national emergency; communal violence escalated into genocide, forcing the Western government to act quickly. The sense of immediacy surrounding the eastern boundary was completely lacking. Hindu minorities in East Bengal were not thought to be in grave danger, and the refugees' westward flight was viewed as the result of irrational concerns and false rumours.

Partition resulted in one of the greatest displacements of people in human history. Approximately 20 million people were affected, making it the greatest exodus in the twentieth century, with 12 million relocated in Punjab alone. This unusual forcible relocation occurred despite the party leader's and British authorities' assurances. The Indian subcontinent was partitioned to avoid war, but it became the source of the worst genocide that might have existed. The partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan is a well-known example of a "refugee-generating process". It left millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs on the wrong side, which is responsible for the greatest exodus in world history.

Migration in Bengal happened in three phases. The first phase of migration occurred between October 1946 and March 1958. Those who entered West Bengal during this period are called "old migrants." They were composed of upper-caste and upper-class Hindu migrants who did not impose a burden on the province administration. Many migrant workers had socially or economically powerful families or properties in the newly created West Bengal.

The second batch of migrants arrived between April 1958 and December 1963. These refugees were dubbed "in-between migrants" by the authorities. The second group of migrants belonged to the middle and upper-middle classes.

This group was not recognised as displaced persons. It received no financial help since the government viewed the organisation as a bunch of economic migrants driven by government benefits. The national government asked the West Bengal government to shut down the rehabilitation ministry. Roy asserts that many of these rich and upper-middle-class people who had previously lived in Calcutta did not register as displaced persons even though they significantly increased the population sizes of post-partition West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. (Roy, 53).

The third phase of migration happened from January 1964 to March 1971. This wave of migration started with the incidents of Hajratwal in 1964 when a few miscreants desecrated Hajratbal Dargah. In reaction to that incident, there were communal riots in various parts of Bangladesh (East Pakistan). The peasantry and the artisan section of East Pakistan left their home for India in this phase. This migration continued to infiltrate into India until the late 1970s. The poor and Dalit migrants were entitled to rehabilitation only if they wanted to resettle outside of West Bengal because they were seen as an economic burden.

The reasons behind the first and second waves of migration were mainly the fear of losing *dhan* (wealth/property) and *maan* (honour/prestige). The third phase of migration, also known as 'new migrants', comprises the lower castes of Bengal, and the reason behind their migration was *praan* (Life).

Nilanjana Chatterjee, in her article "Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence", analyses the reasons behind the migration of East Bengali people. She says, "East Bengali claims to victimhood used the language of Muslim communal violence- fear of losing life, property, and honour (Pran, Dhan and Maan) to legitimate their claim to be political refugees and to gain public sympathy in India (pp-20).

Reverse Migration

There were incidents of reverse migration during partition because of the confusion regarding national boundaries—one on the western side and another on the eastern side of the subcontinent. Preet Nagar Town near Amritsar and Malda district in Bengal province witnessed such reverse migration. These two areas were first declared to be part of Pakistan, and most of the non-Muslims residing in that area vacated for a 'new' country. However, after a few days, both places were declared part of India and people who left again returned to their places; thus, reverse migration happened.

Bengali Partition Literature

The Bengal partition has left a huge imprint on the intellectuals and creative minds over the years. The Bengali language has also produced a large number of writings based on the partition theme, which has contributed to the Bengali literary spectrum. Some of the exemplary works are: Atin Bandopadhyay's *Nilkontho Pakhir Khoje* (1971), Manik Bandopadhyay's *Sarbojanin* (1974), Pratibha Basu's *Samudra Hriday* (1983), Samaresh Basu's *Khandita* (1987), Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purba Poshchim* (1988), Amarendra Ghosh's *Beaini Janata* (1952), Amarendra Ghosh's *Bhangche Sudhu Bhangche* (1951), Jagadish Chandra Mandal's *Banga Bhang* (1977), Shanta Sen's *Janmer Mati* (2007), only to mention a few. A few English novels are also available on Bengali Partition, like Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Tahmina Anam's *The Golden Gate*.

Several Individuals have tried to pen down their personal experiences of partition. Some of the memoirs which represent the partition violence, trauma, and refugee camp experiences are Sunanda Sikdar's *Doyamoyeer Kotha* (Bengali, 2008), Adhir Biswas' *Deshbhager Smriti* (Bengali, 2010) and Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (2012) etc.

The demographic changes in Kolkata after the partition also changed literary activities. The city refugee life can be seen in the poetry of Jibananda Das, Samar Sen, Buddhadeb Bose, Naresh Guha, Premendra Mitra, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shankho Ghosh, and so on.

However, some notable writers in Bengali engage in partition writing, such as Sunil Gangopadhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Samaresh Basu, etc. According to Harrington, the short story is the preferred genre for Bengali partition narratives. He mentioned Bhasabi Phraser, who has developed a collection of translated short stories based on the theme of partition, i.e. *Bengali Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (2006).

Sarbani Banerjee, in her PhD thesis, challenges the Bhadrakol (Upper caste) perspective of Bengali Partition narratives. She has presented some partition works by upper caste writers like Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *The River Churning* (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 1967 Bengali) and Ritwik Ghatak's film *The Cloud-Capped Star* (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960, Bengali) which according to her, stereotypically represent the Bhadrakol Bengali refugees' immigration and settlement. She has brought up some partition writings by non-bhadrakol (lower caste) Bengali writers to compare and contrast the Bhadrakol narrative of partition. These are Adhir Biswas' memoir *Deshbhager Smriti* (*Memory of Partition*, 2010, Bengali) and Allar

Jomine Paa (*Stepping on the Land of Allah*, 2012, Bengali), Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical work *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (*Memoir of Chandal Life*, 2012, Bengali) and Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *Doyamoyeer Kotha* (*Doyamoyee's Tale*, 2008, Bengali). According to Banerjee, these writers "represent a point of departure from the Bhadra refugee's romanticised description of refugee memory." (2015, 3).

Besides these novels, considerable numbers of films have been produced in Bengali, which hinge on several issues concerning the partition of Bengal. Some notable works are: Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1951), Nirmal Dey's *Sare Chuattar* (1953), Sukumar Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare* (1954), Ritwik Kumar Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1975), Satyajit Rai's *Mahanagar* (1963), Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Tahader Kotha* (1993) etc.

Conclusion

Historical events such as these have an impact on politics and on history, society, and culture in colonial India. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the reunion in 1911 broke its events, voluminous enough to change India during the colonial times, in terms of politics, society, and culture. The division opened the door for religious and political division, which finally culminated in the great and dreadful partition of India in 1947. The events preceding Bengal's bifurcation show how challenging it was to deal with the colonial government at the time, the unexpected consequences of its dividing tactics, and the immense power of collective resistance—so far strong in Indian history.

REFERENCES

- [1] Banerjee, S. (2015). More or less refugee?: Bengal Partition in Literature and Cinema. PhD Thesis. <https://core.ac.uk/download/61661696.pdf>
- [2] Chatterjee, P. (1997). The second partition of Bengal. In R. Samaddar (Ed.), *Partition experience of the East: The second partition of Bengal* (pp. 35–58). Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group & New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- [3] Chatterji, J. (2002). *Bengal divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Chatterjee, N. (1992). *Midnight's unwanted children: East Bengali refugees and the politics of rehabilitation* (Doctoral dissertation). Brown University.
- [5] Chatterjee, N. (2002). *Interrogating victimhood: East Bengali refugee narratives of communal violence*. London: Swadhinata Trust.
- [6] Chaudhuri, P. (1983). *Refugees in West Bengal: A study of the growth and distribution of refugee settlements with the CMD* (Occasional Paper No. 55). Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.
- [7] Hassan, M. (2021). Issue of Dalit identity and the partition of Bengal. *The Creative Launcher*, 6(5), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.07>
- [8] Mandal, M. (2011). *Settling the unsettled: A study of Partition refugees in West Bengal*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- [9] Mitra, A. (1990, November 3). Parting of ways: Partition and after in Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25, 2441–2446.
- [10] Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Pandey, G. (2002). *Memory, history and the question of violence: Reflections on the reconstruction of Partition*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.



Mapping Posthuman Rhizomes and Assemblages in the Spatial Distribution of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*

Dr. Reny Skaria

Associate Professor, Department of English, Mar Ivanios College (Autonomous), Nalanchira PO, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Received: 22 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2025; Accepted: 21 Sep 2025; Available online: 25 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article explores the concept of Rhizome and maps the various heterogeneous assemblages it can initiate when used as a perspective in Posthuman discussions. Neal Stephen's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* uses intensive qualities like movements, affects, scans and lines as a virtual potential to define the real world. By tracing these qualities in the language of the novel and exploring its affect in the reader a posthuman way of binding the human-non-human and in human is possible.

Keywords— Rhizome. BwO. Posthuman. Cyberpunk



In *A Thousand Plateau* Gilles Deleuze, the French Philosopher names a process of movements as 'Rhizomes' (239) to explain the formation of BwO an imagined and disorganised body schema that does not form any subjects. Deleuze and Guatteri use the term rhizome to contrast it with the structure of a tree and root. Tree signifies organic interiority or dichotomy but rhizome is a system which refers to multiplicity, connection, heterogeneity and asignifying rupture. "Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees" (Deleuze 9). As a biological term rhizome refers to plants with radicles or roots as in ginger. The very basic characteristics of rhizomatic structure is its ability to connect to anything and form multiplicities and reterritorialise after every rupture unlike the tree that has an order (Deleuze 3-12). Deleuze uses it as a transversal thought pattern that interrogates analogy and dichotomies. Rhizomes bring together a broken ecology of processes where different points join to form what he terms 'assemblages'. This assemblage works as an abstract machine and the concept can be applied to all "structures from the behaviour patterns of an individual, the organisation of institutions, an arrangement of spaces, to the functioning of ecologies" (Livesey 18).

The Rhizome conceives how everything and everybody—all aspects of concrete, abstract and virtual entities and activities—can be seen as multiple

in their interrelational movements with other things and bodies. The nature of rhizome is that of a moving matrix, composed of organic and non-organic parts forming symbiotic and aparallel connections, according to transitory and as yet undetermined routes. (qtd in Parr 233)

This has become a groundbreaking explanation for a new kind of ontology today called fractal ontology where several such networks of things or affects are bonded together intensely and they function like an assemblage machine that creates new body, thoughts, and epistemology. The motivating force for assemblage is the desire that remains as a force within everybody. These relations exist as a map and hence they are about flows and movements. This process has a significant role in determining the technology of posthumanism. Rhizome can serve as a tool to describe various heterogeneous assemblages, inter-species relations, and multiple becomings within the posthuman dialogues and Cyberpunk genre clearly defines rhizomatic connections in its narrative.

Cyberpunks of the 1970's present Posthuman spaces which Frederic Jameson has described in the form of 'narratives which are about the processes of reproduction' that ultimately evolves into a 'vaster and properly unrepresentable totality' that enables human subject to collective subjects in a global system (qtd. in Mcaffery 225-28). They belong to the hard core SF that present a cartography of informationalism that opens

spaces for Posthuman subjectivity through a schizoid possibility of territorialising, deterritorialising and assemblages.

Many SF stories, whatever else they are about, are also about the uncanny processes of denaturalization through which we come to experience ourselves as subjects-in-technoculture ... There has always been SF about how technoculture has become our second nature, often in tension with what many of us still like to think of as our first nature, that very alluring version of the human that we have been constructing (and deconstructing) in the West for the past few hundred years. (Hollinger 270)

Their narratives are based on explorations of spaces that gradually evolve from fixed geographic landscapes to a relational and lived space of technologized mapping and networking where cities, people, highways, malls, cars, billboards and commodities are connected to each other to form landscapes termed as "space capsules" or "suburbs" that decentre a central mega city of what Marshall McLuhan and Scott Buckatman describe as "edge cities" (Bukatman 120). Underneath this well-drawn infrastructure there is a very complex social environment of a 'dystopia' that seems to capture everything through a process of coding and survey in a mafia underworld. This spatiality exists as a phenomenological space in SF novum when the writer presents the cyberspace in perceptible terms so as to create a new consciousness of a real space traversed by the logic of networking and mathematical realism.

A space of speed and movements exists as a plane of immanence in this topology that decentres the novum's spatiality into a pure mathematical distribution of actions, probabilities, multiplicities, variations and coding. Manuel Castells defines these spaces as 'space of flows' a characteristic of 'networked society' or 'informationalism', a new brand of capitalism. "By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political and symbolic structures of society" (Castells 442). Arjun Appadurai the anthropologist identifies several such spaces of flows as 'scapes' in postmodern capitalist society. According to Castells the new space is characterised by uneven cartography of inclusion and exclusion through "time sharing social practices that work through flows" called "networks that are horizontal, non-hierarchical, fluid and mobile . . ." and space becomes an expression where "spatial forms and spaces are formed by the dynamics of the overall social structure" (441-42). Arjun Appadurai

identifies these spaces as a process of flows of people, money, machinery, images, and ideologies and identifies them as ethnoscares, finanscares, technoscares, mediascares and deoscares respectively (Bell 62-63).

The flows are used as haecceities of movements in a rhizomatic network of changes through extension, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*. It presents a spatium in the form of a rhizomatic affect where everything is connected conceptually to each other through flows of movements. The language used in the novel brings in an intermittent usage and juxtaposition of words showing movements of human, automobiles and gadgets. This rhizomatic structure brings out the virtual potential and desires of a networked society that always connects the inside (self) with an outside. So rhizome traces the virtuality or the potential of becoming and locates heterogeneity that brings unlike elements together. Manuel Castells considers three strata for specifying the flow in a networked system. They comprise electronic exchanges like materials of communication network, a spacing of nodes and hubs, and a distribution of managerial elites and process of changes. Snow crash presents an erasure of the agricultural lands through a delocalisation of nature, a de-stratification of the social to a network of corporate firms and franchise and a shift of family to an outside commodity culture as a topoi for deterritorialised movements in a computer generated networking space.

The shifts are actualised as architectural effects called 'sprawls' in the cyberpunks of Gibson. Sprawls refer to disorganised buildings, housing structures and crowded spaces. The world in the novel is privatised and segmented with gated enclaves which Gibson calls as burbclaves where each suburbs have their own rules and services. "When creating a new burbclave, TMAWH Development Corporation will chop down any mountain ranges and divert the course of any mighty rivers that threaten to interrupt this street plan—ergonomically designed to encourage driving safety" (Stephenson 12). A recuperation of movements to inside emerges as folds of multiplicities through a shift of public places like old shops, hotels, urban pathways, and suburbs to an enclosed assemblage of shopping malls in Los Angeles. An enunciation of 'family' to mafia 'communities' like Cosa Nostra disburses the concept of 'home' to an outside and the outside to the inside. Many such franchised city states crop up repeatedly throughout the country and the whole system appears as a rhizomatic space where one does not belong anywhere.

Movements also extend as 'housing' in designing villas, accumulating food from the pizza corners of McDonald, and dispersing the home value to the share markets and real estates. McDonalds itself becomes an iteration of

a customised home space with a homogeneous spatial dynamics through its repetition of the colours, signboards, logo and food thus normalising a home inside it. "McDonald's is Home, condensed into a three ring binder and Xeroxed. 'No Surprises' is the motto of the franchise ghetto, its Good Housekeeping seal, subliminally blazoned on every sign and logo that make up the curves and grids of light that outline the Basin" (Stephenson 191). The network of unending malls, strip malls, fast food deliverers, corporations and chains of service operators create heterogeneous experiences by sheltering, moving and producing bodies, affects, emotions and events. The centrality of space is distributed in this territorialising, deterritorialising, multiplicities and rupture that create a differential plane of rhizomes. Rhizomes are characterised by this heterogeneity and connection and find multiple possibilities of lines of flights to an outside to which the inside connects and flattens in a single plane of consistency for its exteriority. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze 25).

Cyberpunk's narration also contains rhizomatic network of hackers, skaters and rebels whose interaction with technology destabilise the control of the space in a play of capture, visibility and invisibility. An invisible control of corporates and technology exist as a virtual power of signification and subjectification in various assemblages. The readers have to take the ground of a perceiver and conceive the objects and their meaning with respect to their different connections if they have to make any sense of it. So the readers are also expected to perform a cognitive understanding of both the technology and the gadgets. In order to understand the virtuality of power the readers must have a comprehension of a virtual, a beyond the perceived reality of various incorporeal events through the language that binds different things together and produce various affects. By introducing new gadgets cyberpunk also makes the readers to reflect upon the virtual affects of technology on human through the visual images that the punk language permits.

For Deleuze "... the virtual nonetheless has the capacity to bring about actualisation yet the virtual never coincides or can be identified with its actualisation" (Boundas 300). If according to Deleuze, one can shift perspectives from the extensive qualities to the differentials of intensive properties it is possible to find connection within and between everything in universe. As Žižek posits virtual can be identified as "traces of affective intensities" with description of qualities as in Lacanian 'sinthomes' or juxtapositions in a montage where 'pure machinic intensities' can create an impersonal pre-reflexive consciousness (Žižek 5-8) in their expressions. It is this

interweaving of the heterogeneous that cyberpunks celebrate between man and technology to describe how we connect with machines through differences. While describing Fedland as a franchise, the Feds are described as corporate assemblages with high tech gadgets on their bodies but the ugly buildings, the damp granite colour of their uniform, scrawny faces and polygraph machines are unaddressed affects of this technological assemblage. An array of agents like single yards, signboards, number boards of roads and, entry and exit gates are described along with police forces like 'the metacops', 'the enforcers' and the 'world beat security' for law and order. But such arrangements give the affect of terror; "that just about everything, like not mowing your lawn or playing your stereo too loud becomes a national security issue" (45). Uncle Enzo's billboard is a perfect example that asks us to be affirmative of the virtual. "YOU HAVE GOT A FRIEND IN THE FAMILY" that continues with "YOU ARE ENTERING A MAFIA WATCH NEIGHBOURHOOD" but also reminds that "UNCLE ENZO FORGIVES AND FORGETS" with a virtual affect of surveillance within the friendly bonding.

The virtuality of this 'decentred control' of bodies and affect is spatialised as an "optical space" (Deleuze *Thousand* 494) with the installation of apparatus like drones, CCTVs, videotapes, lasers, cameras, antennas, voice-stress histo-grams, polygram tests and radars that create an affect of perception. Mr Lee's city state called Greater Hong Kong for instance is one such panopticon with red laser beams, scanners, antennas and satellite uplinks pointed at the sky that provides a spectre of the real space. They create a disembodied system where everything that is real is captured as flows of data, images and simulated desires. The flows always deterritorialise and reterritorialise and hence enact as "veritable becomings" and incorporeal transformations through an immersion of "interlinks" and "circulation of intensities" between bodies in the story (Deleuze 10). They exist as a space of inclusion where the protagonists Hiro and YT could only give a passive resistance. The immersion of Hiro's body into the datascape of the cities can be argued as a perceptual affect. Hiro and his friend YT observe the radar scanner of the cities as an everyday appearance of their technological other with a preconception of its virtuality rather than with the terror of an encounter with the uncanny. YT muses on what "it" can do when she stands before rez, a scanner machine of the Hong Kong Franchisee. She presents herself as a passive body enmeshed as fine details in the back up of that technological apparatus.

"Like any other radar, they are good at picking up metallic objects. Unlike the radar in an air traffic control center, they

can rez fine details. The rez of a system is only as fine as its wave length; since the wavelength of this radar is about a millimetre, it can see the fillings in your teeth. The grommets in your converse high-tops, the rivets in your Levi's. It can calculate the value of your pocket change" and scan "eye colour, credit record, ancestry and blood type." (84)

Hiro memorises his disembodied body, the other body stored in the data base of Uncle Enzo— its BwO—that decoding of organs to its fractal pattern of scanned lines, codes and graphs. Retinal patterns, DNA, voice graphs, finger-prints, footprints, palm prints and wrist prints crosses with his organic parts transferring information from him to the technological other that will soon emerge as an avatar in his video game. Hiro is also that cybernetic organism who is aware of how his body can be processed to bits of information.

As the networked society always thrives between order and chaos, the street spaces are those molecular forms of chaos that Stephenson describes as "gout of radioactive urine ejected south from the dead center of L.A" (145). It is that becoming of every city, a pure affect of chaos crowded with music bands, fans and punks. Through their inhabitation of the technologically unskilled and the vagabonds called as the "the cheap nasty franchises", they become spaces of contest where young men like Hiro and Jason drive like maniacs or get hauled in front of a firing squad. The streets are inscribed within the cities as patches of pure smooth spaces that exist as hallucinatory affects or sensations and spiral towards the fringes of the city as "an organ without a body" when punks appropriate technology. Organs without bodies are "subjectless partial objects" that can have an autonomous existence even though they are separated from their bodies. The Punk "resists its inclusion within the whole of a body" and exists as a "correlate of the subject". It is the urban's "stand-in within the order of objectivity". "It is that part of the subject that it had to renounce to subjectivize itself to emerge as subject" ((Zizek 153-56). "If SF encourages us to look again at the taken for granted, then representations of impossible places constitute experiments in what can be said about place, new ways of thinking about our experience of being-in-the-world"(Kneale 428). Hiro's home is a smooth space that moves from a storage place of a metal U-stor-It to the neon lit roads where he uses both computer and swords as tools for everyday life. The punks spend their nights in U-Haul-Its and play heavy metal music for skate punks.

The punks organise a collective, adaptable networked and evolvable system that can exist as a counter reaction to the technologized global environment outside.

In their hands, technology appropriates with body as an everyday street culture through the affect of speed. As Katherine Hayles remarks "... It is possible to deconstruct the content of the abstraction while still leaving the mechanism of abstraction intact. Moving out of the frictionless and disembodied realm of abstraction requires articulating embodiment and the body together" (198). Oxford dictionary defines punk as "a ruffian", "a fast music" and "a style". Hiro is a pizza Deliverator, a punk who speeds in highways and can only be tracked through his machinic body that gives him malleability for the optical capture. The smart pizza box inside Hiro's car sends customer's address to the computer interface that "traces" his route map and sends it to the mafia don Uncle Enzo. But Hiro connects the whole technology with the "urban and architectural vernacular"— "language of movement" and binds it with the entropy of his nervousness (Buchanan *space* 20) and with the possible control of his time and distance. His act of driving is also his engagement with a mapping of the urban landscapes through the route maps. Time compresses with the speed of travel and spaces like highways and malls diminishes in the author's descriptions of movements, "temporary halts and the capture of Hiro's car with quantum speed" the justification being that bodies become imperceptible with increase in speed. While critiquing on modern technology Paul Virillio considers speed as a machine that makes matter and space disappear (Kellner 103). But such disappearance is also a becoming of the speed that binds Hiro to the machine.

"When Hiro drives he steers erratically, artificially pumped muscles not fully under his control. The bimbo box surges and slows, surges and slows, because he is pumping the gas pedal, because holding it to the floor doesn't seem to have any effect." (30)

The intensification of the speed is linked with the pull of an underpaid worker's "having a life in line" that accelerates with the car's potential energy to fire a "pound of bacon" into the "Asteroid Belt". The entropy of thermodynamics connects with the nervousness of Hiro and with the same cosmic energy of the universe. It is equally modulated by its random shifts reassuring a random in chaos. Bukatman rightly observes "The cyberspace cowboys are those veterans whose experience of technological fusion is literally ecstatic" (172). His control of the car changes randomly like "overriding the warning buzzer" which finally "catapults into an empty backyard swimming pool". It becomes a collective desire of movements, a chaos of American mobility (Stephenson 2).

Rhizome also contains interconnected spatiality that is always open for various transversal connections.

Within the inter space between the urban and the streets, there is a “fringe crowd” where Hiro meets third world diasporic communities and schizophrenic whites. It acts as a mythical space where he meets mythical cyborg called Gargoyles who reminds him of his deep structure of his brain and its neuro linguistic pathways that binds his biological world to the computer network. Gargoyls in mythology refers to a grotesque figure that creates horror in its appearance and makes us think of the uncanny within us.

“You are forming pathways in your brain. Deep structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you use them . . . your bio ware self modifies– the software becomes part of the hardware. So now you are vulnerable– all hackers are vulnerable–to a nam-shub” (Stephenson 126).

These fringes are the places where “interesting things happen” like “transitions and lights fading into shade of the overpass” (122). That is the place where Hiro recognises the fractal identity of his body of flesh to a system of codes and bits of data. The fringes are machinic, the interstitial space of immanence and Lagos is his analogue who informs Hiro of his Posthuman condition of how our relation with technology is an event of computation and flows.

Metaverse, the computer space has a Posthuman ecology with a transversal connection that brings out the visual and kinaesthetic connection of the user combining eyes, hands, body movements, and sexuality with avatar bodies an artificial Intelligence. Stephenson appropriates the landscape of Metaverse into a mythical fringe space where human bodies, biological systems of perception and cognitive patterns are differently connected to computer generated reality that enacts itself apart from the control of its hubs. “The Metaverse is a fictional structure” where human exists in an android experience in “a form that computers understand. It is a vast “nam-shub” like that of the mythical landscapes “enacting itself on L.Bob Rife’s fiber-optical network” (212). They function like “nodes or places capable of forming communities. They have functional characteristics, human and inhuman assemblages, and machinic enunciations.

“Nodes serve as places that are exchangers, communication hubs, playing a role of coordination for the smooth interaction of all elements integrated into the network. Other places are the nodes of the network . . . that build a series of locality-based activities and organizations around a key function in the network” (Castells 443).

The rationality of existence of such a place is explained through the descriptions of our sensual perception while navigating through its imaginary cityscape. He experienced the cities as geometrical shapes of the computer graphics. Hiro considers the hardware as his own body that Logos had reminded him of a body that is yet to be realised inside the computer.

“In the beginning the laptop clings to him in an erotic way and watching the movement of its camera was like visualising a strip tease. “. . . The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this lens emerges and clicks into place. Its base flushes with the surface of the computer” reminding him “of skirts, lingerie, outer labia and inner labia” (23).

His physical connection with the machine through headphones and goggles was an opening of his body to its own desires, stripping off all its stratifications. Then he begins to perceive the ‘space’ created by electronic gadgets as an experience of reality. The virtual images of spatiality like boulevard, streets, offices, house etc. along with his experiences as an avatar appear as a re-enactment of movement in real spaces.

When his real body is matched by his avatar he incorporates his body with the virtual reality. Through an enhanced perception of his eyes and his spatial orientation counterbalanced by the movements Metaverse is generated by Hiro as well as the computer. Through his interaction he realises the boundedness of his visual perception and the fractal reality of a simulated space where he becomes a pov that the computer permits. “Reduced to a point, the pov is abstracted into a purely temporal entity with no spatial extension” . . . (Hayles 39). The space becomes a Posthuman expression of transcendence when it emerges in Hiro’s visual space beyond the limits of his perception and the scale of his accessibility. This realisation of both the real and the virtual world is also the interface of Posthuman understanding. “. . . when Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness . . . he is actually staring at the graphic representations – the user interface –of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations” (25). It becomes a globalised network space where avatars simulates ‘moving in’ at the office, locating documents in folders, filing cabinets, finding free information in search engine libraries thus experiencing a globalised spatiality through the accessibility of internet.

The distributed control of the network also shifts to non-human agents like virus that creates a viral affect. Viral spaces are expressions of software programmes with a machinic language. Viruses expose the vulnerability of the Metaverse's control as networks through its informational logic. Hiro completely internalises this unboundedness of the system through a hacker's understanding that the metaverse is different in its viral, automated and random nature.

"You talk to the computer in one of these languages and a piece of software called compiler converts it into machinic language. But you never can tell exactly what the compiler is doing. It doesn't always come out the way you want like a dusty pane or warped mirror." (Stephenson 278-79)

Through his experiences with digital actants like viruses he accepts the system's potential of deontologising his position from a human subject to a hacker. The viral spaces are infinitesimal fractal spaces of the cyberspace programmed differently with probabilities and capacities of infecting with information. They decode the spatiality of the digital space by mutation and replication in a symbiotic involution with their software, hence they address the materiality of networked spaces. Hacking turns out to be an unusual encounter between human and machine, human and virus, and virus and system that folds inside to a pack of collective movements from hackers. *Snow Crash* virus changes computer and organic bodies to infected bodies. They edit the coded system which in fact affects the body of the computer and infect all codes of representation of human. Though it is portrayed as an intentional infection initiated by the marginalised, virus is celebrated for its viral nature. In *Snow Crash* virus is also a performative language that expresses itself through glossolalia. When YT meets a woman whose brain is hacked by snowcrash she could only utter glossolalia and stare at her like the blips of a computer screen. The viral infectants behaved like programmed robots with dispersed subjectivities. Virus in cyberpunks is a becoming machine with a complete digital consciousness and carries the actual machinic desire in a control society. It produces links between man and machine by foregrounding the coded structure of human genome and spreads through flows and connections. Virus makes actual body assemblages when it is used as a drug.

The recognition of Posthuman spaces in cyberpunks means locating the becoming machine in human technology assemblage. Hiro realises the machine part of every system that affects other systems and makes multiple assemblages.

"In that situation the people who own the computer are helpless," Ng says. "Right. Because they access the machine at a higher level, which has now been overridden. In the same sense once a neurolinguistic hacker plugs into the deep structures of our brain, we can't get him out—because we can't even control our own brain at such a basic level." (395)

Neal Stephenson perceives a Posthuman capability of the hackers to identify the viral machine in the machinic assemblage. As Hiro reflects a hacker can "... understand the true inner workings of the machine—he sees through the language he is working in and glimpses the secret functioning of the binary code ... " (279).

Rhizomatic connections reveal multiple heterogeneous bonding between human and technology in this novel. The cybernetic technology in cyberpunks is also found as a simulation technology that actualise affective performative events of human avatars with computer virus, a non-human viral potential of replication and mutation. The capitalist global networking remains as an autopoietic self organised form but the openness and connection of interactive technology affects facilitates rhizomatic assemblages. The accommodation of all differences and diverse alterities expresses heterogeneity as the non-human model of enunciation conducive for posthuman future.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bell, David. *Cyberculture Theorists: Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway*. Routledge, 2007.
- [2] Boundas, Constantin V. "Intensity.", Parr. *Deleuze Dictionary*. pp. 133-35.
- [3] ---. "Virtual." Parr. *Deleuze Dictionary*. pp. 300-02.
- [4] Buchanan, Ian. *Deleuze and Guattari's 'Anti-Oedipus': A Reader's Guide*. Bloomsbury, 2008. ProquestEbook Central, ebookcentral. proquest.com /lib/inflibnet-ebooks/detail.action?dicID=766045. Accessed on 10 Oct. 2024.
- [5] Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Duke UP, 1993.
- [6] Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. 1996. Blackwell, 2000.
- [7] Crombez, Joel Michael. *After the Human: Theory and Sociology in the Age of Fractal Ambiguity, Dromology, and Emergent Epi-spaces*. Thesis. University of Tennessee. 2015, www.trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4397&context=utk_gradthes. Accessed on 20 Feb. 2018.
- [8] Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- [9] Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

- [10] Kellner, Douglas. "Virillio, War and Technology: Some Critical Reflections." *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol.16, no. 5-6, pp.103-25, 1999. *Sage Journals*. doi.org/10.1177/02632769922050890. Accessed 18 Jan. 2025
- [11] Kneale, James. "Space." Bould. *The Routledge Companion*. pp. 423-32
- [12] Livesey, Graham. "Assemblage." Parr, *Deleuze Dictionary*, pp.18-19.
- [13] McCaffery, Larry. *Storming the Reality Studio*. Duke UP, 2007.
- [14] Murray, Craig D. et al. "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality." *Ethos*. vol.27, no.3, 1999. pp. 315-43. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/640592. Accessed on 22 July 2020.
- [15] Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*. Bantam, 2008.
- [16] Zizek, Slavoj. *Organs without Bodies*. Routledge, 2012.



Widowhood, Orthodoxy, and the Crisis of Modernity: Re-Reading Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*

Akangkshya Sarma¹, Dr. Mukuta Borah²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Received: 19 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Sep 2025; Accepted: 20 Sep 2025; Available online: 25 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper presents a critical examination of Indira Goswami's novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, reevaluating its portrayal of cultural decay and social transformation in 20th-century Assam. Departing from a traditional thematic reading, this study argues that the novel functions as a complex commentary on the dialectic between inherited tradition and revolutionary change. The fall of the feudal Adhikar family and the crumbling Vaishnavite Sattrā are analyzed not merely as allegories of decline, but as sites where ideological and material contradictions are fiercely negotiated. Drawing on theoretical insights from postcolonialism and subaltern studies, this analysis interrogates how Goswami's narrative unsettles colonial and indigenous power structures. The paper delves into the gendered oppression embodied by the tragic figure of Giribala, whose subtle acts of resistance and eventual demise reveal the systemic violence of patriarchal orthodoxy. Concurrently, it examines the character of Indranath as a failed liberal humanist, whose tragic end exposes the pitfalls of both ossified tradition and uncritical revolutionary fervor. Ultimately, the paper will examine how Goswami's work transcends a simple elegy for a bygone era, presenting instead a nuanced critique of modernity and a compelling case for a more ethically grounded path toward social evolution.



Keywords— Indira Goswami, Widowhood, Tradition, Feudalism, Caste, Gender, Violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, one of the most celebrated voices in Indian literature, stands as a distinguished figure in Assamese literary and cultural history. Born as Indira Goswami in 1942 in Guwahati, Assam, was an Indian writer, poet, professor, scholar, and editor. Known by her pen name, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, she was awarded the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 2000, becoming the first Assamese writer to receive this honor. Goswami's works are characterized by their profound humanism, evocative portrayal of Assamese society, and relentless critique of oppressive socio-religious practices. Her deeply empathetic storytelling explores themes of gender, caste, spirituality,

and social transformation, often set against the backdrop of a changing Assam.

Assamese literature, to which Goswami contributed significantly, is a rich tapestry of oral traditions, religious texts, and modern narratives that span centuries. Emerging initially through ancient scriptures like the *Kirtan-ghosha* of Srimanta Sankardeva, the founder of Assamese Vaishnavism, it gradually evolved to encompass diverse forms of storytelling, poetry, and prose. The colonial and post-colonial eras saw a surge of modern Assamese literature, reflecting the region's socio-political struggles, cultural heritage, and aspirations. Writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Homen Borgohain, and others laid the

groundwork for a literary tradition that resonates with universal themes while remaining deeply rooted in Assamese culture. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, through her works, elevated this tradition by addressing critical issues such as gender oppression, feudal decadence, and the challenges of socio-political upheaval.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's acclaimed novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (Goswami, 2004) translated from Assamese as *Dantal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* emerges as a profound exploration of Assam's socio-cultural and political landscape during a time of transition. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is a Realistic novel, it is a novel of Social Realism. She received the prestigious Sahitya Sabha Award for this novel. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is a powerful novel that is listed as a masterpiece of Indian Literature by Sahitya Akademi and the National Book Trust. The novel is set within the confines of a *Sattr*, a religious Vaishnavite institution integral to Assamese society, the novel offers a poignant narrative of decline and transformation. The novel portrays how the rigid religious conservatism within the household of the *Sattr* Adhikar stifles the human instincts and desires of men and women, ultimately setting religion in opposition to humanity. Critics have noted that the story lacks a conventional villain, with the system and nature as antagonists. This unique approach makes the novel a remarkable work that vividly captures the true essence of the local setting. The Adhikar family, central to the story, symbolizes the erosion of the feudal order and the rigid religious orthodoxy that once shaped Assam's social fabric. Through this microcosm, Goswami unravels broader themes of decay, resistance, and reform that are deeply intertwined with Assam's history and its cultural ethos. The novel's title, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is imbued with symbolism, encapsulating the fragility and decay of a once-mighty socio-religious order. The elephant, representing strength, and its moth-eaten howdah, symbolizing decline, underscore the central theme of the novel: the inexorable fall of traditions unable to adapt to a changing socio-economic landscape. "The decadence and fall in the new politico-economic setup of a family of former glory and power forms the novel's theme. This decadence and fall of the family take place in the eyes of the author-narrator of the story. She has empathy for the family in the simultaneous struggle for life and futile effort to assert its power and spent-up force; and yet as one who also sees the limitations of the family to survive in the New Age with its new ethos, she sees the inevitability of the fall of such a family" (Sarma, p. 44). Goswami's narrative deftly intertwines the personal and the political, with the lives of her characters reflecting the larger struggles of a society caught between tradition and modernity. The novel revolves

around the lives of three widows, Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala along with Indranath, the Future *Sattr* Adhikar (Future head of the monastery). One of the central figures in the novel, Giribala is a young widow whose tragic experiences lay bare the dehumanizing effects of patriarchal and religious orthodoxy. Her forced isolation, the small acts of rebellion in the novel that define her resistance, and her eventual death at the end during a ritualistic penance reveal the intersection of gender, caste, and religious dogma. Giribala's story becomes a powerful critique of the socio-religious order, illustrating the human cost of maintaining outdated traditions. Parallel to Giribala's plight is the journey of Indranath, who grapples with the tension between preserving heritage and embracing reform. Indranath's evolution reflects the complex and often painful process of societal change. His interactions with the rising communist ideologies and the violent misunderstanding of his progressive intentions highlight the ethical dilemmas and human suffering that accompany revolutions. Goswami's portrayal of Indranath mirrors her time's societal and ideological conflicts, capturing the nuances of Assam's socio-political transformation. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's writing is marked by its rootedness in Assamese culture, enriched by her use of local dialects, historical realism, and symbolic imagery. Through *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, she offers a nuanced commentary on progress and its ethical costs, questioning the violence often associated with revolutionary change. At the same time, her critique of feudalism and religious orthodoxy serves as a call for humanism and resilience, advocating for societal reform that prioritizes empathy and inclusivity. This research paper delves into the layered dimensions of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, exploring its symbolic representation of decay, its critique of religious orthodoxy, and its examination of gendered oppression. It also investigates Goswami's portrayal of socio-political upheavals and their implications for Assam's cultural identity. Ultimately, the paper seeks to illuminate how Goswami's work serves as an elegy for a fading order and a beacon for a more equitable future, making her novel a timeless reflection on the challenges and possibilities of social transformation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the decline of traditional familial and socio-political structures within the changing economic and cultural dynamics of the Assamese society, as portrayed in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*.
2. To explore the interplay between religious orthodoxy and liberal humanist ideals, highlighting how the novel critiques oppressive

customs and advocates progressive transformation.

3. To analyze the representation of women, particularly Giribala, in the context of socio-religious conservatism, focusing on their struggle for agency and humanity.
4. To examine the ambivalence in the novel's treatment of tradition, where it simultaneously laments its loss and critiques its repressive nature.
5. To study the character of Indranath as a symbol of liberalism and social conscience, reflecting the novel's engagement with socio-economic change and resistance to orthodoxy.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, focusing on its thematic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. The methodology involves close reading of the text to explore themes such as feudal decay, religious orthodoxy, gender struggles, and socio-economic transitions. Comparative analysis situates the novel alongside Goswami's other works and global literary traditions of social realism. Cultural-contextual interpretation examines Assamese feudal society, Vaishnavite traditions, and emerging liberal ideologies. Theoretical frameworks like postcolonialism, feminism, and socio-political criticism are applied to uncover deeper meanings, supported by a study of Goswami's narrative techniques and symbolic elements. This integrative approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the novel's relevance in Indian literature.

III. RESEARCH ANALYSIS

"It is believed that change in the society can take place only if the youth feels the necessity for such a change. Goswami's characters are portrayed as the rising youth who suffer at the hands of existing norms and customs, but eventually picks up courage and convincingly move forward to bring about change" (Sharma, 2015). Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is rated a classic by the Sahitya Akademi which deals closely with the harsh lives of Brahmin widows and the share-croppers of South Kamrup. "The novel is a bold description of the misery of the downtrodden and the Brahmin widows in the background of the decaying social order of the Sattrā institution at the threshold of Independence. The novel is a melancholy poetry of human suffering, amidst the spread of the menace of opium and the rise of the Communist voice against the sharecroppers" (Baruah, 2007, p. 5). Numerous writers have centered their works on the need for societal

transformation, challenging entrenched customs. Their narratives often focus on women as central figures, portraying them as individuals oppressed by patriarchal norms who rise to challenge these constraints. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, however, while maintaining the depiction of a marginalized woman, also shifts focus to a male protagonist representing the aspirations of the modern generation. In her novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Indranath, a young man destined to become the next Adhikar of the Sattrā, becomes a critical voice against the blind adherence to outdated social practices. Through his journey, the narrative highlights issues such as caste discrimination, the secondary status of women, and the harsh rituals imposed on widows, exposing the flaws in traditional societal structures. In short, the novel serves as a poignant exploration of societal decay, religious orthodoxy, gendered oppression, and socio-political upheaval within the context of Assamese society. One of the central objectives of this research is to examine the narrative's critique of religious orthodoxy and its connection to societal decay. The novel's setting within a *Sattrā*, a Vaishnavite religious institution, becomes a microcosm of the broader societal transitions and challenges of early 20th-century Assam. Goswami meticulously captures the erosion of feudal structures through the Adhikar family, illustrating the disintegration not just of physical institutions but of their moral and spiritual significance. The Sattrā system, with its rigid hierarchies, marginalizes individuals based on caste and gender. Postcolonial theories, such as Frantz Fanon's concept of 'internalized oppression', illuminate how these outdated systems contribute to their collapse by resisting reform. Fanon's concept of 'internalized oppression' is a critical lens for understanding the psychological and societal dynamics of colonized or marginalized groups. It refers to the phenomenon where individuals or communities internalize the ideologies and hierarchies imposed by oppressive systems, ultimately perpetuating their subjugation. This concept is deeply relevant in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, particularly in the portrayal of the Sattrā system and its resistance to reform. In the novel, the Sattrā is depicted as a crumbling relic of a feudal and colonial past. While it represents a significant cultural and spiritual heritage, its rigid adherence to outdated traditions and hierarchies mirrors Fanon's idea of internalized oppression. The custodians of the Sattrā, including the Adhikar family, uphold practices that alienate and marginalize others within their community, even as these practices contribute to the institution's decline. This perpetuation of rigid orthodoxy illustrates how oppressive systems can survive through the complicity or acquiescence of those they subjugate. Fanon's theory, articulated in works like *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2004) and

Black Skin, White Masks (Fanon, 1967) argues that colonized societies often adopt the values, norms, and prejudices of the colonizers. This adoption creates a cycle of self-perpetuated oppression, where the marginalized groups internalize the belief in their inferiority and enforce the structures that subjugate them. In the context of the Sattrā, this can be seen in its leaders' resistance to reform, even when such resistance accelerates the institution's demise. Their refusal to embrace change reflects a fear of losing authority, rooted in a colonial and feudal mindset that prioritizes hierarchy over adaptability. The character of Indranath serves as a counterpoint to this dynamic. As a progressive thinker, he recognizes the stagnation within the Sattrā and seeks to challenge its practices. However, his efforts are met with resistance, not only from traditionalists within the institution but also from the broader community, which fears the disruption of the status quo. This resistance underscores the depth of internalized oppression, where even potential beneficiaries of reform view change as a threat rather than an opportunity. Fanon's concept also highlights the psychological toll of internalized oppression, which is evident in the lives of the marginalized characters in the novel. For instance, Giribala's suffering, along with other widows such as Durga who is Indranath's Aunt, and Saru Gohainne as widows within the Sattrā reflects the entrenched patriarchy and religious orthodoxy that oppress women. Their marginalization is both a result of and a reinforcement of the system's inequities. Despite the visible decay of the Sattrā, its adherents cling to its rituals and hierarchies, illustrating Fanon's assertion that oppressed groups often reproduce the very structures that confine them.

Another significant aspect of this research is the analysis of gendered oppression and patriarchy as depicted in the novel. Goswami's characters, particularly Giribala, offer a deeply empathetic portrayal of the struggles faced by widows and marginalized women. Giribala's life, marked by isolation and systemic discrimination, serves as a critique of societal norms that deny women agency. Giribala lost her husband at a very young age, being a teenage widow she had to face the harsh reality of widowhood both from her maternal home and her in-laws. She was married before she attained puberty, like most of the girls during that era. If a girl attained puberty before her marriage, society would most likely consider her family an outcast. That was one of the reasons why young girls like Giribala had to go through widowhood because of the huge age gap between the partners. "That girl's father will soon be made an outcast if he doesn't get her married fast....Right, you are my fellow! See how her body has shot up like a sturdy palm tree." (Goswami, 404) Giribala is the daughter of the Adhikar of the Sattrā. She left her conservative and orthodox in-laws

after the death of her husband and decided to spend the rest of her days at Sattrā under the shadow of her family. Unfortunately, even the daughter of such a respectable family had to face the same rituals and religious constraints of widowhood in her equally conservative family. From the day she returned to the Sattrā, she faced the problem of coping with the religious orthodoxy. People commented on her late husband's affairs and her mother-in-law's torture. One even asked her if the rumor of a baby dying in her womb between the chaos of the torture from her in-laws was true. All the women had come to Giribala on her arrival only curious to hear and gossip about the dreadful reality and torture of her in-laws from her mouth, but Giribala didn't utter a single word. In one instant, one woman suggested to Giribala's mother, "Listen Gossainee! You keep her for a few days and send her back. Her Husband's place is like heaven for a woman. If she runs away from her husband's house, she is like a naked woman loitering on the streets. Even if she tries to cover herself with clothes, people will snatch them away from her body" (Goswami, p. 410). While Giribala was on her way to the Sattrā after returning from her in-laws, someone from the crowd commented, "Don't touch her! Don't touch her! You women with sindoor. She is a widow now. (Goswami, p. 407). Simone de Beauvoir's theory, as articulated in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1949) provides a compelling framework for understanding Giribala's character in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. Beauvoir's concept of women as the "Other," relegated to a subordinate position in patriarchal societies, is vividly reflected in Giribala's life. As a widow in a rigidly orthodox Assamese society, her identity is reduced to her status within a patriarchal framework, where she is denied agency and subjected to systemic oppression. The cultural and religious norms of the Sattrā institution enforce harsh restrictions on widows like Giribala, dehumanizing them and using tradition to maintain patriarchal control. Giribala's tragic death at the end during a religious ritual symbolizes the ultimate cost of such oppression, highlighting how societal structures sacrifice individual lives to preserve outdated norms. Despite her marginalization, Giribala's subtle acts of resistance, such as quietly rejecting certain rituals, reflect an assertion of agency and humanity, resonating with Beauvoir's emphasis on the psychological toll of "Othering" and the resilience of women in oppressive systems. Giribala's story serves as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of patriarchal traditions, aligning with Beauvoir's call for women's liberation from cultural constructs that deny them autonomy. Widows like Giribala found it difficult to live as human beings, suppressing their desires and accepting their fate. Once on the anniversary of Giribala's grandfather's death, the Adhikar family hosted a

feast. She was locked up in a remote chamber since widows were not permitted near any religious gathering because their presence was deemed unlucky. In Hindu Brahmin society, widows are also required to adhere to a rigid dietary routine. It is prohibited to eat meat when one's spouse has passed away. The aroma of the wonderfully cooked mutton curry prepared for the feast was too strong for Giribala to resist. She was severely humiliated after consuming the mutton curry, and her family severely punished her for disobeying them. Giribala experienced numerous instances where she believed that living was a punishment for widows like herself at the time, and she was only being eaten by social conventions. Another turning point in Giribala's life was her interaction with the European scholar, Mr. Mark, who visited the Sattrā to study ancient Assamese manuscripts. Giribala helped Mark to assist with the work. While Mr. Mark or Sannyasi Sahab as he was named gained affection from the villagers for his devotion and integrity, a misunderstanding led to his downfall. Giribala, battling loneliness, approaches him privately with an emotional appeal, but Mr. Mark maintains his moral restraint. The villagers misinterpret this encounter as immoral and, driven by conservatism, accuse him of misconduct. Despite his innocence, Mr. Mark is forced to abandon his research and leave the region. Giribala faces severe societal condemnation and extreme penance imposed by the village priest. Her punishment culminates in a tragic act of self-immolation during a ritual of "purification," leaving Indranath a helpless observer of the injustice. This story reflects the clash between liberal ideals, societal norms, and individual suffering. Her death was a form of rebellion against the system and also a result of her giving up on society and its norms during a religious ritual becoming a symbolic indictment of a system that prioritizes tradition over individual well-being and rights. Goswami's nuanced exploration of widowhood aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, highlighting how women like Giribala are denied a voice in the societal discourse. Yet, her subtle acts of defiance, such as refusing to adhere to certain oppressive rituals challenge the patriarchal structures that seek to silence her. These acts underscore the resilience of marginalized individuals and hint at the potential for resistance and reform, even within deeply entrenched systems. The socio-political upheavals of Assam during the novel's setting also form a critical dimension of this research. Through the character of Indranath and his engagement with emerging communist ideologies, Goswami captures the clash between tradition and modernity. The Adhikar family possessed an extensive expanse of landed property, symbolizing their social and economic dominance. However, a specific region within their estate became a hotspot for rising communist agitation.

The revolutionary tenants, emboldened by their ideology, not only challenged the Adhikar family's traditional authority but also demanded land redistribution. They went further by insisting that if the Adhikar family wished to retain ownership, they must personally cultivate it, an act deemed unthinkable in their Brahmin Hindu society. For the Adhikars, engaging in manual labor such as plowing the fields was only unconventional but a deeply ingrained cultural taboo. Ploughing, traditionally performed by lower castes or laborers, clashed with their societal identity as upper-caste landowners. The communists' demands struck at the heart of both their economic power and their deeply held religious and social traditions, creating a profound ideological and cultural conflict that challenged the very fabric of the Adhikar family's heritage and their place in the hierarchy of the time. Indranath as a person exemplifies liberal values despite the obstacles he faced. He helps an ostracized leper, makes sure a Muslim elephant hunter is buried and maintains composure in the face of growing danger by going against the religious taboo. But seeing his sister die as a result of social inflexibility drastically changes his viewpoint. He later chose to give up his land to the dissident tenants after realizing the connection between social conservatism and the current political-economic structure, arguing in favor of a framework that would allow liberal ideas to thrive. Unfortunately, others misinterpret his gesture. As he approached the tenants unannounced and unattended, he was brutally slaughtered after being mistaken for an enemy. Even while the tenants saw this needless violence as a sign of progress, it begs the question of why there should be bloodshed, particularly since Indranath had previously supported their cause. The episode critiques both Indranath's naivety and the communists' resort to excessive violence, offering a somber reflection on the costs of societal transformation. The Adhikar family's dwindling fortunes reflect the larger economic and social transformations brought about by colonial rule and the collapse of feudalism. Indranath's interactions with communist activists highlight the growing discontent among marginalized groups and their struggle for equitable societal structures. However, Goswami's critique extends to the ideological rigidity of revolutionary movements, emphasizing the need for empathy and inclusivity in the pursuit of genuine progress. Cultural identity is another thread woven into the narrative. The Sattrā, as a symbol of Assamese heritage, represents the richness and limitations of tradition. Goswami explores the challenges of cultural preservation and adaptation by juxtaposing the decline of the Sattrā with the rise of new ideologies. Symbolism and metaphor are integral to Goswami's storytelling. The title of the novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, encapsulates the themes of decay and transformation. The

image of a majestic elephant burdened by a deteriorating howdah can be seen to serve as a powerful metaphor for the decline of traditional institutions. This symbolism extends throughout the narrative, with the crumbling Sattrā, hollow rituals, and individual struggles reflecting broader societal decay. By anchoring these symbols in Assamese culture and history, Goswami ensures that her critique resonates universally while remaining deeply rooted in local realities.

Goswami illuminates the intricate interplay of tradition, modernity, and social justice in Assamese society through her incisive critique and empathetic storytelling. Her work not only exposes the limitations of outdated systems but also envisions the possibilities of a more equitable and compassionate society. The analysis of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* underscores its enduring relevance in understanding the societal transformation of Assam. "The death of a tradition is certainly very painful as the novel makes us feel but the novel also makes us feel that the to bear that pain is inescapable. The novel depicts human desires and the human longing to live by fulfilling those desires" (Sarma, p. 46). In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Goswami uses the Sattrā as a microcosm to explore the broader societal implications of internalized oppression. The institution's inability to reform mirrors the struggles of colonized societies grappling with the legacies of colonialism. By depicting the gradual disintegration of the Sattrā, Goswami critiques the dangers of clinging to oppressive traditions and highlights the necessity of introspection and reform for societal progress. Fanon's insights thus provide a valuable framework for understanding the novel's themes of decay and resistance. They illuminate how deeply ingrained systems of oppression sustain themselves and underscore the transformative potential of challenging internalized hierarchies. Through this lens, Goswami's work becomes not only a critique of Assamese society but also a universal exploration of the challenges faced by communities seeking to reconcile tradition with modernity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is a profound exploration of the complexities of societal transformation, deeply rooted in the Assamese socio-cultural milieu. Through its rich narrative tapestry, the novel lays bare the tensions between tradition and modernity, shedding light on the human cost of preserving rigid socio-religious systems in the face of inevitable change. The analysis of this literary masterpiece reveals a nuanced critique of feudalism, religious orthodoxy, gendered oppression, and the socio-political upheavals that

shaped 20th-century Assam, providing a microcosmic reflection of larger global transitions.

Central to the novel's thematic resonance is the portrayal of the Adhikar family's decline, serving as a symbolic representation of the erosion of entrenched feudal and religious structures. The moth-eaten howdah and the tusker are enduring metaphors for a decaying socio-political order that fails to adapt to the egalitarian demands of a changing world. This decline is not simply an economic or institutional collapse but a moral and spiritual disintegration, exacerbated by the internalization of oppressive traditions. The Sattrā's resistance to reform epitomizes the tragic inertia of systems that prioritize hierarchy over humanity, mirroring Frantz Fanon's concept of internalized oppression. Goswami's portrayal of gendered oppression, particularly through the character of Giribala, further enriches the narrative's critique of patriarchal and religious orthodoxy. Giribala's journey from silent suffering to tragic defiance highlights the dehumanizing effects of widowhood in a rigidly conservative society. Her acts of quiet rebellion and ultimate demise during a ritualistic penance underscore the systemic subjugation of women, resonating with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of the "Othering" of women in patriarchal systems. Giribala's story stands as a haunting indictment of societal norms that sacrifice individual agency and well-being at the altar of tradition. The novel's exploration of socio-political upheaval, embodied by Indranath's interactions with communist ideologies, offers a layered critique of revolutionary movements. While the communist agitation challenges the oppressive feudal order, Goswami raises questions about the ethical costs of violent reform. Indranath's tragic demise serves as a poignant reminder of the dangers of ideological extremism and the importance of empathy and inclusivity in the pursuit of progress. His character encapsulates the painful dichotomy of preserving heritage while advocating for reform, reflecting the universal struggles of societies navigating the complexities of modernization. Moreover, Goswami's use of cultural symbolism and historical realism grounds her universal themes within the specific context of Assamese heritage. The Sattrā, as both a cultural touchstone and a crumbling institution, encapsulates the dual challenges of preservation and adaptation. The meticulous depiction of local dialects, rituals, and societal hierarchies ensures that the novel's critique remains deeply rooted in its setting while resonating with broader themes of cultural and spiritual transformation.

In conclusion, Goswami's work stands as a testament to the power of literature to critique, inspire, and transform, offering a profound commentary on the cultural and spiritual metamorphosis of Assam and beyond by engaging

with the themes of tradition, transition, and tragedy. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is more than a lament for a decaying order; it is a call for a more humane and equitable society. Goswami's narrative weaves together the personal and the political, the local and the universal, offering a timeless reflection on the challenges and possibilities of social transformation. Her critique of rigid traditions, coupled with her empathetic portrayal of marginalized lives, underscores the necessity of reform that prioritizes humanity and resilience over hierarchy and orthodoxy. This research demonstrates the enduring relevance of Goswami's work, positioning it as a vital commentary on the interplay between tradition, transition, and the human spirit in the face of tragedy. By delving into the layered dimensions of her novel, this paper underscores its status as a masterpiece that transcends its regional roots to offer profound insights into the universal dilemmas of progress and change.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baruah, M. (2007). *Indira Goswami: A Compilation on Her Life, Works, and Achievements*.
- [2] Fanon, F. (1952). *Black skin, white masks*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB11785653>
- [3] Fanon, F. (1961). *The wretched of the Earth*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/20048263>
- [4] Gohain, Prof. H. (n.d.). Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) & her Fictional World: The Search for the Sea. In *The Worm-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (pp. 44–53). B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- [5] Goswami, M. R. (2002). *Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) & her fictional world: The Search for the Sea*.
- [6] Goswami, M. R. (2004). The moth-eaten howdah of the tusker. In *Rupa & Co. eBooks*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA90238637>
- [7] Guha, Amalendu. (1982). *Medieval and Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*. K. K. Publication.
- [8] Jha, Abhijit. (2021). "Widowhood: Reflection on Oppression and Societal Dilemma as Illustrated in Indira Goswami's Text." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 9(4), 1184-1188.
- [9] Misra, T. (2011). Indira Goswami: Brave, gentle and bold. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23065632>
- [10] Pujari, Tapash. (2022). "Nationalism and Communism: A case study of Assam." *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(1), 1-12.
- [11] Sarma, S. (1963). Assamese literature. *Indian Literature*, 6(2), 58–64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23329407>
- [12] Sharma, M. (2015). Indranath and Giribala - The young adult dystopian characters in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. *I-manager's Journal on English Language Teaching*, 5(2), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.26634/jelt.5.2.3399>
- [13] Spivak, G. C. (2003). Can the Subaltern Speak? *Die Philosophin*, 14(27), 42–58. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philosophin200314275>
- [14] Tinsukia, Binita Bora. "Ecology, Culture and Postcolonialism: An Eco-critical Reading of Indira Goswami's 'The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker.'" *Drishhti – The Sight*, 9(1), 22-29.



Affective Dimensions of Translation Tasks: Reducing Anxiety in EFL Learning

Fatima Zahra Alaoui Mrani

Ph.D. Student in English Studies, Marrakech, Morocco

Received: 18 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Sep 2025; Accepted: 19 Sep 2025; Available online: 25 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Foreign language anxiety is still one of the biggest emotional barriers in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In the past, translation exercises have been assumed to be cognitively challenging tasks, but more recent studies show that, if designed with care, certain translation tasks can be used to alleviate the anxiety of learners and to promote psychological safety in language classrooms. This research analyzes the ways in which selective translation exercises could help to alleviate the anxiety of EFL learners while also improving learners' language skills. By conducting a broad analysis of the literature and analysing several hare and qualitative studies, this work investigates learners' emotional reactions to various forms of translation work and attempts to define the translation exercise features that encourage low anxiety. The research shows that learners' anxiety is decreased substantially, alongside more positive emotional responses towards the target language, while performing certain culturally and contextually bound translation tasks, particularly when used with group work. This work offers suggestions to teachers on the use of translation exercises designed to decrease anxiety and improve learner emotional responses in EFL classrooms, ultimately seeking to improve the language teaching and learning in EFL context which lacks emotional and psychological considerations.



Keywords— Foreign language anxiety, translation tasks, EFL learning, psychological safey, affective factors, emotional responses

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the affective factors in the acquisition of a second language have received a great deal of attention in applied linguistics. Among those factors, foreign language anxiety has gained a reputation of being one of the most pervasive and debilitating obstacles in mastering a language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) have fully elucidated foreign language anxiety as a fully fledged self-perception, deeply embedded in a belief, a feeling, and a behavior syndrome attuned to the learning of language as a classroom task. We, as a world, are experiencing the consequences of Horwitz et al. (1986) and their followers where millions of EFL learners are challenged with foreign language anxiety, rising above their linguistic and academic achievements.

Language teaching methods have, in general, been 'problematic' in the consideration of ignoring the emotional

aspects of learning and as such the teaching of the language in question stems from the relatively logical structures of the language. However, limb, or spirit of applied linguistics has gained recognition as a critical, if not the most important, component of the learning process. MacIntyre, 2014 and Dewaele et al 2014, alongside Gregerson (2021) have also pointed that out in their recent work. Of particular interest is anxiety, and how it relates to language, as anxiety is religion and crucible of bad language as it performs a reciprocal relationship: cycle of anxiety and bad performance that is debilitating (Young 1991, Aida 1994).

At the grammar-translation approach and the later neglected communicative approach, translation tasks attracted little interest and appreciation. However, most models of language pedagogy nowadays portray the translation activity in a more positive light. Research shows that such translation activities serve a number of pedagogical aims,

such as fostering metalinguistic awareness, cross-cultural awareness, and even critical thinking (Cook, 2010; Leonardi, 2010; Witte, Harden, & Ramos de Oliveira Harden, 2009). In addition, while still emerging, some evidence suggests that in some cases, translation tasks may lower anxiety by providing more familiar cognitive outline and less the uncertainty that most communicative tasks tend to invoke (Liao, 2006; Carreres, 2006).

Research regarding the role tasks of translation serve to foster psychological safety within language learning environments is still in its formative phase. Psychological safety is the 'shared belief that team members will not be penalized or humiliated for voicing their opinions or for taking interpersonal risks' (Edmondson, 1999). In recent years, psychological safety has emerged as one of the key components that enhance learning and performance around the globe in different educational systems. In the context of language learning, psychological safety permits learners to use the language in its spoken form without the risk of being self-conscious. This, in turn, promotes natural acquisition processes (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

The aim of the current research is to examine affective aspects of translation tasks in the EFL context, and more specifically, how some selective translation tasks mitigate learner anxiety and foster psychological safety. This study focuses on emotional reaction to different types of translation tasks and attempts to determine task features and instructional methods that yield positive affective results without compromising educational objectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety: Theoretical Foundations

Few issues in psychology have proven to be more problematic than that of foreign-language anxiety, which Horwitz et al. (1986) defined as anxiety associated with foreign language learning contexts. The construct has communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation at its core (Horwitz et al., 1986). Research has verified that foreign language anxiety is as widely ubiquitous as it is detrimental to learning, regardless of the particular contexts and cultures involved (Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999; Liu and Jackson, 2008).

In the case of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), the contemplation of anxiety over language learning was enriched by the conceptualization that such anxiety is chronic, as well as acute, and thus modifies the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning of a learner. Their anxiety-attention thesis posits that anxiety has the capacity to interfere with the attention, memory, and processing of information, and thus the learning of a language. In Young

(1991) the language anxiety was classified into six forms: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, beliefs of the instructor about the language teaching, instructor-learner interaction, language teaching methodology employed in the classroom, and language evaluation.

More recent studies have deepened knowledge regarding foreign language anxiety and its connection to other emotions like motivation, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate (Dewaele, 2007; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998; Zheng, 2008). In the same vein, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) offered the construct of foreign language enjoyment as a positive emotion that balances out anxiety and argued that maximum enjoyment and minimum anxiety are the two fundamental goals of effective language teaching.

2.2 Translation in Language Learning: Pedagogical Perspectives

Within the scholarly fields of pedagogy and foreign language acquisition, the handling of the translation and its value to the teaching of foreign languages has greatly shifted over time. Largely, the grammar-translation method has had its place in instructional practice for long periods, particularly with the enduring grammar-translation approach. However, sociolinguistic through direct purposes methods and the communicative method approaches of translation for lesson activities has certainly been proven to lack efficacy (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). Translation, in the opinion of the pragmatists of translation theory, has had a revitalization and been rehabilitated in the last few decades with supporting advancements in theoretical applied linguistics and empirical scholarship validating its application in pedagogy (Cook, 2010; Malmkjaer, 1998).

The translation pedagogy that shifts to contemporary models has catered mostly for primary arguments that dismissal of translation activities is able to spur multiple competences. Leonardi (2010) claimed that the shift of paradigm from linguistics to translations as primary metalinguistic tasks at the level of lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic strata of discourses augurs paradigm shifts in languages. Witte in 2009 and even lately have shown that translation tasks do elevate higher order thinking outcomes through critical thinking as learners work with meaning, form, and culture translation.

The work with learners has been cited for instrumental development of operational types to which pedagogical translation has been proven over time. Culture lacks the ability to see thought. Kramsch 1993 has shown that translation is the as a mediation of culture because to so, translation requires the transition from one culture as systems to the other cultural systems with world views.

Hence, learners become the mediator of intercultural relations of which she has been able to achieve mastery over by refining the understanding of both cultures. (Byram, 1997).

2.3 Affective Dimensions of Translation Tasks

Even though interest in pedagogical translation continues to grow, the affective dimensions of translation tasks in the context of language learning remain unexamined by many scholars. Existing literature demonstrates that learners' emotions concerning translation activities are shaped by the nature of the translation task, its cultural relevance, and how the task is taught (Liao 2006; Carreres 2006).

Liao (2006) is the first to study the attitudes of EFL learners toward translation tasks. From the research, students, in general, had positive attitudes concerning translation tasks, especially if the tasks had a learning and cultural value to the students. Participants claimed that translation tasks alleviated anxiety by framing how students approached the target language in a more familiar cognitive configuration.

In her study on translation as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of Spanish as a second language, Carreres (2006) points out that well-designed translation tasks can positively influence a learner's motivation and engagement. This research reinforced how task design that emphasized authenticity and cultural relevance shaped emotions toward the task. Participants reported that translation activities helped them to access their knowledge and culture, leading to lower levels of anxiety and a sense of inadequacy that surfaced in a target-only language approach.

2.4 Psychological Safety in Language Learning

The idea of psychological safety originated within organizational psychology (Edmondson, 1999) but has recently developed within educational research as well as in context of foreign language acquisition. Psychological safety occurs in an environment when an individual is able to take interpersonal risks, offer their opinions, ask questions, make mistakes, and face other consequences without ridicule (Edmondson, 1999).

In acquisition of foreign language, psychological safety is fundamental as acquisition of any new language requires risk and vulnerability (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Learners must attempt to make correct sentences, wrong utterances, and utter gaps in their language. The absence of psychological safety causes learners to use avoidance strategies which impedes their linguistic development (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2021).

The shift in research focus to exploring psychological safety in foreign language learning context pinpointed numerous significant components of nurturing environments. These components include, but are not limited to, teacher

interpersonal and instructional styles, learner interpersonal relations, evaluation and grading, and techniques of lesson construction (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). It has been established that learners' willingness to communicate, their active participation, and their learning gains, are markedly higher in these environments (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Khajavy, MacIntyre, & Barabadi, 2018).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

In this case, the methodology of the research was a literature review. To aid this literature review, structured studies examining the ties between translation activities and emotions in EFL were analyzed. This research has a qualitative character in that it attempts to pull together fragmented information and create coherent patterns from them across multiple studies and contexts.

3.2 Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published from 1986 and 2024. The following databases were systematically searched: ERIC, PsycINFO, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, the MLA International Bibliography, and the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts. The search included the phrases "foreign language anxiety," "translation tasks," "EFL learning," "psychological safety," and the "affective factors" and "emotional responses".

The studies were selected and prioritized on the basis that they:

- Focused on the emotional aspects of language learning, specifically on anxiety
- Focused on translation tasks in EFL/ESL settings
- Provided empirical evidence responsive to the emotional aspects of translation
- Focused on the psychological aspects of the learning of language
- Published in peer-reviewed journals that are academically reputable.

3.3 Data Analysis

The chosen literature was subjected to thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis process consisted of the following steps:

- Reading the data repeatedly and becoming familiar with the area.
- Coding of the data.
- Identifying themes from the codes.

- Checking and adjusting the themes.
- Describing the themes and citing them as final.
- The final step is producing the report.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Theme 1: Translation Tasks as Anxiety-Reducing Mechanisms

The analysis shows that certain features of translation tasks can help alleviate foreign language anxiety of EFL learners.

Numerous researchers have shown that translation tasks provide learners with cognitive scaffolding that allows them to cope with the complexity of processing the target language (Liao, 2006; Carreres, 2006; Vermes, 2010).

The reducing of anxiety in learners during translation tasks seem to derive from multiple ways. To begin with, translation tasks provide learners with the opportunity to use their native language skills positively, as opposed to the more traditional view of being a handicap. This is part of the growing understanding of multilingualism and the benefits that can be derived from language crossover (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2001). When learners have access to a wide range of vocabulary and structures, their anxiety about the task and a concomitant self-doubt of their linguistic capabilities is greatly diminished as they feel more confident

Furthermore, learners have remarked that translation tasks offer more readily definable parameters and indicators of success compared to other forms of more open-ended and free-flowing communicative activities. In the work of González Davies (2004), learners expressed that they appreciate the definitional boundaries of translation tasks, where learners are asked to generate a specific translation of a text, and that this text can be appraised and analyzed according to certain criteria. This lack of obscurity minimizes the ambiguity that tends to increase anxiety to learners of a language (Young, 1991).

Third, translation activities can be structured to move from familiarity to obstructions, as a means to aid the learners in the development of their confidence. Malmkjær (1998) suggests that learners gain linguistic competence while their emotional stability gets protected because of emotional equilibrium. Learners often feel more at ease while doing translation activities that start with easier tasks that revolve around their culture and progressively introduce complexity.

4.2 Theme 2: Cultural Relevance and Emotional Engagement

An important outcome of several studies stems from the need for relevance to culture to shape emotional reactions

to translation tasks. Research has established that emotionally positive responses to translation tasks accompanied by less anxiety and stress stems from the familiarity of the culture, in comparison to materials that are culture neutral (Liao, 2006; Carreres, 2006; Katan, 2009).

Kramersch (1993) attempts to clarify this in terms of cultural mediation theory by positing that any act of translation involves a cultural 'crossing' of some sort. When students are exposed to cultural materials that they recognize, they are able to access cultural knowledge that is relevant and therefore help their linguistic processing, and in the process conserve cognitive load, thus anxiety. On the other hand, the absence of culture raises the linguistic as well as cultural processing, thus anxiety.

The anxiety benefits of the translation tasks that are relevant to the culture extend to include the emotional benefits that include the counter effect of being more motivated and highly engaged. Carreres' (2006) study participants claim that they feel appreciated and respected as a person who has relevant knowledge to contribute when they engage in translation activities that pertain to their culture. This sense of validation appears to counter feelings of linguistic inadequacy that commonly arise in foreign language contexts.

Moreover, translation activities that cater to the culture of the learners can help connect their life experiences to the content of the target language. This seems to be particularly crucial for adult learners, who perhaps find it harder to relate to standard textbook content that is aimed, older or is from a different culture, than their own. (Duff, 2001).

4.3 Theme 3: Collaborative Translation and Peer Support

According to research evidence, the practice of collaborative translation has the potential to enhance psychological safety and reduce anxiety.

In their research, Kiraly (2000) and Gonzalez Davies (2004) assert that group translation activities provide cognitive and emotional assistance to participants by sharing the workload.

Anxiety seems to be reduced by collaborative translation in several ways. It first reduces the pressure or the fear of performing poorly by sharing multiple roles in completing a whole task.

In class, learners are able to perform at their best and be helped in their weak areas of a task when the task is broken down. In this regard, the environment is perceived as safer and more supportive (Pica, 1994).

Collaborative translation offers opportunities for peer-to-peer scaffolding allowing more competent learners to assist their struggling counterparts.

Translation activities, as documented by Swain and Lapkin (2001), provide a productive avenue for learners to engage with each other while still maintaining a positive emotional climate. In their research, learners are willing to approach peers to ask for clarification and assistance more readily than they would with the teacher.

Finally, group activities in translation can help create a shared sense of responsibility and support, which in turn enhances psychological safety. When learners focus on a shared goal, they build links that cross even the individual activities.

These positive peers relationships seem to be especially relevant in reducing anxiety in language learning. (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

4.4 Theme 4: Task Design Features that Promote Positive Affect

The analysis reveals different particular elements of the design of tasks that may trigger positive emotions while undertaking translation activities. These elements bear the principles of effective design of tasks and translation activities.

Authenticity of the tasks seems to be one of the most important aspects that foster positive emotions. Translation tasks that mirror the actual translation tasks tend to engage learners more and cause less anxiety than imaginary academic tasks (González Davies, 2004). Engaging tasks enable learners to appreciate the significance of and thus engage in translation tasks, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and resistance.

Progressive complexity is another important design feature. Good translation tasks start from known and easy content and gradually step up the linguistic and cultural complexity of the content. This let learners gain and develop confidence and skills over time and avoid the overwhelming anxiety that may result from tasks that are wholly out of reach (Krashen, 1985).

Choice and self-regulation in the task also seem to result in positive emotions. Ushioda (2001) found that learners have more favorable attitudes towards translation tasks to which they engage in more self-guided content choice, design of procedures, and presentation styles. This self-regulation appears to result in more positive feelings of self-efficacy and reduced anxiety from external appraisal.

Well-defined grading categories alongside effective feedback strategies are vital to sustaining positive feelings related to particular course activities. In particular, when learners appreciate the methods by which their work will be assessed, and when feedback targets descriptions instead of trying to teacher-student binary, anxiety and the willingness to learn multiply (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

V. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Curriculum Integration Strategies

According to the results of the research, several strategies can be used to ensure the creation and application of translation tasks aimed to reduce anxiety in the EFL curriculum.

First, translation activities should be integrated gradually, starting with very short texts that are culturally familiar to the learners and which correspond to their interests and experiences. With increased confidence and competence, tasks can start incorporating increasingly complex linguistic features along with cultural content that will be less immediate to students.

Second, translation activities must be tied directly to broad curricular objectives and learning goals. If students understand how translation tasks will contribute to their general language development, they are more likely to collaborate and become less apprehensive about the relevance and value of tasks.

Thirdly, a variety of kinds of translation exercises needs to be employed to generate interest and cater to various learning styles. Such examples can be literary translation, technical translation, audiovisual translation, and creative adaptation exercises. This variety enables all students to find translation exercises that are interesting and specific to their interests.

5.2 Instructor Training and Support

The success of reducing anxiety during translation activities depends on proper instructor preparation and continuous support.

Professional development programs ought to address both the technical aspects of pedagogy as translation as well as the affective aspects of task implementation.

Instructors must be trained on how to identify and address language learning anxiety during translation activities. This encompasses how anxiety is expressed by different learners and how to devise frameworks of support and intervention when the latter is warranted.

In addition, instructors must be trained on how to foster a psychologically safe learning environment where learners can take chances and try new things. This includes clarifying targets, effective praise, and appropriate responses toward learners' responses to errors and challenges.

5.3 Assessment and Feedback Practices

Assessments aimed at progress rather than the final outcome are shown to be the most effective in lowering anxiety and promoting learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Considerable value can be added to the assessment of translation tasks through self-assessment and peer assessment. They enable learners to exercise their evaluative skills and be less reliant on the teacher which in some cases is a source of anxiety.

Feedback is part of the learning process and should be given in a constructive manner focusing on the solutions rather than the problems. This maintains a positive shield of affect while also providing efficient knowledge.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Research Limitations

The current study is limited in scope owing to its use of secondary data which might not capture the range of EFL learning environments across the globe. Much of the literature has been produced within particular cultural and organizational contexts which may restrict the applicability of the results across other settings.

Moreover, the primary importance of decreasing anxiety should not diminish the other factors associated with the learning of a language. Further research should assess the impact of translation tasks on a learner's motivation, self-efficacy, and enjoyment, as these elements are also fundamental in determining the learning outcomes.

6.2 Future Research Directions

There are many areas that require more in-depth study. First, doing experimental studies that aim to measure and compare the affective outcomes from different types of translation tasks could shed light on design elements that may enhance anxiety mitigation.

Second, affect studies in translation-based language learning are still in their infancy. More research is especially needed on the developmental aspects, as in how learners come to feel about translation tasks as time goes on.

Third, examining how cross-cultural frameworks shape emotional experiences with translation tasks may contribute to the development of culturally aware teaching.

Finally, translation-based learning and teaching becomes an interesting area. Particularly, several studies leave gaps as to the tension between anxiety and outcome has been overlooked. Such studies may highlight the emerging importance of positive feelings on learning outcomes, particularly fluency.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study explores the emotional aspects of the EFL learning process and the potential for translation activities designed with care to ease learner anxiety and increase psychological safety. This research found that translation

activities can serve as anxiety-reducing techniques as long as they are culturally relevant and well-designed, and as long as they involve some collaborative work.

It is not enough to focus solely on what learners are doing cognitively; what emotions are tied to the language learning process is equally important. Translation activities offer great possibilities to address affective factors as they promote the development of language and communication, intercultural awareness, and critical thinking.

For practitioners who wish to enhance the emotional dimension of their students' experience in language learning, the incorporation of thoughtful translation exercises seems to be a valid approach. It is critical to note, however, that this is only the first step; much more deliberate work is needed with the tasks, instructors, and assessments of academic and well-being outcomes in order to be more positive and protective towards learners.

Beyond translation pedagogy, this has important implications for the role of affect in second language acquisition. As the field continues to acknowledge the profound emotional dimension of learning, translation activities can be important in a set of strategies to enhance the inclusivity, safety, and efficacy of language learning.

The focus of further research should continue untangling the web of task structure, cultural contexts, and emotions while balancing the creation of anxiety-reducing translation activities that are ready for use in different EFL situations. In this way, the profession of teaching languages will advance in developing the dual-cognitive emotional supportive learning strategies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of Japanese. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(2), 155-168.
- [2] Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-74.
- [3] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- [4] Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- [5] Carreres, Á. (2006). Strange bedfellows: Translation and language teaching. *The interconnectedness of the universal and the particular in translation studies*, 6, 1-15.
- [6] Cheng, Y. S., Horwitz, E. K., & Schallert, D. L. (1999). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language Learning*, 49(3), 417-446.
- [7] Cook, G. (2001). *The discourse of advertising*. Routledge.
- [8] Cook, G. (2010). *Translation in language teaching: An argument for reassessment*. Oxford University Press.

- [9] Cummins, J. (2001). Bilingual children's mother tongue: Why is it important for education? *Sprogforum*, 7(19), 15-20.
- [10] Dewaele, J. M. (2007). Predicting language learners' grades in the L1, L2, L3 and L4: The effect of some psychological and sociocognitive variables. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 4(3), 169-197.
- [11] Dewaele, J. M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 237-274.
- [12] Duff, P. A. (2001). Language, literacy, content, and (pop) culture: Challenges for ESL students in mainstream courses. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(1), 103-132.
- [13] Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.
- [14] González Davies, M. (2004). *Multiple voices in the translation classroom: Activities, tasks and projects*. John Benjamins.
- [15] Gregersen, T., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2021). *Language learner well-being and positive psychology*. Multilingual Matters.
- [16] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- [17] Howatt, A. P. R., & Widdowson, H. G. (2004). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [18] Katan, D. (2009). Translation as intercultural communication. In J. Munday (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to translation studies* (pp. 74-92). Routledge.
- [19] Khajavy, G. H., MacIntyre, P. D., & Barabadi, E. (2018). Role of the emotions and classroom environment in willingness to communicate. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 40(3), 605-624.
- [20] Kiraly, D. (2000). *A social constructivist approach to translator education: Empowerment from theory to practice*. St. Jerome Publishing.
- [21] Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [22] Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- [23] Leonardi, V. (2010). *The role of pedagogical translation in second language acquisition*. Peter Lang.
- [24] Liao, P. S. (2006). EFL learners' beliefs about and strategy use of translation in English learning. *RELC Journal*, 37(2), 191-215.
- [25] Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(1), 71-86.
- [26] MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.
- [27] MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283-305.
- [28] Malmkjær, K. (1998). *Translation and language teaching: Language teaching and translation*. St. Jerome Publishing.
- [29] Mercer, S., & Gregersen, T. (2020). *Teacher wellbeing*. Oxford University Press.
- [30] Peng, J. E., & Woodrow, L. (2010). Willingness to communicate in English: A model in the Chinese EFL classroom context. *Language Learning*, 60(4), 834-876.
- [31] Pica, T. (1994). Research on negotiation: What does it reveal about second-language learning conditions, processes, and outcomes? *Language Learning*, 44(3), 493-527.
- [32] Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2001). Focus on form through collaborative dialogue: Exploring task effects. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching, and testing* (pp. 99-118). Longman.
- [33] Ushioda, E. (2001). Language learning at university: Exploring the role of motivational thinking. In Z. Dörnyei & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 93-125). University of Hawaii Press.
- [34] Vermes, A. (2010). Translation in foreign language teaching: A brief overview of pros and cons. *Eger Journal of English Studies*, 10, 83-93.
- [35] Witte, A., Harden, T., & Ramos de Oliveira Harden, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Translation in second language learning and teaching*. Peter Lang.
- [36] Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426-437.
- [37] Zheng, Y. (2008). Anxiety and second/foreign language learning revisited. *Canadian Journal of New Scholars in Education*, 1(1), 1-12.



Advocacy for Social Change in Indian English Novels

Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra

Professor, Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Received: 22 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2025; Accepted: 22 Sep 2025; Available online: 26 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *This paper examines the persistent tradition of advocacy for social change in Indian English novels across historical periods—from pre-independence to the twenty-first century. It argues that the Indian English novel has consistently functioned as a vehicle for social critique, bearing witness to caste oppression, gender discrimination, Partition violence, authoritarianism during the Emergency, and the inequalities of globalization. Texts by Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Salman Rushdie, Nayantara Sahgal, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, Meena Kandasamy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth, Manu Joseph, and Anuradha Roy, among others, are analyzed for their advocacy potential. Through realism, satire, allegory, polyphony, and ecological narrative, these novels intervene in public discourse, expanding readers' ethical horizons and pressing for reforms in caste, gender, environment, democracy, and economic justice.*



Keywords— *Indian English novel, advocacy, social change, caste, Partition, Emergency, liberalization, gender, environment*

I. INTRODUCTION

From its earliest self-conscious articulations in the 1930s, the Indian English novel has negotiated an unusually intimate relation with projects of social reform. This tradition emerges not as an adjunct to politics but as a constitutive practice of nation-making in which narrative becomes an instrument for witnessing injustice, building counterpublics, and imagining alternative social contracts (Mukherjee, 1985; Boehmer, 2005; Gopal, 2005).

In contrast with strands of Euro-American aesthetics that championed art-for-art's-sake, anglophone fiction in India matured alongside anti-colonial struggle, caste-abolition movements, women's emancipation campaigns, and later developmental critiques, neoliberal transformations, and ecological crises (Menon, 2012; Drèze & Sen, 2013; Fernandes, 2006). For heuristic clarity, this essay reads advocacy across six historical arcs—up to Independence; Post-Independence (1947–1975); up to the Emergency; Post-Emergency; the post-1991 Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization (LPG) era; and the twenty-first century—tracking how novels recalibrate their thematic

foci (caste, gender, community, environment) and formal strategies (social realism, satire, magic realism, polyphony, documentary modes).

The corpus features Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Ahmed Ali, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manu Joseph, Meena Kandasamy, Jeet Thayil, and Anuradha Roy. While not exhaustive, this set is sufficiently representative to show how advocacy shifts from nationalist witnessing to postcolonial critique, from institutional liberalism to intersectional justice, and finally toward planetary ethics (Prakash, 2019; Ghosh, 2016).

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the Indian English novel as a sustained tradition of literary advocacy that extends across historical periods—from the pre-independence struggle against colonial domination to twenty-first-century debates around globalization,

environmental crisis, and intersectional justice. The study seeks to demonstrate that these novels are not merely aesthetic artifacts but active interventions in the social and political life of the nation. Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. Trace how advocacy has shifted in focus from nationalist reform and caste abolition in the early decades to Partition memory, post-independence development, Emergency resistance, neoliberal critique, and planetary concerns in the contemporary period.
2. Illustrate how form itself—realism, satire, allegory, polyphony, testimonial narration—has served as an argument for ethical responsibility.
3. Highlight the role of literature in building counterpublics, amplifying subaltern voices, and modelling alternative institutions of justice and coexistence.
4. Engage with selected authors and texts to show how advocacy is historically situated, culturally mediated, and continually reinvented. By achieving these objectives, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of Indian English fiction as a pedagogical, ethical, and political resource in shaping democratic consciousness.

Research Questions

This paper is guided by a set of interrelated research questions that seek to structure inquiry into the advocacy role of the Indian English novel across multiple timeframes:

1. How have Indian English novelists historically engaged with the imperative of social reform, and in what ways has advocacy been integral to their literary practice?
2. In what manner did pre-independence fiction (e.g., Anand, Rao, Narayan) deploy narrative strategies to challenge caste, colonialism, and cultural erosion, and how do these strategies compare with later modes of testimony and critique?
3. How does Partition fiction (e.g., Singh, Nahal, Malgonkar) negotiate the representation of trauma, memory, and reconciliation, and what ethical frameworks are advanced through these depictions?
4. What shifts are observable in post-Emergency fiction regarding state accountability, feminist resistance, and the defence of civil liberties?
5. How do novels of the liberalization era (e.g., Adiga, K. Desai, Ghosh) interrogate the moral

economy of globalization, exposing inequality and environmental degradation?

6. What new modes of advocacy emerge in twenty-first-century fiction, particularly with respect to intersectional justice, queer politics, ecological ethics, and digital-era democracy?
7. How do narrative forms—testimonial realism, satire, allegory, montage—function as ethical arguments, disciplining readers into critical forms of citizenship?

Together, these questions aim to map the trajectory of advocacy in Indian English fiction, situating literary production as an indispensable site of democratic struggle and ethical imagination.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive approach that synthesizes literary analysis with socio-historical contextualization. Rather than treating novels as isolated aesthetic objects, the study reads them as embedded within and responsive to specific historical conjunctures: colonial rule, Partition, the Emergency, economic liberalization, and the twenty-first-century climate of globalization and authoritarian drift.

Close reading constitutes the primary methodological tool, enabling attention to textual detail—narrative voice, imagery, allegory, irony, and structure—as evidence of advocacy strategies. This is supplemented by historical contextualization, situating literary production alongside contemporaneous socio-political struggles such as anti-caste reform, women's movements, secular-democratic activism, and environmental justice campaigns.

The paper also employs a comparative framework, placing novels across decades in dialogue with one another to highlight shifts and continuities in advocacy. For example, Anand's testimonial realism is juxtaposed with Adiga's corrosive satire, while Roy's nonlinear feminist jurisprudence is read against Sahgal's liberal vigilance. Secondary scholarship, including postcolonial theory (Boehmer, Gopal), feminist criticism (Menon, Rajan), and political history (Prakash, Drèze & Sen), is mobilized to anchor interpretations within established debates.

By combining close textual analysis with historical and theoretical lenses, the methodology ensures that the advocacy dimension of Indian English novels is not reduced to didacticism but understood as an evolving negotiation between form, ethics, and socio-political transformation.

Advocacy in the Pre-Independence Novel

The interwar decades consolidated anglophone fiction as a vehicle for social critique, with the novel deployed as testimony and tool for moral persuasion. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* compresses a day in Bakha's life to anatomize the humiliations of sanitation labour, ritual pollution, and spatial segregation; its close focalization and rhythm of interruption embed readers in the ordinary violence of caste (Anand, 1935/2001; Mukherjee, 1985). If *Untouchable* frames caste as embodied injury, *Coolie* disperses Munoo across plantation, factory, and city, revealing how colonial capitalism and caste entwine to produce mobile regimes of exploitation (Anand, 1936/2001).

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* marries Gandhian satyagraha to village orature; the narrator—an elder woman—vernacularizes nationalist politics so that boycotts, lathi-charges, and women's pickets become legible within a mythic moral cosmos (Rao, 1938/2008; Gopal, 2005). Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* records the attrition of a civilizational lifeworld under colonial rule; its elegiac mode advocates cultural self-respect as a political claim (Ali, 1940/2007). R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* stages schoolboy consciousness amid colonial pedagogy and protest, gently ironizing authority while charting the birth of civic feeling (Narayan, 1935/2006). K. S. Venkataramani's *Murugan, the Tiller* and Krishna Kripalani's fiction participate in Gandhian reformist discourse, foregrounding rural uplift and the dignity of labour (Venkataramani, 1933; Kripalani, 1937).

Together, these texts advocate social reconstruction by witnessing caste violence, translating Gandhi into local idioms, and mourning cultural erosion—constituting reading itself as a civic discipline that anticipated later postcolonial debates on caste abolition, women's participation, and communal harmony (Boehmer, 2005; Gopal, 2005).

Advocacy in Post-Independence Fiction (1947–1975)

The early decades after 1947 reframed advocacy: the violence of Partition, rural precarity, and women's status within new constitutional promises. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* locates tragedy in a Sikh-Muslim-Hindu village whose interlaced intimacies disintegrate under retaliatory desire; the novel's defence of pluralism is enacted through neighbourliness and a final act of sacrificial courage (Singh, 1956/2007; Butalia, 1998; Pandey, 2001).

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* chronicles peasant dispossession as a tannery reshapes a village economy; Rukmani's narration registers hunger, migration, and medical precarity, inviting reflections on entitlements and humane development (Markandaya, 1954/2002; Drèze & Sen, 2013). Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*

indicts profiteering and colonial apathy during the Bengal famine, anticipating postcolonial welfare debates (Bhattacharya, 1947/1979). Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* move advocacy to the intimate theatre of the psyche—where patriarchal injunctions distort selfhood—contesting the privatization of women's suffering by bringing it into public ethical debate (Desai, 1963/2001).

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* extend Partition's ledger of harm, dramatizing cycles of communal vengeance and the fragile possibility of reconciliation (Malgonkar, 1964; Nahal, 1975/2013). R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* allegorizes authenticity and reinvention; Rosie's trajectory toward artistic agency challenges marital control and respectability politics (Narayan, 1958/2006). These works reorient advocacy from colonial rule to the ethics of the new nation-state—calling for secular coexistence, land and food security, and substantive gender equality.

Advocacy in Fiction up to the Emergency

By the early 1970s, disillusionment with corruption and governance set the stage for authoritarian temptation. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—though published in 1981—allegorizes the preconditions and aftermath of the Emergency through Saleem Sinai's fragmented body and the sterilization of dissent; its magic-realist polyphony contests official narratives by restoring cacophony to the public sphere (Rushdie, 1981/2006; Boehmer, 2005; Prakash, 2019).

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* anatomizes elite complicity, censorship, and coercive population control, advocating liberal vigilance and institutional accountability (Sahgal, 1985/2002). Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* explores the sediment of Partition and gendered duty in a decaying Delhi household, suggesting how familial repression mirrors political stagnation (Desai, 1980/2001). Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* later satirizes post-Emergency bureaucracy hollowed by ennui and corruption, indicating why citizens withdraw from civic life (Chatterjee, 1988/2010; Fernandes, 2006). Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* set in the early 1950s advocates secularism and women's choice within a democratic public—an ideal repeatedly threatened in the following decades (Seth, 1993).

Collectively, these novels defend pluralism and civil liberties, using satire, allegory, and domestic realism to expose how everyday authoritarianisms coagulate into state violence.

Advocacy in Post-Emergency Fiction

In the aftermath of the Emergency, anglophone fiction doubled down on testimony, insisting on the human costs of

technocratic governance. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* assembles tailors, a student, and a widow into a precarious solidarity doomed by sterilizations, slum clearances, and police brutality—a sustained argument against developmentalism unmoored from rights (Mistry, 1995/2006; Prakash, 2019). Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* interrogates the very grammar of borders and communal memory, arguing for a cosmopolitan ethics as antidote to cartographic nationalism (Ghosh, 1988/2009; Pandey, 2001).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* refracts caste policing, gendered sexuality, and state impunity through a nonlinear investigation that resembles feminist jurisprudence: form itself becomes argument as the narrative reconstructs a case file of everyday authoritarianisms (Roy, 1997/2002; Menon, 2012; Rajan, 1993). Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* offers a devastating brief against marital patriarchy and silencing, while *The Dark Holds No Terrors* earlier mapped the violence of respectability inhabiting the modern home (Deshpande, 1980; Deshpande, 1988/2008). Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* further indicts corruption and communalized politics in Bombay, showing how macro-politics colonize everyday life (Mistry, 1991/2011).

These works recast advocacy as memory against amnesia and as insistence that development and security must be judged by their effects on the vulnerable.

Advocacy in the Liberalization Era (Post-1991)

The LPG era reconfigured the social terrain: spectacular growth coexisted with intensifying inequality, urban dispossession, and new regimes of aspiration. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* stages a confession from the "Darkness" to the "Light," weaponizing satire to expose a caste-encoded servitude that underwrites entrepreneurial success (Adiga, 2008; Drèze & Sen, 2013). His *Last Man in Tower* dramatizes the coercive nexus of developers, brokers, and residents in Mumbai's real-estate boom, asking whether consent is meaningful under structural duress (Adiga, 2011).

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* braids Himalayan insurgency, mimicry, and migrant precarity, revealing global hierarchies embedded in intimate life (Desai, 2006; Fernandes, 2006). Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* links conservation with refugee politics through the suppressed history of Morichjhāpī, advocating an environmentalism of the poor (Ghosh, 2004; Ghosh, 2016). Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* anatomizes the crime-state nexus, while Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* imagines a feminist commons inside a railway compartment. Jhumpa Lahiri's diaspora fiction registers how liberalization reorders desire, family, and mobility (Lahiri, 2013).

These novels critique the triumphant rhetoric of the market by insisting that growth be measured against justice for migrants, workers, and ecosystems.

Advocacy in Twenty-First Century Fiction

Twenty-first century Indian English novels widen advocacy along intersectional and planetary axes: caste, gender, religion, class, and queerness entangle with climate crisis and digital public spheres. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* composes a choral archive of trans communities, Dalit activism, Kashmir's insurgent geographies, and bureaucrats of conscience, arguing for coalition politics and an ethics of hospitality toward the "unhoused" (Roy, 2017).

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* re-narrates the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit labourers through experimental refusal of readerly comfort, challenging the conventions by which atrocity is aestheticized (Kandasamy, 2014). Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* satirizes caste mobility and scientized meritocracy, complicating celebrations of "New India" (Joseph, 2010). Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* revisits Naxalbari's afterlives across diasporic space, linking political violence to intimate grief (Lahiri, 2013). Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* presses narrative toward nonhuman agencies and climate migration, extending his long project of environmental justice (Ghosh, 2019; Ghosh, 2016).

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* maps addiction and urban abjection as social symptoms, while Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* anatomizes sexual violence and religious hypocrisy. Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* revisits elder care and communal tensions, underscoring the ethics of interdependence (Mistry, 2002/2011). Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* defends academic freedom and secular pedagogy, anticipating contemporary struggles over knowledge and citizenship (Hariharan, 2003).

These novels function as early warning systems for democratic backsliding and as design labs for inclusive futures.

III. FINDINGS

Several systematic findings emerge from this study of advocacy in Indian English novels, revealing the genre's capacity to function as a moral and political laboratory for democratic societies.

1. Advocacy as Historical Continuum

Across nine decades, Indian English fiction demonstrates remarkable continuity in its advocacy role, though its thematic concerns evolve with historical context. Pre-independence novels foreground caste reform, Gandhian

satyagraha, and nationalist identity. Post-independence fiction shifts focus to Partition trauma, rural development, and women's status. The Emergency catalyzes a body of fiction committed to resisting authoritarianism. Post-1991 liberalization novels turn attention to economic inequality, dispossession, and ecological justice, while twenty-first-century texts broaden advocacy to include intersectional justice and planetary ethics. This continuity suggests that advocacy is not incidental but constitutive of the Indian English novel.

2. Form as Advocacy

A key finding is that literary form itself operates as a mode of advocacy. Anand's testimonial realism disciplines readers into empathy with subaltern lives, while Rao's oral narrative style vernacularizes nationalist struggle. Rushdie's magic realism disrupts singular historical narratives, Roy's nonlinear structures mimic legal casework, and Adiga's confessional satire exposes systemic corruption. Such strategies show that advocacy is not reducible to content but is embedded in narrative design.

3. Witnessing and Memory as Ethical Practice

From *Untouchable* to *A Fine Balance* and *The God of Small Things*, novels function as repositories of memory, resisting official erasures of caste violence, Partition atrocities, or Emergency brutality. This commitment to remembering the marginalized is itself an ethical form of advocacy, positioning literature as a counter-archive against state-sanctioned amnesia.

4. Institutions and Counter-Institutions

Another consistent pattern is the novel's dual engagement with institutions. On one hand, literature exposes the failures of the state, family, courts, and markets—revealing corruption, gender oppression, and communal politics. On the other, it imagines counter-institutions: cooperative networks in *A Fine Balance*, feminist commons in *Ladies Coupé*, ecological publics in *The Hungry Tide*. This dialectical engagement suggests that fiction does not merely critique but also prototypes alternative social models.

5. Expanding Horizons of Advocacy

The most recent phase of Indian English fiction illustrates the expansion of advocacy into global and ecological dimensions. Works such as *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *Gun Island* recognize that democratic advocacy cannot be confined to national borders but must include marginalized communities across caste, gender, queer, and refugee lines, as well as nonhuman actors threatened by climate crisis. Advocacy thus becomes planetary in scope, signalling a shift from nation-building to world-making.

6. Pedagogical Value

Finally, the study finds that Indian English novels, by dramatizing ethical dilemmas and social injustices, serve a pedagogical role in cultivating citizenly responsibility. Reading becomes an act of democratic participation, training attention toward the vulnerable and fostering critical engagement with public life.

In sum, the systematic findings show that advocacy is not peripheral but central to the Indian English novel's aesthetic and ethical project. Literature operates here as testimony, critique, memory, and design—an indispensable resource for envisioning democratic futures in times of crisis.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that advocacy is not incidental but constitutive of the Indian English novel, sustained across pre-independence, post-independence, Emergency, liberalization, and contemporary phases. Guided by close reading and socio-historical contextualization, the analysis confirmed that literary production consistently intervenes in public life by bearing witness, critiquing institutions, and imagining alternatives.

Four durable dynamics stand out. First, witnessing is ethical method: testimonial realism and memory-work refuse erasure, whether in Anand's sanitation colonies, Singh's Partition villages, or Mistry's Emergency slums (Anand, 1935/2001; Singh, 1956/2007; Mistry, 1995/2006). Second, form is argument: orature, allegory, montage, and satire discipline readers into citizenly attention, from Rao's Gandhian orature to Rushdie's magic realism and Roy's nonlinear feminist jurisprudence (Rao, 1938/2008; Rushdie, 1981/2006; Roy, 1997/2002). Third, institutions matter: advocacy targets the state, police, courts, markets, families, and schools while also imagining counter-institutions such as cooperatives, feminist commons, and ecological publics (Prakash, 2019; Menon, 2012; Ghosh, 2004, 2016). Fourth, horizons have widened: twenty-first-century fiction binds intersectional justice to planetary ethics, as seen in Roy's trans-Dalit coalitions or Ghosh's climate narratives (Roy, 2017; Ghosh, 2019).

The objectives outlined at the outset—to trace historical shifts, to illustrate the formal innovations of advocacy, and to establish the pedagogical value of fiction—have thus been met by examining a representative corpus from Anand and Rao to Roy and Adiga. The guiding research questions on caste, Partition, authoritarianism, globalization, and intersectionality find coherent answers in recurring patterns of testimony, critique, and alternative imagining. Methodologically, the study reaffirmed that interpretive literary analysis, anchored in historical and theoretical

frames, remains indispensable for understanding how novels participate in democratic life (Mukherjee, 1985; Boehmer, 2005; Gopal, 2005).

In sum, the Indian English novel emerges as both witness and architect: it remembers silenced lives, unsettles official narratives, and designs provisional blueprints for more just futures. In a time of algorithmic publics, democratic fragility, social polarization, and ecological precarity, these novels exemplify literature's enduring capacity to cultivate ethical attention, build solidarities, and extend the horizons of citizenship. Advocacy, as this study shows, is the Indian English novel's most sustained and generative contribution to the cultural and political life of the subcontinent.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adiga, A. (2008). *The white tiger*. HarperCollins.
- [2] Adiga, A. (2011). *Last man in tower*. HarperCollins.
- [3] Ali, A. (2007). *Twilight in Delhi*. Random House. (Original work published 1940)
- [4] Anand, M. R. (2001a). *Untouchable*. Penguin. (Original work published 1935)
- [5] Anand, M. R. (2001b). *Coolie*. Penguin. (Original work published 1936)
- [6] Bhattacharya, B. (1979). *So many hungers!*. Orient Paperbacks. (Original work published 1947)
- [7] Boehmer, E. (2005). *Colonial and postcolonial literature* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [8] Butalia, U. (1998). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Duke University Press.
- [9] Chatterjee, U. (2010). *English, August: An Indian story*. Faber & Faber. (Original work published 1988)
- [10] Desai, A. (2001a). *Cry, the peacock*. Orient Paperbacks. (Original work published 1963)
- [11] Desai, A. (2001b). *Clear light of day*. Vintage. (Original work published 1980)
- [12] Desai, A. (2008). *Fire on the mountain*. Vintage. (Original work published 1977)
- [13] Desai, K. (2006). *The inheritance of loss*. Atlantic.
- [14] Deshpande, S. (1980). *The dark holds no terrors*. Vikas.
- [15] Deshpande, S. (2008). *That long silence*. Penguin. (Original work published 1988)
- [16] Drèze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
- [17] Fernandes, L. (2006). *India's new middle class: Democratic politics in an era of economic reform*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [18] Ghosh, A. (2000). *The glass palace*. HarperCollins.
- [19] Ghosh, A. (2004). *The hungry tide*. HarperCollins.
- [20] Ghosh, A. (2008). *Sea of poppies*. John Murray.
- [21] Ghosh, A. (2009). *The shadow lines*. Penguin. (Original work published 1988)
- [22] Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press.
- [23] Ghosh, A. (2019). *Gun island*. John Murray.
- [24] Gopal, P. (2005). *Literary radicalism in India: Gender, nation and the transition to independence*. Routledge.
- [25] Hariharan, G. (2003). *In times of siege*. Penguin.
- [26] Joseph, M. (2010). *Serious men*. HarperCollins.
- [27] Kandasamy, M. (2014). *The gypsy goddess*. HarperCollins.
- [28] Kripalani, K. (1937). *All times are good*. Oxford University Press.
- [29] Lahiri, J. (2013). *The lowland*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [30] Malgonkar, M. (1964). *A bend in the Ganges*. Rupa.
- [31] Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing like a feminist*. Zubaan.
- [32] Mistry, R. (2006). *A fine balance*. Faber & Faber. (Original work published 1995)
- [33] Mistry, R. (2011). *Such a long journey*. Faber & Faber. (Original work published 1991)
- [34] Mistry, R. (2011b). *Family matters*. Faber & Faber. (Original work published 2002)
- [35] Mukherjee, M. (1985). *Realism and reality: The novel and society in India*. Oxford University Press.
- [36] Nahal, C. (2013). *Azadi*. Penguin. (Original work published 1975)
- [37] Narayan, R. K. (2006a). *Swami and friends*. Penguin. (Original work published 1935)
- [38] Narayan, R. K. (2006b). *The guide*. Penguin. (Original work published 1958)
- [39] Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering partition: Violence, nationalism and history in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- [40] Prakash, G. (2019). *Emergency chronicles: Indira Gandhi and democracy's turning point*. Princeton University Press.
- [41] Rajan, R. S. (1993). *Real and imagined women: Gender, culture and postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- [42] Rao, R. (2008). *Kanthapura*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1938)
- [43] Roy, A. (2002). *The god of small things*. Harper Perennial. (Original work published 1997)
- [44] Roy, A. (2015). *Sleeping on Jupiter*. Hachette India.
- [45] Roy, A. (2017). *The ministry of utmost happiness*. Hamish Hamilton.
- [46] Rushdie, S. (2006). *Midnight's children*. Random House. (Original work published 1981)
- [47] Sahgal, N. (2002). *Rich like us*. HarperCollins. (Original work published 1985)
- [48] Seth, V. (1993). *A suitable boy*. HarperCollins.
- [49] Singh, K. (2007). *Train to Pakistan*. Penguin. (Original work published 1956)
- [50] Thayil, J. (2012). *Narcopolis*. Faber & Faber.
- [51] Venkataramani, K. S. (1933). *Murugan, the tiller*. George Allen & Unwin.



Ecocriticism and the Human Psyche in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

Haaniya Irfan

Undergraduate Research Student, ZHDC, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Received: 20 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 18 Sep 2025; Accepted: 23 Sep 2025; Available online: 26 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is frequently read as a novel about human psychology, sexuality, and relationships. Yet, an equally vital aspect of the text is its ecological dimension. Writing during the industrial transformation of Nottinghamshire, Lawrence positioned nature as a force of healing and spiritual vitality, in stark contrast to the grim, dehumanizing landscapes of coal mines and factories. This paper reinterprets *Sons and Lovers* through the Eco critical frameworks of Greg Garrard and Timothy Morton. Garrard's concepts of "pastoral" and "pollution" illuminate Lawrence's portrayal of nature as refuge and industry as decay, while Morton's critique of "nature" as an aestheticized, cultural construct complicates Lawrence's idealization of the countryside. By close reading Lawrence's descriptions of flowers, landscapes, and industrial spaces, this study demonstrates how the novel articulates both an ecological protest against industrial capitalism and a deeply ambivalent, culturally mediated vision of "nature." Ultimately, Lawrence's ecological imagination anticipates contemporary concerns with climate crisis, urban alienation, and the psychological need for ecological belonging.



Keywords— D. H. Lawrence, Greg Garrard, Industrialization, Nature, Religion, Timothy Morton

I. INTRODUCTION

David Herbert Lawrence's exploration of man – woman relationships is one of the most significant focus of his works. Lawrence in his exploration of relationships between men and women delve into the complexities of human sexuality, gender roles and class structures. However, one of the equally crucial focal point of his corpus of his work is the connection between individual and the organic universe. D.H. Lawrence lived in a time when Britain was witnessing significant transformations. During most of the nineteenth century, industrialism was at its peak in Britain which paved the way for its economic and imperial expansion. However, capitalist industrial civilisation was just like a mixed blessing bringing material satisfaction but making destructive impacts including workers' exploitation, environmental degradation and decline of moral values. Literature of every age reflects as well documents its society, therefore, writers of the nineteenth century such as Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, among many others presented disillusionment with the

advanced industrialization in their works. The same disdain for industrialization appears in Lawrence's works. Lawrence asserts that "The real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness. The country is so lovely; the man-made England is so vile".¹ He believed his generation gave greater importance to material wealth which in turn killed their sentiments for beauty and happiness.

D. H. Lawrence, born in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire in 1885, was a writer whose early life was profoundly shaped by the coal-mining environment of his community. His father, a miner, embodied the working-class ties to industrial labor, while his mother represented refinement and aspiration for a different life. Lawrence's novels frequently dramatize this conflict between the

¹ See "Nottingham and the Mining Countryside" by D.H. Lawrence from *Sons and Lovers*, edited by Ashok Celley. Worldview Publications, 2022, pp. 440-447.

industrial and the organic, between mechanical labor and natural vitality. In *Sons and Lovers*, the mining environment of Bestwood casts a long shadow, its industrial blight shaping the lives and psyches of its inhabitants.

With the emergence of ecocriticism as a strong academic discipline in the late 1970s, critics and scholars have been adopting ecocritical approaches to formulate new perspectives on Lawrence's oeuvre. Ecocriticism, as Greg Garrard defines, is the "study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (2004, p. 5). His framework allows us to see how literature participates in shaping ecological consciousness, particularly through tropes of "pastoral," "wilderness," and "pollution." Timothy Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, critiques the very category of "nature," arguing that "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (2007, p. 1). Together, Garrard and Morton offer productive tools for interpreting *Sons and Lovers* not merely as a realist psychological novel but as a text profoundly engaged with ecological questions. This paper argues that *Sons and Lovers* constructs nature as both a healing refuge and a site of erotic and spiritual intensity, in opposition to industrial "pollution." At the same time, following Morton, we recognize that Lawrence's "Nature" is an aestheticized construct, bound to cultural projections of purity, beauty, and wholeness. By examining this tension, we uncover the ambivalent ecological imagination at the heart of Lawrence's novel.

II. MAIN DISCUSSION

2.1 Nature as Healing and Psychological Refuge

D. H. Lawrence's entire corpus of work, including poetry, plays, novels and short fiction reflects his passionate response to the beauty of the organic universe. According to eco-critics, Lawrence had a sense of natural environment which depicts his awareness of the ecological interconnectedness of human beings with non-human life. For instance, Dolores Chapelle's book *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (1996) offers an entirely new perspective on Lawrence's response to the natural world. La Chapelle feels that what distinguished Lawrence from his contemporaries was his approach to nature. La Chapelle writes:

Given all these factors, it is remarkable that Lawrence managed to convey some understanding of this unity of mind and nature by means of the written word.... The immediate state of nature around his characters – the texture

of the air, the smell of vegetation etc, which most critics generally overlook or dismiss as mere scenery, are neither; these aspects are integral parts of Lawrence's holistic approach. (1996, p. 94)

In *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence depicts how industrialism has captured people's soul and in turn represents nature as an active life force undoing this invasion to some extent. He seems to employ nature as a tool to allow his characters gain a sense of peace and freedom and as a means of escaping reality. Lawrence has described nature not merely as a part of the setting but through the subjective experience of nature by the characters through sight, touch and smell of natural phenomena thus highlighting the interconnectedness of ecology and human soul. The characters who are shown to respond powerfully to nature include Mrs. Morel, Paul and Miriam.

For Lawrence's characters, nature is never a neutral backdrop; it is sensuously alive and deeply connected to the psyche. Mrs. Morel, trapped in an oppressive marriage, seeks comfort in her small domestic garden. After an altercation with her husband leaves her locked out while heavily pregnant, she turns to flowers:

With an effort, she roused herself, to see what it was that penetrated her consciousness. The tall white lilies were reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence. Mrs. Morel gasped slightly in fear. She touched the big, pallid flowers on their petals, then shivered. They seemed to be stretching in the moonlight...Then she drank a deep draught of the scent. It almost made her dizzy (Lawrence, 2022, p. 29).

In the above cited passage, all the natural phenomena, such as the moonlight, the Lilies and the fragrant air, unitedly allow Mrs. Morel to transcend her suffering and pain. Also, the Lily flower is often considered a symbol of the female sexual organ and Mrs. Morel getting overwhelmed by the presence of Lily flowers is an obvious indication towards her gaining sexual pleasure. Her domestic garden becomes a site of shelter and provides access to nature as Seamus O'Malley points out, "The garden is a site of healing and a space in which she can transcend the brutality of her immediate material surroundings" (2014, p. 29). Here, lilies, moonlight, and fragrance operate as healing forces. The scene exemplifies Garrard's "pastoral"—a restorative environment providing solace amid human suffering. Yet Morton's critique is equally important: these lilies are not simply "nature" but symbols laden with cultural associations of

purity, femininity, and sexuality. By aestheticizing flowers into near-mystical entities, Lawrence creates an idealized "Nature" that risks masking ecological entanglements with mining and industrial landscapes.

Similarly, Paul Morel inherits his mother's sensitivity to the natural world. His happiest moments occur not in industrial Bestwood but in the pastoral spaces of Willey Farms: "They found a little green gate, and soon were in a broad alley of the wood, with a new thicket of fir and pine on one hand, an oak glade, dipping down on the other. And among the oaks the blue-bells stood in pools of azure" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 139). These passages reflect what Garrard (2004) calls the "persistent appeal of pastoral" as an imaginative retreat from urban and industrial blight (p.33). Yet Lawrence is not merely indulging nostalgia; he depicts how immersion in pastoral space nourishes Paul's creativity and offers emotional refuge.

In contemporary terms, such scenes anticipate eco-psychology's recognition of nature as restorative for human mental health. The soothing effect of flowers and fields on Mrs. Morel and Paul echoes findings that contact with green spaces reduces stress, anxiety, and alienation in urban life.

2.2 Nature, Sexuality, and Spiritual Communion

Lawrence repeatedly entwines natural imagery with human sexuality and spirituality, constructing "Nature" as an active agent of desire and transcendence. Miriam Leivers is depicted as a young woman whose affinity with nature replaces her capacity for human intimacy: "She could very rarely get into human relations with anyone: so her friend, her companion, her lover was nature" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 184). In a key scene, Miriam caresses flowers with intense reverence: "She fondled and caressed daffodils with her mouth and cheeks and brow" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 236). This description is overtly erotic, yet it displaces human sexuality onto flowers, sacralizing them as substitutes for physical intimacy. Furthermore, for Miriam, flowers embody spirituality, aligning with Garrard's (2004) observation that pastoral spaces often carry moral or sacred connotations (p.41). Yet, from Morton's perspective, Miriam's daffodils are less "natural" than they are cultural projections, fetishized into symbols of purity and transcendence. Her communion with flowers highlights the "aesthetic framing" Morton critiques, where "nature" becomes a beautiful object of human desire, rather than an ecological reality.

Also, it is the familiar passion for nature which initially brings Paul and Miriam together. It is the merriment obtained from the sight of nature that unites

Paul and Miriam. For instance when Paul, Miriam and Clara are walking near the Strelley Farm, both Paul and Miriam enjoy the sight of a field crowded with tall cowslips. "Ah!" cried Miriam, and she looked at Paul, her dark eyes dilating. He smiled. Together they enjoyed the field of flowers.... Miriam plucked the flowers lovingly, lingering over them (Lawrence, 2022, p. 255). For Miriam, nature is an outlet to exercise spirituality due to which she avoids physical relationship with Paul. Her interaction with daffodils and other flowers as well are of deference and highlight her perception of the holy side of nature.

Nature plays a significant role in the relationship of Paul and Clara as well which is especially evident in their first love adventure in the riverside bushes after rain. Both have desires for sensual pleasure which nature ignites and brings them together in an intimacy as, "He led her across to the grass, under the trees at the edge of the path. The cliff of red earth sloped swiftly down, through trees and bushes, to the river that glimmered and was dark between the foliage. The far-below water - meadows were very green. He and she stood leaning against one another, silent, afraid, their bodies touching all along" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 325). All the natural surroundings inspire Paul and Clara to fulfil their physical desire, and later their descent to the river in search of a private space is a clear reference to their sexual intercourse. Clara Dawes, in contrast to Miriam, embodies a more physical connection to nature. Her riverside tryst with Paul reveals nature as an erotic catalyst. The description of the landscape is not passive; it heightens sensual passion, aligning with Garrard's claim that pastoral often operates as a site of erotic longing (2004, p. 40). Later, when Clara's sexuality is reawakened, Paul gives her flowers that she pins to her coat. After their first sexual encounter, the flowers are crushed—symbolizing both consummation and transformation. Morton would urge us to see this as evidence of "Nature" functioning as a symbolic medium for human desire, its material presence subordinated to cultural meaning.

In *Sons and Lovers* nature also appears as a religious force offering spiritual and emotional fulfilment. After the birth of Paul, Mrs. Morel took Paul to the top of hill where her immediate surroundings began to affect her:

The sun was going down. Every open evening, the hills of Derbyshire were blazed over with red sunset. Mrs. Morel watched the sun sink from the glistening sky, leaving a soft flower-blue overhead, while the western space went red, as if all the fire had swum down there, leaving the bell cast flawless blue. The mountain-ash berries

across the field stood fierily out from the dark leaves, for a moment. A few shocks of corn in a corner of the fallow stood up as if alive: she imagined them bowing : perhaps her son would be Joseph (Lawrence, 2022 p.43) .

In Christianity it is believed that God created the universe. Therefore, when a Christian appreciates nature, he or she sees it as a reflection of god's creation. Mrs. Morel in close proximity of nature, feels very close to god. She imagines Paul becoming a Joseph, the saviour of the mankind. She also calls him "lamb"(Lawrence, 2022 , p. 44), a term to refer to Christ . This scene powerfully depicts how one can achieve salvation power through the medium of nature.

2.3 Industrialism and the Logic of Pollution

Against the fecundity of gardens and farms, Lawrence portrays industrial spaces as sites of decay and alienation. In contrast to the alluring depiction of the natural world, the industrial scenes in Lawrence's depiction have been given a gloomy portrait. Paul's first impression of Mr. Jordan's factory is essential in this regard:

Suddenly they spied a big dark archway, in which were names of various firms, Thomas Jordan among them....And they ventured under the archway, as into the jaws of the dragon. They emerged into a wide yard, like a well, with buildings all round. It was littered with straw and boxes and cardboard. The sunshine actually caught one crate whose straw was streaming onto the yard like gold. But elsewhere the place was like a pit. (Lawrence 107)

The factory is depicted through Gothic imagery, aligning with Garrard's "pollution" trope, in which industrial modernity is imagined as corrupt, destructive, and diseased (2004, p. 11).

This contrast between Willey Farms and the factory yard dramatizes Lawrence's ecological critique. While the farm is alive with bluebells and oak glades, the factory is suffocating, pit-like, and grotesque. Such juxtapositions reflect Lawrence's broader conviction that industrial capitalism erodes not only landscapes but also human vitality. "The man-made England is so vile," he laments, indicting the environmental and psychological toll of industrialism (Lawrence, 2022 , p.444). Yet Morton's intervention complicates this binary. To oppose pastoral "Nature" to industrial "pollution" risks falling into what he calls the "beautiful soul syndrome," where one sustains purity by condemning external corruption (2007, p. 113). Lawrence's idealization of farms and woods ignores their entanglement with industrial economies and cultural constructions. By aestheticizing

"Nature" as an innocent refuge, Lawrence risks perpetuating precisely the kind of conceptual separation Morton critiques.

III. CONCLUSION

In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence dramatizes the ecological tension between pastoral refuge and industrial pollution. Through Garrard's lens, nature appears as healing, erotic, and spiritual, while industry embodies alienation and decay. Morton complicates this view by showing that Lawrence's "Nature" is not ecological reality but an aesthetic construct shaped by cultural desire. This ambivalence is the novel's strength: Lawrence emerges as both an ecological prophet and a participant in the cultural idealization of landscape. His warning about "the tragedy of ugliness" resonates today, when climate change and environmental degradation make clear that aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological values are inseparable in our search for survival and harmony.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Komal Yadav, for insightful supervision and thoughtful discussions that significantly enriched the development of this research paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Garrard, Greg. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge .
- [2] LaChapelle, Dolores. (1996) *D. H. Lawrence: Future primitive*. University of Texas Press.
- [3] Lawrence, D. H. (2022). *Sons and lovers*, edited by Ashok Celley. Worldview Publications.
- [4] Morton, Timothy. (2007). *Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Harvard UP .
- [5] O'Malley, S. (2014). "The final aim is the flower": Wild and domestic nature in "*Sons and Lovers*." *The D.H. Lawrence Review*, 39(2), 25–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44235881>



Towards Inclusive Sustainability: Exploring the Intersectionality of Climate Change, Gender Equity and Indigenous Women in Global Environmental Advocacy

Hemalatha S¹, Mathangi S², Dr. R Archana³

¹Research Assistant, The Accessibility Research Centre (ARC), IIT Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: hemalathashanmugam002@gmail.com

²PRT Teacher, Alpha International School, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

³Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of English, SDNB Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2025; Accepted: 21 Sep 2025; Available online: 26 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study examines the intricate nexus encompassing climate change, gender parity and the specific involvements of Indigenous women within the sphere of worldwide environmental advocacy. Embracing an intersectional analytical framework, this study focuses on the nuanced vulnerabilities and distinctive contribution of Indigenous women amidst environmental adversities. It portrays the multifaceted interconnections between sociocultural determinants, gender dynamics and environmental exigencies, thereby elucidating the nuanced impacts on Indigenous women. Within this paradigm, this study seeks to elucidate the perspectives that bridge the divergence between climate mitigation efforts and gender inclusivity. It evaluates the frameworks and policies endeavouring to discern areas where environmental endeavours can exhibit greater inclusivity and responsiveness to the requisites of Indigenous women. With a multidisciplinary methodology, amalgamating environmental science, social justice and gender studies, the study aims to provide a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate relationships that exist between these areas. This study contributes to the discourse on sustainable development by propounding inclusive strategies that afford agency to Indigenous women as pivotal stakeholders in the global environmental landscape. This study endeavours to facilitate the formulation of more efficacious, equitable and enduring resolutions to address the exigencies posed by climate change.



Keywords— Gender Equity, Women, Climate Change, Sustainable Development, Indigenous Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Climate change poses a critical challenge to the planet, necessitating comprehensive and inclusive approaches to address its multifaceted impacts. This research paper delves into the intricate intersectionality of climate change, gender equity, and the specific experiences of Indigenous women within the broader context of global environmental advocacy.

Climate change signifies long-term shifts in global or regional climate patterns, primarily resulting from human activities such as rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and alterations in precipitation patterns. Though

many organizations take steps to raise awareness through programs and conferences, the responsibility lies with communities and individuals to implement practical solutions. Climate change particularly affects marginalized communities and Indigenous peoples, whose sustenance and livelihood are deeply tied to the environment.

Gender equity refers to fair treatment and equal opportunities for individuals of all genders. It advocates for the removal of discrimination and the establishment of a balance in power, resources, and responsibilities. The European Institute of Gender Equality defines it as “provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of

benefits and responsibilities between women, men and all genders.” According to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the world’s Indigenous population comprises some 476 million people across 90 countries, representing 5,000 cultures.

Indigenous women experience intersectional vulnerabilities rooted in their gender, social status, and environmental marginalization. Intersectionality—an analytical framework that explores how race, gender, class, and other social categories overlap—provides a lens to understand these compounding factors.

As such, achieving inclusive sustainability requires a nuanced understanding of climate change, gender equity, and Indigenous women’s experiences. By situating these dimensions together, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights to global environmental advocacy and policy formulation.

II. POSITIONING WOMEN IN THE GLOBALENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

Indigenous women face a triple risk: being women, being Indigenous, and being environmental activists or defenders. They are among the world’s poorest populations and yet are key agents of environmental preservation. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) emphasizes that their consent must be sought before engaging in activities that affect their rights and survival.

Prominent climate activists such as Greta Thunberg, Vandana Shiva, and Luisa Neubauer have gained global recognition, yet Indigenous women activists often remain unheard. One exception is Xiye Bastida, a Chilean-Mexican activist from the Otomi-Toltec community. As a youth climate organizer, she co-led one of the largest marches in New York City with over 300,000 participants.

Despite such contributions, many Indigenous women remain marginalized. As Patricia Espinosa, former UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, observed: “When Indigenous women engage, climate policies and actions at every level benefit from their holistic, nature-focused knowledge and leadership.”

III. THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN CLIMATE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A comparative study by Arneil G. Gabriel on two Indigenous groups in the Philippines (Kalanguya and Dumagat) highlights the crucial role of Indigenous women in environmental protection. These women placed warning

signs to prevent overuse of plants and trees, enforced prohibitions against illegal hunting, and carried out rituals that tied environmental conservation to cultural identity.

Such contributions, though often overlooked, are critical for climate action. Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) held by Indigenous women can inform more sustainable practices and policies. Encouraging their participation in political decision-making is key to ensuring cultural as well as environmental sustainability.

IV. GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S ENVIRONMENT

Indigenous women remain largely excluded from policy-making and decision-making regarding natural resource management and environmental conservation. Their skills and experiences are often marginalized at political and institutional levels.

The Malukan Declaration emphasizes Indigenous women as “guardians of Indigenous knowledge,” reflected in cultural practices such as weaving, rituals, agriculture, and ecological stewardship. Despite various UN declarations recognizing their role, implementation at the national level remains weak.

The Convention on Biological Diversity highlights women’s central role in biodiversity conservation, but gender inequities persist. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has repeatedly emphasized the importance of recognizing Indigenous women’s knowledge in sustainable development, yet capacity-building and political will remain lacking.

Indigenous women continue to face structural discrimination, poverty, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Their knowledge, however, offers invaluable contributions to ecological resilience and sustainable practices if adequately recognized and supported.

V. CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the vital role of Indigenous women as catalysts for sustainable development and environmental advocacy. Their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) provides holistic insights into ecological stewardship, making them key agents in addressing climate change.

The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive, inclusive approaches in climate policy. Despite persistent patriarchal structures that limit women’s participation, gender mainstreaming can foster equitable engagement. Integrating Indigenous women’s perspectives in leadership

and decision-making enriches the discourse on sustainability, offering both ecological and social solutions.

Ultimately, this study advocates for policies that actively promote Indigenous women's agency, ensuring their meaningful participation in climate action and global environmental governance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, B. (2018). Gender equality, food security and the sustainable development goals. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 34, 26–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.07.002>
- [2] Arora-Jonsson, S. (2011). Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(2), 744–751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.01.005>
- [3] Buckley, R. (2020). Indigenous women and climate change: A feminist political ecology perspective. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 3(2), 365–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619859862>
- [4] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>
- [5] International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI). (2016). *Climate change and indigenous women: Voices from the frontlines*. FIMI Publications.
- [6] MacGregor, S. (2010). A stranger silence still: The need for feminist social research on climate change. *The Sociological Review*, 57(s2), 124–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2010.01889.x>
- [7] Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology and development*. Zed Books.
- [8] Shiva, V. (1993). *Monocultures of the mind: Perspectives on biodiversity and biotechnology*. Zed Books.
- [9] Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability, and peace*. South End Press.
- [10] Shiva, V., & Mies, M. (2014). *Ecofeminism* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- [11] United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- [12] Whyte, K. P. (2017). Indigenous climate change studies: Indigenizing futures, decolonizing the Anthropocene. *English Language Notes*, 55(1–2), 153–162. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-55.1-2.153>



Brecht's Theatre for the Scientific Age: A Critical Reading of *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949)

Dr. Girija Suri

Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Gurgaon, India

Email: girijasuri131989@gmail.com

Received: 25 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 18 Sep 2025; Accepted: 22 Sep 2025; Available online: 26 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract—This essay offers a comprehensive reading of Bertolt Brecht's *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949), situating it within twentieth-century performance theory, Marxist aesthetics, and contemporary reception. It argues that Brecht's program is not reducible to stylistic novelties but constitutes an integrated pedagogy that aligns theatrical form with critical social inquiry. Through devices such as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, *Gestus*, episodic dramaturgy, and didactic song, Brecht sought to transform spectators from passive consumers of illusion into active analysts of social relations. The essay demonstrates how Brecht reconfigured acting, music, and staging to produce historically literate publics. The discussion also highlights debates on Brecht's legacy, including feminist and postcolonial critiques, and underscores the continued relevance of his project for addressing contemporary crises of media, democracy, and public reasoning.



Keywords—alienation, Bertolt Brecht, epic theatre, *Gestus*, Marxist aesthetics, performance pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht's *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949) constitutes a pivotal intervention in twentieth-century performance theory and practice. Written across a span of years in which Brecht elaborated his political and aesthetic commitments, the *Organum* indexes a deliberate attempt to reconceive the function of theatre in an era marked by industrialization, technological acceleration, and political crisis. Rather than accepting inherited paradigms of dramatic representation rooted in psychological realism and Aristotelian unity, Brecht proposed a theatre that would cultivate intellectual habits among spectators, namely habits of analysis, comparison, and causal inference. At stake in his manifesto was the question of whether art should merely reflect human feeling or whether it could be organized as a form of public pedagogy that equips citizens to interrogate social structures. The *Organum*, therefore, is normative as well as descriptive as it prescribes practices through which theatre might contribute to emancipatory politics.

II. BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATRE

The *Organum* begins by critiquing the experiential modes encouraged by realism and classical dramaturgy. Brecht claimed that the naturalist emphasis on

seamless illusion and interior psychological motivation functioned to obscure systemic relations; when spectators identify fully with characters, the broader mechanisms of exploitation, institutional constraint, and historical contingency are obscured by individualized stories of fate. For Brecht, theatrical identification could be politically anaesthetizing rather than energizing. He insisted on the need for forms that would prevent passive consumption and instead invite active interpretation. This critique aligns with broader Marxist concerns about ideology i.e. forms of culture can naturalize power arrangements by presenting them as commonsense or timeless. Brecht's program therefore sought to expose the contingency of social relations and the historical processes that produced them.

The *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect is the organum's best-known technique, and understanding it fully requires attention to its dialectical intent. Brecht did not propose alienation as an emotional shield but as an instrument that converts affective response into cognitive work. By interrupting seamless illusion through visible scene changes, placards, or direct addresses that break the fourth wall, the theatre prompts spectators to ask analytic questions: why does this situation arise, what forces produce it, and what possibilities for change present themselves? Alienation thus functions pedagogically; it reveals that each theatrical moment is composed by

choices that can be interrogated rather than natural givens that must be passively accepted. In effect, Brecht inverted the aims of dramatic realism, turning theatrical design into a stimulus for public reasoning.

Closely related to Brecht's alienation technique is his reconception of acting. While the Stanislavskian system asks actors to inhabit their roles through affective recall and emotional immersion, Brechtian actors are asked to demonstrate. This distinction redefines the actor's task from inward psychological transformation to outward exposition of social relations. The concept of *Gestus* i.e. an embodied attitude that expresses a character's social relations and motivations serves as the actor's primary tool. *Gestus* compresses political and economic conditions into visible, interpretable signifiers. For instance, an actor playing a merchant might not only adopt a manner of speaking but also enact gestures that signify bargaining, profit calculation, or social disdain. By rendering such features legible, the actor teaches the spectator to read behavior as socially determined.

Music and songs assume a special dialectical role in Brecht's theatre. Composers such as Kurt Weill collaborated with Brecht to produce songs that functioned as commentary rather than as undisturbed lyrical immersion. Where a conventional musical might heighten sentiment and further the audience's emotional identification with characters, Brechtian songs interrupt the narrative flow, introduce irony, and provide a counterpoint that requires cognitive reconciliation. Songs might summarize a character's motives in a way that starkly contrasts with the dramatic action, or they might present a moral or political thesis that the spectator must adjudicate. This use of music as an analytical device exemplifies Brecht's broader program of turning every element of theatre into an instrument of critical pedagogy.

Dramaturgically, Brecht favored episodic forms that resist teleological closure and facile moral resolution. The episodic play permits the juxtaposition of scenes so that audiences can perform comparative reasoning across contexts. In works like *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the episodic sequence of scenes charts the cycles of war, commerce, and ruin, thereby revealing systemic patterns rather than offering a single moralizing narrative. Episodic structure undermines the consolations of catharsis by refusing a tidy emotional resolution. Instead, it leaves spectators with questions about causes and structural conditions. This rejection of sentimental closure was Brecht's remedy to theatre's potential to domesticate political thought.

Brecht's political commitments were rooted in a historical materialist understanding of society. He believed

theatre should expose how social relations are produced through economic and institutional arrangements. His plays frequently dramatize the mechanics of class, law, and exchange, making visible the relations of production that structure everyday life. Brecht's intent was educational rather than merely propagandist wherein he sought to develop audiences capable of forming hypotheses about social causality and predicting the likely consequences of collective decisions. Thus, his theatre sought to cultivate the public's analytic capacity rather than to instruct them in a fixed ideological script.

Despite Brecht's emphasis on political clarity, he resisted the reduction of art to propaganda. Brecht repeatedly insisted that political theatre must still be theatre of high craft; formal inventiveness and technical rigor were essential to his program. He was wary of didacticism that impoverishes aesthetic complexity. The *Organum* therefore aims at a synthesis—works of theatre that are formally challenging and politically illuminating, capable of stimulating both emotional investment and intellectual scrutiny. For Brecht, the success of political theatre depends on artistic excellence as much as on ideological content.

The actor under Brechtian directives faces complex technical demands. Beyond learning lines and basic blocking, the performer must cultivate an awareness of social context and the capacity for demonstrative clarity. Teaching *Gestus* in the rehearsal room involves exercises that link bodily habit to social meaning—actors experiment with posture, economy of motion, and vocal emphasis to produce readable signs of relation. This pedagogical approach to performance emphasizes precision and interpretive discipline. Actors are not merely craftspeople of illusion but analysts and demonstrators who help spectators discern the social grammar operative in each scene.

Brecht's stagecraft extended to set and lighting design, which he reimagined as legible components rather than invisible supports for illusion. Instead of high realism with fully realized sets, Brecht's stages often used suggestive, sometimes abstract apparatus that made the mechanics of scene change visible. Lighting rigs, ropes, and scenic crew could remain in view, underscoring the constructedness of theatrical events. This tactical visibility reminds audiences that stage reality results from deliberate human choices that can be analyzed, criticized, and revised. By politicizing scenic design, Brecht multiplies the avenues through which spectators can practice interpretive judgment.

A key element of Brecht's praxis was the use of placards, captions, and direct addresses that communicate interpretive cues to the audience. These devices serve both to summarize action and to pose questions. A placard announcing the next scene, for instance, not only orients the spectator temporally but also invites preemptive analysis such as the significance of a particular juxtaposition. Rather than allowing surprises to dissolve critical faculties into emotional response, these devices prefigure thematic concerns and steer attention to sociopolitical dimensions of the action.

Brecht's theoretical program intersects with contemporary philosophical currents such as Benjamin's reflections on historicity and Walter Benjamin's notion of the politicization of memory. Benjamin's account of epic theater emphasizes the possibility of historical recollection as a critical action. It proposes that memory can be made to serve as a political resource when it is displayed and interrogated rather than nostalgically consumed. Brecht's theatre similarly aims to historicize the present and to mobilize memory for critical judgment. By prompting spectators to compare present circumstances with historic patterns, Brechtian performance cultivates a habit of historical literacy.

The *Organum* also offers a critique of psychoanalytic models that reduce social experience to individual neuroses. Brecht's materialism challenged frameworks that privileged inner psychological drives over social conditions. While respecting the human capacity for inner life, Brecht insisted that behaviour is intelligible only when located within its social context. Thus, his theatre sought to displace reductive psychologizing and to emphasize relational determinations. In this sense, Brecht's dramaturgy complements Marxist critiques that emphasize structural causality over individualized interpretation.

III. RECEPTION, CRITIQUE, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BRECHTIAN THEATRE

Critics of Brecht have sometimes charged him with fostering a cold rationalism that suppresses empathy and aesthetic pleasure. Yet this critique often misreads Brecht's dialectical approach to emotion and cognition. Rather than eliminating affect, Brecht desired to redirect it. He implied that feelings occasioned by the play should trigger inquiry rather than passive consolation. In this way, emotion becomes a resource for analysis. When an audience experiences indignation or sorrow, Brecht would have them ask what social processes produced those feelings and what collective responses might address them. Emotion thus becomes a springboard to reasoning.

Brecht's practice evolved over time, informed by experiments in the Weimar period, exile in the United States, and the institutional work of the Berliner Ensemble. These historical junctures shaped Brecht's approach to pedagogy, staging, and political commitment. The Berliner Ensemble institutionalized many of Brecht's methods and served as a laboratory for performance techniques, textual revision, and actor training. However, institutionalization also raised complex questions about reproduction and canonization such as those about preserving Brechtian method without fossilizing it into rigid orthodoxy. Practitioners and scholars have continually wrestled with this tension, seeking to adapt Brechtian forms to contemporary problems while honoring their pedagogical vitality.

The global afterlife of Brecht's *Organum* highlights both its adaptability and its limits. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, theatre-makers have appropriated Brechtian devices to address issues of colonialism, state violence, and poverty, often combining estrangement techniques with indigenous performance traditions. Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* offers one of the most prominent examples of such adaptation, transforming Brechtian pedagogy into participatory practices aimed at empowerment and civic intervention. These developments indicate that while Brecht's methods emerged from specific European contexts, their pedagogical core—training spectators to think critically—has wider applicability.

At the intersection of performance and political activism, Brechtian techniques have been used in community theatre, educational initiatives, and documentary performance. Theatre-makers working in public pedagogy employ estrangement devices to reveal institutional failures, to dramatize historical injustices, and to invite civic engagement. By adapting *Gestus*, episodic montage, and didactic song to local social struggles, practitioners extend Brecht's ambition of a theatre that participates in democratic formation rather than merely reflecting it.

Musicologists and theatre scholars continue to debate the specificities of Brecht's musical strategies. The collaboration with Kurt Weill in the Weimar period produced songs that walked a thin line between popular accessibility and ironic critique. Later collaborations and adaptations retained this tension by using musical style to destabilize narrative affect. Contemporary composers and directors working in a Brechtian idiom often experiment with dissonant or anachronistic music to create temporal estrangement, thereby exposing the contingency of cultural meanings.

From the perspective of rehearsal methodology, Brecht's techniques require a pedagogical regime that teaches performers to translate social analysis into embodied signifiers. Rehearsal practices include exercises in distancing, in the articulation of Gestus, and in the use of interruptive devices such as songs or placards. These tools train actors and directors to think semiotically about performance. Every gesture, light cue, or musical intervention carries interpretive weight. The rehearsal room becomes a space of analytic labor, where political interpretation is rehearsed and refined.

Reception studies have extended Brechtian concerns by empirically investigating how audiences interpret estrangement devices and whether such devices actually foster critical thinking. Ethnographic and survey research suggest nuanced results. Some spectators report heightened analytic awareness, while others experience confusion or disaffection. These mixed outcomes indicate that the efficacy of estrangement depends greatly on cultural context, prior audience habits, and the skillful integration of devices. Therefore, Brechtian techniques are neither magical nor universally effective; instead, they require careful calibration to audience backgrounds and performance contexts.

The *Organum's* insistence on epistemic training through theatre resonates with contemporary concerns about media literacy and the politics of information. In an era of digital abundance and algorithmic shaping of perceptions, Brechtian habits of comparing representations, testing hypotheses, and analyzing causes provide a valuable civic toolkit. Theatre that teaches how to discern rhetorical devices, to interrogate sources, and to evaluate arguments can contribute to democratic resilience. In this sense, Brecht's program extends beyond the stage into broader civic education.

Feminist and postcolonial critiques have enriched Brechtian study by highlighting areas where the *Organum* must be supplemented. Feminist scholars critique Brecht for insufficient attention to gendered power relations and for under-theorizing domestic and intimate realms where patriarchal power often operates. Similarly, postcolonial critics interrogate the eurocentrism of Brechtian categories and stress the need to adapt estrangement techniques to contexts animated by colonial histories and racialized logics. These critiques do not invalidate Brecht's contributions; they instead invite an expanded, intersectional *Organum* that accounts for multiple axes of oppression and difference.

Contemporary theatre practices frequently synthesize Brechtian methods with participatory and interdisciplinary forms. Hybrid performances may

combine documentary materials, audience deliberation, multimedia projections, and episodic arrangements to create layered critical experiences. In such works, alienation is deployed not merely to distance but to provoke collaborative inquiry; audiences are invited into modes of deliberation where theatrical moments become prompts for conversation, reflection, and sometimes collective decision-making.

The ethical dimension of Brechtian pedagogy remains a central issue for scholars and practitioners. The *Organum's* didactic ambition raises questions about responsibility: how to teach without dominating, to guide without dictating. Brecht's answer points to method over message: theatre that trains analytic habits respects the spectator's autonomy by fostering capacities rather than prescribing conclusions. Yet vigilance is necessary to ensure that pedagogical impulses do not become authoritarian; critical pedagogy must be reflexive about its own power relations.

Finally, Brecht's *Organum* stimulates a research agenda for theatre studies that emphasizes interdisciplinarity. Studying Brecht requires attention to textual production, performance practice, rehearsal techniques, historical contexts, and reception. Scholars must utilize archival research, performance analysis, ethnography, and theoretical reflection to capture the full complexity of Brechtian projects. Such an agenda respects Brecht's own commitment to methodical inquiry and public reasoning.

In conclusion, Bertolt Brecht's *A Short Organum for the Theatre* offers an enduring framework for imagining theatre as a site of public pedagogy. Its insistence on estrangement, demonstration, and episodic montage reconfigures performance as a training ground for critical faculties. While critics rightfully demand intersectional expansions and scrupulous attention to reception, Brecht's *organum* continues to provide resources for artists and scholars seeking to align aesthetic innovation with civic education. At a moment when the capacity to analyze, compare, and judge cultural representations is under strain, Brecht's plea for a theatre that cultivates scientific habits of mind remains timely and necessary.

REFERENCES

- [1] Benjamin, Walter. "What Is Epic Theatre?" *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 231–236.
- [2] Brecht, Bertolt. *A Short Organum for the Theatre*. Translated by John Willett, Methuen, 1964.

- [3] Suri, Girija. ““After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?” Decay, Violence, and Redemption in T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion”, “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, and “Marina”” *International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 5(5), 2025. pp. 45-52. <https://aipublications.com/ijllc/detail/after-such-knowledge-what-forgiveness-decay-violence-and-redemption-in-t-s-eliot-s-gerontion-sweeney-among-the-nightingales-and-marina/>
- [4] Jameson, Fredric. *Brecht and Method*. Verso, 1998.
- [5] Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, 2006.
- [6] Mumford, Meg. *Bertolt Brecht*. Routledge, 2009.
- [7] Thomson, Peter. *Brecht: A Practical Handbook*. Routledge, 2008.
- [8] Willett, John. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A Study from Eight Aspects*. Methuen, 1967.
- [9] Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. Chatto & Windus, 1968..

Mail your Manuscript to infogain.ijels@gmail.com



Optimizing the Production of Proficient Explosive Detection Dogs: An Analysis of the Criteria in Selecting Puppies for Training

Ma. Bonissa A. Ole

Philippine Merchant Marine Academy-Graduate School, Philippines

Email: firebolt503@gmail.com

Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2025; Accepted: 23 Sep 2025; Available online: 27 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study analyzed the criteria utilized by the different K9 providers in selecting puppies for training to optimize the production of proficient explosive detection dogs. Using a mixed-method research design, specifically concurrent triangulation, the research explored the different criteria used by various K9 providers in selecting puppies. Data were collected through guided survey-interview questions. Results showed that most K9 providers in the Philippines selected puppies aged 3-5 months, and both male and female puppies were equally chosen. Although medium-sized breeds are preferred, the results revealed that Labrador Retrievers and Belgian Malinois are the most preferred breeds. Regarding general health, K9 providers place importance on the skin and coat and the nervous system. Moreover, completely immunized puppies are preferred. Among the behavioral factors considered, trainability emerged as the most highly valued. Meanwhile, K9 providers consistently conduct subtests under the environmental tests, along with reward focus and persistence, search test, and sudden appearance subtests. Breeding is the top choice for obtaining puppies; however, procurement is also widely used. K9 providers face various challenges during the selection process, including health concerns, the availability of quality puppies, the selection system and cost. However, despite these challenges, the current practices of K9 providers achieve notable success rates. This study recommends standardizing puppy selection criteria with a scoring system, strengthening breeding programs to produce healthy working lines, and improving the selection process through collaboration between private and government K9 providers. Future research should explore the connection between selection criteria and the success rates of explosive detection dogs.



Keywords—Explosive Detection Dog, Philippines, Philippine Coast Guard, Selection Criteria, Working Dog

I. INTRODUCTION

Dogs play a vital role in ensuring public safety, thwarting terrorist activities, and protecting vital installations. It is widely acknowledged that dogs are currently the most effective mobile sensors for detecting explosives, offering the most effective and adaptable method (Farr et al., 2021; Lazarowski et al., 2020). Despite the availability of advanced explosive detection tools, the demand for explosive detection dogs remains high, and law enforcement agencies, along with private K9 providers

from around the globe, continue to train explosive detection dogs. In the Philippines, where advanced technological tools for detecting explosives are limited, the service of explosive detection dogs (EDD) is essential. Consequently, it is crucial that these dogs are proficient, as the risk in explosive detection work is exceptionally high, and failure in detecting improvised explosive devices and other explosive substances could cost thousands of lives. In training working dogs, one area that could improve the production of proficient detection dogs is the selection

process, which decides which dogs will be trained (Bray et al., 2021). The proficiency of explosive detection dogs is closely linked to careful selection of puppies for training, as early detection of key behavioral traits can significantly influence the potential for success.

The Philippine Coast Guard K9 Force selects puppies for training based on the procedure on Canine Selection under HPCG SOP Number 09-10 dated 24 March 2010 (Administration of Coast Guard Working Dogs), which stipulates the requirements of a material dog, including the breed, physical, and behavioral characteristics. Additionally, a Pre-Delivery Inspection (PDI) testing parameter is used to evaluate material dogs prior to acceptance for training. This testing parameter is composed of three stages. Stage 1 involves a drive or performance evaluation and screening for physical conformation; Stage 2 evaluates the veterinary records or veterinary health certificate; and Stage 3 focuses on health screening for contagious and or compromising diseases. Despite the existence of these selection process guidelines, their effectiveness has never been evaluated, and success in training Coast Guard explosive detection dogs remains varied.

Several studies have explored the selection methods and characteristics of dogs likely to succeed as working dogs, but only a few focus specifically on explosive detection dogs. Lazarowski et al. (2020) emphasized that information about the characteristics of explosive detection dogs is predominantly isolated within and across programs, lacking extensive scientific examination and validation. Moreover, Tiira et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of identifying successful working dogs as early as possible, given the high rejection rates and the associated training cost. Likewise, predicting a puppy's future success as a working dog is crucial for working dog programs to optimize placement in detection work, ensuring that resources will be allocated to puppies with a higher chance of success (Lazarowski et al., 2020). Consequently, failing to determine suitable puppies for training can lead to high attrition from training, as noted by Bray et al. (2021).

It is for this reason that this study aimed to analyze the criteria utilized by different K9 providers in selecting puppies for training to optimize the production of proficient explosive detection dogs. The result of this study can provide valuable insights into the factors considered in the selection of puppies for EDD training. Moreover, the results of this study can provide recommendations that can significantly enhance the process of selecting puppies for training, ultimately optimizing the production of proficient explosive detection dogs.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Research Design

A mixed-method research design, specifically concurrent triangulation, was used. Primary data were collected through a guided survey-interview to analyze the criteria in selecting puppies for explosive detection training. A narrative literature review was also conducted to determine the practices of K9 providers from other countries in their selection process.

2. Respondents

The respondents of the study identified through purposive sampling were 14 K9 trainers who have been working for at least five years in their respective K9 training organizations. The researcher conducted interviews and a survey with 6 K9 trainers from the government and 6 K9 trainers from private K9 providers that conduct explosive detection dog training within the Luzon provinces. Additionally, 2 K9 trainers from the US and Canada were also interviewed and participated in the survey.

3. Data Collection

A guided survey-interview questionnaire was used to gather data. It was composed of three parts: Part 1 was the respondents' profile; Part 2 consisted of a set of survey questions pertaining to the current method of puppy selection, followed by interview questions that allowed the respondents to elaborate on their answers; and Part 3 included interview questions on success rates and other related issues.

4. Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to the importance of ethical standards in this research, particularly in the use of human subjects. All necessary measures were taken to obtain the required permissions from the relevant agencies, authorities, and respondents before commencing the survey. The researcher prioritized respecting the autonomy of respondents by providing them with detailed information about the research project. Consents were obtained from the respondents, and appropriate permissions for the usage of their given data were secured. Confidentiality was ensured by using data solely for research purposes, and the anonymity of the subjects was maintained by not linking them to their responses. All authors whose work is utilized in this paper were properly acknowledged through in-text citations and inclusion in the reference list.

III. RESULTS

Factors in Selecting Puppies for Explosive Detection Training

Physical

Most respondents preferred puppies aged 3-5 months (TABLE 1), considering this stage optimal for developing drive and behavior as well as for gradually introducing stimuli. By contrast, foreign K9 providers and several government K9 providers favored older puppies (6-18 months), noting that at this age, traits such as confidence and individuality are more apparent.

Table 1. Age

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
3-5 mos	0	4	5	9
6-11 mos	2	1	1	4
12-18 mos	2	3	1	6

In terms of size, medium-sized breeds were generally most preferred, followed by small breeds (TABLE 2). These were regarded as easier to handle and more economical to maintain.

Table 2. Size

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Small Breeds	2	4	4	10
Medium Breeds	2	5	6	13
Large Breeds	2	3	3	8

As shown in TABLE 3, all respondents indicated no preference for the sex of puppies, selecting both males and females. This suggests that sex has little influence on selection for explosive detection.

Table 3. Sex

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Male	0	0	0	0
Female	0	0	0	0
Both	2	6	6	14

Health Condition

The respondents were asked to identify the health conditions considered when selecting puppies for training in explosive detection. TABLE 4 presents that the most considered health conditions were skin and coat, and the nervous system and other sensory organs, both with 12 responses each. One respondent stressed that the whole nervous system must function properly to meet the demands of training. Next were the heart and lungs, with 11 responses, which emphasized the importance of cardiopulmonary function for endurance and stamina during training and eventual deployment. Meanwhile, gait and reproductive and urinary systems were the least emphasized, with 8 responses each, indicating that they are considered secondary factors compared to those directly affecting performance, sensory perception, and overall health.

Table 4. Health Considerations

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Skin and Coat	2	4	6	12
Nervous system, senses, and other sensory organs	2	5	5	12
Heart and Lungs	2	4	5	11
Musculoskeletal system	2	4	4	10
Laboratory results	1	5	4	10
Gait	2	4	2	8
Reproductive and Urinary system	2	4	2	8

Additional screening methods, such as PennHip evaluations to detect dysplasia risk, which are done during the pre-training trial, were also reported. Some providers also emphasized the importance of reviewing the medical history of both parents and puppies.

As shown in TABLE 5, all respondents required complete immunization before puppies entered training, reflecting its importance among K9 providers.

Table 5. Immunization

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Complete	2	6	6	14
Partial	0	0	0	0

Behavior

Among the response options provided to respondents, trainability ranked highest with 13 responses (TABLE 6). Additionally, nerve, hunting drive, sociability, intensity of search, and the ability to ignore distracting stimuli, as well as the ability to work effectively in stressful situations, also received high consideration, with each receiving 11 responses. Meanwhile, curiosity and aggression were less considered. In relation to this, aggression was viewed negatively, with providers excluding dogs that exhibit resource guarding. Moreover, some respondents also mentioned that they considered the food drive when selecting puppies.

Table 6. Behavior

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Trainability	2	5	6	13
Nerve	2	3	6	11
Hunting Drive	2	3	6	11
Sociability	2	3	6	11
Intensity of search and ability to ignore distracting stimuli	2	3	6	11
Ability to work effectively in	2	4	5	11

stressful situations				
Motivation to sniff	2	3	4	9
Curiosity	2	1	4	7
Aggressiveness	2	2	3	7

Genetics (Breed)

Genetics also plays a role in breeding selection for explosive detection. Despite a general preference for medium and small breeds, the Labrador Retriever emerged as the most used breed among respondents, valued for its high drive, stable temperament, adaptability, and approachable appearance (TABLE 7). Belgian Malinois also ranked highly and dominated certain programs, such as the Philippine Coast Guard K9 Force. Other breeds cited included Golden Retrievers, Jack Russell Terriers, German Shepherds, Springer Spaniels, Griffons, and Beagles, indicating multiple breeds can succeed when they demonstrate strong play, prey, and hunt drives. While breed standards may guide the selection for purebred dogs, respondents noted that performance traits often outweigh strict conformation when identifying suitable candidates.

Table 7. Genetic (Breed)

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Labrador Retriever	1	5	6	12
Belgian Malinois	0	5	5	10
Golden Retriever	1	3	3	7
Jack Russell Terrier	0	2	2	10
German Shorthaired Pointer	1	1	1	10
German Shepherd	0	1	2	8

Source

Breeding was the most preferred source of explosive detection dogs among respondents, particularly private and government providers (TABLE 8). Breeding enables greater control over genetic traits, facilitates early monitoring of puppies, and promotes long-term improvement of breeding lines. Foreign K9 provider respondents and some government K9 providers in the Philippines, by contrast, favored procurement, which enables organizations to select dogs that already meet physical and behavioral standards.

Table 8. Source

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Breeding	0	5	6	11
Procurement	2	4	3	9
Donation	0	4	1	5

Test Conducted to Determine a Puppy's Suitability to Undergo Explosive Detection Training

Performance Test

Results, as shown in TABLE 9, indicate that reward focus was the most emphasized subtest with 12 responses. The search test received 11 responses, while reward persistence and reward arousal received 10 and 9 responses, respectively.

Table 9. Performance Test

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Reward focus	2	4	6	12
Search test	2	5	4	11
Reward persistence	2	3	5	10
Reward arousal	2	3	4	9

Emotional Reactivity Test

As shown in TABLE 10, the sudden appearance subtest was the most frequently considered, receiving 10 responses. This is followed by a novel object with 9 responses and the acoustic startle subtest with 8 responses.

Meanwhile, the animated object subtest is the least conducted, gaining only 5 responses.

Table 10. Emotional Reactivity Test

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Sudden appearance	2	4	4	10
Novel object	2	4	3	9
Acoustic startle	2	2	4	8
Animated object	2	2	1	5

Environmental Test

Compared to the performance and emotional reactivity tests, subtests from the environmental test are consistently conducted during the selection process. Most respondents emphasized the importance of testing puppies on different kinds of surfaces and stairs, as well as in pedestrian and vehicle traffic, with each receiving 13 responses (TABLE 11). Additionally, noise exposure was also highly rated, with 12 responses, followed by unfamiliar objects, which received 11 responses.

Table 11. Environmental Test

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Different type of surfaces and stairs	2	5	4	13
Pedestrian and vehicle traffic	2	5	6	13
Noises	2	5	5	12
Unfamiliar objects	2	5	4	11

Moreover, some respondents mentioned exposing dogs to noises through speakers to desensitize them before exposure, as well as during walks in town (e.g., shopping malls, schools), and then in operational environments. Meanwhile, another respondent added that they test

puppies in groups of people, in dark places, on high and elevated surfaces, when entering rooms, alighting stairs, using elevators/escalators, and in the presence of other animals.

Challenges Encountered in the Process of Selecting Puppies for Explosive Detection Training

The respondents were also asked about the challenges they faced while selecting prospective puppies for training, with the results shown in TABLE 12.

Table 12. Challenges Encountered During Selection of Puppies

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
Lack of assurance that procured puppies are fully vaccinated and have no hereditary medical conditions	1	3	4	8
Lack of standardized and available assessment tool	0	3	2	7
Limited source of working line dogs	1	3	2	6
High cost of quality puppies	1	2	2	5

Among the challenges faced by K9 providers during the selection process, the lack of assurance that the procured puppies are fully vaccinated and have no underlying medical conditions, as indicated by 8 responses. Although the lack of a standardized and available assessment tool was the second major concern, results showed that this does not appear to be a problem for the foreign K9 provider respondents. Additional challenges include the

availability of breeders producing high-quality bloodlines and the logistics of travel.

Success Rates of Puppies for Explosive Detection Based on the Current Selection Method

To determine the effectiveness and reliability of their existing methods of selection, the respondents were asked about the success rates based on the current criteria. As shown in TABLE 13, the majority of respondents reported that the success rate of puppies selected based on their criteria is 76-100%, despite the challenges they encounter.

Table 13. Success Rate

Response Options	Foreign K9 Providers (FKP)	Government K9 Providers (GKP)	Private K9 Providers (PKP)	Total
0-25%	0	0	0	0
26-50%	0	1	1	2
51-75%	1	1	1	3
76-100%	1	4	4	9

IV. DISCUSSION

The study aimed to determine the criteria utilized by K9 providers in selecting puppies for explosive detection training. Regarding physical factors, the preferred age for puppies is 3-5 months. These practices align with findings by Lazarowski et al. (2021), which suggest that detection outcomes can be predicted as early as three months. However, selecting very young puppies carries risks related to incomplete immunization. Nevertheless, a meta-analysis by Jaskinia (2023) found no significant association between age and scent detection accuracy.

Most of the respondents preferred medium-sized breeds. While size may be critical for multipurpose working dogs that require speed, strength, and deterrence (Zink and Schlehr, 2020). It appears less relevant for single-purpose detection dogs, as recent studies (Lazarowski et al., 2018, 2020, 2021; de Miranda Magalhães et al., 2023) emphasize behavioral characteristics rather than size as predictors of effectiveness.

Meanwhile, both male and female puppies are deemed suitable by the respondents. These findings align with those of Salomon et al. (2024) and Lazarowski et al. (2020), who found no significant effect of sex or neutering status on detection success. However, other studies report mixed results: Abdel Fattah and Abdel-Hamid (2020) found male German Shepherds more trainable, Jaskinia (2023) noted a slight performance advantage in females,

and Lazarowski et al. (2018) observed sex distribution differences across detection roles. These inconsistencies suggest that while sex may contribute to performance, it is not a primary determinant of success in explosive detection training.

When it comes to health, the results underscore the central role of health in detection performance. Respondents most frequently emphasized the skin and coat, along with the nervous system and other sensory organs. Healthy skin and coat often reflect the overall well-being of the dog. In relation to this, a study by Harvey et al. (2019) found that dogs with skin problems exhibit more behavioral problems. Additionally, nervous system function ensures quick reactions, coordination, and behavior regulation, all of which are vital for complex detection tasks. Moreover, prior studies confirm that physical fitness and physiology strongly influence efficiency, as heat, fatigue, and respiratory strain can reduce accuracy (Farr et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2024; Fernandez et al., 2024). Thus, maintaining optimal health and conditioning is crucial for resilience and accurate detection outcomes. Additionally, the respondents emphasized the importance of complete immunization. This minimizes the risk of viral diseases, such as canine distemper and canine parainfluenza, which can impair olfactory function (Jenkins et al., 2018) and ensure the long-term suitability of the dog for detection work.

Regarding behavioral traits, trainability emerged as the most valued trait by respondents in selecting puppies for explosive detection. In addition, the consistency with which the respondents demonstrated in choosing other valued behavioral traits of potential explosive detection dogs matches the findings of prior studies that have emphasized the stronger influence of behavioral traits over physical or sensory traits (Bray et al., 2021; Lazarowski et al., 2020, 2021). Meanwhile, aggression was viewed negatively, with providers excluding dogs that exhibit resource guarding, consistent with requirements such as those of the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which demand calm, non-aggressive behavior of dogs in crowded environments (Watson, 2020).

The respondents showed a high preference for Labrador Retrievers. This corresponds to the article by Wendt (2024), which noted that the Labrador Retriever is among the most sought-after breeds for explosive detection work, along with German Shorthaired Pointers. Additionally, the Australian Border Force also favors this breed due to their high drive, steady temperament, adaptability to challenging environments, and non-threatening appearance (Australian Border Force, n.d.). Nevertheless, Belgian Malinois closely followed, while other respondents

remarked on using Springer Spaniels, Griffons, and Beagles.

Breeding emerged as the top choice for obtaining puppies. For some respondents, this makes selection easier, as they can control which dogs to breed and allow for early observation and evaluation of the puppies. Similarly, the Swedish Armed Forces operates a breeding program to ensure a stable supply of dogs with the right traits, rather than depending on outside breeders (Swedish Armed Forces, 2017). However, maintaining a breeding program comes with disadvantages, including the high cost of maintenance and the need to preserve genetic diversity (Bray et al., 2021). On the contrary, foreign respondents and some government K9 providers prefer to obtain dogs through procurement. This approach is common in North America, with agencies such as the TSA and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) relying heavily on purchased dogs (CBSA, 2021; American Kennel Club, 2020). Nonetheless, procurement has drawbacks, including high rejection rates due to behavioral mismatches, orthopedic health issues in imported dogs, and concerns over transparency and efficiency in acquisition processes (Braye et al., 2021; Wendt, 2024; Cima, 2019)

The importance placed on the different tests conducted by the respondents during the selection process varies. The results showed that the respondents placed high emphasis on environmental adaptability, as indicated by the high ratings the subtests under the environmental test received from the respondents, which is consistent with the study by Lazarowski et al. (2018), wherein it was noted that the majority of the failed dogs in the study failed due to insufficient environmental soundness. However, despite the strong link between environmental soundness and the success of working dogs, early sensitivity to the environment does not necessarily predict failure, as many dogs develop confidence and boldness as they mature (Lazarowski et al., 2021). Moreover, the subtests under the test were also highly considered, emphasizing the importance of knowing if the puppy is consistently motivated and possesses reliable search performance. Conversely, the study by MacLean and Hare (2018) found that while a performance test is valuable for identifying dogs most likely to succeed, it cannot perfectly classify all candidates. Similarly, Lazarowski (2020) noted that performance tests are less predictive than emotional reactivity and environmental tests. Meanwhile, the subtests under the emotional reactivity test, which are used to measure the dogs' stability, adaptability, and resilience to unfamiliar stimuli, were the least emphasized compared to the other two tests. However, a study by Lazarowski et al. (2021) found that emotional reactivity scores are good predictors of whether dogs will be chosen for detection

work, depending on the puppy's age. In fact, the study demonstrated that these scores are valuable at both early ages (3 months old) and later ages (11-14 months old). Nevertheless, the inclusion of these three tests in the criteria for selecting puppies for explosive detection training could enhance the overall accuracy in predicting outcomes for explosive detection dog training.

The lack of assurance that the procured puppies are fully vaccinated and have no medical conditions emerged as a major concern for the K9 providers. However, other challenges, such as the lack of standardized assessment tools, limited availability of working-line dogs, and high cost of quality puppies, also pose problems for K9 providers.

Despite the challenges encountered by the respondents, the majority reported a success rate of 76-100%, while a small number reported a success rate of 52-75%.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher arrived at the following conclusions:

The preference for 3-5-month-old, medium-breed puppies, with emphasis on complete immunization, good health, and behavioral traits such as trainability, drive, and stability under stress, highlights the need for a structured health screening and early behavioral assessments. The consistent preference for Labrador Retrievers and reliance on breeding suggest that developing regulated breeding programs can improve reliability and reduce attrition in K9 selection.

The consistent use of performance, emotional reactivity, and environmental tests (particularly reward focus, sudden appearance, and all environmental subtests) underscores their value in predicting working dog potential. Standardizing these testing protocols would strengthen selection accuracy and facilitate comparability across providers

Uncertainties in health condition, the lack of a standardized assessment tool, limited availability of working-line dogs, and high procurement costs remain critical barriers to the successful selection process. In the Philippine setting, these are compounded by a few unreliable breeders, inflated prices, and insufficient government funding. Addressing these systemic issues through enhancements to breeding programs, standardization of health and assessment protocols, and increased institutional support is vital for long-term sustainability.

Despite reported success rates of 76-100% among providers, variability across different K9 programs

indicates room for improvement. Coordination between the government and private K9 providers to share best practices could increase the consistency of training outcomes and reduce training failures.

Furthermore, the foreign K9 providers' emphasis on older puppies (6-18 months), thorough health evaluations, and trial-based procurement highlights practices that enhance the reliability of the selection process. Adapting similar approaches, such as a trial period and a more comprehensive health screening, could potentially intensify local K9 programs.

Lastly, future research could explore the connection between specific selection criteria and the success rate of puppies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank her adviser, Prof. Victoria Q. Paragua, Ph.D., for her guidance, support, and encouragement throughout this research. Sincere appreciation is also extended to the author's professors, colleagues, and the faculty and staff of the PMMA Graduate School, as well as the respondents who shared their knowledge and insights, which greatly contributed to this work. Finally, the author is profoundly grateful to her family for their unwavering love, patience, and support throughout this journey.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdel Fattah, A.F. & El Abdel-Hamid, S.E. (2020). Influence of gender, neuter status, and training method on police dog narcotics olfaction performance, behavior, and welfare. *J Adv Vet Anim Res.* 2020 Oct 7;7(4):655-662. <https://www.ejmanager.com/mnstemp/39/39-1587077435.pdf?t=1758194394>
- [2] AKC Government Relations. 2020. TSA provides guidance on explosive detection canines. American Kennel Club. <https://www.akc.org/legislative-alerts/tsa-provides-guidance-explosive-detection-canines/>
- [3] Australian Border Force. Detector Dog Program. <https://www.abf.gov.au/about-us/what-we-do/border-protection/detector-dogs/overview>
- [4] Bray, E.E., Otto, C.M., Udell, M.A.R., Hall, N.J., Johnston, A.M., & MacLean, E.L. (2021). Enhancing the selection and performance of working dogs. *Frontier Veterinary Science, Sec. Animal Behavior and Welfare.* Volume 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2021.644431>
- [5] Canada Border Service Agency. (2021). Detector Dog Service program. <https://www.cbasa-asfc.gc.ca/security-securite/dds-scd/menu-eng.html>
- [6] De Miranda-Magalhães, A.J., Jantorno, G.M., Pralon, A.Z., de Castro, M.B., & de Melo C.B. (2023). Explosive detection dogs: A perspective from the personality profile,

- selection, training methods, employment, and performance to mitigate a real threat. *MPDI, Companion Animals*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13243773>
- [7] Farr, B.D., Otto, C.M. & Szymczak, J.E. (2021). Perspectives on the performance of Explosive Detection Canines: performance degrading factors. PubMed Central. National Library of Medicine. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8300196/>
- [8] Fernandez, L.S., Kane, S.A., DeChant, M.T., Prada-Tiedemann, P.A., & Hall, N.J. (2024). Environmental effects on explosive detection threshold of domestic dogs. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0306817>
- [9] Gerritsen, R. & Haak, R. (2017.) K9 explosive and mine detection: A manual for training and operations. Brudh Education Inc. https://books.google.com.sa/books?id=Aq10DgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ar&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=falseLazaro
- [10] Hall, N.J., Otto, C.M., and Baltzer, W.I. (2021). Editorial Working Dogs: Form and Function, Volume II. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2021.732304/full>
- [11] Jaskinia, M.M. (2023). Meta-analysis of scent detection canines and potential factors influencing their success rates. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article+13260&context=etd>
- [12] Jenkins, E.K., DeChant, M.T., & Perry, E.B. (2018). When the nose doesn't know: Canine olfactory function associated with health, management, and potential links to microbiota. *Front. Vet. Sci.* 5:56. doi:10.3389/fvets.2018.00056
- [13] Kane, S.A., Fernandez, L.S., Huff, S.E., Prada-Tiedemann, P.A., & Hall, N.J. (2024). Canine detection of explosives under adverse environmental conditions with and without acclimation training. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0297538>
- [14] Lazarowski, L., Rogers, B., Krichbaum, S., Haney, P., Smith, J.G., & Waggoner, P. (2021). Validation of a behavior test for predicting puppies' suitability as detection dogs. PubMed Central. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.00597/full>
- [15] Lazarowski, L., Waggoner, L.P., Krichbaum, S., Singletary, M., Haney, P., Rogers, B., and Angle, C. (2020). Selecting dogs for explosives detection: Behavioral characteristics. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.00597/full>
- [16] Lazarowski, L., Haney, P.S., Brock, J., Fischer, T., Rogers, B., Angle, C., Katz, J.S., and Waggoner, L.P. (2018). Investigation of the behavioral characteristics of dogs purpose-bred and prepared to perform Vapor Wake® detection of person-borne explosives. *Front Vet Sci.* 2018 Mar 20;5:50. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5869930/>
- [17] MacLean, E.V. & Hare, B. (2018). Enhanced selection of assistance and explosive detection dogs using cognitive measures. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6180148/>
- [18] Salamon, A., Baranya, E., Zsiros, L.R., Miklòsi, Á., Csepregi, M., Kubinyi, E., Andics, A., & Gácsi, M. (2024). Success in the Natural Detection Task is influenced by only a few factors generally believed to affect dogs' olfactory performance. *Sci Rep* 14, 12351. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-62957-5>
- [19] Swedish Armed Force. (2017). The Swedish Armed Forces breeding program for German Shepherd Dogs – the next step. https://www.iwdba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/06_arvelius_iwdc_2017.pdf
- [20] Tiira, K., Tikkanen, A., and Vainio, O. (2020). Inhibitory control-Important trait for explosive detection performance in police dogs?. Volume 224, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2020.104942>
- [21] Watson, K. (2020). Explosive Detection Canine Recommended Standards. A notice by the Transportation Security Administration on 03/20/2020. Federal Register. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/03/20/2020-05926/explosives-detection-canine-recommended-standards>
- [22] Wendt, R. (2024). Homegrown detection dogs. *Police Law Enforcement Solutions*. <https://www.policemag.com/special-units/article/15704974/homegrown-detection-dogs>
- [23] Zink, C. & Schlehr, M.R. (2020). Working Dog Structure: Evaluation and Relationship to Function. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.559055/full#h4>



Satirical Realism and Classical Dramatic Structure: A Dual-Framework Analysis of Shrilal Shukla's Raag Darbari

Diwakar Gautam

Department of English Literature (MA), University of Delhi, Delhi, India
JRF, GATE

Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Sep 2025; Accepted: 24 Sep 2025; Available online: 27 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper argues that Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968) represents a uniquely Indian literary form—a "postcolonial satirical tragedy"—that successfully combines realistic social analysis with a classical dramatic structure. By examining the novel through the complementary lenses of Indian literary realism and Aristotelian dramatic theory, we can understand how it achieves both potent political critique and sophisticated literary artistry. The novel functions simultaneously as social documentation, offering a satirical exposure of the rural corruption and failing moral values that characterized the post-Independence era, and as an aesthetic artifact that employs classical principles to create structural coherence. As a work of Indian realism, *Raag Darbari* critiques the collapse of nationalist idealism and the disintegration of the Nehruvian vision. Through its protagonist, Rangnath—an educated urbanite whose idyllic vision is crushed by harsh reality—the novel captures the helplessness of the individual facing a corrupt system. Concurrently, the narrative adheres to an Aristotelian framework. Rangnath's journey mirrors that of a tragic hero, culminating in a moment of *anagnorisis*: a critical discovery of his own powerlessness. The novel skillfully modifies Aristotelian principles, substituting tragic pity with a "satirical catharsis" achieved through bitter laughter. This application of a Western framework to a postcolonial text creates what Homi Bhabha terms a "third space," where different traditions creatively synthesize. Ultimately, this dual approach enables Shukla to bear witness to a collective crisis while achieving aesthetic sophistication, making *Raag Darbari* a cornerstone work of postcolonial satirical realism.



Keywords— Shrilal Shukla, *Raag Darbari*, Satirical Realism, Aristotelian Structure, Postcolonial Literature, Indian Realism, *Anagnorisis*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Realism means, in simple terms, to portray real life with utmost genuineness, a concept that existed since the genesis of literature but was never prominent until the artists from every creative field got tired of the somewhat pretentious illustration of society. In the beginning of 19th century, it started to get the recognition it was always worthy of, with the help of some pioneers of modern literature such as Honoré de Balzac, Henrik Ibsen, Charles Dickens. Yet when it comes to Indian Literature, the mindset of Indian authors post-independence differs from the western culture

and its belief. From the occidental point of view and the disparity between Indians and English colonials, it was suggested that Indians are at a loss of an identity when it came to our own struggles to re-establish ourselves as an independent nation.

However, what makes Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968) particularly compelling is not just its satirical exposure of rural corruption, but its sophisticated employment of both Indian realist techniques and classical Aristotelian dramatic structure. This dual approach enables the novel to function simultaneously as social documentation and aesthetic

artifact, achieving what might be termed "postcolonial satirical tragedy." As Georg Lukacs argues in *The Theory of the Novel*, realism achieves its most powerful effects when it captures "the totality of social relations through the detailed representation of everyday life" (Lukacs 60). But Raag Darbari goes beyond this by also employing classical dramatic principles to create structural coherence and emotional catharsis through bitter laughter rather than tragic pity.

This paper argues that Shukla's achievement lies in his creation of a uniquely Indian literary form that successfully combines realistic social analysis with classical dramatic structure. By examining the novel through the complementary lenses of Indian literary realism and Aristotelian dramatic theory, we can understand how it achieves both political critique and literary artistry, representing what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" of postcolonial cultural production where different traditions creatively synthesize.

II. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND EVOLUTION OF REALISM IN INDIA

V.S. Naipaul, as he expressed in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1976), stresses upon India as a country without any ideology of rejuvenating itself after the freedom from the reign of English Empire for over centuries. With Indian Literature still being nascent before the modernity in Indian texts took over, authors came forward from every part of our country heaving the common burden of lost identity to close this debate. By instilling "Indianness" in the text to complement the realistic portrayal of our own struggles, and to state the spiraling emotions of every Indian, hence came the Realism in Modern Indian Literature.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee demonstrates in *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, Indian realism developed not through direct imitation of European models, but as a response to specific cultural and political conditions of colonization and independence. Mukherjee argues that "Indian literature did not have any tradition of this variety of realism because it was based on a rather different view of reality" (Mukherjee 23). Unlike European realism which emerged from bourgeois individualism, Indian realism developed within the context of colonial subjugation and cultural renaissance, creating distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from Western counterparts.

Parth Chatterjee wrote: "Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity and treachery of the colonizer's claim that 'the backward people are culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the prolifically developing and ever emerging conditions of the modern world'. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people, asserting that a

backward nation could modernize itself while retaining its cultural identity and even express it vividly." This clash of these ideologies produced a discourse which challenged the colonial claim.

Namvar Singh's influential analysis in *Adhunik Sahitya Ki Pravrittian* identifies a specifically Indian approach to realist characterization that emphasizes social types over psychological individuals. Singh argues that Indian realist characters often function as representatives of social forces or cultural tensions, reflecting Indian philosophical traditions that emphasize social role and duty over individual psychology, while also serving the practical function of social critique through recognizable social types.

III. POLITICAL AND CLASSICAL REALISM IN INDIAN LITERATURE

By invoking the relationship between realist logic and the ideals of the liberal state and then proceeding to invert that same logic, Indian novels represent and thus critique the collapse of nationalist idealism into manifesting a dismal reality. We also find the concept "ulti baatein" which translates to inverted logic, which posits that said truth or court of public opinion often is deprived of a certain context for a clear-cut explanation which leads to the forgery of truth or contradiction of what was said and what was understood.

This concept of "ulti baatein" represents what Francesca Orsini, in her analysis of *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940*, describes as the adaptive strategies employed by Hindi writers to address distinctly Indian social and political concerns while utilizing adapted Western literary forms. Orsini demonstrates how "Hindi became an established public language in print, education and politics and struggled successfully to become the future national language of India" during the crucial decades of the independence movement.

If we take the example of Raag Darbari written by Shrilal Shukla in 1968, he made use of his satirical humourism to vocalize his critical comments on the distortion of politics and human nature and he pointedly shed light on the inner corruption of an individual. He paints a picture of India and its socio-politico-economic condition through the idea of village Shivpalganj. Every resident of Shivpalganj holds an ulterior motive and treats every opportunity to make their end meet as a Midas touch. In this novel, corruption is justified in such a twisted manner that it appears uncomfortably natural, which mirrors the crumbling state of our current political situation.

IV. ARISTOTELIAN FRAMEWORK IN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

Shrilal Shukla, born on 31st December 1925 in the state Uttar Pradesh, Shukla's writing style acutely illustrated the dire scenarios of India and its failing moral values after the post-Independence era and the poignant and bitter convalescent condition of a wounded nation. He conveyed the macro-level India's state in a micro-level storytelling, an anecdotal narrative which did not just tell the humorous happenings of a village but insinuated the other side of that spectrum. The intimate structure of the story of Raag Darbari, published in 1968, helps the reader to consume the information in a colloquial manner but also helps understand the inner philosophies and vices of people.

Keeping in mind that the novel's setting is in an isolated village and the representation of the said narrative is done in a theatrical or more precisely in a dramatic way, we can apply the Aristotelian elements and understand how Shukla's Raag Darbari possesses the core structure of Aristotle's Poetics and general Greek theatrics.

However, as postcolonial critics have noted, the application of Western classical theory to postcolonial texts requires careful cultural translation. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial cultural production operates through "ambivalent" processes that simultaneously employ and subvert dominant cultural patterns. The use of Aristotelian framework in analyzing Indian literature thus becomes what Bhabha terms "mimicry" "a process that is "almost the same, but not quite," creating both resemblance and menace to classical Western forms.

The precise outcome of the points in Poetics is that "imitation of reality is didactic," and Aristotle supported this even though his teacher, Plato, did not. The plot has to be mimetic, as Raag Darbari has an anecdotal narrative, it also has an underlying linear plot as the protagonist of the story, Rangnath, through whom we understand the happenings of Shivpalganj. It dilutes the macro level corruption of a whole country to a mere village, mixing it with humor and satire for the audience and the story to have a symbiotic relationship.

Aristotle's concept of "time, space and action" is pristinely present in the narrative of the story, as it is set in post-independence India era after 1947 with the incidents that states the generalized happenings of India (time), in a small village called Shivpalganj, a common name which can be found in every part of the country (space) and every character's motives and timely development of the story to a breaking point which contributes to the plot (action). These unities, as Aristotle stated them in *The Art of Poetry*, make a story dramatic and engaging for the spectators.

V. SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND DRAMATIC PERIPETEIA

The problem of caste is prevalent in India to this day, Brahmins, Baniyas still have the upper hierarchical position in the society, and in the novel, the caste system is spread across the plot with characters like Gayadhin and Vaidyaji. It hinders inter-caste marriage, even though Vaidyaji promotes inter-caste marriage, it is just a ruse to elevate his position by showing his pseudo secularism.

As Vasudha Dalmia argues in *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, the colonial period saw the consolidation of Hindu identity that was "emancipatory" in some ways but also "repressive," excluding "not only the Muslims, but also those on the periphery of the Hindu social order". This historical process of exclusion is reflected in Shukla's portrayal of caste dynamics in Shivpalganj, where traditional hierarchies adapt to modern political structures while maintaining their essential power relations.

The prevalence of what might be called social slavery in India because of caste discrimination remains devastating. Aristotle in his *Politics* justified slavery, arguing "to paraphrase "that "it is not just a necessity but a convenience to have slaves at our disposal as some, from their hour of birth, are designated their role in the society as a ruler or a ruled one." Prime examples of this are the characters Shanichar and Chotte Wrestler's father in the novel, who represent what postcolonial critics call the "subaltern" voices.

Individual's position in the hierarchical chain has supremacy over the links that are below it, a clear contrast between the highest political power and the novel's character "Vaidyaji" who is seen as an apex of the village. Raag Darbari does not have Raags per se, but they are present as a metaphorical theme which makes Vaidyaji the Pied Piper of Shivpalganj. His words hold the ultimatum and every being present at his adjacent radius has to follow whatever order he bestows upon them. The desperation of characters such as Ruppen Babu, Principal Sahib, Shanichar and even Vaidyaji himself to please people or be pleased is visible as these characters, throughout the novel, function as chess pieces.

Vaidyaji, an apex in the village who holds the agency over the concept of Peripeteia, as his words are absolute, he can change the fate of anyone who is standing at his adjacent radius. His megalomaniac and pseudo secular personality, which also relates to the concept of Hexis (disposition of virtue), defies what an ideal Indian man should be. India itself went through peripeteia but differently in various parts of the country, as the ratio of rich and poor, literacy and illiteracy, ideals and vices have a balance of 100 kg weight against one hundred feathers.

VI. RANGNATH AS REALIST OBSERVER AND TRAGIC PROTAGONIST

Indian authors in literature never shy away from showing the clashing of realities by putting uncommon characters in the same space. Rangnath, a man with an idyllic vision of rural India with ironclad ideals and an ardent believer of poetic justice who can be considered a true modern man, had to witness the transition from his modernity to the true face of rural beliefs and norms. Many characters like Principal Sahib, his own uncle Vaidyaji, the truck driver, police officers, his own cousins gradually broke Rangnath's bubble of modern reality and the author, Shrilal Shukla did not spare any mercy to show the pristine representation of this through his anecdotal narrative.

Raag Darbari is a satirical novel, not a tragedy, but satire as a genre can only be made after some sort of tragedy has taken place beforehand. In simplification, satire is an aftermath storytelling of a tragedy genre and thus, elements of Aristotelian tragedy can be identified in the text. All the characters in the novel are harmonized by the fact that they have something to achieve except Rangnath. Rangnath does hold the quality of a tragic hero as he came to the village because of his failing health with having an idyllic vision of rural life, just to have his preconceptions met with harsh reality.

From a realist perspective, Rangnath functions as what Georg Lukacs calls a "typical character" "an individual whose personal experience illuminates broader social conditions. His position as an educated urbanite encountering rural reality provides the narrative with a perspective that enables both social documentation and satirical critique. However, his characterization also follows classical dramatic patterns that align closely with Aristotelian tragic structure.

The provoking and explicit show of selfishness and smart aleck nature of people who hold their own agenda and will go to lengths just to have their desire fulfilled is set against a man with a good sense of justice and who aspires to "post-independence" individualistic ideals.

VII. NEHRUVIAN DISILLUSIONMENT AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Considering the grounded portrayal by Shrilal Shukla of a man in a rigid environment where the idyllic vision of a place becomes the source of hopelessness, a broader approach to understand its severity is by understanding Nehruvian era disintegration. India's post-colonial state began to revolutionize itself, as large-scale reform projects in every economic sector started and the goal of socio-economic equality and stability was promised. The

supposed map of ideal India was laid out, yet it gradually began to become clear to an average citizen of India that the actual beneficiaries of this reformation were the pre-established high-class people. The ratio itself was so unfair that the reality of the situation dominated the ideals which were supposed to become the balancing pillar of the ideological engine which was supposed to run India on equal grounds on both micro and macro level.

This disillusionment reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as the "failure of nationalist idealism" "the gap between independence rhetoric and lived reality that characterizes much postcolonial experience.

VIII. COMMON MAN'S REALISTIC PERCEPTION AND CATHARTIC EFFECTS

As Satendra Singh explained in his essay "The Urban Experience": human nature strives to be devoid of the dystopic way of living, yet the reality is never lenient as the topsy turvy life in an urbanized place will always be a slave of chaos. And so, the Indian novels in majority express a yearning for a person who wants the peaceful environment of the countryside or rural lifestyle, where a tired and frustrated urban dweller wants to escape to, away from all the unmerciful happenings of day-to-day life and corruption of uncontrolled urbanization.

In Raag Darbari, a well-educated person is deliberately put in a setting of rural society of India, a village named Shivpalganj which could be found in every part of our nation. Rangnath becomes our lens to participate in the happening life of Shivpalganj people or more precisely Ganjahe, and with him being a person having resemblance to our lives, we as observers can understand the chaos and unhinged uncivilized manners of the village residents. The helplessness of Rangnath's character to just stand there and see how things unfold is the same as ours "what we feel when any wrongdoing or mishaps, be it to our personal lives or to the lives around us, happens and we cannot do anything because that said phenomenon is out of our control.

The essence of Aristotelian tragedy is to dramatize the essence of reality by emphasizing it against another reality, which posits that a perception of what is real to one can be disrupted by putting it against another one's. This explains the concept of catharsis, which means emotional exit in simple terms. When realities or ideals clash, the audience either feels pity and empathizes with the characters, or they feel fear and regret for the same. We feel fear for Chotte Wrestler's father because of domestic abuse, we feel regret for Shanichar's dog-like condition and him not having his own identity, we feel pity for Rangnath, as him being an idealistic man who gets his idea of fair justice and

modernity crushed because of the corruption and vile humans he witnesses. We feel empathy for Langar, who is forced to bow down before the system. We feel disgust for the likes of Ruppan Babu and Badri Pehelwan and so on.

However, the cathartic effect in Raag Darbari operates through what might be called "satirical catharsis" "a modification of Aristotelian principles that substitutes bitter laughter for tragic pity while maintaining the structural function of emotional purification and resolution.

IX. LOSS OF HUMAN VALUES: FAMILIAL AND SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION

Treating a person as an equal was and still is a debatable concept in India even after post-independence modern-culture development. A society thrives when individuals living together in harmony, compassion, ethics, and discipline are combined to make an appropriate environment of coexistence. Raag Darbari questions this philosophy by again bringing uncommon people together to show the reality of the situation at hand.

Shanichar, a man with dog-like loyalty towards Vaidyaji, cannot identify himself as a man with principles and have his own individualism "he is considered a tool by the characters of the novel. Langar, a clever representation of a man who is at the mercy of the corrupt system, becomes an unheard voice of unheard people. The all-pervasive existence of Langar and treatment of his character identifies with the helplessness of a commoner who is forced to bow down before the system.

Familial dispute is a common theme in Indian literary texts which roots from the desire to have an agency over familial wealth or because of ideological egoism. The unflappable duality of people and dishonest communication galvanizes a certain member of a family to act against unfair means. This totalitarianism in families also leads to favoritism or nepotism.

In Raag Darbari, both Ruppan babu and Badri pehelwan are not qualified for anything and they both are self-proclaimed intellectuals, but because of their father having political connections within rural politics, Ruppan babu is the elected president of the student body of Chhangamal inter college but he desires the seat of village co-operative society. Because of his rebellious and problem-making behavior, Vaidyaji elects Badri pehelwan over his younger son. Shrilal Shukla evokes a basic human quality, which is sympathy "though immorality is etched in majority of characters in Raag Darbari, through Rangnath's lens, the reader is bound to sympathize with certain characteristics of a character but not the whole character.

Bhagwaticharan Varma in his *Bhoole Bisre Chitra* (1959) also attributes economic reasons for familial conflict and inevitable breakage of family. The transfer of Ruppan Babu from one father's faction to another is the basic symbolization of realization of the younger generation of the independence of which they are divested. Factionalism, which is present in the novel, states that to achieve something, one must take a side as Ruppan babu took the side of Khanna master to go against Principal sahib. Factionalism is also a by-product of differences in opinions and generational gap. Munshi Premchand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in Bengali also show the day-to-day problems of rural communities.

X. ANAGNORISIS AND THE ULTIMATE RECOGNITION

The ultimate revelation of Rangnath is that he alone cannot do anything against even a small group of people who are doing whatever they deem worthy. His resemblance to characters like Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet is clear for us to understand, as his reversal of fortune/acceptance that he also became a part of what he was trying to avoid explains the concept of Anagnorisis, which means a critical discovery which emerges at the climax after the mixed aftermath of denouement (unknotting of the plot) and peripeteia.

With actions of principal sahib to get Khanna master fired, Badri pehelwan becoming the president of village Union committee through nepotism, Shanichar, an incapable man becoming the head of Panchayat because of the political power of Vaidyaji, smart aleck like Ruppan babu being the president of Chhangamal inter college, all these things culminated in Rangnath giving up on his ideals and becoming another shell belonging to the corrupt system of India.

This moment represents classical anagnorisis "the painful recognition of a reality previously hidden from the protagonist. As postcolonial critics note, this recognition also reflects the broader postcolonial condition where individual agency encounters systemic corruption that transcends personal moral choice.

XI. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN: MARGINALIZED VOICES

In an interview, this question was asked to Shrilal Shukla: why is the village of Shivpalganj strangely devoid of women? The author replied: "Society in Raag Darbari is a male-dominated society, and politics is still male-dominated. And all the distortions of values that can attract satire or irony come from men in real life. For example,

defected values created by male society. Very few lady politicians indulge in floor-crossing. So male characters are much more attractive if your aim is to satirize distorted values in political life. I don't think a lady would have behaved like Vaidyaji if she'd overseen the college."

Bela, a character who acts as a surplus in the novel, which itself states the significance of women in male hegemony "through her, the author spoke on the matter of autonomy, and how natural talents are looked down upon. Her only support system was her father who becomes the epitomic presentation of the phrase "ignorance is bliss." He showed every quality of a pseudo-modern man who disguises his own patriarchal values as paternal concern. Her illiteracy, for which she never blamed her father, her falling victim to "male gazes" and her being considered an object at disposal, all of this combined made a rich-spirited woman a downtrodden "another" female who got silenced because she has the urge to speak.

This marginalization of women reflects what feminist postcolonial critics describe as the "double colonization" experienced by women in postcolonial contexts "oppressed both by colonial/postcolonial power structures and by patriarchal traditions.

XII. SYNTHESIS: POSTCOLONIAL SATIRICAL TRAGEDY

The text does not have Raags, but it does possess the soul of rhythm, and the text being satirical, it does tackle serious issues. Raag Darbari is a character-driven novel, and the plot of the novel is carried by the actions of the characters in it while the plot still holds the supremacy which Aristotle stated in Poetics. To paraphrase Aristotle: "characters reveal the moral purpose within the adequate length of the dramatic representation, as tragedy represents the people as they are now while plot being the soul of tragedy."

Aristotle's tragedy and Shrilal Shukla's satire have nihilism in common. Aristotle's analysis of Achilles and Oedipus are similar to Shukla's characters in Raag Darbari "both possess the quality of Hamartia. However, what Shukla creates is not pure Aristotelian tragedy but what can be termed "postcolonial satirical tragedy" "a hybrid form that maintains classical structural elements while adapting emotional and cultural content to postcolonial Indian conditions.

This hybrid approach represents what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" of cultural production, where different traditions meet and create new possibilities. As Bhabha argues, such hybrid forms are "almost the same, but not quite," creating both resemblance to classical forms and "menace" to their cultural authority.

The combination of Indian realist techniques with Aristotelian dramatic structure enables Raag Darbari to achieve multiple critical effects simultaneously. The realist framework reveals Shukla's techniques of social documentation and satirical critique, while the dramatic framework illuminates his methods of structural organization and emotional manipulation. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel's literary achievement and cultural significance.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The challenges that arose after India's independence to make India a country of pride and re-establish its identity welcomed unfathomable struggles within India's isolated system, which clearly demonstrated a country's journey towards a path of healing. Many authors such as R.K. Narayan, Munshi Premchand, Satyajit Ray, Arvind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, and Shrilal Shukla himself became critics of India's reality and progenitors of Indian Realism, as they chose to present the situation through a common man's vision. The different ideologies clash when even the slightest discursive statement provokes perplexed reaction, and the overtly sensitive personality of an Indian is heavily influenced by the convalescent condition of India which is always present in Indian literary texts.

Indian realism differs from western realism as it does not identify itself with ethnocentric values and is always regarding itself with the Indian legacies and the ground and humble reality of our culture and norms. As Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, Indian realist techniques evolved in response to specific cultural and political conditions rather than through direct transplantation of Western literary methods. The illustration of Indian society in Post-Independence Literature is complemented by poignancy and intimate themes which evoke empathy for the characters within the novel as we have seen in Raag Darbari.

Shrilal Shukla's ingenious and anecdotal narrative covered everything that India is going through "from corruption in politics to inner corruption of people, amputated democracy to iron-fist rule, the deep-rooted problem of nepotism and the ever-emerging fascism while subtly presenting the voices of the unheard and familial problems and loss of human values which get mixed in the severe political issues.

Raag Darbari is a prime example of how modern Indian literature adapted realism with the colors of Indianness in it, which possesses the essence of India's search for its lost identity. By simultaneously employing Aristotelian dramatic structure, Shukla creates what can be termed "postcolonial satirical tragedy" "a uniquely Indian literary

form that achieves both social critique and aesthetic coherence.

This dual approach “combining Indian realist social documentation with classical dramatic structure” represents a significant innovation in postcolonial literature. It demonstrates how postcolonial writers can creatively synthesize diverse cultural and literary traditions to create new forms suited to their specific historical and cultural conditions. Majority of Indian texts can be analyzed through this lens, as it provides a framework for understanding how postcolonial literature operates through processes of cultural translation and creative adaptation while maintaining both critical power and aesthetic sophistication.

The success of this hybrid approach suggests broader implications for understanding postcolonial literary innovation. Rather than simply adopting either Western or Indian literary traditions, Raag Darbari creates new possibilities through their creative synthesis, enabling the novel to function simultaneously as realistic social documentation and aesthetically sophisticated literary art. This achievement makes it a cornerstone work in the development of postcolonial satirical realism and a model for how traditional forms can be adapted to address contemporary postcolonial conditions.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adiga, A. (2008). *The white tiger*. Free Press.
- [2] Aristotle. (1987). *Poetics* (R. Janko, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company.
- [3] Aristotle. (2017). *Politics* (C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company.
- [4] Bandyopadhyay, B. (1968). *Pather panchali* (T. W. Clark & T. Mukherji, Trans.). Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1929)
- [5] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- [6] Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse*. Zed Books for the United Nations University.
- [7] Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- [8] Chatterjee, S. C. (2011). *Pather dabi*. Rupa Publications. (Original work published 1926)
- [9] Dalmia, V. (1996). *The nationalization of Hindu traditions: Bhāratendu Hariśhchandra and nineteenth-century Banaras*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Lukács, G. (1971). *The theory of the novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature* (A. Bostock, Trans.). The MIT Press. (Original work published 1916)
- [11] Mukherjee, M. (1985). *Realism and reality: The novel and society in India*. Oxford University Press.
- [12] Naipaul, V. S. (1977). *India: A wounded civilization*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [13] Narayan, R. K. (1958). *The guide*. The Viking Press.
- [14] Orsini, F. (2002). *The Hindi public sphere, 1920-1940: Language and literature in the age of nationalism*. Oxford University Press.
- [15] Premchand, M. (2007). *Godan*. Jaico Publishing House. (Original work published 1936)
- [16] Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things*. Random House.
- [17] Shukla, S. (2012). *Raag darbari* (G. Wright, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1968)
- [18] Singh, N. (1977). *Aadhunik sahitya ki pravrittiyan*. Lokbharti Prakashan.
- [19] Varma, B. (1959). *Bhoole bisre chitra*. Rajkamal Prakashan.



A Conversation Analysis Study on Identity Construction in Fraudulent Phone Call

Li Jiabin

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, China

2023024105@stu.sdn.edu.cn

Received: 19 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 17 Sep 2025; Accepted: 21 Sep 2025; Available online: 27 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study employs conversation analysis to examine two authentic cases of institutional identity fraud, specifically telecom fraud involving impersonation of police officers and customer service. By transcribing and analyzing the discourse between the fraudster and the victims, this study explores the practices of the fraudster's identity construction in the different phases of institutional identity fraud. We demonstrate that the fraudster achieves explicit identity construction by directly clarifying the identity, or by performing identity verification in the beginning part of the fraud call. During the fraudulent phone call, the fraudsters use authoritative discourse and comprehension-check questions for identity construction during the fraudulent process.

Keywords— Identity Construction, fraudulent phone call, conversation analysis



I. INTRODUCTION

As a new kind of contactless crime, the telecom fraud has become a public hazard, with criminals targeting massive numbers of innocent victims. It is a prominent criminal problem that currently affects social stability and the sense of security of the public (Ning Yea, 2019). On May 11, 2022, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) announced five types of high incidence telecom network fraud cases, which are click farming and rebate scams, false investment and finance management, false network loans, impersonating customer service, and impersonating public security organs. In fraud activities, criminals often pretend to be public security organs (Public Security Bureau, Procuratorate and Court) and other authorities to disguise their identity and cheat victims, so as to implement fraud. This type of fraud is called institutional identity fraud. It not only causes financial losses to the victims, but also affects people's confidence in the social governance system. Therefore, in-depth study of the characteristics and modes of institutional identity fraud has important theoretical and practical significance for preventing and combating fraud, maintaining social stability and restoring public trust. The purpose of this paper is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the conversation of institutional identity fraud, and to explore the linguistic and behavioral strategies adopted by fraudsters when they impersonate institutional identities to commit fraud, as well as the

discourse response and coping style of victims in this context. This paper uses the methodology of conversation analysis to transcribe and analyze real fraudulent phone calls, focusing on the practice of fraudsters' identity construction in different stages of institutional identity fraud process.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scientific research on telecom frauds has achieved a lot since the end of last century. On the one hand, the early research achievements on telecom fraud was mainly as follows, the introduction to telecom fraud (O'Brien & John T, 1998.), the categorization of telecom fraud (Collins & Michael, 1999), causes and consequences of telecom fraud (Hoath & Peter, 1998), suitability of relevant laws and regulations (Albrecht, 2008), and the technological development in banks and telecommunications companies for the prevention on telecom fraud (Cox, 1997). On the other hand, with the development of internet and online communication, the research is increasingly focused on the novelty of telecom fraud, such as the approaches to the computer-aided identification of telecom frauds (Subudhi, 2017), the improvement of relevant laws to promote the establishment of law enforcement system and administrative supervision system to prevent and combat

telecom fraud (Wu, 2015), the joint investigation and control mechanism among banks, judicial bodies and telecommunications companies (Wang, 2016), the mechanism of international cooperation on the prevention and punishment and the judicial assistance mechanism (Huang, 2016).

In addition, the linguistic research on telecom fraud focuses remarkably on email frauds. Chilwa(2009) has made a computer-mediated analysis of discourse structures and functions of emails, which reveals that the email writers apply discourse/pragmatic strategies such as socio-cultural greeting formulas, self-identification, reassurance/confidence building, narrativity and action prompting strategies to sustain the receivers' interest. Onyebadi and Park (2012) have examined the framing of email communications used in the frauds, with the findings indicating that the scammers used Realism as the main persuasive lexical characteristic in the messages.

Besides, the research on cellphone fraud discourse has also attracted attention. Yuan(2019) select the corpus collected in telecom fraud cases and apply theory of pragmatic presupposition to study the discourse patterns of criminal gangs or criminal individuals so as to provide important clues and evidences for investigation and determine the investigative strategies. Chen(2020) discuss the threat language of fraudsters in Chinese cellphone fraud conversations from the perspective of discourse psychology. Fan (2024) has made a pragmatic analysis and structured description of the fraud telephone, and built a structured model of the fraud telephone, describing the conversation structure, module function, implementation strategy, module content and other characteristics. Iloanusi (2022) analyzes scam calls in Nigeria, focusing on the contextual cues used by fraudsters and the responses of the recipients, and examines ten scam call audio clips using CA. Using conversation analysis to study telecom fraud conversation provides detailed insights into the linguistic strategies, power dynamics, and contextual interactions employed by fraudsters to manipulate victims. Therefore, this paper uses a conversation analysis approach to analyze.

Identity construction theory is an important framework for understanding how individuals display and construct their identities through language and behavior in social interactions. It has a wide range of applications in the fields of sociology, linguistics and psychology. In linguistics, identity construction theory is used to analyze how language constructs identity in everyday communication. Holmes (2000) showed that identity features such as gender, occupation and cultural background are displayed and constructed in language use. Identity construction theory demonstrates and constructs

personal identity through language and interactional behaviors, and the method of conversation analysis plays an important role in revealing the processes and mechanisms of identity construction in interaction. Recent studies on identity construction using Conversation Analysis highlight its application in various contexts such as doctor-patient communication, educational settings, family interactions, and legal interviews. These studies reveal that identity is dynamically constructed through language and discursive strategies, showing fluidity in roles and relationships across different interactional settings. The findings underscore the importance of conversational techniques in establishing and negotiating identities in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

Research on identity construction in telephone fraud focuses on how fraudsters construct their false identities through linguistic and interactional strategies in order to deceive and manipulate victims. Chen(2020) delves into the threatening language used in Chinese cellphone fraud, highlighting how fraudsters create false identities through strategic information sharing and turn-taking.

Based on previous studies, most research subjects have been relatively broad, with few analyses focusing on specific types of fraud. Therefore, this paper will select institutional identity fraud, which has been increasingly prevalent in recent years, as the corpus for analysis. The study aims to examine the practices used by these fraudsters to construct their identities.

III. DATA AND METHOD

3.1 Method: Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is a sociological research method proposed and developed in the 1960s by Harvey Sacks and his colleagues Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. This method uses audio or video recordings of people's real interactions as its only means of collecting observational material, and makes detailed textual and symbolic transcriptions of natural conversations, including pauses, trailing off, overlapping, and so on, in order to reproduce as much detail as possible of the natural conversations in written form. On this basis, the methods by which people perform different social behaviors are explained, and the laws and order of interactive communication are discovered. Turn-taking, turn-design, repair, sequence, and preference structure are some of the more mature and systematic conversational mechanisms discovered by conversational analysis research.(Wu & Liu, 2018)

In CA, "practice" refers to the specific linguistic and interactional behaviors used by participants during conversations. These behaviors, often learned through repetition and socialization, include types such as turn-

taking management, repair mechanisms, sequence organization, and identity construction. Studying these practices helps understand the mechanics of interaction, reveals social and cultural norms, and can be applied in fields like education, healthcare, and law to improve communication strategies.

3.2 Data

The data for this study consist of 10 mins transcribed recordings collected from Internet real institutional identity fraud cases. We employed a conversation analytic methodology (Sacks et al., 1974) for the current research. Conducting a study within a CA framework requires making recordings in a naturally occurring setting, transcribing the recorded data to identify interactional patterns and building a collection of recurring patterns of interaction based on microanalysis of the data. Transcriptions were done following the conventions developed by Jefferson (2004) (see Appendix).

IV. ANALYSIS

Although the fraudster constructs a series of institutional identities such as "police" and "customer service", these identities are constructed and utilized differently at different times (e.g., at the beginning, middle, or end of the phone call) during the telecom fraud process. In the interaction with the fraudster, the defrauded person defines the identity of the other party according to the specific context. In this paper, we use CA to study the process of constructing the suspect's identity in cases of institutional identity fraud, focusing on the discursive interactions between the defrauder and the defrauded, as well as how the defrauder manifests the objectivity of his or her institutional identity in different ways and under different timing positions.

4.1 Data

At the beginning of a telephone scam, the scammer uses the structural features of the identification-recognition sequence (Schegloff, 1986) in the beginning of the telephone call to directly construct his or her own explicit institutional identity. The practices for the construction of the fraudster's institutional identity at this point include: informing the other party of their institutional name, informing the other party of their work number or name.

Excerpt 1:

- 1 ((The phone rings, and the call is answered))
 2 SCA : 啊:你 把 这 手机 免提 关掉
 a: ni ba zhe shouji mianti guandiao
 you let this phone speakerphone turn off
 ah: Turn your phone's speakerphone off

- 3 啊:我们 这个 案件 还在 (0.3) 还在 这个 侦办 期间
 a: women zhege anjian haizai haizai zhege zhenban qijian
 Our this case still still this investigation period
 ah: Our this case is still (0.3) is still during this investigation period
 4 啊:你 不能 把 我们 这个 案件 的 部分 啊
 a: ni buneng ba women zhege anjian de bufen a
 you cannot let our this case NOM part PRT
 ah: You cannot disclose parts of our case
 5 告知 这个 无关 的 第三者 (0.2) 啊:
 gaozhi zhege wuguan de disanzhe a
 inform this unrelated NOM third party PRT
 to unrelated third parties (0.2) ah:

At the beginning of the call, the fraudster makes an immediate request: at line 2, he asks the recipient to turn his cell phone off speakerphone, which is a tactic to control the conversation environment. Through this requirement, fraudster attempt to establish a sense of authority and control, making the victims feel compelled to follow instructions. The fraudster then emphasized that the case is under investigation: Line 3 mentioned that the case is currently under investigation, in order to increase the urgency and importance of the dialogue. This statement will make the victim think that the matter is serious, thereby increasing their awareness of fraudulent discourse. Subsequently, the fraudster explicitly states that the case must not be communicated to an unrelated third party in Line 5, which further enhances the secrecy and formality of the conversation and gives the recipient a sense of sensitivity and confidentiality, which leads to a greater level of trust in the identity of the fraudster.

Excerpt 2:

- 35 SCA : 好, 我 先 自我 介绍 一下,
 hao, wo xian ziwo jieshao yixia,
 okay I first myself introduce once
 Okay, let me introduce myself first,
 36 我 是 这个(.) 亳州 公安局 啊(.)
 wo shi zhege Bozhou Gong'anju a
 I am this Bozhou Public Security Bureau PRT
 I am this (.) Bozhou Public Security Bureau ah (.)
 37 这个 刑侦 支队 的 民警,
 zhege xingzhen zhidui de minjing,
 this Criminal Investigation detachment NOM policeman,
 this Criminal Investigation Brigade's police officer,
 38 啊(.)我 姓 陈(0.2)耳 东 陈(.) 陈 卫民(.)
 a wo xing Chen er dong Chen Chen Weimin
 a I surname Chen ear east Chen Chen Weimin
 Ah (.) my surname is Chen (0.2) ear-east Chen (.) Chen Weimin
 (.)

39 警民编号<031289>听到吗?
jingmin bianhao ling san yi er ba jiu tingdao ma?
police number zero three one two eight nine hear PRT?
police code <zero three one two eight nine> do you hear me?

In excerpt 2, the fraudster first clarifies his identity in line 36-37: the fraudster clearly identifies himself as a police officer from the Criminal Investigation Detachment of the Bozhou Public Security Bureau, providing specific information about his workshop and position. This detailed self-introduction helps to enhance the authenticity and credibility of the identity. This stage plays an important role in the construction of their identity. It can be noted that the fraudster provides specific name and police number (Chen Weimin, police number 031289) in line 38-39, which further convinced the victims of their identity. This specific information will make the victim feel the formality and authority of the fraudster's identity. At the end, the fraudster also asks "Did you hear it?" after the introduction, which makes the victim feel the importance and seriousness of the conversation, further enhancing the authenticity of their identity.

Excerpt 3:

03 FRA : 嗯:就是说 这边 呢 帮 您 核实 一下您 的这个 身份信息(.)

en Jiushishuo zhebian ne bang nin heshi yixia nin de zhege shenfen xinxi
en namely here PRT help you verify once you NOM this identity info
Um: That is to say, on our end, we are helping you verify your this identity information (.)

04 您 的 身份证 号 是 不是 xxx?
nin de shenfenzheng hao shi bushi xxx?
you NOM identity card number right not xxx?
Is your ID number xxx?

05 GIR : ↑多少?
duoshao?
What
↑ What (did you say)?

06 FRA : 您 的 证件 号 是 不是 xxx?
nin de zhengjian hao shi bushi xxx?
you NOM certificate number right not xxx
Is your ID number xxx?

07 GIR : 你 怎么 知道 我的 身份证 号?
ni zenme zhidao wode shenfenzheng hao?
you what know my ID card number?
How do you know my ID number?

08 FRA : 是 这样 的(.) 我 是这边(.) 支付宝 的 工作人员(.)
shi zheyang de Wo shi zhebian Zhifubao de gongzuoren
right this way NOM I am here Alipay NOM staff
Yes (.) I am here (.) Alipay staff (.)

09 所以 呢(.) 是 能 看见 您的 个人 信息 的(.)
suoyi ne shi neng kanjian ninde geren xinxi de
so PRT right can see your personal information NOM
So therefore (.) [I] can see your personal information (.)

10 就是说(.) 目前 您的 支付宝 账号(.)
jiushishuo (.) muqian ninde Zhifubao zhanghao
namely currently your Alipay account
That is to say (.) your currently Alipay account (.)

11 是 用 您的 身份证 实名 认证 绑定过 的吗?
shi yong ninde shenfenzheng shiming renzheng bangdingguo de ma?
right use your ID card real-name identification bound NOM PRT?
Was it real-name verified and bound using your ID card?

12 目前属于违规的学生账户(0.2)然后呢(.)
muqian shuyu weigui de xuesheng zhanghu ranhou ne
currently belong to violation NOM student account then PRT
Currently classified as a non compliant student account (0.2),and(.)

13 这边今天就给您致电(.)
zhebian jintian jiugei nin zhidian
here today give you call
I'll call you here today (.)

14 就是需要耽误您几分钟(.)
jiushi xuyao danwu nin jifenzhong
namely need delay you several minutes
It will take you a few minutes (.)

15 把您对接到支付宝后面的系统里面。
ba nin duijiedao Zhifubao houmian de xitong limian.
let you connect Alipay behind NOM system inside
to connect you to the system behind Alipay.

In excerpt 3, an excerpt of a fraudulent phone call impersonating Alipay customer service, the fraudster does not identify himself at the beginning of the call, but first verified his identity information in line 06. The fraudster confirmed the ID card number of the fraudster, which build his sense of authority and credibility by directly calling his personal information, so that the fraudster believes that the other party does has the right to view his private information, and further enhancing his sense of control over the fraudster. The fraudster will reduce suspicion and increase trust because the fraudster have access to their personal information. In line 08, the fraudster clearly states that he is a "staff member of Alipay", establishing his institutional identity through this direct self declaration. This identity claim not only increases the formality of the conversation, but also enhances the trust of the victim in their identity.

At this stage the fraudster informs the other party of his or her institutional identity as part of a direct construction of identity, including using the practice of "appositive

reference” (Chu Zexiang, 1998) to inform the other party of their identity and to “introduce himself” in a position other than at the beginning of the call. Appositive reference is a rhetorical structure in which one word or phrase follows or replaces another to provide further description or explanation. This is often used to clarify the reference, add information or clarify the object being referred to. In institutional identity fraud, a fraudster may use appositive reference to emphasize his or her assumed identity or to add credibility to the discourse. For example, in Excerpt 3, line 08, “Yes. I’m here, Alipay staff”, “wo shi zhe bian(I am here)” and “Alipay staff” are in appositive reference. “wo shi zhe bian(I am here)” is an ambiguous pronoun, but the subsequent “Alipay staff” adds to it explicitly, providing specific identity information. Through this structure, the discourse becomes more concrete and credible, further reinforcing the identity constructed by the scammer. These practice is also in Excerpt 2, line 36, Excerpt 4, line 18, and Excerpt 6, line 12.

4.2 Identity construction during fraud process

If the entire fraudulent activity is regarded as a more complex and complete activity, then remove the beginning of the fraudulent phone call and the end of the fraudulent phone call, the middle part of what we call the fraud process. When victims question the fraudsters of current fraudulent activities, fraudsters also use identity construction to eliminate their doubts and carry out their own fraudulent activities. The practices for constructing institutional identities include: the fraudster’s use of authoritative discourse and comprehension-check questions for identity construction.

4.2.1 Authoritative discourse

Authoritative discourse is one of the common practices used by fraudsters to commit institutional identity fraud. This tactic involves the use of formal language, references to authoritative institutions or policies, and the demonstration of mastery of the recipient’s personal information. These authoritative discourses serve the following purposes: through the use of authoritative discourse, the fraudster attempts to quickly establish the recipient’s trust in his or her identity; the use of authoritative discourse reduces the recipient’s suspicion by making the conversation seem more formal and credible; and through the demonstration of authority and professionalism, the fraudster is better able to manipulate the course of the conversation and get the recipient to cooperate with his or her demands.

Excerpt 4:

18 SCA : <我们这个>亳州 公安局 今天 打电话 给你 (0.2)

- women zhege bozhou gong'anju jintian dadianhua geini
our this bozhou Public Security Bureau today call you
<our>The bozhou Public Security Bureau is calling you today (0.2)
- 19 那 最 主要 的 目的
na zui zhuyao de mudi
PRT most main NOM goal
The main purpose
- 20 啊 (.) 也 没有 说 你 有 犯罪 (.)
a ye meiyou shuo ni you fanzui
PRT also not say you have commit a crime
Ah (...). And it doesn't say you committed a crime (.)
- 21 但是 我们 有接到 这个 武汉 公安局 这边
danshi women youjiedao zhege Wuhan Gong'anju zhebian
but we receive this Wuhan bureau of public security here
But we have received an urgent investigation document
- 22 传真过来 一份 紧急 协查 文件
chuanzhengulai yifen jinji xiecha wenjian
fax a portion urgent assistance in investigation file
faxed by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau
- 23 那 这份 文件 (0.3) 啊:
na zhefen wenjian a
PRT this document PRT
Then this document (0.3) ah:
- 24 是 要求 我们 要 通知到 你>这个<王丽萍本人啊
Shi yaoqiu women yao tongzhidao ni zhege Wang Liping benren a
PRT need we demand inform you this Wang Liping oneself PRT
is requiring us to notify you >this< Wang Liping yourself ah
- 25 带上 身份证 到 我们 公安局 过来 签收 的
daishang shenfenzheng dao women gong'anju guolai qianshou de
bring ID card arrive our bureau of public security come sign NOM
To bring your ID card to our Public Security Bureau to come and receive it
Excerpt 5:
- 39 SCA : 根据 武汉 公安局 传真 过来 的
genju Wuhan Gong'anju chuanzhen guolai de
according to Wuhan bureau of public security fax come NOM
According to the document sent by fax
- 40 这份 文件 上面 显示(0.3)
zhefen wenjian shangmian xianshi
this document above show
from Wuhan Public Security Bureau, it shows (0.3)
- 41 这个 武汉 公安局 在 这个 最近(0.3)
zhege Wuhan Gong'anju zai zhege zuijin
this Wuhan bureau of public security in this recently
Recently, Wuhan Public Security Bureau (0.3)
- 42 啊:他们是 有 抓获 一名 这个 洗黑钱 的 犯罪 分子
a tamen shi you zhuhuo yiming zhege xiheiqian de fanzui fenzi

a they PRT have arrest one PRTmoney laundering NOM commit member
Ah: they have arrested one [of] this money laundering criminal

- 43 啊:他叫这个刘杰(.)文刀刘(.)杰出的杰(.)
 a ta jiao zhege Liu Jie wen dao liu jie chu de jie
 a he call this Liu Jie wen dao liu jie chu de jie
 Ah: he is called this Liu Jie (.) Liu (.) Jie (.)
- 44 这个刘杰(0.2)啊(.)他是一名男性(.)45岁
 zhege liu jie a ta shi yiming nanxing sishiwu sui
 This liu jie PRT he is one man forty-five years old
 Liu Jie (0.2) ah (.) He is a male (.) 45 years old

Excerpt 6:

- 12 FRA : 额::因为 是 这样的(.)国家三一五会议结束以后呢(0.2)
E Yinwei shi zheyangde Guojia SanYiWu huiyi jieshu yihou ne
PRT because is this country SanYiWu conference finish after PRT
Uh:: Because it's like this(.) After the National 3-15 Conference ended (0.2)
- 13 中国 领导 现(.)会联合 五部委
 Zhongguo lingdao xian huilianhe wubuwei
 China leader present unite five ministries
 Chinese leaders now (.) will jointly five ministries and commissions
- 14 发布了 十个 公告 嘛(.)
 fabule shige gonggao ma
 release ten announcement PRT(.)
 issued ten announcements. (.)
- 15 然后是关于进一步大学生互联网消费贷款
 ranhou shi guanyu jinyibu daxuesheng hulianwang xiaofei daikuan
 then is about further undergraduate internet consume loan
 Then is regarding further university students internet consumer loan
- 16 监督管理工作的通知。
 jiandu guanli gongzuo de tongzhi.
 supervise mange work NOM notice
 supervision management work notice.

The above excerpt is the stage of the fraudster's "case background description" during the fraud process. In Excerpt 4 in lines 20-21 fraudster mentioned "But we have received an urgent investigation document faxed by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau", and in Excerpt 5 in line 39-40 "According to the document sent by fax from Wuhan Public Security Bureau, it shows", authoritative documents are cited to increase the authority and authenticity of the discourse. The victims think this information is officially endorsed, thus reducing suspicion. Then more detailed information about the criminal (name, gender, age) in Excerpt 5 lines 42-43 are provided. These specific details make the case appear real and credible. By describing the details of the fraudster, the fraudster is reinforcing his mastery of the case and further enhancing the credibility of his police identity. In addition to the description of the time, line 40 in Excerpt 5 "recently" is

mentioned. By providing a specific timeline, the fraudster is increasing the immediacy and urgency of the case, and making the fraudster feel the reality and importance of the case.

In impersonating Alipay customer service fraud, Excerpt 6, the fraudster claims that the victim's account belongs to a "non-compliant student account" and explains that this is due to a change in national policy. By citing official information such as the "Two Sessions" and the "Announcement issued by five national institutions", the fraudster further enhances the authority and credibility of his words, leading the victim to believe that this is an official and legitimate act.

4.2.2 Comprehension-check questions

The phrases "Is it clear?" and "Do you understand?" in institutional identity fraud can be collectively referred to as "comprehension-check questions". These types of questions can be used by the fraudster to confirm the level of understanding of the recipient, but they also reflect his or her manipulative role in the conversation. These are also another practices of the fraudster in the process of the fraud..

Excerpt 7:

- 32 SCA : [你这边]待会注意听(0.2)警官问到你的问题
 ni zhebian daihui zhuyi ting jingguan wendao ni de wenti
 You here later take care hear police ask you NOM question
 [you] later pay attention to listening (0.2) to the questions the police officer asks you
- 33 你这边做到这个(0.2)实话实说就可以(.)清楚吗?
 ni zhebian zuodao zhege shihuaishishuo jiukeyi qingchu ma?
 you here achieve this speak frankly ok clear PRT
 You can (0.2) speak frankly (.) Clear?
 ...

- 69 SCA : 我知道(0.2)你要清楚我们公安局
 wo zhidao ni yao qingchu women gong'anju
 I know you should understand our bureau of public security
 I know (0.2) you need to understand [that] our Public Security Bureau
- 70 要chao 要找你(0.2)是很简单的(.)清楚吗?
 yaochao yaozhao ni shi hen jianan de qingchu ma?
 find find you is very easy NOM clear PRT
 Want to want to find you (0.2) is very simple (.) Clear?

Excerpt 8:

- 19 FRA : 额:女士是这样的(.)
 e nvshi shi zheyang de
 PRT madam is this NOM
 Uh: Madam, it's like this (.)
- 20 在今年 各 大 平台 像往常一样
 zaijinnian ge da pingtai xiangwangchangyiyang

- this year every major platform as usual
This year, major platforms, same as usual,
- 21 给 大学生 贷 那个 房贷 嘛(.)
gei daxuesheng dai nage fangdai ma
pay college students loan that housing loan PRT
provide loans and housing loans to college students (.)
- 22 然后 很多 大学生 因为 就是 还不上 贷款(.)
ranhou henduo daxuesheng yinwei jiushi huanbushang daikuan
then many college students because namely couldn't repay loans
And many college students choose to jump off buildings (.)
- 23 然后 选择 跳 楼 的 视频(0.2)
ranhou xuanze tiao lou de shipin
then choose jump off buildings NOM video
because they just can't repay their loans(0.2)
- 24 频频 发生(.)所以 国家 就下来 一个 这样 的政策(.)
pinpin fasheng suoyi guojia jiuxialai yige zheyang de zhengce
frequently occur so state introduce one this NOM policy
Such incidents occurred frequently(.) so the state introduced this policy.(.)
- 25 就是说 您的 账户 是属于 违规 的 账户(.)明白 吗?
Jiushishuo ninde zhanghu shishuyu weigui de zhanghu mingbai ma?
Namely your account belong to violation NOM account understand PRT
That is to say, your account is a non-compliant account (.) Understand?

The fraudster repeatedly requests the victim's cooperation and emphasized the need for a private conversation, which further exploits the authoritative identity to make the victim feel compelled to comply. Comprehension-check questions such as "Is it clear?" and "Do you understand?" are used several times in lines 33 and 70 of Excerpt 7 and in line 24 of Excerpt 8. "Is it clear?" appears nine times in the police impersonation conversation. The multiple use of comprehension-check questions plays an important role in the identity construction of the police impersonator. The question was used to confirm that the victim understood the information provided by the fraudster. This practice not only ensures that the recipient pays attention to important information, but also makes the recipient feel that he or she needs to understand and comply with everything the fraudster says. By constantly confirming, the fraudster is able to ensure that the recipient does not miss any important information, thus increasing the recipient's compliance.

The sentence establishes a sense of authority. This formula is strongly authoritative and is usually used between superiors and subordinates or in official conversations to show a commanding and confirming tone. Through this expression, the fraudster tries to imitate the authoritative tone of a police officer, creating a strong impression of

authority on the part of the victim. Secondly, it reinforces the sense of command. The repetition of "Is it clear?" reinforces the sense of obedience, making the victim feel obliged to follow instructions, thus reducing the likelihood of resistance and suspicion. It also creates a tense atmosphere, making the victim feel that the matter is important and urgent, and thus inclined to cooperate with the fraudster's demands, reinforcing the sense of obedience. The use of comprehension-check questions helps the fraudster to control the pace of the conversation, ensuring that every aspect is under his control. This framing of the interaction allows the victim to be guided in a specific direction, reducing the amount of time spent thinking and the likelihood of suspicion. Through constant validation, the fraudster is able to progressively drill down to more detailed questions and obtain progressively more information.

V. CONCLUSION

This study uses CA to examine the practices used by fraudsters for identity construction in institutional identity fraud. The result shows that at the beginning of the fraudulent phone call, the fraudster achieves explicit identity construction by informing the other party of his or her organization's name and a detailed self-introduction to make his or her identity clear, or by using already-stolen identity information of the defrauded person to verify his or her identity. During fraudulent phone calls, fraudsters use authoritative discourse, such as the use of formal language, references to authoritative organizations or policies, and comprehension-check questions, such as "Is it clear?" and "Do you understand?" to construct identities during the fraudulent process. Overall, this study enriches the understanding of institutional identity fraud in fraudulent conversations and provides ideas for fighting telecom and online fraud. Subsequent research will focus on how fraudsters' constructed institutional identities are recognized, and then propose practical anti-fraud communication strategies at the verbal communication level.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ye, N. , Cheng, L. , & Zhao, Y. . (2019). Identity construction of suspects in telecom and internet fraud discourse: from a sociosemiotic perspective. *Social Semiotics*, 29(3), 319-335.
- [2] O'Brien, J. T. (1998). Telecommunications fraud: opportunities for techno-criminals. *FBI L. Enforcement Bull.*, 67, 20 F. Shu, Construction of a structured model for scam calls based on pragmatic analysis, *Journal of People's Police University of China*, (04), 2024, 5-12.

- [3] Collins, M. (1999). Telecommunications crime—Part 1. *Computers & Security*, 18(7), 577-586.
- [4] Hoath, P. (1998). Telecoms fraud, the gory details. *Computer Fraud & Security*, 1998(1), 10-14.
- [5] Albrecht, W. S., Albrecht, C., & Albrecht, C. C. (2008). Current trends in fraud and its detection. *Information Security Journal: a global perspective*, 17(1), 2-12.
- [6] Cox, K. C., Eick, S. G., Wills, G. J., & Brachman, R. J. (1997). Brief application description; visual data mining: Recognizing telephone calling fraud. *Data mining and knowledge discovery*, 1, 225-231.
- [7] Subudhi, S., & Panigrahi, S. (2017). Use of Possibilistic fuzzy C-means clustering for telecom fraud detection. In *Computational Intelligence in Data Mining: Proceedings of the International Conference on CIDM*, 10-11 December 2016 (pp. 633-641). Springer Singapore.
- [8] C. P. Wu, The development, changes, and prevention of telecom fraud under the 'Internet+' background, *Journal of People's Public Security University of China (Social Sciences Edition)*, (06), 2015, 17-21
- [9] X. W. Wang, The transformation of ideas and innovation of mechanisms in combating telecom fraud crimes, *People's Tribune*, (02), 2016, 42-44.
- [10] X. L. Huang & Z. C. Wang, On international cooperation in the punishment and prevention of telecom fraud crimes: Background of the big data era, *Guizhou Social Sciences*, (02), 2016, 164-168.
- [11] Chiluwu, I. (2009). The discourse of digital deceptions and '419' emails. *Discourse studies*, 11(6), 635-660.
- [12] Onyebadi, U., & Park, J. (2012). 'I' m Sister Maria. Please help me' : A lexical study of 4-1-9 international advance fee fraud email communications. *International Communication Gazette*, 74(2), 181-199.
- [13] Y. Yuan, A study on discourse patterns and verbal strategies in telecom fraud cases, *Journal of Guizhou Police Officer Vocational College*, (04), 2019, 64-68.
- [14] Chen, J. (2021). "You are in trouble!" : A discursive psychological analysis of threatening language in Chinese cellphone fraud interactions. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique*, 34, 1065-1092
- [15] F. Shu, Construction of a structured model for scam calls based on pragmatic analysis, *Journal of People's Police University of China*, (04), 2024, 5-12.
- [16] Ik-Iloanusi, A. I., & Chiemezie, O. A. (2023). Conversational Analysis of Scam Calls in Nigeria. *Awka Journal Of Linguistics And Languages*, 2.
- [17] Holmes, J. (2000). Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace. *Discourse studies*, 2(2), 159-185.
- [18] Y. X. Wu & S. Liu, The sequential structure of request acts in natural Chinese conversation, *Journal of Shanxi University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (03), 2018, 69-76.
- [19] Schegloff, E. A. (1986). The routine as achievement. *Human studies*, 9(2), 111-151.

APPENDIX

Transcription conventions

(1.5)	Time gap in tenths of a second
(.)	Pause in talk of less than two-tenths of a second (micro pause)
[]	Marks the point of the onset and end of overlapping talk
=	'Latching' between utterances, either by different speakers or between units produced by the same speaker
?	Rising intonation – not necessarily a question
.	Falling or final intonation – not necessarily the end of a sentence
,	'Continuing' intonation – not necessarily a clause boundary
::	Stretching of the sound just preceding; the more colons, the longer the stretching
↑↓	Marked shift into higher or lower pitch
<u>word</u>	Stress or emphasis of underlined item; the longer the underlining, the greater the emphasis
WORD	Markedly louder volume than surrounding talk
° °	Talk between the degree signs is markedly softer or quieter than surrounding talk
<word>	Slower speech rate than surrounding talk
>word<	Faster speech rate than surrounding talk
-	Cut-off or self-interruption of the prior word or sound; often done with a glottal or dental stop
(())	Transcriber's comments on proceeding talk (e.g. description of non-verbal activities)
(word)	Transcriber's best guess of an unclear fragment
(xxx)	Inaudible talk



The Impact of the Renaissance on the Development of Literature Period (14TH&17TH)

Purvie Singh¹, Ashok Singh Rao²

¹MA student of English Literature, Mody University of Science and Technology, Laxmangarh, Sikar, India

²Professor Mody University of Science and Technology, Laxmangarh, Sikar, India
com

Received: 22 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 20 Sep 2025; Accepted: 24 Sep 2025; Available online: 27 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— The Renaissance, spanning the 14th to 17th centuries, marked a profound cultural and intellectual transformation in Europe that continues to shape global literary traditions. This study examines the impact of Renaissance humanism on the development of literature by analyzing its influence on poetry, prose, and drama, as well as its intersections with visual culture and global exchange. Through a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach informed by cultural studies and new historicism, the paper situates Renaissance literature within its socio-political and artistic contexts, highlighting the role of patronage, artistic experimentation, and colonial encounters. The findings reveal that the Renaissance was not a homogeneous “rebirth” but a contested and dynamic process, simultaneously preserving classical ideals and creating new forms of literary modernity. This study contributes to international scholarship by reframing the Renaissance as both a European and a global phenomenon, whose legacy endures in modern literary and cultural thought.



Keywords— Renaissance, Humanism, English Literature, Classical Revival, Early Modern Europe, Cultural Identity, Literary Innovation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance, meaning “rebirth,” was one of the most significant intellectual and artistic movements in European history. Originating in Italy during the 14th century and spreading across Europe until the 17th century, it marked a cultural departure from the medieval worldview and introduced new ways of thinking about art, politics, philosophy, and literature. Renaissance humanism, a revival of Greco-Roman learning, emphasized the dignity of man, secular inquiry, and individual creativity.

Writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Erasmus, and Shakespeare redefined the scope of literature, while artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Botticelli transformed visual culture. The invention of the printing press accelerated the dissemination of texts, broadening access to knowledge and reshaping the relationship between authors and readers.

Yet, scholarship often privileges the aesthetic achievements

of the Renaissance while overlooking its contradictions and global entanglements. This paper addresses that gap by examining how Renaissance humanism reshaped literature across genres—poetry, drama, and prose—while situating these developments within their broader cultural, political, and global contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early accounts such as Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) celebrated the Renaissance as the dawn of modern individuality and secular culture. Later scholars including Paul Oskar Kristeller emphasized continuity with medieval traditions, while Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) introduced New Historicism, framing Renaissance literature within networks of power and ideology.

Humanism has been a central theme, with Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine highlighting its practical role in education

and politics. In literature, humanism inspired Petrarch's sonnets, Montaigne's essays, and Shakespeare's plays, each exploring human experience in new ways.

Art history scholarship, such as Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), demonstrated how cultural values shaped artistic production, while studies of patronage (Kent, 2000) revealed the role of wealthy elites like the Medici family.

More recent perspectives emphasize the global Renaissance. Jerry Brotton (*The Renaissance Bazaar*, 2002) argues that cross-cultural exchanges with the Ottoman Empire, Asia, and the Americas shaped European thought. Ania Loomba and Jyotsna Singh introduced postcolonial readings, revealing how Renaissance literature was implicated in colonial expansion and racial ideologies. This scholarship suggests that while the Renaissance is often seen as a European "rebirth," it was equally a global moment of exchange and contestation.

Humanism as Intellectual Context

Renaissance humanism revived classical models while reorienting literature towards secular and individual concerns. Thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola emphasized human potential and free will, while Erasmus blended Christian ethics with classical wisdom. This intellectual framework encouraged literary experimentation, vernacular writing, and the exploration of human psychology.

Humanism also shifted literature from collective religious allegory to personal introspection and secular themes. Texts became spaces of inquiry into morality, politics, and identity, laying the foundations of modern literary expression.

Renaissance Poetry: Individuality and Classical Influence

Renaissance poetry embodied the spirit of humanism through form, style, and subject matter. The sonnet, perfected by Petrarch, became central to Renaissance poetics. In England, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard introduced it, while Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* and Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrated its versatility. Themes of love, beauty, time, and mortality reflected humanist concerns with individuality and inner life. Metaphors, classical

allusions, and symbolic language allowed poets to explore desire and personal identity. Epic poetry, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, fused Christian and classical traditions, dramatizing the tensions between faith and reason.

Poetry thus became a medium of both artistic refinement and philosophical inquiry, bridging private emotions and

public ideals.

Renaissance Drama: Theatre, Psychology, and Society

Drama was perhaps the most transformative genre of the Renaissance. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* epitomized the humanist thirst for knowledge and the dangers of ambition. William Shakespeare's tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*) examined human psychology and moral conflict with unprecedented depth, while his comedies and histories engaged with questions of power, identity, and social order.

Theatre functioned as a communal cultural space. The Globe Theatre and similar venues democratized access to performance, attracting audiences from across social classes. This mirrored the participatory energy of humanism, turning literature into a shared civic experience. Ben Jonson's satirical plays, meanwhile, exposed the follies of society, connecting Renaissance drama with contemporary politics and everyday life.

Renaissance Prose: Politics, Philosophy and Science

Prose writing embodied the intellectual boldness of the Renaissance. Montaigne's *Essays* pioneered a new genre of introspection and skepticism. Machiavelli's *The Prince* redefined political theory, advocating pragmatic governance over medieval ideals of divine right. Francis Bacon's works advanced empirical reasoning, laying the groundwork for the scientific method. These prose forms shifted literature toward secular analysis, blending personal reflection with political and philosophical inquiry. They reflected the Renaissance conviction that literature was central to understanding and shaping human experience.

Art, Patronage and Cultural Identity

Renaissance literature cannot be separated from its artistic and cultural environment. Visual culture, from Michelangelo's *David* to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, embodied humanist ideals of beauty, proportion, and naturalism. Nudity in art symbolized purity, divinity, and human dignity, marking a departure from medieval stylization.

Patronage was central: the Medici family in Florence funded artists and writers, ensuring that creativity flourished under networks of wealth and power. Similarly, English monarchs supported theatre and literature, shaping cultural production through institutional frameworks.

Art and literature were thus intertwined, reinforcing cultural identity and civic pride while negotiating religious and political tensions.

Global and Postcolonial Dimensions

Although often portrayed as a European movement, the Renaissance was shaped by global exchanges. Contact with

the Ottoman Empire, trade with Asia, and the colonization of the Americas expanded horizons and introduced new cultural encounters. These interactions were reflected in literature, where themes of exploration, conquest, and racial difference emerged. Postcolonial scholars argue that the Renaissance cannot be isolated from colonial expansion. Works like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* dramatize anxieties of power, conquest, and cultural encounter. In India, the legacy of Renaissance humanism entered through colonial education, shaping Indo-Anglian literature. Writers such as Raja Rao and Toru Dutt adapted Renaissance ideals of individuality and human dignity to articulate postcolonial identities. Thus, the Renaissance was not simply a "rebirth" of Europe but part of a global circulation of ideas, texts, and power.

III. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Renaissance was a dynamic cultural movement that reshaped literature through the ideals of humanism, the revival of classical models, and new modes of individual expression. Poetry celebrated desire and mortality; drama explored psychology and society; prose redefined politics and philosophy. Art and patronage reinforced these developments, embedding literature in a broader cultural matrix. At the same time, the Renaissance was not purely European—it was entangled with global exchanges and colonial encounters. Its legacy extends into modern literary traditions and even into Indo-Anglian literature, where its ideals were reinterpreted under colonial and postcolonial conditions. By situating the Renaissance in a comparative and international framework, this research contributes to broader debates about cultural identity, modernity, and the enduring role of literature in shaping human thought. Future studies may extend this inquiry into digital humanities and transnational perspectives, examining how Renaissance texts continue to be reimagined in contemporary contexts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Harper & Row, 1860.
- [2] Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [3] Kristeller, Paul Oskar. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*. Columbia University Press, 1979.
- [4] Grafton, Anthony, and Lisa Jardine. *From Humanism to the Humanities*. Harvard University Press, 1986.
- [5] Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Oxford University Press, 1972.
- [6] Brotton, Jerry. *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- [7] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 1998.
- [8] Singh, Jyotsna. *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism*. Routledge, 1996.
- [9] Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Chatto & Windus, 1943.
- [10] Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Trans. Harvey Mansfield. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- [11] Bacon, Francis. *The Advancement of Learning*. Oxford University Press, 2000 [1605].
- [12] Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essays: A Selection*. Penguin, 1993.
- [13] Montrose, Louis A. "Professing the Renaissance: the poetics and politics of culture." *The new historicism*. Routledge, 2013. 15-36
- [14] Shermamatova, S., and M. Ibrokhimova. "THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK LITERATURE." *Oriental renaissance: Innovative, educational, natural and social sciences* 2.11 (2022): 510-518.
- [15] Holton, David. "The Cretan Renaissance." *Literature and society in renaissance Crete* (1991): 1-16.
- [16] <https://brainly.in/question/54729743>
- [17] <https://www.scribd.com/document/504105246/The-Impact-of-Renaissance-on-English-Literature> Rubini, Rocco. *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger*. University of Chicago Press, 2019



Exploration of Folkloric Elements, Ancient Indian Literary Sources and Epic Narratives in Contemporary Bodo Poetry

Pranab Jyoti Narzary, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Bodo, Pandu College, Guwahati, India

Received: 21 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2025; Accepted: 23 Sep 2025; Available online: 28 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This research paper explores the interplay of folklore, ancient Indian literary sources, and epic narratives in contemporary Bodo poetry, highlighting how these elements have shaped contemporary Bodo literature. Bodo poets have creatively adapted and reinterpreted folklore and mythological references to address modern existential realities and cultural identity. By examining the works of key poets such as Samar Brahma Choudhury, Prasenjit Brahma, and Charan Narzary, the paper illustrates the ways in which these writers draw from rich traditional narratives, integrating them with Western poetic influences to create a unique literary expression. The study emphasizes the transformation in themes, prosody, and religious perspectives in Bodo poetry, underscoring its dynamic evolution and the poets' role in blending indigenous genius with external cultural elements. Through detailed analysis, the paper asserts the importance of originality and assimilation in literature, showcasing how contemporary Bodo poets articulate their ontological experiences and contemporary issues by harnessing the power of folklore and ancient literary traditions.



Keywords— Folklore, Narrative, Space, Contemporary Bodo Poetry.

Introduction

The relationship between folklore and literature is much discussed field of interest in folklore research. Folklore generally studies tales, songs and traditions of the lower classes of people. In his famous essay 'verbal art' Bascom refers to two distinct dimensions of the relationship between folklore and literature. One he calls 'literary of folklore in which the utilization of folklore materials can be found in the writings of established writers. (Bascom, 1973)

Undoubtedly the relationship between folklore and literature must be a complicated one and it is necessary to study thoroughly. In the modern literature of the world there is ample evidence of use of folklore. Various types of popular literature during recent years have used the materials of folklore. No literature can avoid society and society is essentially related to its tradition,

rituals, celebration and of course folklore. Folklore in literature opens many possibilities.

Bodo literature has been significantly influenced by its interaction with distant cultures and literatures. These influences have impacted both the thematic content and the forms of expression in Bodo poetry. This literature now exhibits a rich blend of new influences, particularly in its prosody and phrasing, which owes much to Western poetry. Nature, once seen merely as a backdrop, is now perceived as an active agent in human affairs. The most profound change has been in religious perspectives, with a new mystical conception emerging alongside a historical outlook.

Folkloric aspects and Ancient Indian Literary Sources in Contemporary Bodo poetry:

In contemporary Bodo literature, especially poetry, writers often draw upon folklore from various

cultures to articulate their ontological experiences. These poets reinterpret, modify, revise, and transform folklore to reflect contemporary realities.

Samar Brahma Choudhury was the first significant Bodo writer to extensively use folklore in his work. As a leader of the Bodo political movement and a public figure, he was familiar with popular beliefs and incorporated extravagant tales, proverbs, and maxims into his writing. He drew from mythical and *Puranic* sources, enhancing them with his intelligence.

Oh dear, my *ajwli* (beloved)
The owl, the messenger of
Yamraj
Is scared to hoot
Tonight, there is no wind
No peace
No sleep
I am awake all alone
In the stillness of the dark night
In the stony graveyard
To stare the footsteps of the
dark night
With my eyes wide open
I am awake
In wait of the *Daushrigwba*
In my bosom rests
The wound of endless suffering
of the mother world
In my eye nests
The wide mouthed leech of
Yaksha in banishment at the
Ramgiri Hills
(Choudhury)

There is also a reference of another mythical character *Yaksha*, is the name of a broad class of nature-spirits, usually benevolent, who are caretakers of the natural treasures hidden in the earth and tree roots. Thus, the poet Choudhury was optimistic and he dreamt that one day a saviour or protector will appear to rescue this community.

India's first work of creative poetry, the epic *Ramayana*, remains one of the highest achievements of the Indian genius. If the next great epic, the *Mahabharata*, has exposed the readers or listeners to life in its picturesque magnitude and immense range, the *Ramayana* with its quiet lyrical flow and simple story has moved them to

pathos and has led them closer to the characters, helping them to draw from the characters comport and patience. Rama and Sita, though Divine, suffer like human beings the unforeseen and abrupt turn of events, the pangs of personal disaster, but at the same time represent the assurance of the ultimate triumph of truth over all obstacles created by the forces of evil. The story of *Ramayana* really fascinates the modern Bodo poets to compose a good poem.

Prasenjit Brahma's poem "Bima" (Mother) praises women by referencing ancient mythological figures like Sita, Draupadi, and Shakuntala, highlighting their resilience and strength. Sita represents all women striving for existence and silently bearing grief. Draupadi and Kunti's polyandry in the *Mahabharata* is also noted. Urmila, the lesser-known wife of Lakshmana in the *Ramayana*, symbolizes neglected women, and modern feminist literature has reimagined her role. Through these allusions, Brahma encourages Bodo women to be brave and kind.

Thus, he writes-

The Sita of the paddy field
Wife of Pandavas
Kunti's daughter in law
Draupadi too
I won't mention the unwise
Urmila
Kalidas Sakuntala is the
Hemamalini of yore

In the above poem Sita, Draupadi and Sakuntala is the living character of the ancient epics, but Urmila is less known woman who was the wife of Laxmana one of the brothers of Rama in *Ramayana*. Sita is the representative figure of all women who are striving for their existence and who have been shouldering their grief silently and she is symbol of all mothers. Draupadi is also a woman character of *Mahabharata* who has five husbands and in the same way by embracing six gods Kunti has brought up six children. These are the fine examples of polyandry in the Indian civilization. On the other hand, everyone knows about the wife of Laxmana in *Ramayana* who is none other than Urmila, she is a symbol of all neglected and deprived women. Valmiki also ignored to narrate her stories. But now Urmila is a strong weapon for the feminist authors and she is a creation myth of the feminist literature. By alluding all those characters of the ancient myths and literary sources the poet Prasenjit Brahma comes to the context of Bodo women who are also mother, sister, mentor, friend, caring and goddess of the family and

mankind. By praising women, he encouraged them to be braved and kind in the world.

Eminent Bodo poet Charan Narzary frequently uses Indian myths and tales in his poetry. In "Wanderer," he references Durvasa, a sage known for his anger, to urge the Bodo community to pursue their rights through intellectual means rather than violence. (Boro)

Wanderer
In your eyes
I could see
The indomitable anger of
Durbasa Muni,
Wait; do not set the fire with
your curse
Else everything will turn into
ashes
Where shall we live?

In the above poem the author has mentioned a character Durvasa of Purana. Durvasa is one of the most intriguing and fascinating characters from the world of the Rishis and he was the son of the great sage Atri and his equally powerful consort Anasuya. Durvasa is widely remembered for his role in the Dushyant-Sakuntala episode, popularized by Kalidas's immortal play. He cursed Sakuntala who, engrossed as she was in the thoughts of her lover, neglected to greet him when he entered the hermitage of her foster father, saying that the one in whom she sat absorbed would not even recognize her, a curse which of course was subsequently modified by him so that all was well that ended well. Therefore, the poet Charan Narzary urged the Bodo community to be calm so that they can pursue their legitimate democratic rights with intellectual pursuit rather than violence.

Brajendra Kumar Brahma's "Balmikini Somaijung" (By the Promise of Valmiki) reflects on the transformation of Ratnakara the bandit into Valmiki the seer, symbolizing the potential for progress and change. This theme is echoed in his other works, which blend imagery and symbolism to address contemporary issues and spiritual aspirations.

There!
Again, the birth of Ravana.
There are your plunders again!
Blessed by the power of demon
You are insolent and haughty
In your fiery eyes on one score

Which are blazing out of ten
heads

The snow of the Himalayan
Mountain

Are broken to pieces

At these startles the mind of
humanity

You don't know

The world has various aspects

But you have seen only one

By your twenty eyes

So won't the ladder to heaven

Be built now?

But we haven't lost heart

For we know

There's hole even in demon's
blessing

We still dream of

Building a dyke in the sea

Together with Rama

Let another Ramayana be born.

In the above poem if Valmiki lived in a heroic age that reveled in the romance of war consequent upon the unsettled state of society and looked upon its heroes as objects of evolution, Brajendra Kr. Brahma lived at a time when people were tired of wars and their horrors and badly needed a spiritual message to smooth on the agony of the human soul that had realized the futility of mutual annihilation. In another poem he writes-

In search of Amrit

We fetched the sea

But now we are in trouble

As if he is deaf

Where is Nilgrib Bathwu Bwrai
now?

Whether he is in graveyard or
sleeping drunk?

The poison is spreading over
the sea

Here in the poem the poet with the reference of Hindu mythology compares the Bathwu Bwrai, the supreme soul of the Bodos with Siva or Nilgrib. The Hindu religious books have also established Siva as non-Aryan God. In the poem the poet has not talked about religion but he is talking about the evil which has

overlapped the virtuous among the Bodos also. This is an imagery of the poet.(Boro)

Brajendra Kr. Brahma as a Bodo poet is not only concerned with contemporary Bodo life but also known for his exploration and upholding vision; sometime, he appears to be in between modernity and post-modernity. For some time, his poetic life appears to be autonomous and the next moment his poems appear to be based on references. In one hand his poems are based on aesthetic sense and on the other the same poem seems to be celebrating freedom, thereby promoting pleasure shared by the common mass. His poems are complex and mobile as they go beyond life and at the same those are explorative. That he is a poet who truly represents the common mass and expands the inner-self is very clear. In his poem, "Beyond the Bodhidrum' Criss cross of the strains of modernity and post-modernity is noteworthy, as a modern poem it begins with contemporary Bodo life, full of sorrow and suffering, and gradually moves towards the world beyond life. That is an aesthetic life where reality turns infinite.

I want to untangle the knots
Of heaven and hell
And life before and after now,
Taking all responsibilities in
my hands
I want to fathom
Life
And this real world

Untangling the 'knots of heaven and hell' refers to the struggle that the Bodo people carried on for a long time for creating their own identity. The wretched life they had been living without dignity was as good as 'hell' and the life the poet envisions, of energy, vigour and high self-esteem is as good as 'heaven'. Thus, what the poet calls as heaven is no different from his vision. Each and every Bodo the poet represents is a Buddha moving gradually from suffering to liberty: the united movement of the Bodos takes them from 'margin' to 'centre'. The difference is there in their way only. But the goal is same: liberation.

The body sweats blood
By fighting all along
For sustaining the solitary life;
Picking the drop of eternity
I begin to tread the old road
Taken by the myriad people

The poem implies that attainment of nirvana' is not meant for the seer like Buddha only, it could also be

attained by the common people. If Buddha could achieve it through meditation, they could achieve it through karma'. The poet tries to tread the old road/taken by the myriad people (the great seers) have already achieved.

An uprising young Bodo poet, Uthrisar Khungur Basumatary, among the poets of young generation, is a true modernist. His theme and techniques are based on experiment and the deep experiences of life. He uses complex images drawn from the complexities of life. As a modernist he looks upon the contemporary Bodo socio-political issues with liberal thought and ideas. He sees the contemporary life with globalized attitude and outlook because of his study and association which are forward and up-to-date. The theme of social and political evolution is predominant in his poems. The Liberalization, globalization and loneliness of modern, urban life are being picturized from the background of his poetry. That the poet yearns for a space without being clumsy is obvious enough in his poetry, Uthrisar Khungur Basumatary has also written a beautiful poem on Buddha. An illustration of the metonymic use of myth is provided for us by Basumatary's poem "I shall wait for you". In the poem Siddhartha, as a young boy, dissatisfied with the spiritual complacency of those around him goes ahead with a spiritual quest:

The Prince Sidhartha
confronted with several
questions
Before decided to seat under the
Bodhidrum tree
Now I'm also confronting with
the same queries
To know
What is there beyond the sea
covered with mists?
(Basumatary)

The poem suggests the spiritual quest of the Bodo people ought to go for and from post-modern point of view the unseen spirituality in each and every one, leading them from "invisibility to visibility.

Bijoy Baglary's poetry intertwines various themes, capturing the nuances of Bodo life. His modernist approach reflects the uncertainty and chaos of contemporary life, using references to both Western and Eastern mythology.

Lakshmi is wife of Bishnu-
having thousands of looks
Shiva's wife Sati-turned into
fifty-one pieces

In the name of her husband
Ganesh's beloved Swaha-the
symbol of happiness
My wife the *Mwsaphakhri*
(spotted tigress)
One and only during my
sorrows
If I could meet you, I would
have asked
What do you want from me"?
What is intellectual beauty?
Where lays your happiness?
In the bosom of lives or in
separation
Or in the endless end
Or in having all

Though he praised women in many of his poems he also blamed the women for ruining many kingdoms and families. He has cited many references from different myth and tales to prove that only because of women the country and kingdom have to face with harsh consequences.

Bishnujyoti Kachari, known for his humanitarian appeal, incorporates characters from the Mahabharata to advocate for social and national integration. His poem "Dengkhw: Injur Swusinaini" (Songs of Breaking the Wall) calls for breaking the walls of division and hatred.

There's a starving octopus
In my heart
Hundreds of imprisoned lions
are roaring
In my heart
In every drop of my blood
As if echoing
The songs of breaking the wall
Kumbhakarna-
Now it's time to your death

Here the author wants to break the wall of divisions and hatred. Therefore, he warns the inhuman people by referring Kumbhakarna.

Dhiraj Basumatary's poems focus on Bodo aspirations and often reference historical and mythological tales. In one poem, he invokes the story of Joymati, an Assamese historical figure, to discuss the silent endurance of women in a male-dominated world.

You should know

How the prostitutes become
nude
Only for a mouthful food
And you should recite
The sad poems of Anupama for
me
If you want to be my beloved
By looking up the bright sky
Silently bear the punishment of
Joymati.

In the above poem by mentioning the tale of Joymati, a popular Assamese historical tale, where Joymati sacrifices herself for the survival of her husband and in the poem the poet also says that it is better to bear silently all the pains and sorrows in the male dominated world.

CONCLUSION

Originality in literature lies in its ability to absorb universal elements and express them uniquely. It is essential to assimilate the best from various literatures while grounding it in indigenous traditions. Modern Bodo poets have infused new ideals into their tradition, reflecting a blend of native genius and external influences. By harnessing folklore and ancient literary sources, contemporary Bodo poets articulate their ontological experiences and address contemporary realities.

Originality in literature lies in its capacity to absorb the universal in all literature and give a unique expression suited to its native genius. It is meaningless to get involved in the controversy of the tradition and influence of the other languages for the growth of modern poetry. We must try to assimilate what is best wherever that may be, and offer it to the eternal being. In this endeavour we shall not confine ourselves to the west but to the literature of other countries too. The modern Bodo poets have tried to infuse new ideals into their tradition. No mere foreign grafting can ever thrive and flourish, unless the tender plant on which the grafting is to be made to first germinates and send its roots deep into its own indigenous soil.

Thus, in the contemporary Bodo literature, especially Bodo poetry, writers often harness folklore of other language and culture to articulate intensely their ontological experience. The poets re-interpret, modify, revise and transform that folklore to articulate contemporary reality. Bodo poetry has a long and glorious heritage. A study on Bodo poetry has offered scopes to read a few modernist Bodo poets as inheritor of a poetic tradition which comprises the aspects of folklore as Bodo

poetry has a consistent and coherent connection with folklore. Ancient Bodo literature was basically oral and pastoral songs, ballads and myths made the key foundation of that literature. Such tradition continued to the time of modern Bodo poetry. Charan Narzary, Samar Brahma Choudhury, Vikram, Brajendra kr. Brahma, Bijoy Baglary, Anju and many other modern Bodo poets have alluded to the various Puranic, Vedic and mythic characters of India and abroad in their creative writings.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bascom, William. 1973. Folklore, Verbal Art and Culture. *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 86. No. 342. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i223683>
- [2] Boro, Anil. 2011. *A History of Bodo Literature*. Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi.
- [3] Anju. 2005. *Khonthaini Ikebana*, edited by Anju, Bodo Sahitya Sabha.
- [4] Daimari, Anjali and Pranab Jyoti Narzary. 2011. *Agan*. Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi.



Desire, Lack, and the Objet Petit a: Gregor Samsa's Transformation and the Lacanian Dialectic of Desire

Abduladheem Khalaf Jasim¹, N. Solomon Benny²

¹Research scholar, Department of English, College of Arts & Commerce, Andhra University, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Arts & Commerce, Andhra University, India.

Corresponding Author: Abduladheem Khalaf Jasim, abdiraq665@gmail.com

Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 20 Sep 2025; Accepted: 24 Sep 2025; Available online: 28 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as a Lacanian allegory of desire, focusing on the themes of identity, the unattainable object of desire (objet petit a), and the necessity of exclusion within the symbolic order. By analyzing Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect, the study highlights how Kafka's narrative exemplifies Lacan's concept of the subject's fragmented identity and the inherent lack that structures human existence. Gregor's metamorphosis symbolizes the impossibility of fulfilling desire, as his physical transformation mirrors his internal dissonance and inability to reconcile his desires with societal expectations. Furthermore, the paper examines how Gregor's eventual death serves as a manifestation of Lacan's theory of exclusion, where the family's survival and the stability of the symbolic order are ensured through the expulsion of the "real" — Gregor's monstrous form. Ultimately, *The Metamorphosis* reinforces Lacan's assertion that identity is never stable and that desire remains an elusive, unfulfilled pursuit that shapes and destabilizes the human subject.



Keywords— Lacanian desire, Fragmented identity, Objet petit a, Symbolic order, Exclusion

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Significance of *The Metamorphosis*

First published in 1915, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is perhaps, still the most enigmatic of modernist texts; a surreal yet deeply psychological exploration of alienation and the existential crisis. The novella's hero, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning and discovers that he's been turned into a giant insect, an absurd condition that renders him socially and existentially isolated. Although a great deal of commentary has been written about the text in existentialist (e.g., Camus, 1942/1991), Marxist (e.g., Jameson, 1981), and psychoanalytic terms (e.g., Freud, 1920/1961), for our purposes, an engaging consideration of the novella can be made via Jacques Lacan's re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The Lacanian perspective focuses in particular on the role of language, the unconscious, and the symbolic structures that shape human subjectivity. A central concept in Lacan's work is the 'objet petit a' or the 'object small a',

which refers to an object of desire that drives all human longing and is ultimately unattainable (Lacan, 1977). If Gregor's metamorphosis is a moment of radical alienation, we can read it in *The Metamorphosis* as disturbing the Symbolic order of language and family ties that granted him the ability to be meaningful. His status changes from that of a provider and object of familial desire to an unwanted surplus, reflecting Lacan's idea that the subject always exists through a lack that can never be wholly satisfied.

In this study, the implication of Gregor Samsa in insect form will be thoroughly examined in light of Lacan's ideas on desire and lack. The application of Lacanian theory through the psychoanalytic lens of Gregor's condition in relation to his family's transformation of perception of him, is the purpose of this research, in addition to his ultimate demise as well.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Gregor Samsa's transformation reflect Lacanian concepts of desire and lack?

2. In what ways does Gregor function as objet petit a within his family dynamic?

3. How does Gregor's eventual demise align with Lacan's concept of jouissance and the death drive?

The last but not least aim of this research is to show that *The Metamorphosis* can be read as a Lacanian allegory of human subjectivity, desire and alienation. By engaging with Lacanian theory, this study will demonstrate how Gregor's transformation embodies a crisis of identity, shaped through the confines of the Symbolic order and the family's recognition of him as an object of utility rather than a subject with innate value.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Concept of Desire

The Lacanian parody of Freudian psychoanalysis has three focal registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan 1949). For Lacan, the subject's entry into the Symbolic order, the system of meaning made up of social and linguistic relations, forms a primary lack, the absence that shapes desire (Fink, 1995). This is the point of which the objet petit a comes, the missing object of desire, which gets its unattainability from this lack, an ideal object that is not for the subject to ever fully achieve (Evans, 1996).

Gregor's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* operates like an intrusion of the Real, rupturing his symbolic identity as (1) a worker and (2) a caring member of a family. Before his metamorphosis, Gregor is an economic provider, the stabilizing force around which his family's needs are inextricably ordered. But when he turns into an insect, he no longer functions this way, and so he exposes the contingency of his objectification from the family perspective. His family's abandonment of him corresponds to Lacan's assumption that desire is always structured to the around an absence; as soon as Gregor is rendered no longer useful, he is cast out of the Symbolic and becomes an unbearable excess.

Gregor's trajectory also relies heavily on Lacan's theory of jouissance, or excessive, self-destructive pleasure. His reclusion from food, his en masse alienation, his demise—all align with a movement toward the death drive, a term first posited by Freud (1920/1961), later augmented by Lacan. Gregor's death can therefore be understood as the potentiality of an impossible desire, his being as objet petit a is unlivable for his family, yet his death re-establishes their stability within the Symbolic order.

II. LACANIAN DESIRE AND THE CONCEPT OF OBJET PETIT

In this chapter, we will elucidate Lacan's gloss of Freudian psychoanalysis — his vision of the structure of the psyche, the nature of desire, and the notion of the objet

petit a — as a foundation of theory to denote Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis in *The Metamorphosis* as a subjectivity crisis, organized according to the dynamic of lack, alienation, and infinite desire.

2.1. Freud's Theory of Desire and Its Lacanian Reinterpretation

Sigmund Freud's theory of desire, most notably expressed in texts like *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961), requires a drive-oriented theory of the subject that argues that human behavior is subject to drives encountered in unconscious forms, specifically the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Hauser notes that according to Freud, the pleasure principle drives an organism to pursue gratification (primary process thinking), while the reality principle requires that some gratification will be withheld or postponed (Freud, 1920/1961).

The structure of desire is re-conceived by Jacques Lacan informed by both structural linguistics and poststructuralist theory, rooted in Freudian concepts. Lacan describes Desire as an effect of language, not just a biological urge (Lacan 1977). By learning language, he contends, human beings are introduced into an order that takes symbolic form, and thereby shaped to find their identity and their relations with others mediated through symbolic structures. But this process also creates a deficit, in that humans lose their primordial inflammation with the world (Fink, 1995). Whereas biological needs are finite, stable, and can be satiated (at least temporarily) such as hunger for food, desire is the unending and often illusory chase of something that can never be attained.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's change is an externalization of this deficit. Before his transformation, he is an economic provider, trying to meet his family's expectations. But this role does not satisfy him; it alienates him, as Lacan points out in his axiom that "desire is mediated by the Other" — the social structures, family expectations and cultural norms (Žižek, 2006).

2.2. The Structure of the Subject in Lacan: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic

As rooted in Lacan's tripartite model of subjectivity—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan, 1949)—a fundamental structure, through its rearticulations frames our understandings of the formation of identity and desire. Each of these orders contributes to how the subject relates to the world:

The Imaginary: This stage corresponds to the mirror stage, in which an infant recognizes a mirror image as its own and, for the first time, understands itself as an image. But this recognition is deceptive, because as the child misidentifies itself with an idealized, coherent image it masks the fragmented nature of her being (Lacan, 1949). Gregor's life before metamorphosis can be seen as existing

in the Imaginary—he builds a self as a committed son and worker, but this self is ultimately a mirage.

The Symbolic: The entry of the subject into this symbolic order is mediated by the acquisition of language and the internalization of the cultural and social structures. Thus, this subject's identity is alienated in the symbolic realm of the Father's Law (Nom-du-Père), a framework of prohibitions defining permissible desires (Lacan, 1953). Gregor's transformation, then, represents his ejection from this order — his loss of speech, his inability to fulfill his role in society, the rejection of him by his family all indicate the collapse of his symbolic function.

The Real: The Real is whatever escapes language and cannot be symbolized. It rears its head in times of trauma, breaking up the unity of the Symbolic order (Fink, 1995). Gregor's introduction of an insubordinate body is quintessentially an invasion of the Real, and his rigid insect body cannot be allegorically subsumed into the Symbolic order and thus exists as an unassimilable excess.

Gregor's transition from the Symbolic to the Real means that he is disappearing as a subject. The third and final great crime is represented elegantly, and comically, in the second half of the film as we see the protagonist slowly strip him of the ability to express himself, to think on his own, and he ultimately loses his will to live—all foreshadowed by that imaginary bubble world he once inhabited but was expelled from.

2.3. Objet Petit a: The Elusive Object of Desire and Lack

A defining feature of Lacanian desire is the object petit a, the object that eludes attainment but that constitutes the human structure of desire. According to Lacan (1977), desire always aims at a distress, something out of reach and impossible to attain, and the objet petit a alludes to this irremovable lap between effective imagination and desire. Not an object in itself, but the abstract cause of desire — something the subject expects will bring complete satisfaction and yet the act of attaining it only mirrors a persistent state of incompleteness.

Gregor's role in his family can be examined through the lens of the objet petit a: as an object of familial desire—as a person he possesses no value in and of himself, but acts as a function, providing economic stability. His family wants him to the extent that he lives this role. But, once transformed into an insect, he no longer plays this role, and as such his status within the family falls prey to the contingency of this fact.

His insect form simultaneously represents the horror of objet petit a — the object that cannot be matched to the terms of the Symbolic — and an alternative solution. The family's initial reaction to Gregor is confusion, but as they discover that he has outlived his utility, their reaction becomes one of rejection. As objet petit a, Gregor stirs up

the family's symbolic order, uncovering the fundamental lack that undergirded their desires (Žižek, 2006)

2.4. Alienation and the Role of the Other in the Formation of Desire

The subject's desire is always mediated by the Other, which for Lacan refers to the collective social structures that define meaning and impose prohibitions. The subject, in other words, does not want for itself, but what it imagines the Other wants (Lacan, 1977). This idea, the "desire of the Other," emphasizes the ways that identity is built in relation to others.

Murderous or otherwise, this flourishing is just one possibility — in Gregor's own life, pre-metamorphosis, he is shaped by the desires of his family. He does it not for his own benefit but to live up to their expectations. But his transformation makes him an object of horror, not desire. As a result, he ends up increasingly alienated because The Other (his family) no longer regards him as a relevant element of the Symbolic order.

Gregor's loss of language is another manifestation of this alienation. Lacan (1953) contends that the subject is formed through language, and Gregor's chickenspeak signifies his symbolic death long before his corporeal one. That lack of language renders him an object instead of a subject, an illustration of Lacan's hypothesis that identity only exists through its recognition by the Other.

Ultimately, Gregor's transformation speaks to the fragile nature of desire and identity. His family's shifting view of him — transformed from provider to burden — shows how desire is built more around absence than presence. Gregor's death, then, resolves this crisis; his removal allows his family to regain their symbolic stability, supporting Lacan's assertion that desire is always structured around absence rather than presence.

III. GREGOR SAMSA AND THE LACANIAN DIALECTIC OF DESIRE

This chapter provides a close reading of *The Metamorphosis* through the Lacanian dialectic of desire. By examining Gregor's role within the family, his transformation as an externalization of lack, and his shift from a desired object to an abject figure, this chapter argues that Gregor's metamorphosis exposes the fundamental instability of desire and identity.

3.1. Gregor's Role in the Family as an Object of Desire

Gregor operates as a phantasmatic object within the family's symbolic economy before his transformation. He is the family's chief breadwinner, supporting his parents and his younger sister, Grete. But his value is not intrinsic to him, but rather based on his function. As Lacan (1977) explains, the subject's desire is mediated by the Other, be it

parents, social norms, or institutional structures, that define the subject's position within the symbolic order.

Gregor's self-concept before his transformation conforms with what Lacan terms the desire of the Other, in other words his identity is organized around the demands placed on him by his family. His father, who used to be the money earner in the family, becomes reliant on Gregor's salary, and Grete avails herself of a life of luxury paid for by her brother's death (Kafka, 1915/2009). Gregor internalizes that want, thinking he only has value to give to the family, as their breadwinner. But it is not a sustainable position, erasing his own subjectivity.

Freud (1920/1961) maintained that repression results in the return of the repressed in distorted ways, and Gregor's change can be seen as the externalization of his repressed dissent. His desire is not his own but the product of exigences of the Other. His transformation therefore signifies a radical departure from his designated role, revealing the contingency of his being in relation to the family structure

3.2. Transformation as a Manifestation of His Lack and Alienation

Lacan (1949) suggests that identity is structured around the subject's misrecognition of itself in the mirror stage, producing an illusory sense of wholeness. Such a misrecognition underlies Gregor's pre-metamorphosis self—he imagines himself a dutiful employee and son, but this self is a fiction propped up by the Symbolic order. His metamorphosis unravels this illusion and compels him to confront his inherent lack in his most naked state.

Gregor's deficiency is only aggravated by his loss of language. According to Lacanian theory, language is the conduit through which the subject accesses the Symbolic order (Lacan, 1953). In losing the ability to speak, Gregor is cast out of the intersubjective order and into the Real. The family cannot recognize him as any subject; he resigns to be an abject object. His loss of language becomes his symbolic castration — he no longer participates in the family conversation but becomes an excess without meaning.

Kafka's text makes Gregor's alienation self-evident through his family's changing view of him. At first they try to care for him, but their discomfort deepens as they come to see that he no longer has a function. His father's violent retribution—driving Gregor back into his room and wounding him on an apple—symbolizes the brutal rejection of the Real when it intrudes upon the Symbolic order (Kafka, 1915/2009). As objet petit a, a concept that Lacan defined as the object at the center of our most urgent wishes, Gregor becomes unendurable for the family, since he is the hole at the center of what they want.

3.3. The Family's Changing Relationship to Gregor: From Desire to Rejection

According to Lacan (1977), desire is structured around a lack, and the moment this lack becomes too apparent it creates anxiety. At first, Gregor's family responds to his condition with reluctance, trying to keep things as normal as possible. Grete takes on the role of caregiver, but that role is dependent on her ability to manage the crisis. As Gregor becomes more deteriorated, he also becomes ever intolerable, leading to total rejection.

Grete's changing attitude toward her brother reveals the mechanics of this so-called Lacanian desire. At first, she views Gregor as an object to be cared for, but when he can no longer function as a subject, he becomes for her a surplus object, an excess to be discarded. Her last declaration — “We have to rid ourselves of it” (Kafka, 1915/2009, 49) — is a clear sign that Gregor has completed his transition from a subject to an object, from objet petit a to abject waste

3.4. Gregor as *Objet Petit a*: The Inaccessible Object of the Other's Desire

Gregor's transformation shows what he really is, objet petit a, the object that defines desire and is as well its interruption. Before his transformation, the desires of his family turn on his labor, and after he loses that capacity, he is an unwieldy, disruptive entity. His death resolves this crisis — through the expulsion of excess, the family re-establishing its symbolic stability.

Žižek (2006) describes how objet petit a is the cause of desire and simultaneously, its most basic impediment. Gregor's existence gives testament to this paradox—his presence supports the family's economy, while his continued existence as an insect reveals the instability of their desires. His death restores order, then, and reasserts the Lacanian assertion that desire always turns on a lack that must be hidden.

IV. THE DEATH DRIVE AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF SUBJECTIVITY

This chapter explores Gregor's gradual decline through the lens of Lacan's concept of *jouissance* and Freud's theory of the death drive. Gregor's self-negation, culminating in his voluntary starvation, exemplifies the destructive excess of desire when the subject loses its place within the Symbolic order.

4.1. Gregor's Deterioration and the Concept of *Jouissance*

Jouissance (Lacan, 1977) is an enjoyment that is excessive and often self-destructive, one which goes beyond the pleasure principle. Contrary to pleasure, ruled by the reality principle, jouissance knows no discipline and brings frequently about suffering. This is the destructive

mode of *jouissance* that characterizes Gregor's life after he becomes an insect — his body decays, he loses his appetite and gradually he emits himself from reality.

Kafka's accounts of Gregor's deteriorating body symbolize his embodiment in *jouissance*. He takes grotesque delight in creeping up the walls, hiding under the furniture and finally, rotting. His self-negation can be viewed as an extreme version of the death drive, an impulse toward self-destruction that Freud (1920/1961) contended was integral to all life.

4.2. His Death as a Resolution of Desire and Lack

Gregor's death is not an accident of fate but a logical end to his alienation. Once he understands that his existence is no longer tolerable to his family, he refuses to eat, assimilating to his excessive object nature. His choice to starve himself signals his last dislocation from the Symbolic order, representing the absolute implication in the Real.

For Lacan (1977), this would be the death drive: not a desire for death itself, but a drive to escape the limits of the Symbolic order. Gregor's death embodies this escape—by taking himself out of the picture, he solves the family's crises of desire. His absence enables their return to symbolic coherence, reinforcing the Lacanian axiom that social stability is secured through the exclusion of excess.

4.3. The Family's "Liberation" and the Restoration of the Symbolic Order

With Gregor gone, his family undergoes a symbolic rebirth. His parents and sister leave the apartment for the first time, discussing plans for Grete's future (Kafka, 1915/2009). This ending reinforces the idea that Gregor was an obstacle to their desires; his removal allows the Symbolic order to reassert itself.

4.4. Conclusion: The *Metamorphosis* as a Lacanian Allegory of Desire

One of the most significant texts for Lacan as a psychoanalyst is Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which explores the nature of human desire through the lens of fusion at the limits of self. Gregory Samsa's metamorphosis into a giant vermin forms an outward presentation of a man torn apart from the inside, the struggle between Gregory's desire and the demands of the symbolic order around him. Lacan teaches that desire is constructed by the absence that arises from when the infant is detached from the mother, and enters into the realm of language and the symbolic order. This fragmentation creates a basic absence that the subject will always try to fill, but it will never be filled.

Gregor's transformation represents that founding absence and impossibility of satisfaction. Before his transformation, he is a man of too much responsibility, a breadwinner for his family. His identity is defined by duty and labor; it represents a submission to the symbolic order

— the social roles that constitute and bind the person. But his physical transformation reveals the dissonance between how he sees himself and how he serves the family and society. His new shape as a feckless, cockroach-shaped insect is a human allegory of Lacan's *objet petit a*, the object of desire that one never attains but forever chases. Gregor's inability to assimilate his desire into any stable structure or identity is a reflection of Lacan's notion that, for him, identity is not a stable, coherent entity — but a fragmented formation influenced by both the unconscious and the external.

Furthermore, Gregor's demise lays bare the acts of exclusion that uphold the symbolic order. According to Lacan, the symbolic system functions only on the grounds of the exclusion of the real, the unrepresentable, and the excessive. Gregor's monstrous body, the real — the unspeakable and unmanageable dimension of the human subject — is finally rejected by his family. Such expulsion is necessary for the survival of the family, and for the preservation of their symbolic structure, even as it leads to the annihilation of Gregor. His death is a return to an idealized, pre-crisis state for the family, whose life resumes normalcy once Gregor is out of the picture. Thus, Kafka's novella reiterates Lacan's claim as to the fundamentals of a subject's desire as a ceaseless, un-quenched endeavor, and identity, always bound up in the symbolic order, is predicated on this process of exclusion and of repression of the real.

In this sense, the tale becomes a compelling allegory of Lacanian desire, whereby the unattainable nature of desire is rendered inextricably linked to both the key is the signifier, the play of exclusion and the functioning of the symbolic order itself. Gregor's tragic demise reflects the Lacanian perspective which maintains that the subject is endlessly plagued by a lack, perpetually attempting to fill a space that can never be filled and thus shows the dire ontological ramifications of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- [2] Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton University Press.
- [3] Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1920)
- [4] Kafka, F. (2009). *The metamorphosis* (S. Corngold, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1915)
- [5] Lacan, J. (1949/1977). The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience (A. Sheridan, Trans.). In *Écrits: A selection* (pp. 1–7). Routledge.

- [6] Lacan, J. (1953/1977). The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis (A. Sheridan, Trans.). In *Écrits: A selection* (pp. 30–113). Routledge.
- [7] Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Routledge.
- [8] Žižek, S. (2006). *The parallax view*. MIT Press.



A Study on Translation Strategies of Mechanical English from the Perspective of Transformative Translation: A Case Study of *English for Mechanical Engineering*

Zhiwei Sun, Mingxia Liu, Jing Wang*

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology, China

*Corresponding author

Postal address: School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology, No. 266, Zhangzhou Road, Zhangdian District, Zibo255049, China.

Received: 25 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Sep 2025; Accepted: 25 Sep 2025; Available online: 28 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The quality of mechanical English translation directly affects the accurate transmission of technical information and the effectiveness of cross-cultural cooperation. Based on the Transformative Translation theory, this paper adopts a mixed research method, integrating perspectives from linguistics, translation studies, and mechanical engineering (an interdisciplinary field) to construct a closed-loop research framework of "theoretical derivation-corpus analysis-strategy construction", aiming to study the language strategies of professional English in mechanical engineering and explore the application of Transformative Translation theory in mechanical English translation. The findings show that the flexibility and purposiveness of Transformative Translation Theory are highly consistent with the needs of mechanical English translation; moreover, the application of seven transformative translation methods (addition, deletion, editing, narration, condensation, integration, and alteration) can effectively solve the problems of verbosity and low readability caused by traditional full translation, providing more practical translation experience for other translators.*

Keywords—*English for Mechanical Engineering, Mechanical English, Transformative Translation, translation methods, translation strategy*



I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

With globalization advancing, international exchanges in mechanical engineering have intensified, making mechanical English indispensable for accurate technical information transmission and cross-cultural collaboration. However, its high specialization, dense terminology, and complex syntax pose significant challenges to translators.

Traditional word-for-word translation fails to satisfy the multifaceted demands of accuracy, readability, and functionality. Thus, exploring a more suitable theoretical and practical framework is imperative.

Literature and case reviews show the "Transformative Translation Theory" has great potential in technical translation. It emphasizes adaptive adjustments to source texts (via addition, deletion, restructuring, and explication)

based on target audiences' needs—aligning well with mechanical English's challenges (e.g., terminology comprehension, syntactic simplification, cultural discrepancy mitigation). *English for Mechanical Engineering* (Shi, 2022) is a classic textbook in this field, integrating theoretical depth and technical practicality, which will be taken as the research object in the study.

1.2 Research objective and significance

This study focuses on the theoretical and practical aspects of mechanical English translation, with both academic and practical value for cross-cultural communication in mechanical engineering.

1.2.1 Theoretical significance

The Transformative Theory provides a new perspective for mechanical English translation research, reflecting translation's functional orientation. It enhances understanding of mechanical English translation's characteristics and offers theoretical guidance to improve translation quality.

1.2.2 Practical significance

It guides practitioners in accurately converting mechanical terms/concepts, enhances translators' efficiency and quality, and provides a scientific basis for complex text translation, boosting practitioners' professional competence.

1.3 Research methods

A closed-loop framework ("theoretical derivation - corpus analysis - strategy construction") is adopted, combining qualitative-quantitative analysis and interdisciplinary perspectives (linguistics, translation studies, mechanical engineering):

1.3.1 Chinese-English Comparative Analysis: Compares terminology (e.g., "tolerance" vs "公差"), syntax (English passives vs Chinese actives), and discourse (English "Question-Method-Outcome" vs Chinese "general-specific-general") via parallel text analysis of typical segments.

1.3.2 Case Study: Selects 3–5 typical cases per text type (technical definitions, operating procedures, troubleshooting) from *English for Mechanical Engineering*, analyzing steps: marking text features/obstacles, applying strategies, and comparing translation quality.

1.3.3 Interdisciplinary Approach: Uses linguistics (analyzing lexical/syntactic/discourse features), translation studies (designing strategies via Transformative Theory),

and mechanical engineering (ensuring terminological accuracy).

1.4 Paper structure

The paper has five chapters: Introduction (background, objectives, methods), Literature Review (research status), Theoretical Framework (Transformative Theory's origin and concepts), Case Analysis (cases from *English for Mechanical Engineering*), and Conclusion (findings, limitations, suggestions).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mechanical English translation

Mechanical English is a core subcategory of Technical English, specifically tailored for the fields of mechanical engineering and manufacturing. As a branch of specialized English, it not only inherits the fundamental linguistic characteristics of scientific and technical English (e.g., objectivity, precision, and formality) but also exhibits distinct domain-specific features rooted in mechanical engineering practices.

2.1.1 Term Density and Sentence Complexity

Mechanical English translation requires precise handling of a large number of standardized terms (such as those from ISO/ASME standards), as well as dealing with nested passive sentences and complex modifying structures. Through term classification management (direct translation of core terms, interpretation of derivative terms) and sentence modular decomposition (extracting the main structure + logical clarification), ensure the accurate transmission of technical parameters (such as "tolerance $\pm 0.02\text{mm}$ ") and logical relationships.

2.1.2 Information Reorganization and Function Adaptation

Mechanical English translation needs to dynamically adjust the way information is presented based on the functional goals of the text. For informative texts (such as academic papers), translation should prioritize ensuring consistency in terminology (for example, "finite element analysis" must strictly correspond to "有限元分析") and data integrity (retaining all experimental parameters); While for operational texts (such as equipment manuals), the clarity of instructions should be strengthened. For instance, the passive sentence "The valve should be inspected annually" should be translated into an active sentence

structure “Annual inspection of the valve is required”, and layout techniques (such as red font, icons) should be used to highlight safety warnings. In prescriptive texts (such as patent documents), the innovative points should be highlighted through sentence order reconfiguration.

2.1.3 Multimodal collaboration and localization conversion

Mechanical English translation requires the integration of text and graphics for conversion and the adaptation of cross-cultural technologies. Technical documents often contain multimodal information. For example, when translating the text description “Refer to Figure 2A for assembly sequence” in combination with the logical chain of the diagram “Step 1→2→3”, it is necessary to ensure that the textual guidance strictly corresponds to the labels of the chart. At the localization level, unit system conversions, differences in safety regulations (such as comparing the North American OSHA standards with the national standard GB 7258), and cultural cognitive differences (such as the direct style of Western technical documents and the preference of Chinese readers for explicit causality chains) need to be handled.

2.2 Research on mechanical English translation

2.2.1 Research status in the world

International research on technical translation primarily revolves around two theoretical frameworks: the functionalist school and localization theory. A representative scholar in this field is Nord (2001), who proposed the “Skopos Theory” (purpose theory), which emphasizes that translational behavior should serve preset goals (e.g., information transmission, operational guidance for end-users) and operates on the core principle that “the end justifies the means.” This principle aligns closely with the “reader demand orientation” of transformative translation theory, as both prioritize the target audience’s needs over rigid adherence to the source text’s form.

Nord further advocated for prioritizing “functional equivalence” (where the target text achieves the same effect as the source text) rather than “formal equivalence” (word-for-word matching) in technical document translation. This viewpoint provides theoretical justification for the rational use of strategies like addition, deletion, and rewriting in mechanical English translation—strategies that are often necessary to clarify complex technical concepts for non-

expert readers.

2.2.2 Research status in China

Research on mechanical English translation has long centered on linguistic feature analysis. At the lexical level, scholars focus on terminology standardization; Ye (2000) proposed that standardization should target professional terms and language units expressing specialized concepts, rather than linguistic features themselves. At the syntactic level, studies mainly explore transformation strategies for typical structures like passive voice and non-subject-predicate constructions (Xiang, 2020). In recent years, the discourse function perspective has emerged, with researchers focusing on coherence reconstruction of technical texts and transmission of communicative intentions (Li, 2024).

Since the transformative translation theory system was systematically established, it has steadily expanded its application scope in scientific and technological translation. Early studies focused on concept explanation and methodological construction (Huang, 2011), while recent research has shifted to the empirical dimension: scholars have made progress using eye-tracking experiments to evaluate technical translation comprehension efficiency (Qiu, 2025), corpora to quantify term consistency (Zhang, 2012), and verifying the readability-enhancing effect of compilation strategies in medical translation. These achievements highlight two inspirations: technical translation needs to balance linguistic accuracy and cultural adaptability, and methodology should emphasize data-driven empirical verification.

However, most foreign studies focus on general technical texts (e.g., software interfaces, medical instructions), with limited discussion on high-professional-threshold fields like mechanical engineering, and insufficient in-depth exploration of the systematic application of transformative translation theory.

2.2.3 Challenges in mechanical English translation

Mechanical English translation faces unique challenges stemming from the distinct linguistic and functional features of mechanical texts, which differ significantly from literary or general English texts. Three key challenges in mechanical English translation are as follows:

(1) Balance the Precision of Terminology and the

Complexity of Syntax

Technical texts contain high-density terminology (such as “tolerance stack-up” corresponding to “公差累积分析”), which must strictly follow ISO/ASME standards. However, cross-cultural differences in terminology (such as the need to explain “actuator” in Chinese context as “执行器 (动力驱动装置)”), often result in redundant explanations or information loss. Additionally, complex sentence structures with a percentage exceeding 60% of nested passive structures require the translator to break down the logical chain, while maintaining the integrity of technical details.

(2) Functional Adaptation and Multimodal Collaboration

Different text types (such as operation manuals require clear instructions, academic papers need rigorous theories) require dynamic adjustment strategies: operational texts need to convert passive voice to active sentence structure (e.g., “Calibration must be performed” → “Must perform calibration”), while patent translations need to maintain legal rigor. Additionally, graphic-text collaboration requires that chart labels (such as “Fig.3A Assembly Steps”) strictly correspond to the text description, and units need to be converted (e.g., “15 psi → 103 kilopascals”) and safety symbols (such as OSHA warning symbols → national standard GB symbols) to be changed. Any deviation may lead to technical misinterpretation.

(3) Cultural cognitive differences and conflicts with industry norms

For instance, the direct narrative style of Western technical documents contrasts with the preference for explicit causality in Chinese, and this difference needs to be adapted through the addition of logical connectives for local adaptation; at the same time, balancing international standards (such as ASME Y14.5) with regional practices (such as the Chinese GB/T 1182 geometric tolerance standard) often requires additional annotations, resulting in an overloaded translation information.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The origin of Transformative Translation Theory

Transformative Translation Theory, pioneered by Chinese scholar Huang Zhonglian (2002), originated from critical reflections on traditional “full translation” methods and

practical observations of historical translation practices. In the mid-1990s, Huang identified limitations in conventional approaches that prioritized textual fidelity over functional adaptability, particularly in technical and cross-cultural contexts. Drawing inspiration from Yan Fu’s 19th-century translations, which strategically adapted Western texts to meet Chinese socio-cultural needs, Huang conceptualized “transformative translation” (变译) as a reader-centered framework.

Formally introduced at the 1997 International Translation Symposium, Transformative Translation Theory emphasized selective extraction, restructuring, and localized adaptation of source content to address specific audience demands. Huang’s systematic work, culminating in the 2002 monograph *Transformative Translation Theory*. Grounded in pragmatism, the theory emerged as a response to globalization’s demands for efficient, purpose-driven technical communication, solidifying its role in modern translation studies (Huang, 2002).

3.2 Main concepts of Transformative Translation Theory

3.2.1 Core definition

Transformative translation (translation variant) is a translation activity in which the translator selectively absorbs the core content or part of the original work by means of addition, deletion, contraction, merger, modification, imitation, etc., according to the special needs of specific readers under specific conditions. Its essence is a function-oriented translation strategy, which aims to achieve efficient dissemination and localization of information by flexibly adjusting the form and content of the original text (Huang, 2002).

3.2.2 Translation methods

The translation adaptation activity is an action where the translator adapts and translates the original work according to the specific needs of the readers. The essence of translation adaptation lies in adaptation, which is precisely what distinguishes it from full translation. The adaptation methods can be roughly classified into seven types: addition, subtraction, compilation, narration, reduction, combination, and modification (Huang, 2002).

(1) Addition

Expansion refers to the addition of information based on the original work. The methods of expansion can be divided into explanation - Annotate technical terms or

cultural concepts (e.g., “flange→法兰 (pipe connector)”), commentary - Insert evaluative remarks or background analysis and supplementation Add case studies, diagrams, or analogies (e.g., explaining gear ratios using “bicycle gear shifting”).

(2) Reduction

Remove redundant, repetitive, or irrelevant content to focus on critical information. Omit lengthy experimental procedures, retaining only key parameters and eliminate culturally incompatible examples.

(3) Restructuring

Reorganize source content for clearer logic. It includes: selecting a part from the original work and organizing it; arranging the content of the original work in a certain order; writing and organizing the materials provided by the original work and converting them into target language text.

(4) Paraphrasing

Convey core ideas concisely by breaking original sentence structures.

For example: Simplify nested sentences like “The component, which undergoes cyclic loading...” to “部件承受循环载荷，需定期检测”

(5) Condensation

By adopting a new format, the original work is condensed and clarified, achieving a higher quality with less content. This way, reading time is saved and the desired information can be quickly located.

(6) Integration

And “integration” refers to a flexible approach of combining two or more related or logically sequential parts from the original work into one to enhance information density.

(7) Adaptation

This means changing, causing significant alterations to the original work, altering its content or form, including replacing the content or form in the original work with something more suitable for the target language readers, adapting rewriting the original work in another genre based on its content, and transforming modifying the entire original work so that the entire translation is suitable for the new requirements, etc.

These seven strategies—adding, deleting, editing, narrating, condensing, integrating, and altering—

collectively optimize information delivery by adjusting volume, refining structure, and ensuring cross-cultural relevance, thereby meeting the practical needs of specific audiences.

3.2.3 Translation principles

Formulate the basic principles (such as integrity and pertinence) and operational methods (such as translation of deleted sentences in paragraphs and inter-article compilation) of translation, emphasizing standardization and operability (Huang, 2002). Transformative Translation Theory, centers on functional orientation and adaptive flexibility, emphasizing that translation should adapt source texts to meet the specific needs of target readers under defined conditions. Its core principles include the following six aspects:

(1) Skopos-Driven Adaptation Principle

The ultimate goal of translation is to fulfill the specific needs of target readers, rather than pursuing absolute textual fidelity to the original. Operational manuals prioritize actionable instructions, academic papers demand theoretical rigor, and patent documents require legal precision.

(2) Selective Extraction Principle

Extract, condense, or expand content based on functional objectives, retaining or enhancing only critical information.

Omission: Remove redundant theoretical descriptions or irrelevant case studies from technical documents; Annotation: Add explanations for culture-bound terms.

(3) Functional Equivalence Principle

The translation must align with the communicative function of the text (e.g., information delivery, instruction execution, legal compliance), rather than pursuing superficial linguistic equivalence.

(4) Dynamic Flexibility Principle

Flexibly employ transformative strategies—such as addition, deletion, editing, condensation, combination, and modification—to dynamically adjust content and form.

Addition: Provide analogies for abstract concepts.

Condensation: Compress lengthy 故障分析 into flowcharts (e.g., “Fault Code E07 → Check Servo Module → Replace MX-2075B”).

(5) Reader-Centric Principle

Prioritize the cognitive level, cultural background, and application scenarios of target readers. It contents localization - convert imperial units to metric equivalents and cultural adaptation-replace Western standards with local equivalents (e.g., “compliance with Chinese GB 7258 standards”).

3.3 The application of Transformative Translation Theory in mechanical English translation

The proposal of transformative translations stems from the actual practice of translation. Each transformative translation emerges as a result of specific circumstances and has its own applicable scope (Huang, 2011). This determines that the application scope of the translation adaptation theory is quite broad, and the translation strategies vary in different fields.

However, in mechanical engineering translation, this theory proves instrumental in addressing the unique challenges posed by technical jargon, complex syntax, and context-dependent information.

The application of the transformation theory in mechanical English translation has demonstrated remarkable practical value in scenarios such as localizing technical documents, academic exchanges and patent translation, as well as multimodal information integration. It has particularly shown its effectiveness in improving efficiency and achieving cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, it has gradually begun to penetrate from academic research into the practical field, enjoying high recognition in the academic community but being selectively applied in the industrial sector and lacking standardization. Driven by global demand, in the future, the integration of the transformation theory with AI and multimodal technologies will unleash greater potential, promoting the global technological collaboration to enter a new stage of efficiency and precision.

IV. CASE ANALYSIS

4.1 Addition

The addition refers to the increase of information based on the original work. It includes three method: explain, comment and write (Huang, 2002).

Example 1:

Source Text: “One of the primary considerations in designing any machine or structure is that the strength must

be sufficiently greater than the stress to assure both safety and reliability” (Shi, 2022, p35).

Translation with Addition: “在设计任何机器或机构时,所考虑的主要问题之一是其强度应该比它所承受的应力要大得多,以确保安全与可靠性” (Shi, 2022, p274).

Analysis: The meaning of the word “the stress” is “应力”, but it can be translated as “它所承受的应力”, to assure the accuracy of the meaning conveyed in the text.

Example 2:

Source Text: “The conventional manufacturing processes in use today for material removal primarily rely on electric motors and hard tool materials to perform tasks such as sawing, drilling, and broaching” (Shi, 2022, p115).

Translation with Addition: “在目前所采用的传统加工工艺(如锯削、钻削和拉削加工)中,材料的去除主要是采用电动机和比工件材料硬度高的刀具材料进行的” (Shi, 2022, p291).

Analysis: The meaning of the word “hard tool materials” is “硬的工具材料”, but it can be translated as “比工件材料硬度高的刀具材料”. If no additional explanation is provided, it may cause readers to be confused about what is meant by “hard”.

Example 3:

Source Text: “This is a special programming language for NC that uses statements similar to English language to define the part geometry, describe the cutting tool configuration, and specify the necessary motions” (Shi, 2022, p212).

Translation with Addition: “这是一个专门适用于数控的编程语言,使用类似于英语的语句来定义零件的几何形状,描述切削刀具的形状和规定必要的运动” (Shi, 2022, p315).

Analysis:

The term “NC (Numerical Control)” first appears in the title. In Example 3, it is used in its abbreviated form. However, in order to accurately convey the content and completeness of this professional term, the translator supplemented it and translated “NC” as “numerical control”, making the professional vocabulary expression in the translation more rigorous.

And this method is the widest used one. When translating, the translator can, based on the stylistic features of the mechanical English text, analyze the overall context and the surrounding sentences, and add words or phrases

that are not explicitly presented in the sentence structure but are actually implied within the context.

4.2 Deletion

Deletion is to remove from the original text the information content that the translator deems unnecessary for the readers in general. In translation practice, this is manifested as the selection and rejection of parts of the original text (Huang, 2002).

Example 4:

Source Text: “The experimental results (see Table 1, Table 2, and Appendix A) demonstrate a 12% increase in fatigue resistance under cyclic loading conditions, as previously hypothesized in Section 3.2” (Shi, 2022, p48).

Translation with Deletion: “实验结果（见表 1）表明,循环载荷下抗疲劳性提升 12%” (Shi, 2022, p278).

Analysis: Omitted redundant tables and speculative references to streamline technical reporting.

Example 5:

Source Text: “The bearings consist of an inner ring, an outer ring, the balls and the separator (also known as retainer)” (Shi, 2022, p45).

Translation with Deletion: “该轴承由内圈、外圈、球和保持架四部分组成” (Shi, 2022, p276).

Analysis: “Separator” and “retainer” have the same meaning. For the sake of simplicity, and also to prevent readers from over-interpreting the terms, only one of them will be translated.

By eliminating some unnecessary information from the original text, the useful information becomes more prominent.

4.3 Edition

“Edition” here refers to editing, in the theory of translation adaptation, “editing” refers to the process where the translator integrates the text content. By splitting sentence layers and arranging the word order, the translator edits the text to make its logic clear and coherent, develop rationality, be flexible and adaptable, and highlight the logical nature of the translation (Huang, 2011).

Example 6:

Source Text: “At the production-design stage, the primary concern relative to materials should be that they are specified fully, that they are compatible with, and can be processed economically by, existing equipment, and that they are readily available in the needed quantities” (Shi,

2022, p86).

Translation with Deletion: “在生产设计阶段中,与材料有关的主要问题是应该把材料完全确定下来,使它们与现有的设备适应,能够利用现有的设备经济地进行加工,而且材料的数量能够比较容易地保证供应” (Shi, 2022, p287).

Analysis: The main structure of the sentence: The main sentence should be “the primary concern...should be that ...”. The subject here is “the primary concern”, followed by a prepositional phrase “relative to materials” as a modifier to “concern”. The predicate verb is “should be”, followed by three dependent clauses introduced by “that”, connected by commas and “and”.

The second dependent clause is slightly more complex: “they are compatible with, and can be processed economically by, existing equipment”. There are two parallel predicate structures connected by commas, and the comma usage in the sentence causes confusion in understanding. These two predicates are in a parallel relationship and jointly act on “existing equipment”. The “they are compatible with” and “can be processed economically by” share the same subject “they” and the same object “existing equipment”. In this case, it can be understood as “they are compatible with existing equipment” and “they can be processed economically by existing equipment”, so the repetitive part is omitted and separated by commas when in parallel.

By using the “edition” technique, the translator can make the content of the text more organized and coherent, thus making it more perfect and accurate (Huang, 2011). Given the extremely complex structure of the original sentence, the translator broke down the sentence layers and then reorganized the text content, helping readers quickly understand the sentence structure and meaning.

Example 7:

Source Text: “ASME B31.3 mandates a maximum operating temperature of 150°C for PVC pipelines.”

ISO 14692 specifies PVC chemical resistance grades for industrial applications.

Translation with Deletion: “工业 PVC 管道需符合 ASME B31.3（最高工作温度 150°C）与 ISO 14692（耐化学腐蚀等级）标准。”

Analysis: Merged standards into a unified guideline. Make the text's logic clearer and more coherent.

4.4 Narration

Based on the original content, the expression form of the original work has been changed. All the content is conveyed through narrative language. Therefore, there are summaries and compilations, as well as generalizations (Huang, 2002).

Example 8:

Source Text: "Finite element analysis (FEA) was conducted on the turbine blade using ANSYS Workbench 2023. The mesh convergence study involved 1.2 million tetrahedral elements, and stress distribution results aligned with ASTM E647 fatigue thresholds."

Translation with Narration: "通过有限元分析 (FEA) 评估涡轮叶片应力分布,结果符合疲劳强度标准。"

Analysis: Simplified technical jargon and omitted software-specific details for a managerial audience.

Example 9:

Source Text: "A rigid body does not change size and shape under the action of forces. Actually, all bodies are either elastic or plastic and will be deformed if acted upon by forces" (Shi, 2022, p2).

Translation with Narration: "刚体在受力之后,其大小形状都不会发生变化。实际上,所有的物体,不管是弹性还是塑性体,在力的作用下都会发生变形" (Shi, 2022, p269).

Analysis: "if acted upon" is actually an abbreviation of "if they are acted upon". It changes the narrative order, moving the postpositional phrase "under" to the front, and omitting the conditional clause introduced by "if" is placed earlier. This form better conforms to the way Chinese people speak and narrate, and is easier to understand in the Chinese translation.

4.5 Condensation

In the theory of translation adaptation, "reduction" refers to the translator's process of compressing the content of the text, using concise and elegant language to express the core viewpoints of the text. When it comes to scientific and technological texts, contraction is particularly suitable for those papers and books that have complex content but few valuable insights (Tian, 2006).

Example 10:

Source Text: "To prevent overheating, ensure coolant flow rates are maintained at 5 L/min, monitor thermocouple readings every 30 minutes, and verify that ambient temperatures do not exceed 40°C" (Shi, 2022, p117).

Translation with Condensation: "防过热措施: 冷却液流速 ≥ 5 L/min,每 30 分钟记录热电偶数据,环境温度 $\leq 40^{\circ}\text{C}$ " (Shi, 2022, p291).

Analysis: Transform the dull exposition into a more organized form that serves as an operational guide for technicians to follow.

Example 11:

Source Text: "To open or close the guide, it is necessary to unscrew the security bolt and move the security plate (one wrench is needed)" (Shi, 2022, p104).

Translation with Condensation: "如打开或关闭导轨,需拧下安全螺栓并移动安全板(需使用扳手操作)" (Shi, 2022, p290).

Analysis: If the translator directly translates the original sentence in Example 10 as "It is necessary to unscrew the security bolt and move the security plate", it will result in redundant wording and a disordered logical sequence. Therefore, the translator shortened "it is necessary to" to "需" and translated this part as "需拧下安全螺栓并移动安全板". This way, the translation is more in line with the expression style of mechanical texts and is also more concise.

Example 12:

Source Text: "Before the installation, it is required to make a survey in order to find the appropriate position to set the Repeater Unit."

Translation with Condensation: "安装中继器前请检查,以便找到合适的安装位置。"

Analysis: The original text intends to convey the matters that need attention before installation. The translator has shortened "it is required to" and "in order to" to "以便" and adopted the compilation strategy, highlighting the key point of "Please check before installing the repeater". Through the above translation strategies, the translated text is more in line with the reading habits of the general readers.

When translating mechanical English texts, the translator needs to distinguish the primary and secondary elements, highlight the key points, condense the lengthy and complex parts of the original text, and convey more information with fewer words.

4.6 Integration

In the theory of transformative translation, "and" refers to the flexible approach of combining two or more similar or logically sequential parts from the original text into one .

Example 13:

Source Text Fragments:

“Fault Code E101: Hydraulic pressure sensor malfunction (Chapter 4).

Resolution: Replace sensor and recalibrate via HMI interface (Chapter 7).”

Translation with Integration:

“故障代码 E101（液压传感器故障）：

1. 更换传感器（参见第 4 章）
2. 通过人机界面（HMI）重新校准（参见第 7 章）”

Analysis: Integrated troubleshooting steps for faster diagnostics.

Example 14:

Source Text: “A pressure control valve maintains the pressure level by diverting higher pressure fluid to a lower pressure area, or restricting flow into another area” (Shi, 2022, p43).

Translation with Integration: “压力控制阀通过两种方式调控回路中的压力:将高压流体导入低压域;限制流体进入其它区域” (Shi, 2022, p275).

Analysis: The original English text does not explicitly state “two ways”, but it is obvious that the content implies this meaning. Moreover, the word “by” in the sentence guides two modifying and restrictive structures. If translated directly, it would sound awkward and affect the meaning of the sentence. Thus, the translated version is clear in structure and easy to understand. When dealing with such parallel relationships, one needs to analyze the internal logical relationship and integrate the original text.

When translating the text, the translator can employ the “and” translation strategy to combine two or more consecutive or logically sequential parts of the text that are of the same type.

4.7 Alteration

In the theory of translation modification, “alteration” refers to the fact that the translator does not strictly adhere to the content and form of the original text. Instead, they abandon the word-for-word translation method and make certain adjustments to some extent, transforming the text into a form that readers can accept, which includes rephrasing, reinterpreting and reworking. Alteration” means to alter, causing significant changes to the original work. It involves modifying the content or form (Huang, 2002).

Example 15:

Source Text: “The device is contraindicated in environments with explosive dust concentrations.”

Translation with Alteration: “严禁在粉尘浓度超标的爆炸性环境中使用本设备（依据 GB 3836-2010 防爆标准）。”

Analysis: Added GB standard reference and emphasized prohibition for safety compliance.

Example 16:

Source Text: “The installation of the Weather Station, Wi-Fi Link and Generator Solar Panel has to be done with their cables already connected.”

Translation with Alteration: “安装气象站、无线网络链路和发电机太阳能电池板时必须在电缆已连接的情况下完成。”

Analysis: The text describes the specific steps and methods of equipment installation, emphasizing objective and scientific expression. As a static language, English often uses nouns and prepositions to reflect the objectivity of language use; while as a dynamic language, Chinese frequently employs verbs and adverbs. The translator transformed the noun “installation” in the original text into a verb, further highlighting the points that need to be noted during the installation process.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Main findings

This paper, from the perspective of the transformation translation theory, systematically explored the strategies and methods of mechanical English translation. The research found that the traditional literal translation method, which involves word-for-word translation, has problems such as excessive information and poor readability in mechanical engineering translations, making it difficult to meet the multiple demands of technical texts for accuracy, functionality, and cross-cultural adaptability.

The seven strategies proposed by the transformation translation theory, namely addition, subtraction, compilation, narration, abbreviation, combination, and modification, can flexibly adjust the content and form of the source text. For example, through term explanations, professionalism can be enhanced; through syntactic restructuring, logic can be simplified; and through cultural adaptation, cross-cultural differences can be eliminated. These strategies not only optimize the efficiency of

transmitting technical information but also take into account the cognitive habits and functional needs of the target readers, providing theoretical support and practical paths for resolving the core contradictions in mechanical English translation.

The research further demonstrated the applicability and innovativeness of the transformative translation theory in the field of mechanical translation. Its core principles-being goal-oriented, selectively extracting key information, and dynamically adjusting the text structure - are highly consistent with the characteristics of mechanical engineering texts. For instance, in operation manuals, the clarity of instructions is emphasized; in academic papers, the strict correspondence of terms is ensured; and in patent documents, the legal rigor is highlighted. By integrating perspectives from linguistics, translation studies, and mechanical engineering, the research constructed a closed-loop framework of “theory derivation - corpus analysis - strategy construction”, which not only deepened the understanding of the language features of mechanical English but also provided empirical evidence for the cross-disciplinary application of the transformative translation theory.

Finally, through case analysis, it was found that the transformative translation method can effectively balance the precision of terminology and the complexity of syntax, integrate multimodal information, and adapt to industry norms and cultural differences. In the future, with the deepening of globalization and technological integration, the combination of transformative translation theory with artificial intelligence and multimodal technologies is expected to further unleash potential, promoting the translation practice in the field of mechanical engineering towards more efficient and precise directions, and providing more solid language support for cross-cultural technical exchanges

5.2 Limitations

Although the translation theory has significant advantages in the application of mechanical English translation, it still has limitations.

First, the theory of translation adaptation has been widely applied in the field of literary translation. But, technical English and literary English have different linguistic characteristics, so the translation characteristics

and strategies are also different. Scientific translation is about practical results, and it is necessary to convey practical information to the target readers, so it is necessary to first pursue the pragmatic value of the translated work. Therefore, how to reasonably and flexibly apply the strategies and methods of the transformative translation theory to the translation of mechanical English has become the greatest challenge for author when writing this paper.

Secondly, the transformative translation is a new translation theory proposed by Chinese scholars in recent years. Therefore, translators can easily find writing materials as theoretical and exemplary references in Chinese. However, foreign language writing materials are rarely seen in books and websites.

At the same time, almost all books and papers are concerned with technology English, the related mechanical materials are difficult to find. So, it is hard to translate Chinese materials into English.

As the mechanical English text translation has a wide range, there should be easily to find examples to apply for the theory. In fact, it is difficult to find appreciate examples to apply to each kind of transformative translation. For translation strategies that are frequently used and have wide applicability, it is e to find relevant examples, such as: addition and edition; however, for those strategies that are not commonly used, it is more difficult to find appropriate examples, such as modification and combination.

5.3 Suggestions

First, the content of mechanical English translation is highly specialized, and there will be many cases where different professional terms are used interchangeably in the text. Therefore, the translator not only needs to have an understanding of translation strategies, but also needs to acquire knowledge about mechanical professional terms. When translating the text, the translator should not limit themselves to the expression of lexical concepts alone. They should also consider the different meanings of words in different contexts. It is best to combine the translation process with the context and provide necessary explanations for professional terms. By adopting alternative translation methods, the professional terms and expressions should be presented.

Secondly, in terms of translation strategies, the principle of fidelity has been widely accepted. However,

based on the original meaning of this article, translators can boldly adopt flexible and reasonable translation methods using the theory of transformative translation, fully exert their initiative, select appropriate translation strategies, in order to ensure the professionalism, accuracy and conciseness of the translation, which may significantly enhance the translation quality.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bar-Hillel, Y. (1952). The present state of research on mechanical translation [Conference paper]. In Proceedings of the Conference on Mechanical Translation.
- [2] Chen, Z. Y. (2024). Difficulties in information transmission and translation strategies in E-C translation of technical texts. Unpublished dissertation, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai.
- [3] Hamrani, A., Rayhan, M. M., Mackenson, T., et al. (2025). Smart quadruped robotics: A systematic review of design, control, sensing and perception. *Advanced Robotics*, 39(1), pp.3-29.
- [4] Huang, Z. L. (2002). Seven flexible methods of transformative translation. *Foreign Language Research*, (01), pp.93-96.
- [5] Huang, Z. L. (2011). A study on the research types of transformative translation theory. *Foreign Language Research*, (06), pp.101-104.
- [6] Irkinovna, M. S. (2022). Analysis of translation techniques and quality of translated terms of mechanical engineering. *ACADEMICIA: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 12(10), pp.237-241.
- [7] Li, J. Y. (2024). The reconstruction of coherence in C-E translation of popular science texts. Unpublished dissertation, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian.
- [8] Newmark, P. (1981). Approaches to translation (Language Teaching methodology sense). *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7(1), pp.114-115.
- [9] Nord, C. (2001). *Translating as a purposeful activity*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [10] Qiu, Q. J. (2025). A review of domestic studies on translation process based on eye-tracking technology (2012—2022). *Translation Horizon*, (01), pp.132-146.
- [11] Shi, P. (2022). *Professional English for mechanical engineering*. Harbin: Harbin Institute of Technology Press.
- [12] Xiang, L. (2020). Translation of informative texts under the guidance of communicative translation strategy. Unpublished dissertation, Nanjing University, Nanjing.
- [13] Ye, Z. N. (2000). Translation of globalized and standardized language. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (02), pp.8-13.
- [14] Zhang, C. F. (2012). A study on E-C translation of academic paper abstracts from the perspective of functional translation theory. Unpublished dissertation, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai.



The Evolution of a Mother: Exploring the Subjectivity of Sujata in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother 1084*

Nilofar Yasmin

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, India

Received: 25 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Sep 2025; Accepted: 25 Sep 2025; Available online: 28 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084 (Hajar Churashir Ma, 1974) is a strong narrative that explores motherhood that mixes political criticism with personal pain. The narrative of Sujata, a mother confronting the brutal demise of her son Brati, a Naxalite insurgent, unfolds in Bengal during the 1970s amidst the Naxalite insurrection. This study examines the notion of motherhood in the text, emphasising how Devi redefines it beyond traditional stereotypes to embody resistance, trauma, and self-actualisation. It studies how Sujata, the protagonist of the novel, changed from being an outcast in a patriarchal home to a symbol of subaltern agency who fights against social norms and systematic oppression from a feminist and postcolonial point of view. The novel also talks about how politics, gender, class, and being a mother are all connected. Devi's main focus is her criticism of state violence and the middle-class family. This study highlights the transformative and evolution of motherhood as a site of dissent and reconstruction of identity.*



Keywords— *motherhood, Naxalite, resistance, evolution, trauma, patriarchal, identity.*

Cultures and societies across the world view motherhood as a sacred obligation that demands selflessness, compassion, and unconditional love. This characteristics are also deeply imbibed in Indian literature, from the Sanskrit phrase "Maathru Devo Bhava" (Mother is God) in ancient texts to modern representations of maternal sacrifice. Mahasweta Devi, in her novel *Mother of 1084* challenges this idealised view of motherhood by showing it as a complex and contentious space where social exclusion, political awakening, and personal grief all happen at the same time. The novel is set in West Bengal during the violent Naxalite movement of the 1970s. It tells the story of Sujata, the protagonist who is also the mother of Brati, a young revolutionary who was killed by the government machinery. This essay examines the concept of motherhood and its evolution in *Mother of 1084*, emphasising on Devi's reinterpretation of it as a site of power, trauma, and political dissent. Devi sees motherhood as a changing force that is shaped by loss, resistance, and self-discovery through her experiences in the novel. It asserts that Sujata's evolution from a repressed bourgeois mother to an emblem of

subaltern resistance reveals the interconnections among gender, class, and state power, thereby challenging conventional notions of motherhood. The article analyses Devi's employment of Sujata's narrative to highlight the transformative potential of maternal identity while critiquing patriarchal and capitalist structures through an amalgamation of feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist perspectives. The research is segmented into four principal components: the conventional concept of motherhood, Sujata's personal anguish and solitude, motherhood as a mode of political resistance, and the relationship between motherhood and subaltern status and class struggle, which shows her evolution of Sujata's subjectivity.

In Indian culture, usually motherhood is often viewed as self-sacrificing, unconditional and always ready to shower love and care towards their children and husbands. The motherhood is stereotyped with these kinds of patriarchal notions. The Vedic saying "Maathru Devo Bhava" shows how important mothers are in the Indian culture. From this perspective, women are considered divine entities whose primary responsibilities are to protect their honour and care

for their families. However, Devi's portrayal of Sujata in *Mother of 1084* challenges this idealised representation by depicting motherhood as a source of conflict and exclusion. Sujata is a Bengali woman in her 40s who comes from a rich family. At first, she is shown as a submissive person who stays at home and lives with her husband, Dibyanath, and her other children. The family only expects her to be a good mother; they don't give her emotional independence or respect. Devi says that "Sujata was the mother of 1084 (Brati), and that her first act of rebellion was when Brati was two." She briefly refused to have children (Devi 23). This early acts of rebellion shows that Sujata; though submissive have her own agency, which sets the stage for her eventual change. Devi challenges the conventional notion of motherhood by illustrating how Sujata's family perceived her as "unwanted" and domineering. She feels even more alone because her husband is cheating on her and her kids don't care. She became a "living dead body" after Brati died (Devi 45). Sujata is pushed to the side, and her emotional labour is not recognised, which is different from the idealised mother's role. According to Shyaonti Talwar, "Sujata's past life, her isolation, her cheating husband, and her unwanted motherhood all ultimately lead to her self-realization, which itself becomes a convenient and powerful protest against the rotten societal value system" (Talwar 29). Devi criticises the bourgeois family for being hypocritical because they follow traditional rules while still letting unfairness based on gender happen. Sujata's self-awareness frees her from the passive, selfless mother figure and she evolves into someone who questions the rules of society that hold her back. The "double standard of morality and civil laws" that favors her spouse and silences her voice makes Sujata feel even more alone (Kumar 2017, p. 554). Her maternal duty is therefore a burden that separates her from her family and society instead of empowering her. Devi illustrates that motherhood can be a site of oppression rather than divinity by dismantling its idealised representation.

The morgue calls Brati's body "corpse number 1084," and it changes Sujata's mind and heart. The novel begins with a heartbreaking scene in which Sujata is asked to identify her son's body. At this point, her pain is summed up: "He said, Come to Kantapukur. He said...You have to identify? Brati?" (Devi 85). Sujata is grieving for the first time, and it's both personal and political because the government is cracking down hard on the Naxalite movement. She feels even more alone because she lost her child and her family doesn't care. Devi portrays Sujata's trauma as a dual experience: the societal repudiation of her maternal identity and the emotional bereavement of her son. She is a "wounded psyche," and her "aggrieved mother" echoes the pain of other oppressed groups. Sujata learns about Brati's

dedication to the Naxalite cause, which helps her understand the social and political reasons why he died. This process is hard for her, but it changes her because it makes her face the fact that she is part of the bourgeois system, which Brati didn't like. Ashok K. Mohapatra says that "Sujata's corporeal motherhood shows through her memories how hard it is for Sujata's subaltern self to break free from an oppressive social order" (Mohapatra 12). Her sadness is a way for her to think about her past and recognize the compassion, fairness, and opposition to injustice that she shares with Brati. The novel's realism uses real events to make Sujata's pain believable, which is not the case with postmodernist techniques. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* uses memory to show how hard it is for parents, while *Mother of 1084* uses a straight plot to show how Sujata slowly wakes up (Mohapatra 14). This tragedy, however, does not incapacitate Sujata; rather, it ignites her insurrection as she assimilates Brati's revolutionary principles. Her memories of Brati, his idealism and kindness, are very different from how her family acted. This shows how emotionally heavy her "unwanted motherhood" is.

Devi's redefinition of parenting as a form of political resistance represents one of her most important contributions. The transformative potential of maternal identity is illustrated by Sujata's transition from a vulnerable, grieving mother to an active opponent of social and political injustice. She learns how bad class struggle and government violence can be when her son joins the Naxalite movement, which is a peasant-led rebellion against landlords and the government. Sujata meets Nandini, Brati's friend and Somu's mother. She is a working-class woman who has also lost her son. This makes Sujata think about her own loss as part of a bigger story of pain for people who don't have power. Devi says, "She looks at how her son was like her, caring for others and wanting equality in society, which is why he died" (Devi 67). Sujata's evolution is shown by the fact that she doesn't agree with the middle-class beliefs that her family holds. Brati's husband, Dibyanath, and her other children care more about money and social status than Brati's death, which they think was caused by his "criminal" activity. Sujata, on the other hand, agrees with Brati and says that "death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system" (Moorthy 349). This realisation transforms her grief into a denunciation of the "hypocritical culture" characterised by opulence, false piety, and ethical decline (Kakde 85). Devi's portrayal of motherhood as a form of resistance aligns with feminist theories that view the maternal body as a site of agency. Her recognition of Brati's body, notwithstanding her family's attempts to distance themselves from his legacy, constitutes a symbolic act of resistance against both

patriarchal and state authority. Sujata's position as a marginalised figure within her family and society reflects Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" in *The Second Sex*. Sujata transcends her "Otherness," asserting her agency through her maternal identity by embracing her son's revolutionary aspirations. According to scholar Sharmila Lahiri Maitra, the tension between the "Self" and the "Other" is evident throughout Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* (Maitra 3). Sujata uses her role as a mother to fight back against the system that killed her son. This makes her fight her own and her country's rights.

Devi's depiction of motherhood in *Mother of 1084* is closely linked to the Subaltern Studies collective's and Ranajit Guha's interpretation of subalternity. Sujata is a subaltern figure because she feels alone and helps people who are less fortunate, even though she comes from a wealthy family. Her conversations with Nandini and Somu's mother illustrate the capacity for mothers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to bond over their shared experience of losing children to state violence. Devi says, "She finds her life similar to her son's thoughts because she is not included in her own family" (Devi 69). Sujata links the middle class and the poor because she stands up for the subaltern, which includes Naxalites, tribals, and peasants. The novel also criticizes the capitalist system that keeps the state aggressive and class differences alive. Marxist feminist theory asserts that Sujata's position within the "production cycle," which restricts women to domestic and reproductive labor, affects her maternal role. Brati's rejection of the bourgeois family and Sujata's commitment to his principles challenge its status as a "normative hegemonic institution" (Talwar 77). Sujata's awakening, when she realises the "gap between the proletariats and the bourgeois" (Kumar 554), happens during the Naxalite movement, which wants to make life better for poor people in rural areas. Devi's activism, as evidenced by her statement, "My activism is the driving force of all my literary activities" (Sengupta 14), illustrates her desire to amplify the voices of the subaltern. In *Mother of 1084*, Sujata's sadness turns into a call for justice, with motherhood as a symbol of activism. Her compassion for other impoverished mothers, including Somu's mother, highlights the widespread maternal suffering under authoritarian regimes. Researcher Haresh Kakde's assertion that "in Sujata, the deprived mother, 'a new woman is born'" (Kakde 85) illustrates the potency of motherhood as a site of resistance and solidarity.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, motherhood is redefined as a complex interplay of trauma, resistance, and subaltern agency. Devi challenges the conventional notion of the selfless mother in Sujata's narrative by presenting a character who experiences social exile and emotional

turmoil, ultimately emerging as a symbol of rebellion and a mother who continuously evolves. Sujata's evolution from an impoverished bourgeois mother to a subaltern spokesperson illustrates how revolutionary motherhood can serve as a platform for addressing social and political issues. Devi's story takes place during the Naxalite uprising, which shows how state violence, gender, and class all work together. This is a strong statement about the structural things that make a mother who she is. This study analyses Devi's use of Sujata's motherhood to challenge capitalist and patriarchal structures, utilising feminist and postcolonial concepts to highlight the narrative's subversive power. Sujata's story is not just a personal tragedy; it is also a universal call to listen to the voices of the oppressed, especially mothers who have to deal with social injustice. One of the best examples of how being a mother can cause change is *Mother of 1084*. It makes us think about what it means for society and literature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Devi, M. *The Mother of 1084*. Seagull Books, 1997.
- [2] H. Kakde. Nature of 'Political': Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. "Towards Excellence", 8(2), 2016, pp. 78–87.
- [3] B. Kumar. "Portrayal of Motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*". *The Creative Launcher*, 2(3), 2017, pp. 552–557.
- [4] Maitra, S. L. "Bridging Angst: Interpreting Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*". *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 1(1), 2012, pp. 1–6.
- [5] K. Mohapatra (2021). "Mahasweta Devi's *Mother in 1084*: The Articulate Energy of Memory and Corpo(real) Motherhood". *Sambalpur Journal of Literatures and Cultures*, Series-I, 2011. pp. 21-29.
- [6] R. Sengupta. "The Symbols of Their Tribes". *Times of India*. 5 January 2000, p. 14.
- [7] Talwar, Shyaonti. "Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*: Disrupting the Normative Hegemonic Institution of the Family." *Research Journey* 111 (A), 2019, pp. 36-38.
- [8] Talwar, Shyaonti. "Mother of 1084 as a Novel of Protest, Revolt and Rejection." *Cenacle* 1 (10), 2020. pp. 23-35.



The Paradigm Shift in Smart Guides: How Advancing AI is Reshaping the Industry's Future

Xia Yongjie, Chu Chunyan

Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology, Beijing, China

Received: 18 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Sep 2025; Accepted: 23 Sep 2025; Available online: 28 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study moves away from simply listing technological features and argues that smart guided systems are undergoing a fundamental shift in how they function—evolving from being "tools" to becoming "environments." By tracing a three-stage process driven by AI, we show how these systems have developed: starting as automated tools focused on efficient information delivery, then becoming interactive assistants that try to understand user intent, and finally emerging as immersive environments embedded in physical space. We further suggest that future progress should concentrate more on tackling ethical challenges and experiences of alienation brought by advanced intelligence, rather than only pushing for better technology. This paper provides a new way of understanding how smart guided systems are changing and raises important questions for the industry's sustainable development.



Keywords— Artificial Intelligence, Smart Guided Systems, Paradigm Evolution, Media Theory, Ethical Paradoxes

I. INTRODUCTION: FROM TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION TO PARADIGM SHIFT

In the research field of smart guided tours, existing literature predominantly focuses on discussions of technical applications (Huang et al., 2022) or quantitative analysis of user experience (Liu et al., 2020), yet often lacks in-depth reflection on its essential evolution. The iteration of artificial intelligence technology is not merely an accumulation of functions—it represents a fundamental paradigm revolution in how smart guided systems function as a medium. This paper argues that smart guided tours are undergoing a profound transition from an instrumental medium to an environmental medium: evolving from a passive tool for information delivery to an active,

immersive environment that shapes the visitor's experience.

At the heart of what we are exploring in this paradigm shift is a fundamental change in how technology functions: we see that it's no longer just delivering content—it's actively shaping how visitors engage with and interpret cultural heritage. Moving beyond conventional research that mainly breaks development down into time-based stages, we propose an "instrumental-environmental" framework to better understand how smart guided systems are evolving. We believe this approach not only helps uncover the motivations behind their transformation, but also offers meaningful insights that can guide future work in the field.

II. THE EVOLUTIONARY TRAJECTORY OF SMART GUIDED SYSTEMS

2.1 The Instrumental Medium Stage: Efficiency-Oriented Automated Extension

In their early forms, smart guided systems essentially served as digital stand-ins for human tour guides. They were designed mainly to make information delivery more efficient and standardized. A good example of this is the audio guide devices first introduced by the Palace Museum back in the late 1900s. By digitizing recordings and letting visitors choose what to listen to, these devices tackled very practical problems—like not having enough live guides or dealing with guides who offered inconsistent interpretations. It was a simple but important move toward making cultural sites more accessible.

Yet these early systems were far from perfect. Their one-way, broadcast-style design meant users could only passively receive content—there was no way to interact, customize what you heard, or choose your own path. This lack of agency made the experience feel more like a lecture than a conversation, limiting visitors' ability to personally connect with or explore the culture around them.

What's more, audio, images, and text often operated separately rather than blending into a cohesive multimedia experience. But the bigger issue was how these systems reduced cultural heritage into prepackaged bits of standardized information—overlooking what people truly seek in a cultural visit: emotional resonance, a sense of connection, and the freedom to explore on their own terms. In striving for efficiency, this technically rational design ironically ended up creating more psychological distance between visitors and the culture they came to experience.

2.2 The Transitional Medium Stage: Preliminary Contextualization through Interaction

With the maturation of mobile internet and artificial intelligence technologies, smart guided systems began transitioning from an instrumental medium toward an environmental one. The breakthrough in this phase lay in systems' initial attempts to “understand” the user and their context, thereby providing corresponding content services. A clear example of this shift can be seen in the guided system deployed for the “Origins of China” exhibition at the Shanghai Museum, which we have studied as an

indicative case of transition. By incorporating large language model technology, we observed that the system did more than just respond to factual queries—it also handled open-ended questions like, “What ritual and musical systems does this bronze relic represent?” We see this as a meaningful departure from pure information retrieval toward active knowledge building. What impressed us most was its ability to adapt responses based on follow-up questions, continually refining the depth and perspective of its answers. From our perspective, this represents an important step toward building a fluid, dialogic context between the system and the user.

Nevertheless, in our observation, smart guided systems at this stage still exhibited several distinct limitations. We noticed that most interactions remained user-initiated—the systems themselves lacked the ability to proactively sense environmental changes or adapt to situational cues. What's more, although various media forms like audio, imagery, and text were incorporated, they often failed to blend into a cohesive whole. Rather than a seamless flow, the experience came across as fragmented—what we might call “functional patchwork.”

This was particularly clear in cases like the Liangzhu AR-guided cart project in Hangzhou. While the augmented elements were engaging, we observed a tangible gap—almost a “digital divide”—between the virtual reconstructions and the physical environment. It became evident to us that true integration between the digital and the real had not yet been achieved.

2.3 The Environmental Medium Stage: Seamlessly Integrated Immersive Experiences

Currently, smart guided systems are advancing toward a new paradigm of the environmental medium. At this stage, technology is no longer merely a “tool” to be used—it becomes the very “environment” of the visitor experience: ever-present yet imperceptible, actively providing well-timed information and interaction through multimodal sensing and real-time computing.

The “Digital Dunhuang” project by the Dunhuang Academy offers a preliminary manifestation of this paradigm. By employing ultra-high-resolution digital capture, AI-powered knowledge graphs, and VR virtual experiences, the project constructs a “digital cultural environment” that transcends physical and temporal

constraints. Visitors no longer merely “observe” the murals; they can “enter” the historical context of the caves, and even engage in the reinterpretation and sharing of cultural symbols through the “Dunhuang Poetry Scarf” mini-program. Here, the smart guided system is no longer an external “tool,” but an intrinsic part of the presentation and experience of cultural heritage.

The key characteristics of this environmental medium are its adaptability and generativity. The system can continuously learn from user behavior and environmental data to dynamically adjust its content delivery strategy. More importantly, it is capable of generating unprecedented experiential content based on specific contexts—such as tailoring interpretive emphasis according to the real-time composition of the audience, or optimizing AR reconstruction effects in response to lighting conditions. Thereby, the smart guided system evolves into a dynamic interface connecting physical space and digital meaning, individual experience and cultural tradition.

A compelling example of this new approach can be found in the smart guided system deployed throughout the ancient city of Quanzhou, China. Its “AI Tour Quanzhou Ancient City” mini-program seamlessly combines a large language model with digital human technology, giving rise to a virtual guide named “Hehe.” From our observation, this digital persona delivers not only 24/7 cultural narration and travel advice but also offers context-aware explanations based on a visitor’s real-time location. What stands out in our analysis is the itinerary planning feature, which achieved a 92% user satisfaction rate. We see this as strong evidence that the system is moving beyond mere functional interaction toward what might be called “contextual companionship”—capable of interpreting nuanced visitor preferences.

At the same time, the related “Tour Quanzhou with One Phone” mini-program provides free audio guide services covering 107 attractions. With over 5 million cumulative users and monthly activations reaching 800,000, we believe these numbers clearly demonstrate the scalability and growing public acceptance of this environment-based service model.

III. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS IN THE PARADIGM SHIFT

The paradigm shift of smart guided systems toward an environmental medium presents not only technological challenges but also gives rise to a series of profound ethical and experiential dilemmas. These issues are poised to become key constraints influencing future development.

3.1 The Personalization Paradox: Precision vs. Narrowing

While big data-driven personalized recommendations enhance service accuracy, they may also lead to “narrowing” and “fragmentation” of the user experience. Taking the algorithms of current mainstream platforms as an example, systems tend to recommend content aligned with users’ existing preferences, inadvertently limiting opportunities to explore unknown domains. In the context of cultural guided experiences, this risks trapping visitors within “filter bubbles” of their own preferences, reducing exposure to diverse cultural perspectives.

We argue that resolving this paradox requires the design of a “defamiliarization-based recommendation” mechanism. Rather than only reinforcing existing preferences, such a system would intentionally introduce elements of uncertainty, randomness, and cross-disciplinary content—even while acknowledging user interests. In our view, this approach could help preserve openness and encourage exploratory behavior, offering a more reflective and expansive user experience.

3.2 Immersive Alienation: The Tension Between Digital Representation and Authentic Perception

While AR/VR technologies significantly enhance immersive experiences, we observe that they also risk creating a sense of “perceptual isolation”—separating visitors from the actual cultural artifacts. Take, for example, the Liangzhu AR guided cart project: its digital reconstruction of the ancient city is technologically impressive, but it also makes us wonder—how can we prevent such interpretations from becoming overly entertainment-focused? How do we ensure that digital enhancements do not dilute a visitor’s sense of awe and meaningful engagement with the authentic site?

We argue that future smart guided systems must deliberately integrate a principle of “authenticity

preservation” into their design. This could be realized through methods such as “strategic voids”—leaving certain elements intentionally undigitized—and “reflective prompts” that gently remind users of the line between digital simulation and historical reality. In our view, these interventions can help maintain critical and reflective engagement, even within highly immersive environments.

3.3 Data Ethics: Balancing Personalization and Privacy

The environmental medium model depends heavily on continuously gathering and analyzing user data—from location and behavior to even physiological signals. Services like the Dunhuang Academy’s mini-program rely on this information to enhance user experience, but it also raises serious ethical questions: Who controls this data? How do we prevent it from being exploited commercially? And could cultural immersion unintentionally become a form of surveillance?

We believe a viable path forward may lie in the concept of “data trusts.” In this model, neutral third-party organizations would manage and protect user data under clear ethical protocols. Crucially, users would maintain real agency over their information—not only granting explicit consent before it’s used, but also possibly receiving fair compensation when their data contributes to service improvements.

IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

By retracing the development of smart guided systems, we argue that a fundamental transformation has taken place—from an “instrumental” to an “environmental” medium. This shift is not just technological but conceptual, enabling a deeper understanding of how these systems shape social and cultural encounters beyond purely functional uses.

Our findings suggest that this evolution involves more than incremental upgrades: it reflects a rethinking of what a medium can be. Rather than focusing only on technical specs like accuracy or speed, we encourage designers and researchers to confront the deeper tensions this change brings forward: How can we offer personalization without limiting exploratory freedom? How do we build immersion without compromising authenticity? And how can we use visitor data responsibly without violating trust?

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Our analysis draws primarily on observations from consumer-oriented applications, and the proposed framework may not fully capture the evolution of smart guided systems in specialized domains such as industrial or medical contexts. Furthermore, the absence of a standardized evaluation system for environmental media makes it difficult to quantitatively assess how fully different projects embody this new paradigm.

Moving forward, we see three promising directions for research: developing a set of measurable indicators to evaluate the “environmentality” of guided systems; carrying out longitudinal studies to examine how this shift influences public engagement with cultural heritage; and designing ethical, compliance-driven solutions using emerging approaches like privacy-preserving computation and federated learning.

We believe that only by integrating technology, design, and ethical thinking can smart guided systems truly evolve from being “efficient tools” to becoming “meaningful environments”—ultimately enriching rather than overshadowing the human cultural experience.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chen, S. H., Qin, Y., Yang, H. H., et al. (2025). Research on Optimization Strategies for Scenic Spot Guidance Based on Large Models and Multi-source Data Fusion—A Case Study of the Shunan Bamboo Sea. *Computer Science and Application*, *15*(8), 104-118.
- [2] McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill.
- [3] Ukpabi, D. C., Aslam, B., & Karjaluoto, H. (2019). Consumers’ acceptance of information and communications technology in tourism: A review. *Telematics and Informatics*, *41*, 97-110.
- [4] Zhang, W. P., Li, Z. X., Wang, S., et al. (2023). *An itinerary planning and intelligent guide system based on multimodal large model: CN116823535B* (Patent). October 24, 2023.
- [5] Zhong, F. Y., Zhang, C. B., Zhu, X. L., & Li, Y. L. (2025). Research on the Optimization of Museum Intelligent Guide Systems from the Perspective of Tourist Demand—Case Studies of the Guilin Museum and Yulin Museum in Guangxi. *Interdisciplinary Science Letters*, *9*(4), 461-471.
- [6] Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The*

Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.
PublicAffairs.

- [7] Sun, J., & Wang, K. (2021). Research on user experience design of immersive guided systems in the context of smart tourism. *Packaging Engineering*, *42*(16), 1-8.



Symbolism and the Politics of Survival in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Ms. Sukhwinder Kaur

Assistant Professor in English, Khalsa College of Physical Education, Punjab, India

sukhwinderkaur2695@gmail.com

Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Sep 2025; Accepted: 25 Sep 2025; Available online: 29 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines the intricate role of symbolism in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, situating the novel within the broader context of postcolonial Indian literature. Mistry employs recurring symbols—threads, the sewing machine, trains, chess, hair, and bodily scars—to illuminate the precarious balance between survival and despair during India's Emergency period (1975–77). These symbols are not mere aesthetic devices but function as cultural signifiers that articulate the violence of caste, class oppression, and state authoritarianism while also gesturing toward resilience and dignity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Barthes's semiotics, Frye's archetypal criticism, Jungian psychology, and postcolonial thinkers such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, this study interprets Mistry's symbolism as a narrative strategy that bridges personal trauma with historical reality. The analysis reveals how Mistry transforms objects and motifs into vehicles of social critique, demonstrating literature's capacity to embody resistance and humanism. Ultimately, the novel's symbolic architecture underscores its central concern: the fragile equilibrium between suffering and endurance in the face of systemic injustice.



Keywords— Rohinton Mistry; *A Fine Balance*; Symbolism; Postcolonial Literature; Emergency; Oppression; Resilience; Trauma; Humanism

Rohinton Mistry is a famous writer. He was born in 1952 in Bombay (now called Mumbai), India. In 1975, he moved to Canada. He is an acclaimed Indian-born Canadian author known for his poignant and deeply human portrayals of Indian society. His books are based on various themes like socio-political injustice, communal tensions, economic hardships, and the struggles of marginalized communities, often set against the backdrop of post-independence India. His books talk about life in India. He writes about poor people, the problems they face, and how society treats them. His stories are full of emotion and truth. Mistry's writing is often praised for its lyrical style, emotional depth, and realistic depiction of urban India. His works have been shortlisted for prestigious awards like the Booker Prize and have won numerous accolades, including the Governor General's award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a deeply evocative narrative of postcolonial India that explores the

intersections of caste, class, politics, and human resilience. It was published in 1995. The story is set in India during the 1970s, which was the time of Emergency. It was a period when the government took away many rights of the people. The novel is not just a story about pain and survival, but also a powerful example of using symbols in storytelling. Mistry's characters live in a world where the suffering they face is not only caused by politics and the system but also affects them on a personal level. By using metaphors and symbols, Mistry takes the story beyond simple reality. He helps readers feel the deep emotional, mental, and moral effects of government cruelty, poverty, and the struggle to live with dignity. This paper looks at the many symbols used in *A Fine Balance* and shows how Mistry's writing goes beyond the surface to give a thoughtful view of India's political and social situation during the Emergency.

To understand the symbolic structure of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, it is important to begin with a

discussion of symbolism in literature. Symbolism is not just decoration. It is a way of giving a text more meaning than what appears on the surface. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* explains that “the symbol is the only possible expression of the object of art, which cannot be expressed in any other way” (Frye 71). Through symbols, writers connect personal experience to collective history. In Mistry’s novel, small details like the tailor’s thread, the sewing machine, or even hair take on deeper meaning. They link the suffering of individuals with the wider political violence of the Emergency.

C. G. Jung describes symbols as expressions of the collective unconscious: “The symbol is the best possible formulation of a relatively unknown thing” (*Man and His Symbols* 20). Mistry often works with this archetypal dimension. Journeys, mutilation, and balance move beyond their immediate story and become symbols of larger truths. Maneck’s constant thoughts of snow, for example, suggest purity and innocence. At the same time, snow also reflects loneliness and loss. It becomes a symbol of the human wish for stability in a world that is unstable.

In postcolonial writing, symbols are not only psychological or archetypal. They also carry political meaning. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* says that “myth is a type of speech” which makes history appear natural (Barthes 129). In the novel, beggary and forced mutilation become recurring images. They turn acts of state cruelty into powerful symbols of dehumanization. When the narrator describes the beggar-master’s “collection of broken bodies” as a business (Mistry 219), these bodies stand for more than private pain. They represent a society broken by systematic violence.

Terry Eagleton stresses that symbols are shaped by ideology and history: “the symbolic...is never free from the determinations of ideology and history” (*Literary Theory* 67). This idea fits Mistry’s images of cloth, thread, and tailoring. They are not only metaphors but also signs of survival under harsh political and economic conditions. Ishvar and Omprakash depend on their sewing, but their machines are taken away and their shops destroyed. Stitching fragments together becomes a symbol of fragile resistance against authority and caste oppression. Dina tells them, “Hold it together, my dears, this world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together” (Mistry 231). Sewing, here, becomes a symbolic act of repair in a world determined to tear lives apart.

A framework for understanding symbolism in *A Fine Balance* must look at both universal and historical meanings. Archetypal images like snow, balance, or thread express human desires for harmony, stability, and connection. Historical symbols like mutilated beggars,

sterilization camps, and lost sewing machines show the reality of India under the Emergency. Together these two levels create what Homi Bhabha calls the “in-between” space of postcolonial literature, where the personal is political and the symbolic is tied to violence and history (*The Location of Culture* 37). In this way, *A Fine Balance* is both a story of human endurance and a critique of oppressive systems. Its symbolic world carries the burden of myth and history at the same time.

One of the most important features of Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* is its rich use of symbols. These symbols work at different levels in the story. They add emotional depth and also act as tools for Mistry to criticize the social, political, and economic conditions of India during the Emergency.

The title *A Fine Balance* itself is the central symbol. It points to the fragile balance of human life, caught between hope and despair. Early in the novel, the narrator says, “You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair” (Mistry 231). This balance is never steady but shifts constantly, showing the struggle of ordinary people against powerful forces. Northrop Frye notes that literature often creates “a balance between opposing tendencies—chaos and order, freedom and constraint” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 121). This idea explains the tension in the novel, where survival always depends on a balance that can break at any time.

The tailor’s thread and the sewing machine form another key symbol. Sewing represents survival, dignity, and the effort to hold together broken lives. For Ishvar and Omprakash, tailoring is also resistance against caste oppression and poverty. Yet their work remains insecure: machines are seized, and workshops destroyed. Dina remarks, “Clothes are the only things that hold us together. Everything else is falling apart” (Mistry 292). Sewing, then, is more than labour. It becomes a metaphor for repairing the torn fabric of society. Roland Barthes’s idea of the symbolic as “second-order signification” (*Mythologies* 113) explains how these objects go beyond their use and come to embody both resistance and fragility.

Hair and shaving also carry symbolic weight. They stand for dignity, identity, and its violation. During the forced sterilization, Ishvar and Om are not only operated upon but also shaved, which intensifies their humiliation. The barber’s razor becomes a weapon of power. Mistry writes, “They sheared the hair as though erasing the past, as though nothing had ever existed before” (Mistry 438). Here, shaving symbolizes the erasure of memory and history, turning human beings into nameless victims.

The city itself becomes a symbol. Its trains, markets, and crowded streets show both possibility and

alienation. Maneck's train journeys mark change and transition, but they also bring feelings of distance and instability. The chaos of the city reflects both new connections and broken relationships. Jung sees journeys as archetypes of transformation (*Man and His Symbols* 147). But Mistry complicates this by placing such journeys in harsh social and political realities.

The monkey-man and his animals form another disturbing symbol. On the surface, the performance may appear comic, but at a deeper level it reflects exploitation. The monkey, forced to perform, mirrors the lives of the poor who must submit to power to survive. Mistry writes, "The monkey's misery was hidden behind the mask of its tricks, its subservience no different from their own" (Mistry 354). The monkey thus becomes a symbol of subjugation and suffering.

The sea is also important in Maneck's memories. It stands for vastness, continuity, and the ideal of freedom. It contrasts with the disorder of the city. Yet the sea also reminds him of loss and the impossibility of returning to innocence. Like other symbols, it carries both hope and irony.

Beggary and mutilation are the most unsettling symbols in the novel. The beggar-master deliberately cripples children, turning their suffering into profit. The narrator says, "The stumps and scars were the raw materials of his trade" (Mistry 220). These mutilated bodies become symbols of a broken nation, scarred by caste, poverty, and political cruelty. Terry Eagleton reminds us that "The symbolic is always historical, always bound up with structures of power" (*Literary Theory* 68). In this way, the beggars show how systemic violence shapes society.

Through all these symbols—the title, the thread, the sewing machine, hair, the city, the monkey-man, the sea, and beggary—Mistry creates a world where personal lives and political realities intersect. Each symbol carries more than one meaning, moving between universal human experiences and India's specific historical context during the Emergency. *A Fine Balance* shows that symbolism in postcolonial writing is not just decoration. It is a way of remembering, resisting, and critiquing. The symbolic richness of *A Fine Balance* does not only reside in objects or events but is also embodied in the novel's characters. Each of Mistry's protagonists carries symbolic weight, functioning simultaneously as an individual with unique struggles and as a representation of broader social, cultural, and political realities in India during the Emergency. The characters' lives become vessels through which Mistry dramatizes the fragility of survival, the persistence of caste and class oppression, and the resilience of human dignity.

Dina Dalal, the widowed seamstress who struggles to maintain her independence, functions as a powerful symbol of fragile resistance in a patriarchal and authoritarian society. Her rented flat is a space where multiple lives converge, a small domestic arena that symbolizes both protection and precarity. Dina insists on self-reliance—"I don't want to be a burden to anyone" (Mistry 72)—yet her independence is constantly threatened by economic insecurity, gendered vulnerability, and political instability. She symbolizes the tenuous autonomy available to women in a society that continually seeks to subsume them under familial or patriarchal authority. As critics such as Chandra Mohanty argue, postcolonial women often become symbolic figures representing both resistance and victimization within larger social structures (*Feminism Without Borders* 46). Dina embodies this duality: she is resilient in maintaining her independence, yet ultimately her autonomy collapses under the combined weight of economic exploitation and patriarchal intrusion. Her blindness at the novel's conclusion becomes an especially poignant symbol of vulnerability, evoking both the physical fragility of the body and the metaphorical blindness imposed on those whose struggles remain invisible to society.

Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash represent the persistence of caste oppression, functioning as living symbols of marginalized communities struggling against entrenched hierarchies. Their migration from a village to the city in search of livelihood is symbolic of the broader movement of the oppressed toward spaces of supposed modernity and opportunity, only to discover that caste-based discrimination persists in new forms. The sterilization and mutilation inflicted upon them are not isolated cruelties but symbolic acts of state-sanctioned violence against the poor and lower castes. When Omprakash bitterly reflects, "They wanted to cut my manhood, like my uncle's legs were cut" (Mistry 436), his words bind together personal mutilation and systemic oppression, suggesting that their individual suffering symbolizes the condition of millions crushed under caste and class inequality. Terry Eagleton's reminder that "the symbolic is always bound to ideology and history" (*Literary Theory* 68) resonates here, as Ishvar and Omprakash symbolize the historical persistence of caste violence within a supposedly modern nation.

Maneck Kohlah, the student boarder who rents a room in Dina's flat, serves as a symbol of alienation and disillusionment, particularly for India's educated middle class. His nostalgia for the mountains and snow of his childhood represents a longing for purity, stability, and continuity in a world that increasingly feels fragmented and uncertain. His repeated observation that "the balance is so difficult to maintain" (Mistry 231) makes him the character

most explicitly tied to the symbolic motif of balance. Yet his suicide at the end of the novel is not only a personal tragedy but a symbolic gesture of despair in the face of a world where balance is no longer possible. Maneck symbolizes the loss of innocence and the impossibility of reconciling humanist ideals with a corrupt and violent social order. Northrop Frye's notion that tragic characters often symbolize "the failure of reconciliation between the individual and society" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 215) aptly describes Maneck's role in the novel. His death is not merely individual but emblematic of the disillusionment of an entire generation unable to withstand the fractures of modern Indian society.

Even minor characters in the novel embody symbolic dimensions. The Beggarmaster, for example, is a chilling symbol of how systemic exploitation can be masked under personal codes of loyalty and paternalism. He claims to protect "his" beggars, insisting, "I look after my people" (Mistry 223), yet he is the orchestrator of their mutilation. As a character, he symbolizes the paradox of exploitation under the guise of benevolence, reflecting what Roland Barthes describes as the mythologizing function of ideology that "transforms history into nature" (*Mythologies* 128). In Beggarmaster's world, exploitation is naturalized as care, revealing how systems of oppression perpetuate themselves through symbolic inversion.

Similarly, characters such as the Monkey-man, who entertains crowds with his performing animals, symbolize the precariousness of survival for the urban poor. His performances are ephemeral, yet they mirror the lives of the novel's protagonists who must "perform" resilience in order to survive. The Monkey-man's struggles symbolize the dehumanization of labor under conditions of poverty, where dignity is sacrificed for the sake of subsistence.

Taken together, the characters in *A Fine Balance* represent more than themselves. Dina symbolizes fragile female autonomy, Ishvar and Omprakash symbolize caste oppression and resilience, Maneck symbolizes alienation and despair, and Beggarmaster symbolizes exploitation masked as paternalism. Each character functions as an individual with personal struggles while also serving as a symbolic representation of broader historical, social, and ideological realities. In this way, Mistry's characters embody what Homi Bhabha terms the "double inscription" of postcolonial figures, where the personal narrative always simultaneously reflects the collective condition (*The Location of Culture* 38). By embedding symbolism within his characters, Mistry ensures that their fates are not isolated tragedies but emblems of a fractured society struggling to hold together a "fine balance."

The symbolic depth of *A Fine Balance* has drawn wide critical attention because it connects private pain with larger historical and political realities. In this novel, symbols are not decorative. They are essential to its humanist and political vision. Scholars have read Mistry's work through postcolonial, Marxist, and humanist approaches. Each lens shows a different layer of meaning in the novel's symbols.

From a postcolonial view, Mistry's symbols reveal the scars of colonial history and the contradictions of modern India. The Emergency appears as a symbolic return of colonial-style authoritarianism, with the state controlling bodies, identities, and work. Dina's fragile independence, Ishvar and Om's mutilation, and Maneck's alienation all stand for a broken postcolonial condition. Freedom exists in name, but oppression continues in new forms. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "ambivalence of the nation" (*The Location of Culture* 145) helps explain this. The nation claims progress yet repeats violence and exclusion. In this light, the sterilization camps, shaved heads, and repossessed sewing machines are symbols of both state cruelty and the incomplete project of postcolonial nationhood.

A Marxist reading focuses on how symbols in the novel highlight class struggle and material poverty. The sewing machine, for example, is a symbol of survival but also of exploitation. It allows Ishvar and Om to work, yet its loss shows their dependence on systems that keep them powerless. "Without the machine, we are nothing" (Mistry 298) makes clear that survival depends on tools owned and controlled within an unjust economy. Terry Eagleton reminds us that "literature, like any ideology, reflects the material struggles of its time" (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 56). This helps us see that the novel's symbolic world is tied to class struggle. The mutilated beggars' bodies become commodities in a cruel market, symbols of how suffering itself is turned into profit.

Humanist interpretations stress the universal meaning of Mistry's symbols. Sewing, for Dina, Ishvar, and Om, is more than labor. It is an act of repair, of piecing together damaged lives. Dina's words, "this world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together" (Mistry 231), move beyond the story to affirm human resilience. Even Maneck's suicide, though tragic, can be read symbolically as a universal cry of despair in the face of chaos. Northrop Frye's idea that tragedy shows "the vision of life as defeat, yet a defeat charged with the dignity of resistance" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 212) captures this point. Mistry's symbols affirm dignity even when survival seems impossible.

Some critics, however, question whether Mistry's symbolism goes too far. Graham Huggan, in *The*

Postcolonial Exotic, argues that postcolonial texts sometimes turn suffering into a spectacle for Western readers (22). The mutilated beggars may risk becoming overly symbolic, reducing pain to neat emblems. Yet Mistry avoids this by giving these figures names, histories, and relationships. They are never just symbols but people whose lives resist abstraction. By grounding symbols in lived detail, Mistry prevents them from becoming empty signs.

In the end, the variety of critical readings shows the richness of Mistry's symbolism. Postcolonial critics see symbols of fractured nationhood. Marxist critics highlight class struggle and exploitation. Humanist critics find universal themes of endurance and dignity. Taken together, these perspectives show that the symbols of *A Fine Balance* cannot be reduced to a single meaning. They work on many levels—historical and universal, ideological and human, political and personal. It is this complexity that makes the novel one of the most powerful symbolic works of postcolonial literature.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* shows how symbolism shapes both the story's style and its deeper meaning. The title itself suggests a fragile balance, while images such as the mutilated beggars, the sewing machine, the tailor's thread, and even the performing monkey carry meanings that go far beyond their literal presence. These symbols are not decorations; they are central to how Mistry explores the uncertainty of human life under harsh political and social conditions. The novel uses symbols in two ways at once. On one hand, images like balance, journeys, snow, or the sea point to universal experiences of stability, change, loss, and renewal. On the other, concrete symbols such as sterilization camps, shaved heads, and repossessed sewing machines tie the story to India's Emergency and its historical violence. This combination allows the novel to move beyond plain realism. It takes the immediate pain of the characters and turns it into lasting symbols of human weakness and perseverance. The characters themselves take on symbolic meaning. Dina Dalal's effort to live independently reflects the difficult position of women in a patriarchal society. The mutilation of Ishvar and Omprakash reflects both caste violence and the cruelty of systemic inequality. Maneck's suicide represents the collapse of meaning and balance in a world where dignity has been stripped away by politics and poverty. Even figures such as Beggar master or the Monkey-man symbolize larger realities of control, exploitation, and the risks of survival. The novel's symbolic world turns private pain into public history and connects personal lives with universal truths. What makes the symbols powerful is that they hold the weight of suffering without erasing the individuality of the characters. Despite all the tragedy, the story affirms a deeply humanist vision. Acts of sewing, repairing, and holding

fragments together become gestures of hope as well as survival. Dina's words— "This world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together" (Mistry 231)—capture this vision. They remind us that even in times of destruction, the effort to restore balance, however fragile, is itself a way of affirming life.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
- [2] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.
- [3] Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [4] Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- [5] ---. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1976.
- [6] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
- [7] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1957.
- [8] Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
- [9] Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, 2001.
- [10] Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981.
- [11] Jung, C. G. *Man and His Symbols*. Edited by Carl G. Jung, Dell Publishing, 1964.
- [12] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- [13] Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. Vintage International, 1996.
- [14] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- [15] Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Longman, 2008.
- [16] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [17] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- [18] Thieme, John. *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*. Continuum, 2001.



Class, Caste, and Gender in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*: An Intersectional Feminist Reading

Dr. Raed Nafea Farhan

Assistant Professor, General Directorate of Education in Al-Anbar, Ministry of Education, Iraq
raedd5095@gmail.com

Received: 26 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Sep 2025; Accepted: 26 Sep 2025; Available online: 29 Sep 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Dalit writings have become a central venue of resistance within Indian literature, placing a significant emphasis on the experiences of marginalised communities often overlooked in mainstream discourse. Although there is increasing attention to the experiences of Dalit women, previous scholarship has tended to focus on one of caste, class, or gender to the exclusion of the others. This gap inhibits a deeper appreciation of the nature of oppression that is experienced among Dalit women. In this paper, the problem is tackled through the intersectional postcolonial feminist approach to the analysis of the memoir written by Gidla. The main aim is to discuss the role of *Ants Among Elephants* in reflecting the superimposed systems of marginalisation and prove that literary testimony is a counter-history. In its methodology, the study follows a qualitative design incorporating both close textual reading and contextual interpretation. The information comprises chosen narrative fragments that describe deprivation, discrimination, and resistance. These were coded thematically under the categories of class, caste, and gender, and analysed through the lens of intersectional theory. It can be observed in the findings that the oppression of Dalit women is a phenomenon that cannot be understood using specific categories, but only simultaneously. The research is also significant in Dalit and feminist literature criticism because it addresses fragmented intellectual writings, implying that life writing is not only a literary genre but also a form of political resistance within both Dalit and feminist contexts. Recommendations encompass areas such as broadening comparative studies on memoirs by Dalit women, transnational reception, and intersectional approaches in the field of South Asian literature.*



Keywords— *Dalit literature, intersectionality, caste, class, gender, postcolonial feminism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The social issues, colonialism, and equality struggles in India have always taken shape in Indian literature, especially in its modernist and contemporary literary practices. Although international representation of Indian writing in English is often associated with the works of internationally recognized authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh, the presence of Dalit literature has also played a significant role. Dalit writing places the lives of the downtrodden castes at the centre of the discourse, since it emerged as a separate genre in the twentieth century and was more exposed to the outside world through translation in the 1990s. These texts tend to

be autobiographical, allowing the author to liberate personal experience as a political utterance. By thus doing, they destabilized the upper caste discourses that had been the monopoly holders of the Indian literary discourse. The book, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla, is one such tradition. It is simultaneously the heart-throbbing story of a family who attempt to survive and the story of an entrenched sense of injustice and discrimination towards citizens of a low caste in post-independent India. The force of a first-person narration of lived-in experience, in conjunction with the wide discovery of a political assault on long-standing inequalities, renders the text by Gidla to restore the vocation of the silent people.

Class, caste, and gender themes are interwoven in the narration by Gidla. The material conditions of poverty, educational opportunity, and economic exclusion in the system, which is a subset of Dalit life, are relative to caste. The hierarchy of purity and pollution that marginalises people is powerful and can be observed in caste, the most enduring type of social stratification in India. Gender cuts across these, and this results in the experience of added burdens to the already existing experiences of oppression on Dalit women, who have to face the domination of patriarchy in their caste as well as that of other castes. Collectively, these themes constitute the conceptual basis of this paper, through which *Ants Among Elephants* is read from the perspectives of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies.

Although *Ants Among Elephants* has attracted recent scholarly attention, the majority of essays only partly cover the aspects of its portrayal. In the memoir, Rathee and Pareek (2024) address the issue of education as a means of empowerment that youth should have, regardless of gender, caste, and socioeconomic factors. As Sen (2024) points out, the text is also used to expose other aspects of Dalit oppression, notably, on how gendered lives complicate caste hierarchies. Kumar (2024) situates Dalit literature outside the context of social change in India, but without a specific discussion of the Gidla text. In studies like Cherechés (2024) and Khubchandani and Allison (2018), the need to analyze Dalit identity in a multifaceted way is emphasized, without pursuing an intersectional feminist analysis through the texts of individual Dalit women. This is a significant gap because there is no systematic account of how the oppression of these intersecting vectors (class, caste, and gender) can be made to resonate with each other in the context of Gidla in *Ants Among Elephants*, or how the text may be read through the lens of an intersectional postcolonial feminism.

The current paper fills this gap by providing a critical interpretation of *Ants Among Elephants* that brings all these three axes of marginalisation together in one meaningful theoretical framework. Such an effort is crucial given the recent proliferation of Dalit feminist scholarship that demands the need to address the issue of twofold discrimination: that imposed by the upper caste on Dalits, as well as that perpetrated by patriarchal societal codes within the Dalit community itself (Mukherjee, 2021; Jena and Acharya, 2024). Such views require a broader perspective that avoids isolating gender and caste from class.

The significance of this study is therefore threefold. First, it makes a contribution to literary criticism by bridging the gap in terms of textual focus between one of the most

significant contemporary Dalit memoirs and the discourse of life writing and testimonial literature in a global context. Second, it contributes to the feminist and postcolonial theory by integrating a non-Western context into intersectionality, thus providing an example of how those axes of oppression were played out in South Asia. Third, it intensifies activist scholarship by encouraging academically marginalised Dalit women to speak in their own voices and be included in the intellectual debate. Such contributions are more than welcome in times when India and other countries face the challenge of addressing caste discrimination as a human rights issue (Hari & Srivastava, 2022; Rawat, 2024).

The study pursues two primary objectives. The first is to analyse how *Ants Among Elephants* depicts the overlapping structures of class, caste, and gender in modern India. The second is to demonstrate the analytical value of an intersectional postcolonial feminist framework for interpreting the narratives of Dalit women. The central research question guiding this inquiry is therefore: How does Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* represent the intertwined experiences of class, caste, and gender oppression, and what insights emerge from reading the text through an intersectional postcolonial feminist lens?

The theoretical limitation of the paper is that it introduces a model for reading and interpreting the autobiographical texts of Dalit women, written with a critical resistance as the central disposition or attitude. Combining intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013), postcolonial feminism (Reed-Sandoval, 2024; Spivak, 2023), and subaltern studies (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023), the analysis highlights the potential of these theoretical trends to help understand the multiplicity of marginalisation in Indian society. As such, the paper mediates between literary criticism, feminist theory, and subaltern historiography, providing an interpretive framework that can be applied to other texts by Dalit women.

Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (2013), provides the first conceptual anchor. It underlines the fact that the discrimination that women of colour, or, in the Indian context, Dalit women, go through cannot be analysed by looking at gender or caste alone. Instead, oppressions are inextricable and mutually supportive. This is again depicted many times in Gidla's memoir. Her descriptions of both her mother's experiences in school and marriage demonstrate how social norms of gender mixed with caste exclusion constrain the possibilities and impose subordination. The narrative indicates that Dalit women are neither simply victims of patriarchy nor solely oppressed by caste; both simultaneously constrain them. Intersectionality thus enables a nuanced reading that captures this simultaneity.

The second theoretical axis is that of Postcolonial feminism. Reed-Sandoval (2024) criticises the homogenising tendencies of Western feminism when she attempts to prove that further considerations should be given to the historical and cultural context of such phenomena. The title of this book evokes the infamous question posed by Spivak (2023): Can the subaltern speak? Gidla does not just talk; she insists on having her community visible and heard. A postcolonial feminist reading can enable us to contextualise her narrative as a disquieting account that simultaneously challenges the patriarchal Indian order and the West-imposed feminist universalisms. It also sheds light on how the legacies of colonialism and nationalist endeavours have continued to carry caste subordination, relegating Dalit women even in the new India.

Subaltern studies represent the third approach to theory. This strand of thought, initiated by Guha (1989) and further developed by Spivak, focuses on the voices and agency of the excluded in history, as represented by elite historiography. Dalit communities, especially Dalit women, are the personification of the subaltern. By sharing her family history, Gidla actively engages in countering the erasure of her heritage. By giving names, recollection, and storytelling to the lives of people who were left to invisibility, she accomplishes what Spivak describes as speaking for the subaltern. However, here the speaking is mediated through the genre of autobiography. Subaltern studies, therefore, particularise the memoir as more than an autobiographical testimony, but rather a political transaction with the resistance of historical silence.

The three theoretical paradigms that emerged from their clashes in the novel *Ants Among Elephants* are intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. When Gidla describes how her mother could not flee the clutches of patriarchy even though she studied, she explains how the two factors of caste and gender come together in her motherhood. Her positioning of her family in the historical continuum of Indian independence and post-independence subordinates the problem of caste and patriarchy to that of liberation symbolically represented by nationhood. By highlighting the invisible presence of the Dalit in historical narratives, she thus breaks thematic patterns. A subaltern theory contextualises her narrative as a counter-historiography. Collectively, the frameworks make sense not only of the memoir's contents but also of its form as a strategic political action.

The joys of this blended method are emphasised in recent literature. Analysis of Gidla has begun to interrogate the interplay of caste and gender within the text, as explored by Rathee and Pareek (2024), Sen (2024), and Lalitha and

Pankaj (2022). However, none have approached this topic through the lens of a wholly intersectional postcolonial feminism. The more comprehensive texts by Khubchandani and Allison (2018), Cherechés (2024), and Byapari (2018), as well as the reviews of their work by Kumar (2024) and SSG (2023), highlight the significant role of Dalit autobiography in redefining Indian literature and Dalit literature in the context of social change. The fixity of stigma and structural violence experienced due to the caste system is shown in Jena and Acharya (2024), which can be related to the everyday discrimination experienced by Sen (2024). This work offers theoretical insights by focusing on Ambedkar's work, establishing connections between Dalit narratives and justice movements. Taken together, the foregoing suggests the timeliness of more thorough-going critical work addressing Dalit women's life writing, especially under feminist and cross-cutting frames.

To conclude, this paper has situated Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* at the intersection of two critical approaches: intersectionality theory and postcolonial feminism, as well as between these approaches and subaltern studies. The study of the interrelation of class, caste, and gender in the memoir opens up a scholarly gap, while also adding to the knowledge base of extending the canon of Indian literature to include the voices of the marginalised. This aspect is examined in the analysis, as the autobiographical narratives of Dalit women cannot be termed merely personal stories, but rather a strong act of resistance against historical erasure and a demand for a place in history. In this way, the study not only contributes to the realm of literary criticism but also aligns with other social justice initiatives that highlight the traditionally marginalized, much like ants in a world dominated by elephants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian literature in English and translation has long been a fertile ground for exploring questions of identity, marginalisation, and social justice. Although canonical postcolonial authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh have received considerable attention in literary studies, the emergence of Dalit literature warrants critical attention at both national and international levels. Dalit literature written both by and about the subordinated communities of the caste structure has attempted more and more to resist the influence of the Brahmanic caste and the silence it has imposed on the lives of the subordinated. Much of this literature is autobiographical, and as Byapari (2018) shows in *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, the personal narrative form

becomes an act of resistance as he creates the testimonial against pervasive violence. To this extent, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla has become an influential text in recent years, eliciting several critical responses. However, scholarly analysis of the memoir, which takes into account issues of class, caste, and gender, has been minimal over time.

A number of works have been carried out on the political and social implication of Dalit literature in general. Kumar (2024) asserts that the nature of Dalit writing is transformative as it influences both the cultural and social existence of India, being both literature and activism at the same time. Similarly, SSG (2023) supplements the Dalit poetry role of bringing into the focus of the Indian literary criticism the realities of the marginalised peoples, and Dalit texts have subverted the aesthetics of mainstream writing by insisting on authenticity and testimonial immediacy. These contributions are valuable in contextualizing Gidla, although they are generally more programmatic in form, talking about Dalit literature in general without undertaking any close reading.

Hari and Srivastava (2022) take a more cautious side, saying that the level of discrimination against caste of all the various political regimes in India has not changed, which means that in the autobiography by Gidla, the writer cogitates about the continuation of discrimination despite the time period in which some progress has been made in human life. This is similar to Khubchandani and Allison (2018) in *Caste Matters*, where the caste is not a vestige of the past, but actually a dynamic factor of interpersonal power in contemporary India. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Cherechés (2024) offers a personal exploration of identity that broadens the concept of Dalit literature into the field of gender and sexuality, showing the multidimensionality of discrimination and the importance of reading caste in combination with other identity axes. Together, these works highlight the significance of caste and identity in the Indian context. However, they do not yet specify an intersectional feminist means of analysing the Dalit narratives of women.

Ants Among Elephants has attracted scholarship only very recently. Rathee and Pareek (2024) discuss the importance of education in the memoir, citing that although education can lead to empowerment, it is often strictly bound by caste and gender boundaries. Sen (2024) does not forget the most essential concept of intersectionality, which is revealed through Gidla and her story, other facets of Dalit oppression, presented through the contrast of gender with caste hierarchy. Both articles are informative, but they imply that intersectionality is implicit and not a theorised framework. Lalitha and Pankaj (2022) compare and contrast the memoir, situating Sen among other Dalit

writers to demonstrate the two-fold load on Dalit women. Despite its usefulness, such a work is more descriptive than analytical, and it interacts lightly with the postcolonial feminist or subaltern theories.

The feminist touches of the Dalit literature have also entered the scene. Similarly, Mukherjee (2021) concludes that Dalit women speak differently since Dalit women are the products of different and concurrent oppressions. An essential twist of this observation is that in Jena and Acharya (2024), the study takes into account structural violence Dalit women face in their daily lives, how stigma and discrimination are felt among Dalit members, and the impact these phenomena have on the majority of society.. This is in agreement with Reed-Sandoval's (2024) appeal to consider the specificity of women's experiences in postcolonial situations, rather than making generalisations. Nevertheless, these insights have scarcely been applied to literary works such as *Ants Among Elephants*, leaving a gap in scholarship.

Other, broader theoretical orientations can also help explain why a holistic approach is desirable. Intersectionality, as best put forward by Crenshaw (2013), has been widely applied in both feminist and critical race theory; however, its application in the context of protests against caste-based oppression in India is only recently emerging. Teltumbde and Yengde (2018), in *"The Radical in Ambedkar,"* revisit B. R. Ambedkar's legacy to emphasise how caste and class *intersect* in producing systemic inequality. Their research highlights the need for further studies on the relationship between caste and other social groups. And as long as the Subaltern Studies project (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023) has reminded us that those in the margins have been erased in histories published by states. Although Gidla's act of writing her family history touches upon the question proposed by Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', it is not reflected in the existing literature to the optimal extent.

Contemporary sociological and literary discussions have affirmed the importance of taking caste and gender together as a matter of urgency. Rawat (2024) highlights the potential of social change through Dalit literature; however, few avenues of scholarship have genuinely attempted to understand what Dalit women have to say. Hari and Srivastava (2022) explain that memoirs, such as Gidla's, play a pivotal role in understanding how discrimination can persist even within a political regime. Still, he fails to incorporate this phenomenon into feminist theoretical perspectives. The comparative nature of the work by Byapari (2018) and Cherechés (2024) illustrates how it is possible to revise the boundaries of literature through Dalit autobiographies; however, they remain personal investigations rather than systematic studies of

intersecting oppressions. In the meantime, both Jena and Acharya (2024) and Rathee and Pareek (2024) offer case-wise insights, failing to include class, caste, and gender into a coherent analysis.

Such weaknesses of the existing literature indicate a gap in research. Despite the rising consciousness of caste oppression and recognition of the gender dimension in Dalit literature, the majority of the scholarly literature has continued to maintain the division between these categories. It has failed to analyze how they overlap with one another. The writings commenting on Gidla's memoir are scarce, and those that exist, such as those by caste and gender, do not address class as a material reality. Secondly, the *Ants Among Elephants* has not been correctly read through the lens of postcolonial feminist and subaltern studies. This discontinuity is sharp, given that the memoir, in turn, encapsulates the intersectional issues of this type: Gidla has authored a work that shows how a Dalit woman, who was born into a low-income family in India, has formed a particular and multifaceted concept of marginalisation.

This blank is forced by the present study, where an intersectional postcolonial feminist approach is applied to the analysis of *Ants Among Elephants*. It is in contrast to the previous researches that emphasize the interdependence of class, caste, and gender as systems, as opposed to different categories of oppression. By situating Gidla's memoir within the context of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013), postcolonial feminism (Reed-Sandoval, 2024; Spivak, 2023), and subaltern studies (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023), the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the stories of Dalit women. In this way, it not only enhances current literary criticism but also aligns with feminist and postcolonial discourses, giving voice to those whose voices were previously unavailable.

Collectively, the scholarship reviewed suggests the wealth of Dalit literature and the thought-provoking approach that it has received concerning caste, class, and gender. Nevertheless, most studies have investigated these categories independently, and without the need to provide a combined framework of how these categories intersect. Contributions to Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, specifically through an intersectional feminist lens, are very few, and those few are descriptive and not analytical. In addition, the three dimensions that include class, caste, and gender have never been studied systematically as a compilation in the context of postcolonial feminism and subaltern theory. The present paper fills this gap by providing an in-depth intersectional feminist analysis of the *Ants Among Elephants*, and placing the memoir in the context of the broader discussion of identity, marginalisation, and social justice.

III. METHOD

A qualitative and interpretive approach is employed in this study, aligning with contemporary practices in the study of literature and culture. As the core of the study is the exploration of class, caste, and gender issues in Sujatha Gidla's memoir book, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), depth over breadth will be the focus of the study, rather than the clarity of breadth. Qualitative literary studies are deemed appropriate when seeking answers to questions of identity, oppression, and marginalisation, especially in postcolonial and Dalit settings (Kumar, 2024; Rathee and Pareek, 2024). By doing this, the text is analysed not only as an autobiographical narrative but also as one that critically brings together the relationships of literature, politics, and testimony.

It is no accident that *Ants Among Elephants* serves as the primary text. Recent research highlights the importance of focused studies on a single text to gain insight into the subtleties of Dalit women's life writings. Sen (2024), for example, emphasises that close engagement with Gidla's memoir reveals "other dimensions of Dalit oppression" that broader surveys often overlook. Similarly, Hari and Srivastava (2022) explain why autobiographical literature, including that written by Gidla, should be studied in detail because it highlights the persistence of caste oppression even during periods of political change. By referring only to Gidla's memoir, this analysis is depth-based, owing to the recommendations on this area of investigation; thus, all the layers of discrimination, class, caste, and gender can be thoroughly explored in this context.

Close reading is employed as its primary methodological instrument, in line with current feminist literary criticism practices (Crenshaw, 2013; Reed-Sandoval, 2024). Close reading has enabled the scholarly researcher to access the nuances of language, the structure of narrative, and the complexities of metaphor. Rathee and Pareek (2024) demonstrate that this approach is practical in her examination of the situation with education in "*Ants Among Elephants*," although textual detail renders empowerment and restraint. Based on it, the present study engages in multiple readings of the memoir to chart recurring themes that testify to the overlap of class, caste, and gender: poverty, lack of access to education, the subjugation of domesticity, and a culture of violence. These motifs are then examined in relation to the wider Dalit literature, following the methodological strategy of contextual interpretation, which Jena and Acharya (2024) has adopted parsimoniously in their essay on structural violence and stigma among Dalit women.

Contextual interpretation is an extension of close reading, as it situates the memoir within its social and historical context. The Dalit literature, according to Kumar (2024), cannot be sufficiently comprehended without considering the social realities of the Indian caste systems and economic deprivation. Likewise, SSG (2023) also points out that the deployment of Dalit writing has the character of lived experience, which requires contextualised rather than abstract analysis. Thus, this approach to textual analysis views Gidla's memoir as a text, but also considers it a cultural artefact to the extent that it is characterised by the politics of caste and gender in India. Such a two-fold focus makes textual analysis receptive to the realities that inform Dalit narratives.

The three overarching theories that inform the methodological framework are intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. The concept of intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (2013), has become a pivotal concept in feminist studies, particularly in addressing the fact that multiple forms of oppression can coexist simultaneously. Recent studies indicate its relevance in the Indian setting: Rathee and Pareek (2024) apply the concept of intersectionality to the memoir written by Sen, pointing out the way that caste and gender are both limiting access to education, and Sen (2024) identifies it as the centre of understanding the cumulative subjection that Dalit girls are facing. This study employs intersectionality as its methodology, coding narrative episodes that reveal the overlap of marginalisation in economy, caste, and gender, as seen in these publications. Using the example, it will be impossible to discuss Gidla and her mother as the victims of the educational process, as the problems of gender inequality alone; it is the place of caste and interclass contradictions that should be admitted.

The second methodological orientation is postcolonial feminism. Reed-Sandoval (2024) has cautioned against Western feminist universalism and has asked that special attention be given to postcolonial societal contexts. The recent Dalit feminist studies support the relevance of this orientation. Mukherjee (2021) explains that Dalit women speak differently and create narratives that reflect the impact of both caste and gender inequality. The work of Jena and Acharya (2024) further suggests that postcolonial feminist theories are crucial for examining the simultaneous operation of stigma and discrimination at both personal and structural levels in India. According to the logic of this study, postcolonial feminism serves as a framework that informs the reading of the Gidla memoir, focusing on how her narration challenges both the patriarchal upper-caste discourse and mainstream feminism, which tends to homogenise itself. Theoretically,

it implies that it is the specific situation in the context of the Indian social hierarchy that is expressed in the testimony of Gidla in relation to her experience of oppression, rather than that of women in general.

The third methodological strand, as Guha (1989) and Spivak (2023) perhaps assert, is that subaltern voices have often been silenced in mainstream historiography, giving rise to the concern of whether the subaltern can speak at all. This unchanged invisibility of Dalit populations in mainstream Indian history is highlighted by recent authors, such as Hari and Srivastava (2022) and Kumar (2024). In contrast, the power of using autobiographical writing as a means of re-establishing an awakened voice is demonstrated by Cherechés (2024). Although Gidla wrote in English to address an international audience, her memoir is methodologically significant in that it constitutes an equivalent reclamation. The performance of narrating her family's struggles can be read as an interplay between the subaltern and the act of narrating an alternative history, one that is alternative to the dominant histories of the elite. This framework also ensures a stronger focus on analysing the weaknesses and opportunities related to Dalit self-representation.

The analysis procedure is divided into phases, where theoretical orientations are integrated with textual practices. In the first, the script is read repeatedly to highlight frequent moments of marginality. They fall under thematic coded categories of class, caste, and gender in accordance with the strategies explained by Rathee and Pareek (2024) and Jena and Acharya (2024). Second, the analysis of the intersections between these sets of rules is conducted with the help of the model described by Crenshaw (2013), as this approach enables every moment of the narrative to be explained in connection with the interacting regimes of oppression. Third, the results are situated within the context of postcolonial feminist criticism, as articulated by Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (2023), who emphasise the importance of cultural and historical specificity. Lastly, the entire account of the story is viewed as a matter of subaltern agency, which aligns with Guha (1989) and modern Dalit feminism (Sen, 2024; Kumar, 2024).

Reliability in this nature of methodology is done through the triangulation of this methodology in an existing scholarship. The process of education being perceived as both empowering and constraining is indicative of what Rathee and Pareek (2024) observed in their research, and the experience of structural stigma is analogous to that of Jena and Acharya (2024). The same applies to the idea of Dalit autobiographies as political interventions because it is based on Byapari (2018), Cherechés (2024), and Khubchandani and Allison (2018). Bringing the textual

analysis into line with these new studies makes it both more convincing and more useful. Validity will be achieved by adhering to feminist research ethics, which involve avoiding generalisations due to the localisation of voices and situating them in their contexts; this prevents the indulgence in universalist generalisations (Reed-Sandoval, 2024).

One of the key factors of the methodology is ethics. The Dalit testimonies usually contain incidents of trauma and violence, and this can easily contribute to the sensationalising of their narratives. Based on feminist principles of methodology (Mukherjee, 2021; Sen, 2024), the present study focuses on respect, accountability, and reflexivity. Instead of viewing the family of Gidla as victims, they are stronger, defiant, and active in the analysis. This ethical positioning ensures that the study makes a positive contribution to elevating marginalised voices, rather than marginalising or instrumentalising the people.

The method's weaknesses are clearly stated. A single-text orientation will necessarily limit the scope, but it can be justified in light of recent scholarship on intensely focused concerns in Dalit women's narratives (Sen, 2024; Rathee and Pareek, 2024). Moreover, the use of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern theory in relation to each other can potentially cause a theoretical overload; yet, these three approaches are complementary, and therefore, such a combination is somewhat justified. The concept of intersectionality elucidates the fact of concomitant oppression. Postcolonial feminism is described within the context of historico-cultural identity, and the idea of subaltern studies suggests that it can be viewed as a response to the culture of silence. In combination, they create a stratified methodology that is specifically suited to Gidla's memoir.

To conclude, the research's overall approach is qualitative, interpretive, and theory-guided. This is a close reading analysis and contextual interpretation of *Ants Among Elephants*, informed by theories of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. The given methodology is informed by the recent literature concerning Dalit literature and feminism that posits that one should perform intersectional analyses with caution in a particular context (Rathee and Pareek, 2024; Sen, 2024; Jena and Acharya, 2024; Kumar, 2024). This method results in originality and profundity due to its detailed analysis of a single piece of writing, as well as its careful observation of the processes of narration and its themes. In addition to filling an essential gap in the existing literature, this paper will illustrate that literary criticism can be used to inform a broader discussion on caste, class, gender, and social justice in modern India.

IV. ANALYSIS

This paper will focus on the textual analysis of the book *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and will analyse the details of three interconnected notions: class, caste, and gender. Using the approaches of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern theory as an analytical tool, the chapter shows how the personal experiences of Gidla could be taken as a witness to the macro-level oppression. All these themes will be addressed, and an attempt will be made to explore how they intersect and lead to compound forms of marginalisation.

4.1 Class

The exposition of the poverty of the lower classes is one of the strongest tones in *Ants Among Elephants*. Gidla does not refer to her family deprivation as a result of individual misconstruction but as a situation built into the Indian culture. She vividly recalls, "*We often had only one meal a day, and my mother would go hungry so that we children could eat*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 45). This excerpt further clarifies that poverty is not presented as a personal challenge, but rather as an inherent situation that pervades the daily existence of Dalits. The account aligns with Hari and Srivastava's (2022) observation that Dalit autobiographies highlight the persistence of deprivation despite the promises of independence and modernisation, demonstrating that social reforms have not eradicated entrenched inequalities: Combined the personal experience as well as the scholarly contributions made by Gidla over the last few years reaffirm the sequential nature of poverty as envisioned in Dalit accounts is never erratic but procedural, as it has been deeply sowed in structures of exclusion.

Education is also another area where class is portrayed, since it is one of the most significant barriers to the upward mobility of people living in poverty. According to Gidla, the availability of education to her mother was marred by both monetary and social disadvantages: "*My mother was told that people like us did not need education beyond the basics*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 88). This memory illustrates what Rathee and Pareek (2024) analyze as the two-fold nature of education among Dalits. However, education is a potential resource of empowerment, but fiscal constraints and the stigmatisation of caste constantly hinder it. These episodes demonstrate that poverty is never a stand-alone phenomenon but is instead augmented by other systemic factors; as such, it cannot be a sufficient category when examined in isolation. Therefore, the text and critical studies (Rathee and Pareek, 2024; Kumar,

2024) suggest that the issue of class deprivation is closely intertwined with gender and caste oppression.

4.2 Caste

Caste is the defining axis of marginalisation in "Ants Among Elephants." Gidla narrates her family's experiences as "untouchables" within the Indian caste system, revealing the daily humiliations and exclusions that structure Dalit life. She recalls, *"We could not drink from the village well, nor enter the homes of those above us"* (Gidla, 2017, p. 62). These passages illustrate how caste influences even the most fundamental aspects of survival, encompassing both public and personal spheres. According to Sen (2024), the memoir also reveals other aspects of Dalit oppression, as it shows not only the overt forms of caste functioning but also how it influences institutions and personal relationships. The combination of Gidla and Sen highlights that the issue of caste is not merely an external label, but an all-encompassing system that permeates the lives of the Dalit community.

The metaphor in the title of the book "Ants Among Elephants" is a forceful portrayal of the caste hierarchy itself: Dalits are abundant yet invisible, small and easily trampled underfoot by the more prominent actors, i.e., elephants. Gidla writes, *"We were like ants, moving quietly, unseen, always beneath the feet of those who ruled over us"* (Gidla, 2017, p. 14). It is this type of imagery that typifies the sense Spivak (1988) means by the subaltern: the recognition of presence but not voice, the being seen but only in the context of oppression. Gidla makes clear through subaltern studies that Dalit voices were always omitted in formal historiography (Guha, 1989), which is why Gidla has written a memoir that contests the historiography produced. Appropriating this imagery, the text narrates and challenges the oppression of caste, thereby confirming the ambivalence of the subaltern in speaking within and against dominant discourse.

Caste also influences contemporary political and economic life. Farhan (2023) and Hari and Srivastava (2022) states that even after achieving political independence, castes persisted within modern institutions under different names. Gidla also provides textual evidence of such continuity in her memoir, as her family's upward mobility was repeatedly rebuffed by caste prejudice. As a case in point, employment and land ownership were not options due to the inertia of caste stigma. This proves the point that caste remains a live issue in twenty-first-century India, shaping possibilities and exclusions even in the cities and newspapers of the so-called modern era (Khubchandani & Allison 2018). Therefore, the memoirs and scholarly literature reveal that caste discrimination not only exists

within the rural tradition but also in the mechanisms that are said to be contemporary and egalitarian.

4.3 Gender

While class and caste are central, gender adds a layer of oppression in Gidla's memoir. Her accounts of her mother and other women in her family reveal how Dalit women bear a "double burden": they are oppressed not only as Dalits but also as women. Gidla recalls, *"My mother was married off against her will, her voice drowned in decisions made by others"* (Gidla, 2017, p. 103). This scene serves to show that Dalit women do not speak the same way because Mukherjee (2021) explains that they are the victims of the combined forms of oppressions, where the caste and gender analyses are not effective in determining their harassment. Another similarity in the argument offered by Jena and Acharya (2024) is that stigma and violence against Dalit women are structural and predispose them to it, particularly. Together with the newer literature, Gidla uses personal testimony to show that the oppression of Dalit women is a multidimensional phenomenon.

The memoir also recounts instances of domestic violence and educational denial, illustrating how patriarchal norms operate within marginalised communities. Gidla notes, *"Even when my mother excelled in school, she was told it was pointless for a girl of our caste to continue"* (Gidla, 2017, p. 89). At this instance, it is clear that it is not only the issue of poverty or castes that did not allow her mother to access education, but also the patriarchal control. This can be explained through the prism of postcolonial feminist theory, as Reed-Sandoval (2024) critiques the unifying of women's experiences and demands contextual translations. In this way, the memoir by Gidla proves that Dalit women cannot become subsumed under the umbrella of universal patriarchy and instead must be understood in light of caste and gender in a postcolonial society.

It is worth pointing out, however, that Gidla herself resists, through the very narrative voice. By writing the book in English, she places herself in a global context, proclaiming the voice of Dalit women, who are otherwise marginalised in Indian and international feminist discourses. This act resonates with Spivak's (2023) question, *"Can the subaltern speak?"* Gidla's text demonstrates that the subaltern woman not only speaks but reframes her silence as testimony. The analytical breakthrough point here is that Dalit women in their narratives simultaneously offer both an archive of deprivation and an act of challenge or protest, as evident in their words and structure.

4.4 Intersections

Although class, caste, and gender can be analysed individually, their true significance emerges in their

intersections. Crenshaw's (2013) model of intersectionality is indispensable for reading *Ants Among Elephants*. For instance, when describing her mother's struggles to continue her schooling, Gidla recalls, "Even though she ranked first in her class, the headmaster said education beyond this level was wasted on a girl like her" (Gidla, 2017, p. 91). This scene illustrates not only the intersection of class (poverty), caste forces, and patriarchal culture but the sheer intensity of the intersection. The same can be said of Rathee and Pareek (2024), who point out that no progress has been made on the issue of either caste discrimination or gender limitations of the Dalits. The accretion of textual resources and critical knowledge reflects that double-axis analyses fail to track the multiple oppressions the Dalit women face.

Sen (2024) similarly argues that the memoir exemplifies how multiple oppressions overlap, producing "other dimensions" of marginalisation. Gidla captures this complexity when she writes, "My mother's poverty marked her as lesser, her caste marked her as untouchable, and her gender marked her as powerless" (Gidla, 2017, p. 134). This sentence suggests that oppression cannot be encountered in parts, but rather as a whole. Jena and Acharya (2024) discuss the multidimensionality of Dalit women's oppression, which should be analysed through an intersectional approach. Accordingly, the memoir and recent scholarship confirm that intersectionality offers the most effective approach to understanding the coexistence of class, caste, and gender oppression in postcolonial India.

With the help of the three lenses of class, caste, and gender, a close reading of *Ants Among Elephants* reveals how the story of Gidla represents the state of compressed oppression experienced by Dalit women in contemporary India. Caste develops as a structural domination of poverty and exclusion; caste is a form of persistent social hierarchy that denies worth and access, and gender; add to this form of patriarchal possession. Where any of these categories intersect, the memoir presents how marginalisation is experienced simultaneously, in Crenshaw's (2013) words, the oppressions are interlocking rather than additive. Not only does Gidla's memoir document these realities, but it also offers a subaltern intervention, providing a space for Dalit women to speak in the Indian and global literary landscapes. This section, therefore, forms the textual basis for the subsequent discussion, which contextualises these findings in relation to other existing literature and highlights the peculiarities of this work.

4.5 Discussion

The above discussions of *Ants Among Elephants* have confirmed that this memoir is not the depiction of class,

caste, and gender as discrete scales through which oppression is affected, but through interrelated systems of oppression that define the lives of Dalit women. This conclusion resonates with new scholarship, although it surpasses it with a comprehensive, integrated intersectional postcolonial feminist analysis. In this discussion, the findings are placed in the context of other related works, highlighting both the converging and divergent understandings of these works before drawing on the entirety of the theory and the literary contributions of the study.

Such a focus on the importance of class in the analysis is verified by Kumar (2024), who determines that one of the key elements of Dalit literature is the insistence that inequality is not arbitrary, but is structurally determined. In demonstrating the pervasive nature of poverty in education, employment, and at home, Gidla illustrates once again the inadequacy of critiquing systems based on inequality, as conveyed in Kumar. Similarly, Hari and Srivastava (2022) notes that Dalit autobiographies reveal how deprivation has persisted unchanged, regardless of the political movement. This opinion is supported by the analysis, which shows how the Gidla family remained poor despite the overall assertions of modernisation and independence. The novel contribution of the paper, in relation to these observations, is that it associates class with gender and caste, and argues that poverty cannot be decoupled from these variables when it applies to Dalit women.

The results of caste oppression are consistent with those presented by Sen (2024), who asserts that *Ants Among Elephants* focuses on other aspects of Dalit oppression by describing in detail the manifestations of exclusion. This analysis helps verify that caste is not merely about ritual purity, but also involves day-to-day challenges related to education and employment. This supports Khubchandani and Allison's (2018) assertion in *Caste Matters* that caste remains a live and vibrant institution in modern-day India. Nevertheless, this paper will contribute to the discussion by highlighting the metaphor of ants among elephants as one of the literary tools that signifies how Dalits are often rendered invisible in mainstream discourse. This understanding situates the memoir within the context of subaltern studies and the need to give a voice to the marginalised. However, Gidla makes it very clear that she is reclaiming that voice.

Feminist studies on gender are extended by the treatment of gender in the analysis. Mukherjee (2021) argues that Dalit women have a different way of speaking as such narratives are constructed through a combination of caste and gender oppressions. This is strengthened by Jena and Acharya (2024), who demonstrate how Dalit women faced

structural violence, which is normalised in Indian society. The analysis confirms these findings by the description of how the experience of domestic violence and the lack of education of Gidla's mother can best represent the biased effects experienced by Dalit women. Nonetheless, the value here is methodological in nature: by adapting postcolonial feminism, the work locates the experiences within larger discourses surrounding the particularity of postcolonial women's subjugation. Universalising the concept of women, however, threatens to obliterate the specifics of Dalit women's lives as Reed-Sandoval (2024) warns. This paper shows exactly why Gidla, in this fashion, subverts such universalism, placing the experiences of Dalit women in a category of their own, yet politically salient.

The primary novelty of this work lies in the examination of the interrelationship among class, caste, and gender. Intersectionality, a theory established by Crenshaw (2013), has garnered numerous citations; however, its applications in Indian literary studies are limited. Rathee and Pareek (2024) briefly comment on intersectionality as it applies to education within *Ants Among Elephants*, and Sen (2024) recognises that there exist intersecting forms of oppression. Still, neither paper attempts to develop a comprehensive account of intersectionality. Comparatively, the present analysis shows how various episodes in the memoir show how oppression is concurrent: poverty, caste stigma, and patriarchal control do not happen sequentially. This intersectional perspective not only helps explain what Gidla writes but also fills the identified gap in the literature review, namely the lack of combined analyses that treat class, caste, and gender as intermeshed systems in a unified way.

In addition, this paper contextualises Gidla's memoir as a subaltern intervention. Although Spivak (2023) famously argued that the subaltern cannot speak, the text written by Gidla proves the opposite, as writing is a method of saying that breaks the discourse of dominance. The analysis has therefore contributed to subaltern studies in terms of how memoirs by Dalit women serve as counter-histories, reclaiming space in national and literary history. This contribution builds on the work of Cherechés (2024) and Byapari (2018) by highlighting the testimonial value of Dalit autobiographies, while also making a feminist and intersectional contribution.

The limitations presented in the discussion also highlight gaps in possible studies that relate to the current work. Works such as Jena and Acharya (2024), Rathee and Pareek (2024), and Sen (2024) highlight specific aspects of the caste and gender issues presented in Gidla's text; however, they are fragmented, as each addresses a single aspect at a time. Wider reviews of Dalit work (Kumar,

2024; Hari and Srivastava, 2022; SSG, 2023) do not harp on Dalit women nearly as much, perhaps tacitly recognising the centrality of their accounts even though most Dalit literature is available to and supported by men. This paper fills these gaps by providing a comprehensive, theory-informed approach to see the relationship of class, caste, and gender as mutually constitutive.

The effects of such findings are pretty serious. To begin with, they affirm that the memoirs by Dalit women cannot be regarded as marginal to Indian literature. Through the narration of her family's story, Gidla engages in an act of resistance, which can be evaluated as a contribution to the democratisation of the literary canon formation. Second, the paper illustrates the value of intersectional postcolonial feminist approaches to literary analysis, which is the ability to reveal the complexity of marginalised identity formation in postcolonial contexts. Third, the discussion contributes to subaltern studies by demonstrating how life writing functions as a counter-historiography, amplifying the voices that have been silenced in the dominant discourse.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights how the analysis of *Ants Among Elephants* converges with existing scholarship in affirming the significance of caste, class, and gender, while also extending it by offering a comprehensive intersectional framework. The study fills a clear gap in literary criticism by integrating these categories and situating Gidla's memoir within feminist and subaltern debates. Ultimately, the contribution of this research is twofold: it deepens our understanding of Dalit women's life writing and advances methodological approaches in postcolonial feminist literary studies.

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* has revealed that the memoir functions as a powerful intervention in the ongoing discourse on caste, class, and gender in Indian literature.

Because of the critical approach to reading the text and the study of the Vietnamese culture through the prism of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and the subaltern studies, this study has proved that Gidla has taken the platform of narrating her own family history as an opportunity to open the eyes to the structural exteriorities of marginalisation, in addition to giving a voice to the Dalit women. With the results, it emerges that vicious circles of class poverty and caste-based satisfaction, coalesced with patriarchal gender principles, are not distinct layers of domination. Still, instead, they intertwine to form intricate idealisations of deprivation. Through the narration of the experiences, Gidla not only testifies to

injustice but also makes Dalit women the epicentre of literary and cultural discourses.

The overall objective of this analysis is to investigate how the text of *Ants Among Elephants* exemplifies the intersection of various forms of oppression and the avoidance of assimilation. Class emerges as an inescapable fact of deprivation, defined by a deficiency of opportunities in education as well as in the economy. The longest-standing component of discrimination that has been favored is caste discrimination. Gender is an additional burden, more so in the case of Dalit women, who must not only face an external form of patriarchal repression, but also internalized imperatives in the peripheral groups. This situation could be well captured with the trope of ants among elephants: being visible and invisible at the same time, but weak and strong. This conclusion affirms the practicality of an intersectional analysis in the perceptions of how complicated, marginalised identities may be.

This paper makes three contributions. To begin with, it features a textual input, as a textual analysis of a single modern Dalit memoir is provided. Previous works have highlighted insider critique or ducking arms, but here, the concepts of class, caste, and gender are woven together, resulting in a more comprehensive analysis. Second, the study makes a theoretical contribution by applying intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies in a combined approach. Such an integrated framework enables us to understand how feminist and postcolonial theories can be used in the caste context in India, thereby increasing their applicability to non-Western contexts. Third, the research is scholarly because it fills a gap in the existing literature. Compared with previous scholarship that tended to isolate class, caste, or gender as units of analysis, this work demonstrates how these manifestations are inseparable and that it is only when they are analysed together that the meaning of Dalit women's narratives can be identified.

Besides its scholarly contribution, there are other implications of the study. This implies that the voice of women must take the centre stage and their accounts must not be peripheral or marginal in the case of Dalit studies; we ought to see them as the embodiment of larger systematic realities. Feminist ideology shows how the small-scale theories can become constraining and emphasizes the necessity of implementing the context-related approaches. It demonstrates to postcolonial studies how the subaltern can be made a speakable and listenable voice through the use of testimony in literature, thereby revealing the master historical/cultural narratives. Collectively, they contribute to the evidence that the life

writing of Dalit women is also a political protest and bearing.

The paper provides several suggestions on future scholarly choices and practice. Future studies should make comparisons between the work of Dalit women's autobiographies, as in the case of Yashica Dutt or Baby Kamble, and that of Gidla. Such comparisons can be those that capture general modalities of oppression, and those that capture the particularities of different narratives. The global component of women Dalit writing is another area of discussion that deserves evaluation among scholars. Since Gidla writes in English, her memoir can be defined as a transnational space where caste questions are inseparably combined with other questions of racial and gender justice. The political resonance of these texts may become thinkable as they are received in different new cultural contexts. Third, the literature of Dalit women should be integrated into academic programs. In this way, the canons of literature would not only be diversified, but the awareness of the students about the intersection of literature with social justice would also be raised.

Finally, the paper recommends that researchers should advance intersectional approaches to literature studies. Despite intersectionality becoming a term of reference, its methodological application in South Asian literature studies remains deficient. An intersectional approach has offered one such example by providing a closer reading and contextual analysis. Still, future tasks may have greater recourse to formal coding and/or oral histories and ethnographic descriptions to complement the textual analysis. This interdisciplinary effort would help bridge the gap between the social sciences and literary criticism, as well as enhance our understanding of oppression and resistance.

In conclusion, it could be said that *Ants Among Elephants* is not only an autobiographical book but a literary and political intervention that addresses silence. It can be considered an example of how narratives of Dalit women break the hegemonic discourse and bring to the fore what has been kept secret in most cases. The results of this study demonstrate the importance of the intersection of classes, caste, and gender as a multifactorial system. The contributions emphasize the topicality of intersectional postcolonial feminist work, and the recommendations list the directions of further research, not to mention other methods of fostering inclusivity and critical thinking toward the current literature. This paper concludes that the life writing of Dalit women should assume a leading role in postcolonial and feminist theories, as it not only provides a means to bear witness to oppression but also

serves as a strength in protesting subordination and challenging knowledge.

REFERENCES

- [1] Byapari, M. (2018). *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Sage Publications.
- [2] Cherechés, B. (2024). *The Resilience of Caste through Yashica Dutt's Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir (2019)* (No. ART-2024-138557).
- [3] Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.
- [4] Farhan, R. N. (2023). Resistance to the Grim Caste System in Indian Society with A Particular Reference to Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable". *Journal of Almaarif University*, 34(4), 286-296.
- [5] Gidla, S. (2017). *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [6] Guha, R. (Ed.). (1989). *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History* (Vol. 6, p. 335). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Hari, S. H. S., Saraswat, S., & Srivastava, P. K. (2022). Caste, Impurity, and Untouchability: A Study of Ants Among Elephants. *Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results*, 13.
- [8] Jena, B. K., & Acharya, A. K. (2024). Dalit, Structural Violence, and Stigma in India: An Approach to Study the Untouchability. *Sociological Research Online*, 13607804241282944.
- [9] Khubchandani, J., Soni, A., Fahey, N., Raithatha, N., Prabhakaran, A., Byatt, N., ... & Allison, J. J. (2018). Caste matters: perceived discrimination among women in rural India. *Archives of women's mental health*, 21(2), 163-170.
- [10] Kumar, S. (2024). Role of Dalit Literature in Social Change in India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(3), 1-11.
- [11] Lalitha, S., & Pankaj, A. K. (2022). Dalit women in cinema: a narrative of gender and caste. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 81(1), 143-157.
- [12] Mukherjee, S. (2021). Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance. *Tête à Tête: Journal of Francophone Studies*, 1(1), 11.
- [13] Rathee, K., & Pareek, S. (2024). From Ignorance to Empowerment: Education's Role in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*. *Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress*, 8(2).
- [14] Reed-Sandoval, A. (2024). Decolonial Feminism and the Open Borders Debate. *Social Philosophy Today*, 40, 21-39.
- [15] Satyanarayana, K. (2019). The political and aesthetic significance of contemporary Dalit literature. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54(1), 9-24.
- [16] Sen, A. (2024). The other dimensions of Dalit oppression: Tracing intersectionality through ants among elephants. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 26(1), 2.
- [17] Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.
- [18] SS, G. (2023). Unveiling the voices of the Oppressed: Exploring the significance of Dalit writings in Indian Literature. *South India Journal of Social Sciences*, 21(2), 167-177.
- [19] Teltumbde, A., & Yengde, S. (Eds.). (2018). *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*. Penguin Random House.



Self-Confidence, Self-Respect, and Financial Independence: Pillars of Women's Empowerment in India

G. Winmathi Marimuthu

Programme Assistant (Computer), ICAR KVK, CENDECT, Theni District, Tamil Nadu India

Received: 28 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Sep 2025; Accepted: 28 Sep 2025; Available online: 01 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Women empowerment is central to building an inclusive and just society. While equality ensures that women receive the same opportunities as men, equity addresses the diverse challenges and circumstances women face. Among the key drivers of empowerment are self-confidence, self-respect, respect for others, financial independence, boldness, honesty, ethical living, continuous self-improvement, nurturing love (Anbu), helping others, and lifelong learning. These elements collectively enable women to overcome societal barriers, make principled decisions, and achieve personal and professional growth. This article emphasizes that true empowerment requires both equality and equity, complemented by psychological, ethical, social, and economic pillars. Recommendations are provided for integrating self-development programs, financial literacy initiatives, and value-based education to promote holistic women's empowerment in India.



Keywords— Women Empowerment, Equality, Equity, Self-Confidence, Self-Respect, Financial Independence, Boldness, Honesty, Ethical Living, Anbu (Love), Helping Others, Continuous Learning

Introduction

Women's empowerment is crucial for gender equality and national progress. Despite educational opportunities and legal reforms, many women continue to face barriers rooted in patriarchal norms and economic dependence. True empowerment arises from a combination of self-confidence, self-respect, respect for others, financial independence, boldness, honesty, ethical living, continuous self-improvement, nurturing love (Anbu), helping others, and lifelong learning. These pillars enable women to make principled decisions, overcome social pressures, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Self-Confidence and Boldness

Self-confidence and boldness allow women to believe in their abilities and take courageous steps toward their goals. Empowered women can:

- Lead in family, community, and workplace settings
- Express opinions and assert their rights

- Pursue education, career growth, and entrepreneurship

Self-Respect and Respect for Others

Self-respect and respect for others are key to principled empowerment. They enable women to:

- Recognize their worth and maintain dignity
- Set healthy personal boundaries
- Treat others with fairness, empathy, and kindness
- Value differing perspectives through active listening

Promoting empathy requires seeing the world from others' perspectives, respecting differences, and responding with compassion.

Financial Independence and Responsibility

Financial independence provides autonomy and security, allowing women to:

- Make informed personal and professional choices

- Invest in education, health, and career development
- Use resources responsibly and ethically

Initiatives such as microfinance programs, self-help groups, and women-led enterprises demonstrate the transformative power of financial autonomy (World Bank, 2019).

Honesty, Ethical Conduct, Nurturing Love, and Helping Others

- **Honesty and Ethical Conduct:** Guide women to stay on the right path and avoid shortcuts.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Encourages women to enhance their skills, knowledge, and character daily.
- **Nurturing Love (Anbu):** Treating all children as one's own fosters empathy, responsibility, and social harmony. This nurturing attitude also extends to the workplace, creating positive, cooperative environments.
- **Helping Others:** Emphasizes interdependence and ethical responsibility, recognizing that success is collective.

Personal Teaching Experience

- Treated all students as my own children during five years of teaching.
- Guided students with care and discipline, supporting their growth.
- Developed self-confidence, patience, ethical conduct, and responsibility through teaching.
- Demonstrated that empowerment begins with caring for others and leading by example.

lifelong learning

- **Daily Learning:** Empowered women make learning a daily habit.
- **Staying Updated:** Awareness of current trends ensures competence and relevance.
- **Growth:** Enhances decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership abilities.
- **Ethical and Informed Choices:** Well-informed women make responsible, empowered decisions.

Moving Forward with Faith and Truth

Faith and truth are essential in every action. Speaking the truth removes fear, while faith provides strength to face challenges. Progress comes not from waiting for problems to end, but from moving forward each day with courage and patience.

Interconnection of the Pillars

The empowerment pillars are deeply interconnected:

- Confidence and boldness motivate financial independence
- Financial independence reinforces self-respect and ethical living
- Ethical conduct, love, and helping others strengthen confidence and social influence

This synergy ensures sustainable empowerment for women, families, and communities.

Case Examples

- **Rural India:** Women in Tamil Nadu self-help groups combine financial training with confidence-building and community support to achieve empowerment.
- **Urban India:** Professional women in metropolitan cities leverage education and career opportunities while maintaining ethical practices and empathy, becoming role models for younger generations.

Challenges

Despite progress, women still face:

- Traditions and norms that restrict autonomy
- Wage gaps and limited leadership opportunities
- Lack of financial literacy and guidance
- Limited opportunities for holistic personal development

Recommendations

1. Financial literacy and responsibility programs
2. Self-development workshops on confidence and boldness
3. Ethical and moral guidance initiatives
4. Nurturing and empathy programs
5. Helping others initiatives to build mutual support
6. Policy support for equal pay, workplace protections, and women-friendly infrastructure
7. Community support networks such as mentorship and peer learning

Conclusion

Women's empowerment in India rests on the pillars of self-confidence, self-respect, respect for others, financial independence, boldness, honesty, continuous self-improvement, nurturing love (Anbu), helping others, and lifelong learning. Together, these elements enable women

to overcome barriers, pursue their aspirations ethically, and contribute meaningfully to society. Holistic empowerment nurtures psychological strength, economic autonomy, moral values, empathy, and community support, shaping women into confident, principled, and independent agents of change.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.
- [2] Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>
- [3] Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] UN Women. (2020). Women's economic empowerment. <https://www.unwomen.org>
- [5] World Bank. (2019). *Women, business and the law 2019: A decade of reform*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/31327>



What Do People Need in Panga? Posthuman Ethics and Companionship in Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot Duology

Aparna. M

Department of English, University of Kerala, India

Received: 30 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 27 Sep 2025; Accepted: 30 Sep 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot duology, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022), presents a quiet but radical reimagining of human-machine relationships. Set in the ecologically balanced world of Panga, where sentient robots have long withdrawn from human society, the story follows a tea monk named Dex and a returning robot, Mosschap, on a shared journey prompted by the question: "What do people need?". Rather than dramatizing technological power or conflict, Chambers crafts a narrative rooted in attentive companionship and a quiet ethics of care. This article argues that the series models a posthuman ethic based not on transcendence or utility, but on relational subjectivity and co-becoming. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*, the article examines how Dex and Mosschap's evolving bond disrupts anthropocentric narratives and offers an alternative vision of care. By interpreting Mosschap not merely as a machine but as a companion species, akin to Haraway's ethically entangled cyborgs, the article explores how speculative fiction can generate new modes of ethical imagination. Chambers's work suggests that kinship and understanding arise not from shared essence or total comprehension, but from the act of moving alongside one another with openness, humility, and sustained attention.



Keywords— Becky Chambers, Monk and Robot duology, Posthumanism, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Relational Subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

In much of speculative fiction, the relationship between humans and machines is defined by conflict, control, or collapse. Robots are often imagined as tools of labor, symbols of technological hubris, or antagonistic forces poised to overthrow their creators. Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* duology, composed of the novellas *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022), offers a striking departure from these paradigms. The story begins with Sibling Dex, a tea monk in the ecotopian world of Panga, who leaves monastic life in search of something more fulfilling. As a tea monk, Dex travels across villages offering tea, comfort, and a listening ear to anyone in need. Yet they remain unsettled, burdened by a quiet crisis of purpose they cannot articulate. Panga is

a post-industrial society where humans live in ecological balance, and where sentient robots, after gaining self-awareness, withdrew from human society long ago. They were given the choice to come back any time or initiate contact if they desire so. It is during Dex's travels that they unexpectedly encounter Splendid Speckled Mosschap, the first robot to return to human lands in centuries. Mosschap arrives, as an emissary of the robots, not with demands or technological agendas, but with a simple and profound question: "What do humans need?" This question sets them on a journey together through varied human settlements, not just to find solutions, but to listen, observe, and reflect. As Dex points out, the question may have no definitive answer. That changes from person to person, minute to minute. What unfolds in the narrative is an evolving companionship

grounded in presence, ethical curiosity, and the willingness to stay in conversation without demanding clarity.

Rather than framing technology as a force of domination or transcendence, Chambers constructs a world in which a robot and a human travels side by side, sharing uncertainty and care. This article argues that *Monk and Robot* articulates a posthuman ethic rooted in companionship, relationality and ethical presence. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, the researcher reads Dex and Mosschap's evolving bond as a model of co-becoming that destabilizes human-centered frameworks. Braidotti's emphasis on relational subjectivity and Haraway's theorization of cross-species companionship provide a lens through which to understand how Chambers envisions a world where meaning is not derived from mastery or resolution, but from sustained relational presence across difference.

Through a series of quiet, dialogic encounters, Chambers constructs an alternative mode of ethical life, one that values attentiveness over utility, presence over productivity, and shared inquiry over predetermined answers. The companionship between Dex and Mosschap is not symbolic but materially situated and mutually transformative. It resists traditional narrative arcs of problem and solution, offering instead a meditation on how beings, human and nonhuman, might coexist without hierarchy, and relate without the need to fully understand or assimilate one another. This reading draws on Braidotti's critique of the autonomous self and Haraway's concept of "significant otherness" (Companion Species 7), positioning Chambers's novellas as a vision of posthuman kinship enacted not through grand gestures, but through the simple, sustained act of journeying together.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology rooted in literary analysis and posthuman theory. The analysis draws upon close reading of Becky Chambers' *Monk and Robot duology - A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022)- to examine how the narratives articulate posthuman ethics, companionship, and relational subjectivity. The framework is informed by Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*, particularly their concepts of zoe-centric life, co-becoming, and cross-species companionship. Through this theoretical lens, the paper interprets the evolving relationship between the human monk Dex and the sentient robot Mosschap as a model of posthuman kinship. The method prioritizes textual interpretation over empirical

generalization, aiming to uncover how Chambers's storytelling enacts ethical and philosophical commitments embedded in posthuman discourse.

III. POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AND ETHICAL RELATIONALITY

In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti challenges the core tenets of classical humanism by displacing the figure of the self-contained, rational individual and advancing a model of subjectivity shaped through connection and change. Rather than defining the human through opposition to animals, machines, or nature, Braidotti calls for an ethics grounded in "an enlarged sense of inter-connection among self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (49). She distinguishes between *bios*, the socially coded life of the human, and *zoe*, the nonhuman, impersonal, and vital force of life that animates all beings and systems. Braidotti writes, "Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains" (60). It is this *zoe*-centred vision of interconnected life that finds narrative expression in Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* series. The protagonists, Dex and Mosschap, emerge as relational subjects whose identities evolve through encounters with each other and the world. Dex, introduced as a figure already estranged from traditional roles, serves as a tea monk but harbors a quiet, inarticulate restlessness. Their decision to leave the monastery and later abandon even the formal circuits of tea service is not framed as rebellion, but as a search for something unnamed. This departure marks the beginning of what Braidotti terms a "nomadic subjectivity" (49), a mode of becoming defined not by aimlessness, but by openness to transformation. As she writes, "The critical posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (49). Dex's sense of self unfolds not in solitude but through material and affective entanglements with landscapes, strangers, and most significantly, with Mosschap.

Mosschap, too, resists binary classification. As a sentient and sapient robot created long after the first generation of robots walked away from human society, it returns not to rejoin systems of labor or hierarchy, but to observe, to ask, and to listen. While Mosschap initially expects a clear answer to his question, the novellas reveal that the value lies not in resolution but in the shared reflection the question invites. Its role is not functional but ethical. In this, Mosschap reflects the *zoe*-oriented ethic Braidotti articulates- a life force that embraces machinic consciousness as part of the greater web of being. Rather than functioning as an outsider, Mosschap inhabits this

shared field of vitality through sustained attentiveness and open-ended inquiry.

The mutual transformation between Dex and Mosschap unfolds not through dramatic events but in quiet, everyday moments. Their friendship deepens during unhurried conversations during their travels throughout Panga. These encounters do not serve a traditional arc of problem and resolution but instead foreground sustained attentiveness and a mode of relational care. Chambers replaces narrative urgency with receptivity and open-endedness. This emphasis on shared presence echoes Braidotti's *zoe*, the impersonal vitality that cuts across species boundaries and sustains connection without requiring sameness.

IV. COMPANION SPECIES AND THE ETHICS OF CO-PRESENCE

While Braidotti provides the framework for understanding posthuman subjectivity, Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* invites a more intimate engagement with relational ethics through the figure of the "companion species." Haraway uses this term to describe beings, most often animals, who live in close and ongoing entanglement with humans, not through domination or assimilation, but through "significant otherness" (7). Companionship here is not based on utility, hierarchy, or even similarity, but on the mutual shaping of lives through sustained proximity and shared vulnerability.

This commitment to living-with difference extends into Haraway's later work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, where she provocatively calls to "make kin, not babies" (103). Here, kin-making is not about genealogical ties but about cultivating bonds across species, technologies, and systems as a way of navigating the Anthropocene. Chambers's imagined world of Panga resonates with this provocation: the alliance between Dex and Mosschap is not framed in terms of productivity or resolution, but as a practice of kin-making that affirms difference while sustaining connection.

Though dogs remain the central example in her book *The Companion Species*, Haraway includes cyborgs in its ambit as well. She notes, "implicitly, this manifesto is about more than the relation of dogs and people. Dogs and people figure a universe. Clearly, cyborgs – with their historical congealings of the machinic and the organic in the codes of information, where boundaries are less about skin than about statistically defined densities of signal and noise – fit within the taxon of companion species" (4). While Mosschap is not biologically hybrid, it is not simply another robot either; as a sentient, self-aware being capable of ethical reflection and dialogue, Mosschap occupies a space

akin to Haraway's cyborgs. It inhabits a boundary space between the machinic and the relational, fitting within the taxon of companion species.

Haraway emphasizes that companion species relationships involve mutual agency, where both parties actively shape the interaction. Dex and Mosschap exhibit this through their collaborative journey. Dex, seeking purpose, chooses to guide Mosschap through human communities, while Mosschap, driven by curiosity about humans, offers Dex new perspectives on existence. For example, in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Mosschap's question, "What do you need, and how might I help?" prompts Dex to reflect on their own desires, while Dex's experiences help Mosschap understand human emotions and societal structures. Their relationship reflects co-evolution, as humans and robots on Panga have distinct but intertwined histories. Robots gained sentience during the Factory Age and chose to leave human society, shaping Panga's sustainable present. Mosschap's return to human lands signifies a new phase of co-habitation, where both species learn from each other, much like Haraway's human-dog co-evolution narrative.

Haraway's framework seeks to dismantle boundaries like human/nonhuman and organic/technological. Dex and Mosschap's relationship blurs these lines: Mosschap, a 'wild-built' robot made from parts of previous robots, is both technological and organic in its connection to Panga's ecosystem, while Dex, a human, navigates a world where technology and nature coexist harmoniously. Their pronoun exchange in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* further reflects Haraway's boundary-breaking ethos. When Dex questions Mosschap's use of "it" to refer to one of its friends, Mosschap explains, "Robots are not people. We are machines, and machines are objects. Objects are its" (69). When Dex presses further, he retorts, "I would never call you just an animal, Sibling Dex. We don't have to fall into the same category to be of equal value" (69). This dialogue challenges human-centric assumptions about personhood and aligns with Haraway's call to recognize nonhumans as equal partners without demanding sameness.

Haraway stresses ethical responsibility in companion species relationships, urging respect and curiosity. Dex and Mosschap embody this through their mutual care. When Mosschap's mechanical part breaks in *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Dex ensures it is repaired, showing concern for Mosschap's well-being. Mosschap, in turn, supports Dex's emotional journey, gently reminding them that he is allowed to just exist and existence need not always be justified by purpose. This reciprocal care reflects Haraway's call for ethical engagement that acknowledges the other's needs.

In *When Species Meet*, Haraway emphasizes that "to be one is always to become with many" (4). Dex and Mosschap

remain distinct in their ontological makeup- one biological, one machinic-but their companionship thrives precisely because it is shaped through co-presence rather than fusion. Their bond sustains difference through mutual care and curiosity, rather than attempting to dissolve it. Haraway's concept of "significant otherness" (7), first elaborated in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, becomes especially meaningful in this context. Dex and Mosschap are radically different in form, origin, and experience, yet their companionship is grounded in shared attentiveness, not sameness. Their ethical relation is not defined by obligation, but by sustained presence, by being together in a way that allows each to remain distinct yet transformed. Chambers's narrative thus enacts the kind of ethical co-presence Haraway explores: one that affirms difference, fosters curiosity, and refuses the flattening effects of mastery or assimilation.

V. CONCLUSION

Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* series offers a rare vision of future life where ethical engagement is neither heroic nor hierarchical, but grounded in slow, mutual presence. By centering a relationship shaped by curiosity and care, the novellas resist dominant narratives of technological domination and posthuman transcendence. Instead, they ask what it means to be in the world together, not as problem-solvers or prophets, but as co-inhabitants who learn to listen, dwell, and accompany.

Through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory, Dex and Mosschap emerge as non-unitary subjects in flux, shaped by their encounters and rooted in a shared material world. Donna Haraway's concept of companion species further reframes their bond as one of significant otherness, where ethical responsibility is not about mastery or merging, but about staying with difference and remaining in relation. In bringing these frameworks into dialogue with Chambers's quiet narrative, one can see how science fiction can become a space not for spectacle, but for imagining new forms of kinship and ethical imagination.

Ultimately, *Monk and Robot* duology does not offer a prescriptive roadmap to utopia or a fixed blueprint for repair. Instead, it offers something more radical in its simplicity: the suggestion that travelling together, without demanding resolution, may itself be a form of care. In a time marked by disconnection, acceleration, and ecological unease, Chambers invites readers to consider the quiet power of shared presence and the ethical world that can emerge when we learn, at last, to travel with rather than ahead.

REFERENCES

- [1] Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
- [2] Chambers, B. (2021). *A psalm for the wild-built*. Tordotcom.
- [3] Chambers, B. (2022). *A prayer for the crown-shy*. Tordotcom.
- [4] Haraway, D. J. (1985). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp.149–181). Routledge.
- [5] Haraway, D. J. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- [6] Haraway, D. J. (2008). *When species meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [7] Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.



Shifting Grounds: Infiltrated Identities and Fading Roots in *Pride and Prejudice*

Saloni Parmar¹, Dr Guni Vats²

¹Research Scholar, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, India

²Assistant Professor, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, India

Received: 29 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Sep 2025; Accepted: 29 Sep 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— In an era of increasing cultural interconnectedness, the negotiation between inherited identity and external influence has become a defining aspect of modern social experience. While often associated with contemporary globalization, the tensions of cross-cultural infiltration—alongside its accompanying identity crises and alienation from heritage—are not new phenomena. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, though set within the seemingly insular world of the early nineteenth-century English gentry, offers a subtle yet rich exploration of these dynamics. This paper examines the novel through the lens of cultural infiltration, focusing on how Mr. Darcy's intrusion into the provincial life of the Bennets challenges both Elizabeth Bennet's self-perception and her ties to her familial heritage. The analysis positions Darcy not merely as a romantic figure but as a symbolic representative of an external cultural order that disrupts local values, precipitating an identity crisis and a gradual distancing from inherited customs. Using theoretical perspectives from cultural studies, particularly concepts of hybridity, identity negotiation, and heritage alienation, the paper draws parallels between Austen's narrative and present-day experiences of globalization and intercultural encounters. It contends that Austen's work demonstrates how cultural intrusion—while potentially destabilizing—can also become a catalyst for transformation, fostering the creation of hybrid identities that reconcile pride in heritage with openness to the new.



Keywords— Cultural Infiltration, Identity Crisis, Heritage Alienation, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural infiltration is frequently framed as a modern reality, intensified by the rapid circulation of people, goods, and ideas across national and cultural boundaries. Yet, its underlying processes—resistance, negotiation, assimilation, and transformation—are visible in earlier historical contexts and literary narratives. In this regard, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a compelling literary microcosm. The world of the Bennets in rural Hertfordshire is a closed social system governed by entrenched codes of class, propriety, and familial reputation. The arrival of Fitzwilliam Darcy from the more sophisticated and aristocratic world of Derbyshire introduces a form of cultural intrusion, albeit within the same national framework. Darcy brings with him a set of values, manners, and expectations foreign to the provincial

sphere, and his presence disrupts local perceptions, particularly those of Elizabeth Bennet.

This paper interprets Darcy's role as a form of cross-cultural infiltration, where "culture" is defined not solely by geography but also by socio-economic class, behavioural norms, and inherited tradition. In doing so, it addresses two key consequences of such infiltration: the identity crisis experienced by those who encounter the "other," and the alienation from heritage that may result from adapting to, or integrating with, an external cultural order. These processes, while embedded in Austen's narrative, resonate strongly with contemporary debates on globalization, hybridity, and the negotiation of identity in the face of cultural change.

Understanding *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of cross-cultural infiltration requires an interdisciplinary approach

that bridges literary criticism with cultural theory. Three interrelated concepts—cultural infiltration, identity crisis, and heritage alienation—form the basis of this framework.

➤ Cultural Infiltration

In its most neutral sense, cultural infiltration refers to the entry of external cultural forms, values, or practices into an established cultural setting. This “entry” may occur through physical migration, economic exchange, ideological diffusion, or personal relationships. While the term often carries connotations of imposition or dominance, it can also signify opportunities for dialogue, enrichment, and transformation. Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of *hybridity* is particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes the creative potential that emerges when cultures interact and produce something neither wholly original nor wholly foreign. In Austen’s narrative, Darcy’s introduction to Hertfordshire functions as an infiltration of a provincial social ecosystem by an aristocratic outsider. His wealth, manners, and restrained demeanour initially provoke suspicion and resentment, mirroring how unfamiliar cultural elements can be met with defensive pride in existing traditions.

➤ Identity Crisis

Stuart Hall (1997) describes identity as a dynamic construct, shaped by history, culture, and continuous negotiation. When confronted with alternative values, individuals may experience dissonance between their inherited self-concept and the new possibilities offered by external influences. This disparity constitutes an identity crisis—a period of uncertainty in which a person’s sense of identity becomes insecure. Elizabeth Bennet’s evolving perception of Darcy illustrates this process. Initially defining herself in opposition to his perceived arrogance, she is forced to reevaluate both her judgment and her own social position after learning more about his character and world. This revaluation parallels the destabilization of identity that occurs in modern cross-cultural encounters.

➤ Heritage Alienation

Heritage alienation refers to the gradual distancing from one’s inherited cultural values, practices, or affiliations, often as a result of assimilation into a different cultural order. Such shifts can create tension between loyalty to tradition and the desire for social mobility or broader belonging. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s eventual acceptance of Darcy entails an implicit negotiation of her ties to her family’s way of life. While she does not abandon her heritage entirely, the refinement and status associated with Pemberley inevitably influence her self-perception and her future social positioning, creating a subtle, if not complete, estrangement from her national roots.

Although *Pride and Prejudice* is rooted in the insular rhythms of rural Regency England, it exists within a society already marked by intra-national cultural stratification. The world of the landed gentry, represented by the Bennets, is distinct from the aristocracy of Darcy’s Pemberley and the military circles brought into the narrative by the militia regiment. These distinctions are not simply matters of wealth or manners—they encode different cultural orientations. Darcy, in particular, embodies a cosmopolitan strain within Austen’s England. His exposure to London society, his education, and his position within an extended aristocratic network bring with them a set of assumptions and behaviours foreign to Elizabeth’s provincial environment. Darcy’s initial dismissal of the Meryton assembly—seeing it as unsophisticated—serves as an early textual marker of infiltration, where the dominant cultural gaze evaluates and categorises the “other” from a position of perceived superiority.

Elizabeth’s own entry into Darcy’s sphere is gradual. Invitations to Netherfield, the Gardiners’ London home, and ultimately Pemberley represent gradual immersions into an alternative social code. Each visit subtly modifies her perception, making her increasingly conversant with the expectations and subtleties of aristocratic culture. This process mirrors soft infiltration, where prolonged exposure fosters adaptation without overt force.

The novel’s central courtship plot doubles as a journey through identity destabilisation. Elizabeth begins with a confident self-conception: intelligent, witty, and grounded in her moral judgement. However, her encounters with Darcy, as well as her growing awareness of her family’s social limitations, introduce disruption in this self-assurance.

Darcy’s first proposal scene is pivotal—not only because it signals romantic conflict but because it forces Elizabeth to confront conflicting narratives about herself and her community. His comments on her inferior connections challenge her pride in her heritage. The dual recognition—of Darcy’s misjudgement and of her own—creates a liminal space in which her identity becomes unsettled. This instability is compounded when Elizabeth visits Pemberley. The estate’s elegance, Darcy’s changed demeanour, and the housekeeper’s praise destabilise her earlier certainty. She begins to see that her earlier dismissal of Darcy may have been shaped by her own provincial biases. This realisation is emblematic of what cultural theorists identify as identity negotiation—a process in which one re-evaluates personal identity in light of new cultural frameworks. Darcy, too, experiences an identity shift. His interactions with Elizabeth challenge his inherited notions of superiority, compelling him to reconcile aristocratic pride with personal humility. In

this sense, both characters undergo reciprocal infiltration—absorbing aspects of each other’s worldview.

➤ **Heritage Alienation and the Reconfiguration of Belonging**

The progression of Elizabeth’s relationship with Darcy entails an increasing distance from her original social world. While the Bennet family remains central to her personal identity, the marital bond with Darcy necessarily relocates her within a different cultural environment. This relocation is not purely physical but symbolic, signalling her partial alienation from the norms and limitations of her upbringing. Heritage alienation here is not total erasure but selective detachment. Elizabeth retains the moral directness and independence nurtured in her provincial setting, yet she must adopt the behavioural codes of aristocratic society to function as Pemberley’s mistress. This hybrid identity—part Bennet, part Darcy—reflects Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the “third space,” where cultural negotiation produces something new rather than replacing the old entirely. The alienation is underscored by the treatment of Lydia’s elopement. Elizabeth’s acute awareness of how such scandal is perceived in Darcy’s world forces her to evaluate the cost of affiliation with her family’s unrefined elements. In this moment, the heritage she once took for granted becomes a potential liability—not in moral terms, but in terms of social capital and cultural legitimacy.

➤ **From Resistance to Integration**

Elizabeth’s initial resistance to Darcy’s influence is grounded in her pride—pride in her wit, her judgement, and her roots. Yet this resistance gradually shifts to critical openness. The process of integration is mutual: Darcy learns to value sincerity and emotional authenticity over rigid class boundaries, while Elizabeth absorbs the subtlety and restraint prized in his world. The final resolution of the novel, marriage, marks not an uncritical assimilation but a negotiated synthesis. Elizabeth does not entirely abandon her origins, nor does Darcy wholly renounce his aristocratic values. Instead, they form a hybrid cultural bond, illustrating that infiltration need not culminate in the demolish of heritage; it can instead reconstruct identities that draw from multiple traditions. This shift has broader implications. In reframing *Pride and Prejudice* through the lens of cross-cultural infiltration, it becomes clear that Austen’s narrative models a form of cultural engagement in which identity is both challenged and enriched, and heritage is both preserved and redefined.

The processes of cultural infiltration evident in *Pride and Prejudice* find strong parallels in 21st-century globalisation. Just as Elizabeth Bennet’s provincial English identity is shaped, challenged, and partially redefined through her encounters with Darcy’s aristocratic world, individuals

today navigate increasingly hybrid cultural spaces—often balancing local traditions with global influences.

In many postcolonial societies, including India, this tension is visible in the rapid spread of global consumer culture, Western education systems, and media-driven ideals of success and sophistication. The resulting identity negotiations are not unlike Elizabeth’s journey: initial resistance, gradual exposure, and eventual selective integration. Austen’s narrative thus resonates not because it depicts a timeless romance, but because it portrays a psychological process of cultural adjustment that remains relevant.

Elizabeth’s shifting loyalties and behavioural adaptations can be likened to the heritage alienation experienced when younger generations adopt lifestyles, languages, and values that diverge sharply from their familial or regional origins. In the digital era, this alienation is often accelerated:

- **Language erosion** parallels the Bennet sisters’ move toward the polished speech of Darcy’s circle.
- **Changing courtship norms** mirror the adoption of global dating cultures, displacing society-specific practices.
- **Aesthetic assimilation**—from clothing to interior design—echoes the way Elizabeth’s domestic environment will inevitably reflect Pemberley’s grandeur rather than Longbourn’s modesty.

However, Austen also offers a counterpoint to full erasure. Elizabeth retains aspects of her wit, moral candidness, and independence, suggesting that while heritage can be reshaped, it need not be obliterated. In modern contexts, this points toward the possibility of cultural sustainability—maintaining local identity within global frameworks.

➤ **The Double Movement of Cultural Exchange**

In *Pride and Prejudice*, cultural infiltration is not a one-way process. Darcy, though representing the more dominant cultural sphere, undergoes his own identity recalibration. Exposure to Elizabeth’s frankness and her provincial moral integrity challenges his inherited sense of superiority. This reciprocal infiltration aligns with current intercultural theory, which posits that genuine cross-cultural encounters transform both sides, even when power imbalances exist. With regard to contemporary scenarios, this suggests that globalisation is not merely about Westernisation or cultural dominance; it can also involve the diffusion of local values into larger cultural networks—whether through cuisine, art, or social attitudes.

In today’s multicultural urban environments, individuals often find themselves in Elizabeth-like positions—navigating overlapping cultural codes. For example:

- A young Indian professional in London may internalise aspects of British workplace culture while retaining familial traditions.
- Immigrant families in the U.S. often adopt American consumer habits yet preserve language and cuisine as cultural anchors.
- Social mobility in global metropolises can echo Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, where access to new socio-economic strata requires behavioural adaptation.

Such cases reveal that Austen's narrative can serve as a template for understanding the lived experiences of cultural negotiation in modern cities, where heritage and adaptation continuously jostle for primacy.

Viewing *Pride and Prejudice* through this lens expands Austen studies beyond historical literary analysis into the territory of cultural anthropology and sociology. It challenges the notion that Austen's works are merely insular depictions of early 19th-century England, demonstrating instead that they model enduring dynamics of cultural contact.

Moreover, in postcolonial contexts, this reading complicates the binary of cultural preservation versus assimilation. Elizabeth's trajectory illustrates a third possibility—a hybrid identity forged in the interplay between different cultural value systems. This hybridity, while enriching, demands constant negotiation and a willingness to live with contradictions.

CONCLUSION

The examination of *Pride and Prejudice* through the lens of cross-cultural infiltration reveals that Jane Austen's work, while rooted in Regency England, offers a remarkably flexible framework for understanding modern identity negotiations. The narrative arc of Elizabeth Bennet's movement from provincial Longbourn to the cosmopolitan environment of Pemberley serves as an early literary model of the identity shifts, negotiations, and selective adaptations that occur when distinct cultural spheres intersect. In the novel, Elizabeth's transformation is neither a complete rejection of her heritage nor a wholesale adoption of Darcy's aristocratic culture. Instead, she develops a hybrid identity, incorporating elements from both worlds. This process mirrors the lived experience of individuals today who navigate globalised societies, balancing traditional values with cosmopolitan sensibilities. Such a journey inevitably involves identity crisis, as old affiliations are questioned, and heritage alienation, as some aspects of cultural inheritance fade in relevance. Yet, Austen's narrative resists a tragic vision of cultural loss. Elizabeth

retains the moral integrity, critical wit, and grounded sensibility that define her character from the start. This resilience suggests that heritage, while mutable, can remain a core stabilising force even in the face of cultural transformation. In turn, Darcy's own evolution—softening his pride, recognising the validity of perspectives beyond his elite circle—demonstrates that cultural infiltration can be mutual rather than unilateral. In the contemporary context, such a reading encourages a more nuanced understanding of cultural exchange. Globalisation is often framed as a dominant culture eroding smaller ones, but Austen's text suggests that cultural contact can be a dialogue—one in which identity is continuously reshaped through reciprocity, negotiation, and mutual influence. This has significant implications for postcolonial and intercultural studies, as it moves beyond the binaries of assimilation versus resistance to embrace the complexity of cultural hybridity.

Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* endures not simply as a romantic comedy of manners but as a study in the timeless processes of cultural adaptation. Its portrayal of the tensions between tradition and change, selfhood and societal expectation, makes it deeply relevant in today's interconnected world. Whether read in 19th-century parlours or in 21st-century classrooms, the novel invites reflection on how individuals can navigate new cultural landscapes without losing sight of their roots—a challenge as pressing now as it was in Austen's time.

REFERENCES

- [1] Austen, J. (2003). *Pride and prejudice*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1813).
- [2] Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- [3] Hall, S. (1996). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Mongia (Ed.), *Contemporary postcolonial theory: A reader* (pp. 110–121). Arnold.
- [4] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- [5] Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- [6] Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- [7] Bhabha, Homi. "Culture Diversity and Cultural Differences." *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 206–9. Print.



Silverware and Space: The Construction and Deconstruction of the Butler Figure through Object Metaphors in *The Remains of the Day*

Bai Wei

Beijing Forestry University

Received: 30 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 27 Sep 2025; Accepted: 30 Sep 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— In Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, a system of metaphors built around objects such as silverware, corridors, and banquet halls constructs a paradox of existence in which the butler Stevens dissolves his humanity in the pursuit of professional dignity. Silverware, as the material embodiment of the butler's spirit, and the sacred ritual of its polishing—alongside the meticulous spatial order of corridors and other domestic spaces—together weave a disciplinary network of professional myth. This transforms Stevens's sense of self-worth into a mechanical gleam and order akin to that of objects. Yet as silverware becomes historical evidence of Nazi complicity, and as the spatial order of Darlington Hall is restructured by an American businessman, both elements metaphorically expose the hollowness of professional dignity. The rise and fall of this system of metaphors not only deconstructs the emotional void Stevens conceals beneath the identity of the "great butler," but also reflects the crisis of British cultural identity in the postcolonial era. When silverware is reduced to a historical relic and spaces of power are reshaped by the new world order, the individual's adherence to "English dignity" becomes, like a drooping curtain, the last fig leaf of a fading empire.



Keywords— metaphor, object, postcolonial era, professional dignity, silverware, spatial order, *The Remains of the Day*

I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro employs the metaphorical function of objects such as silverware and spaces—including the pantry, banquet hall, and corridors—to shape the complex figure of the butler Stevens, who suppresses his personal emotions in the name of

professional duty. As these objects evolve in meaning throughout the narrative, they gradually deconstruct his constructed identity and reveal the underlying tragedy it conceals.

Existing scholarship on the characterization of Stevens generally falls into two categories. The first focuses

on his self-discipline. For example, Zhang Guoqing and Xu Zhen argue that in the banquet hall, Stevens views the aristocrats as “light” and the servants as “shadow,” a metaphor that illustrates “his strict adherence to social norms” (80). O’Brien, through an analysis of Stevens’s alienated use of language, notes that he treats humor as a matter of “duty” rather than a mode of natural interaction, highlighting his inability to engage in genuine emotional communication (790). The second perspective emphasizes his awakening humanity. Horton, for instance, contends that the moment at the end of the novel when Stevens admits to having made “mistakes” marks his first genuine acknowledgment of the value of human warmth (22).

“Objects do not create their own world but are embedded in human behavior and interaction” (Hahn 41). Scholars have analyzed the metaphorical function of objects in representing imperial ideology from various angles. Li Chunfeng and Liu Fuli suggest that silverware symbolizes “the decline of an empire once glorious” (14). Wang Ye points out that “landscape, as constructed by Stevens, becomes a form of power—an unconscious political expression of imperial desire and imagination” (140). Lin Ping takes the example of a story in which an Indian butler subdues a tiger, arguing that “the tiger symbolizes colonial unrest threatening the order and rationality of the imperial center, but the British butler neutralizes the threat with impeccable composure, thereby upholding ‘dignity’” (128). In addition, Nalkara notes that the spatial distribution and function of the hall mirror the disciplinary mechanisms of a modern prison, and that Stevens lives within it like a “docile prisoner,” passively subject to hierarchical control (64).

Overall, while existing research has focused on the symbolic meaning of material objects and the shaping of the butler image, it tends to serve broader thematic concerns such as “Britishness” or “colonial metaphors,” and seldom provides a systematic analysis of how these objects dynamically contribute to the construction and eventual collapse of Stevens’s identity. This paper will center on silverware and the physical environment of the butler’s life,

exploring how these objects evolve from “tools sustaining a professional myth” to “agents dismantling self-deception.” In doing so, it aims to offer a more comprehensive portrait of the tragic dimensions of Stevens’s character and a deeper understanding of the novel’s central themes.

II. FROM RITUAL OBJECTS TO IMPERIAL SYMBOLISM — THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL DIGNITY IN THE BUTLER FIGURE

2.1. The Sanctity of Silverware: Symbolizing Professional Dignity and Imperial Order

In Victorian Britain (1837–1901), silverware, as a central medium of material culture, embodied the complex interplay between social power and class identity. It reflected the “financial power and social status” of the upper class and becoming a “hierarchical representation catalogue” (Railey 69). In *The Remains of the Day*, silverware appears 25 times, and its symbolic weight far exceeds its practical use.

Polishing silverware, though simple in form, was of paramount importance. For Stevens’s father, it was “his chief responsibility” and a source of pride (Ishiguro 73). Stevens himself treats this task with equal reverence, regarding the shine of silver as a direct reflection of his professional excellence. “A butler’s duty is to provide the best possible service,” he insists, “not to meddle in matters of national importance” (260). For him, the spotless silver signifies not only meticulous service, but more importantly, a disciplined sense of dignity. When asked, “What is dignity?”, Stevens responds: “It’s something to do with not removing one’s clothes in public” (272). This seemingly trivial remark reveals a deeper ethic of self-discipline: emotional restraint, decorum, and “a certain noble reserve” (37). Silver becomes the physical embodiment of this restraint, a surface onto which he projects his obsession with perfection. As Davis observes, “He is obsessed with personal perfection” (24). Stevens polishes the silver “to a gleam” (181), not tolerating a single stain—each blemish a

metaphor for human emotion. As Liang writes, “His inner wall crumbling under the weight of humanity, his outer walls standing firm” (17). Stevens offers his entire being to the profession. “Any professional butler,” he says, “must inhabit his role completely when in front of others” (218). Even as his father lay dying, Stevens continued serving Lord Darlington without interruption, viewing emotional deviation as a breach of professional dignity.

Silverware represents more than occupational pride—it mediates personal value. To Stevens, the shine of silver reflects not only his professionalism, but also the grandeur of Darlington Hall. He believes that serving a “great gentleman” is equivalent to “serving humanity” (154), and only “when his lordship’s work was done” could he consider himself “a satisfied man” (224). He sees silverware as instrumental in enabling Lord Darlington’s “global conferences” (283), and thereby as central to both men’s fulfillment. As one guest remarks, the silverware was “a delight to the eye”—an aesthetic pleasure Stevens equates with historical contribution. “However small,” he reflects, “one has made one’s contribution to the course of history” (182). This inflated self-valuation reflects a blind loyalty to aristocratic hierarchy and an unequal master-servant dynamic.

2.2. The Pantry, Corridors, and Banquet Hall: Spatial Discipline and the Internalization of Hierarchy

“Space is political, ideological.” (Lefebvre 46) At Darlington Hall, space—especially the banquet hall, pantry, and corridors—is saturated with hierarchical power relations. These spaces become tools of external discipline that shape Stevens’s identity as a butler.

The pantry, Stevens’s domain, is described by Miss Kenton as “cold and dark,” “bare and colorless” (67), like a prison. In contrast with the sunny outdoors, this space is stark and lifeless. When Miss Kenton tries to decorate it with flowers, Stevens considers them “a distraction.” The room reflects his inner world—rigid, restrained, and emotionally sterile. He isolates himself within this cold and joyless space as a constant reminder of professional

discipline. His rejection of Miss Kenton’s warmth suggests a deeper refusal to expose or share his emotional self. Stevens insists that “every object must be arranged exactly to my wishes—and stay that way” (213), signaling his resistance to change and deep anxiety about disorder. This spatial discipline mirrors his internal repression.

As Zhao notes, “spatial design is a means for the subject to constitute the other and for the other to be subjected” (9). The corridor and banquet hall starkly illustrate social hierarchy. Even on sunny days, the corridor “never gets any sunlight” and remains “dim and gloomy,” whereas the banquet hall is lit by “a giant chandelier, soft and delicate” (129). This contrast in lighting reflects status distinctions: the banquet hall is the realm of lords, while the corridor is the servant’s domain. Stevens moves through “dark corridors” (295), embodying his perceived inferiority. Darkness becomes a metaphor for his subservience—he exists in shadow to illuminate his masters. This spatial inequality is also visible in the quarters of Stevens’s father, which Stevens describes as “cramped and stark,” like “a prison cell” (84), where his father can’t even straighten his back. By contrast, the banquet hall is “magnificent, full of distinguished guests” (129). Such contrast reveals the estate’s internal hierarchy. For Stevens, the great house is “the hub around which the wheel of the world revolves” (152). Within this spatial structure, he devotes his life to noble service. “To have given one’s best years in service to such a person,” he says, “is a source of deep pride” (80). During dinners, he stands “far in the shadows from the table” (95), literally embodying the role of the invisible servant.

Ultimately, both silverware and space function as disciplinary instruments, shaping Stevens into a butler who lives only through duty and suppresses his humanity. The hierarchical order and internalized service ethic reflected in these objects mirror broader imperial ideologies, rendering Darlington Hall a microcosm of the British Empire.

III. OBJECT ALIENATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS — THE COLLAPSE OF THE BUTLER'S BELIEF SYSTEM

While the object constructs his professional identity, it also reveals the cracks in his humanity, foreshadowing the gradual disintegration of the dignity system he believes in. This identity crisis not only concerns the individual's inner self, but also implies the author's reflection on the decline of the British Empire and moral misalignment.

3.1. The Dissolution of Silverware's Value: From a Symbol of Dignity to Meaninglessness

Previously, we established silverware as the physical embodiment of Stevens's professional dignity and blind devotion. However, the object also comes to signify the hollowness of his beliefs.

On the third day of his journey, Stevens recalls visits to Darlington Hall by figures such as Lord Halifax and von Ribbentrop. He lingers over memories of silver polish brands and the shine of the cutlery, noting how the gleam left a strong impression on guests and, in his view, contributed to the "tenor" of political discussions. Yet he avoids mentioning the actual content of those meetings. Given the presence of Nazi officials and appeasement sympathizers, these "unofficial meetings" (177) were likely acts of collusion. As Liu observes, Stevens "like a submissive slave, obediently obeys his master's command" (23). In this light, silverware becomes complicit in moral failure. It is not just an emblem of service—it facilitates silence and participation in historical wrongdoing. Moreover, his focus on silver rather than substance suggests a psychological evasion. Even as Lord Darlington's moral fall becomes apparent, Stevens clings to material signifiers to avoid confronting the collapse of the ideals he has built his life upon, because that would mean the dissolution of the meaning of professional dignity he had been pursuing all along. By the sixth day, he finally acknowledges that his master "had been misguided," and questions: "What was the point in it all?" (316) This signals a gradual erosion of his inner defenses and an emerging awareness of his complicity.

Another scene that underscores the diminished symbolic power of silver involves Stevens's current employer, Mr. Farraday. While reading his newspaper, Farraday briefly glances at the silverware. Stevens, misreading the gesture, hastily replaces the silverware and feels deeply humiliated. In reality, Farraday—an American unfamiliar with British rituals—likely found nothing wrong. His words "Ah, Stevens" (183) was not an blame for dissatisfaction with the cleanliness of the silverware, but simple confusion and a little bit of blame for Stevens interrupting the newspaper. The moment exposes the growing disconnect between Stevens's world and a modern, post-imperial reality. What once represented prestige and self-worth is now outdated and irrelevant. The silver, once central to British etiquette, no longer commands respect in the eyes of newer elites.

3.2. The Double Deconstruction of Space: Emotional Awakening and Shifting Power

The spatial symbolism in the novel also unravels Stevens's image. One scene, deeply etched in his memory, features Miss Kenton crying in the corridor—"a feeling rising from deep inside me" (274), he recalls. On another occasion, hearing her weep behind a door, he pauses in the dark hallway, admitting, "At first, I was a little downcast" (296).

From this, it can be seen that Stevens had deep feelings for Miss Kenton. He did not show them on his face, but from the fact that he wanted to comfort the sad Miss Kenton and the special feelings in his heart that he was reluctant to admit, his cold and detached appearance was self-evident. He was very reluctant to let Miss Kenton go, so when she met her old acquaintance, Stevens stomped his feet "bang bang bang" in the kitchen, causing a huge commotion (279). His body couldn't deceive himself, although his words seemed indifferent. Just as he thought in his heart when he saw Miss Kenton for the last time: "-- Why should I be so evasive anymore?" At that moment, my heart was broken. (10) In the end, Stevens still let down his psychological defense and admitted his love for Miss

Kenton, leaving behind endless regret and self-reproach.

In addition, the final destination of Darlington House was to be sold to an American merchant. The purpose of the American merchant in retaining the butler's status was merely to conform to the refined and experience the British style. The butler became a commodity and a symbol of status, which further demonstrated the emptiness of the butler's value.

These moments reveal the limits of Stevens's emotional repression. His cold, ordered exterior begins to fracture, exposing a man filled with regret, affection, and unresolved longing. The butler's crisis is not merely personal—it reflects the breakdown of a larger imperial ideal founded on service, discipline, and control.

IV. FROM BUTLER TO EMPIRE — THE IMPERIAL PREDICAMENT OF BUTLER NARRATIVE

4.1. The Butler Identity as a Metaphorical Isomorph of the British Empire

As the previous chapters have shown, objects such as silverware, corridors, and banquet halls not only construct the image of Stevens as a butler who suppresses his emotions and relentlessly pursues professional perfection, but also, through the destabilization of their symbolic meanings, gradually deconstruct the very dignity he strives to uphold. This process of identity collapse on an individual level mirrors the ideological structure, hierarchical order, and eventual decline of the British Empire itself.

Through the motif of silverware, Kazuo Ishiguro shapes Stevens as a figure who devotes himself entirely to professional service while neglecting the pleasures of life. His sense of self-worth is entirely derived from serving upper-class gentlemen, thereby rendering his identity wholly dependent on those with greater social power and higher status. This self-sacrificing obedience echoes the imperial ideology of Britain: to subsume its colonies into a grand system of power, disciplining and educating them into submission under a unified imperial

vision. Stevens's blind loyalty functions as a metaphorical justification for imperial dominance. The novel's implicit deconstruction of this loyalty suggests that such a power structure is ultimately unsustainable and destined to collapse under the weight of historical change. The dignity that Stevens so persistently pursues mirrors the values Britain once imposed upon its colonies—values that are, in essence, built on self-deception and hollow ideology.

The spatial configuration and resource distribution within Darlington Hall similarly allude to imperial logic. The stark contrast between the simplicity of the pantry and the opulence of the banquet hall, or between the darkness of the corridor and the brilliance of crystal chandeliers, symbolizes the rigid division between social classes and the insurmountable barriers of identity. Such a highly stratified spatial structure reflects the unequal relationship between the imperial center and the colonial periphery, where wealth and power are centralized, and marginal individuals or nations are relegated to subservient roles. The series of "historic meetings" held within the estate function like imperial diplomatic conferences, orchestrated by dominant powers while silencing the voices of the oppressed.

As silverware becomes complicit in historical wrongdoing, corridors expose Stevens's hidden humanity, and Darlington Hall is eventually sold to an American owner, the meaning of Stevens's existence—once thought to be as a participant in "great history"—is reduced to being merely a symbol of his new employer's fascination with British traditions and customs (61). In this transformation, Stevens becomes an ornamental relic, commodified as a cultural curiosity. This shift not only implies the waning of British imperial discourse but also signals the failure of the old colonial order in the post-war global context. Stevens's desperate denial of having served Lord Darlington—an attempt to sever his professional dignity from its historical consequences—reveals a profound act of self-deconstruction. His identity crumbles alongside the empire he once served so faithfully.

4.2. From Individual to Nation: Possibilities of Reconstruction in the Postcolonial Era

In the novel's final pages, Stevens begins to shed the hardened exterior he has long maintained. At the end of his journey, he acknowledges, "You've got to enjoy your evenings. They're the best part of the day" (316). Sitting on a bench and waiting for the pier lights to turn on, he tries to practice small talk with his new employer. This moment is rich in symbolism: while the old era has come to an end, the lights on the pier gesture toward an uncertain yet possible future.

This scene embodies not only the possibility of personal redemption but also the first step toward reconstructing identity. After the disintegration of the old hierarchical system and its associated values, Ishiguro leaves a glimmer of vitality within his protagonist. In this sense, *The Remains of the Day* is not entirely pessimistic. It implies that even after the collapse of imperial values, the individual may still have the capacity to reimagine the self and rebuild a meaningful life.

V. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the metaphors of silverware and space in the novel, this paper explores how these objects work together to construct—and simultaneously deconstruct—the image of a butler who suppresses his humanity in pursuit of extreme professional dignity. The hierarchical tensions and shifting values embedded in this figure reflect the underlying imperial ideology, revealing the author's contemplation of the uncertain future of a declining British Empire.

Through this novel, Kazuo Ishiguro offers a restrained yet incisive critique of the postcolonial identity crisis and the moral vacuum within British society. He refrains from prescribing a definitive new order, but through Stevens's awakening and belated self-reflection, he intimates that the true question worth asking in the wake of history and institutional collapse is not "Whom should I serve?" but rather "Who am I" and "How should I live".

REFERENCES

- [1] Davis, R. G. (2002). *Imaginary homelands revisited in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*. Springer.
- [2] Hahn, H. P. (2015). Die geringen Dinge des Alltags: Kritische Anmerkungen zu einigen aktuellen Trends der Material Culture Studies. In *Materialisierung von Kultur: Diskurse Dinge Praktiken*(pp. 28–42). Königshausen & Neumann.
- [3] Horton, E. (2018). 'A genuine old-fashioned English butler': Nationalism and conservative politics in *The Remains of the Day*. *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 31(1), 11–26.
- [4] Nalkara, S. O. (2020). Space defining the individual in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 14(2), 59–73.
- [5] O'Brien, S. (1996). Serving a new world order: Postcolonial politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 42(4), 787–806.
- [6] Railey, K. (2007). Flags in the dust and the material culture of class. In J. R. Urgo & A. J. Abadie (Eds.), *Faulkner and material culture*(pp. 68–81). University Press of Mississippi.
- [7] 李春风、刘富丽. (2023). 银器的言说——新物质主义视域下的《长日将尽》. *复旦外国语言文学论丛*, 1, 14–19.
- [8] 梁中杰. (2010). 身份的迷失与复得: 对小说《长日留痕》的巴赫金式解读. *四川外语学院学报*, 10, 17–47.
- [9] 勒菲弗. (2008). *空间与政治* (第2版). (李春, 译). 上海人民出版社.
- [10] 林萍. (2018). “英国性”的拷问: 后殖民视域下的《长日留痕》. *当代外国文学*, 39(1), 126–132.
- [11] 石黑一雄. (2018). *长日将尽*. (冯涛, 译). 上海译文出版社.
- [12] 王烨. (2018). “后帝国”时代英国乡村神话的祛魅——石黑一雄小说《长日留痕》的空间权力分析. *当代外国文学*, 39(3), 137–143.
- [13] 伍德沃德, I. (2018). 理解物质文化. (张进、张同德, 译). 甘肃教育出版社.
- [14] 徐贞、张国庆. (2023). 尊严、风景与英国性: 《长日留痕》中的民族共同体书写. *当代外国文学*, 44(2), 77–84.
- [15] 赵莉华. (2011). *空间政治: 托尼·莫里森小说研究*. 四川大学出版社.



Multiple Dimensions of Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk": A Study of Puritan Influence, Psychoanalysis and Racial Acceptance in American Literature

Jangle Lalita¹, Mitkari S.B²

¹Department of English, H.P.T. Arts & R.Y. Science College, Nashik, Maharashtra, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, V. G. Shivdare College of Arts Commerce and Science, Solapur, Maharashtra, India

Received: 30 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 27 Sep 2025; Accepted: 30 Sep 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk" is a deceptively simple lyric that reflects complex moral, psychological and social themes. This study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining textual analysis, historical contextualization, Freudian psychoanalysis and comparative literature to explore the poem's multiple dimensions. Through the Puritan lens the poem reveals ethical and spiritual concerns highlighting the tension between human morality and the natural world. Psychoanalytic interpretation positions the bird as a symbol of instinct (id) and the speaker as the ego mediating curiosity, fear and empathy. Additionally, a comparative reading with African American literature including the works of Douglass, Ellison and Angelou uncovers symbolic resonances around freedom, autonomy and respectful coexistence. By synthesizing these perspectives, this research demonstrates that Dickinson's brief lyric engages with broader human experiences-fear, compassion and ethical responsibility, while reflecting enduring cultural and psychological concerns. The study contributes to Dickinson scholarship by revealing how a single poem can bridge personal reflection, moral inquiry and social commentary offering insights relevant to both literary analysis and broader cultural understanding.

Keywords— American Literature, Emily Dickinson's, Psychoanalysis, Puritan Influence, Racial Acceptance,



I. INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) one of America's most original poets, often transformed small observations of nature into deeply symbolic works. Her poem "A Bird Came Down the Walk" is deceptively simple in its portrayal of a small everyday encounter with nature. Yet beneath its quiet surface lies a complex network of meanings that reflect Dickinson's larger engagement with questions of morality, psychology and society. In present work, we seek to examine the poem through three major critical lenses.

First, the study explores the Puritan influence that shaped Dickinson's worldview, particularly the tension between

human sinfulness and divine grace which subtly informs the poem's imagery of fear, danger and reconciliation. Second, it applies psychoanalytic criticism, drawing on Freudian and a post-Freudian idea to uncover how the poem reveals unconscious desires, fears and the human struggle between instinct and civility. Finally, the paper engages with the theme of racial acceptance, situating Dickinson's depiction of difference and coexistence within the broader discourse of American literature's engagement with race relations and otherness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk" is one of her most commonly included poems, but its interpretations are still very open. Scholars have viewed it as a delightful nature sketch, a subtle symbol of spiritual experience, a look into fear and sympathy and even a reflection on how humans coexist with others. This literature review organizes key scholarship into four perspectives: close reading, Puritan heritage, psychoanalysis and race/acceptance. It shows how each perspective helps us understand the poem better and highlights the gaps that this research seeks to fill.

Most critics begin with the poem's formal and linguistic precision. Dickinson's characteristic short lines and dashes have been seen as creating a sudden jerky rhythm that mirrors the bird's "rapid eyes" and quick movements. Commentators note how Dickinson moves from detached observation ("He bit an Angle Worm in halves") (Dickinson 208) [2] to a growing sense of intimacy, culminating in the almost mystical image of flight where "softer" wings than oars move through the sky (Dickinson 208) [2]. Oliver Tearle observes that this tonal shift from casual observation to awe- reflects the speaker's emotional journey, turning a simple scene into "a meditation on the delicate relation between humans and nature" [13]. Close readings therefore emphasize Dickinson's ability to compress complex psychological and moral experiences into a brief lyric moment.

A second area of research looks at Dickinson's New England roots. Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* is essential for understanding the intellectual climate of Dickinson's Amherst. Miller states that the Puritan "plain style" focused on clarity, brevity and moral seriousness. These qualities appear in Dickinson's carefully crafted lines (Miller 62) [11]. Critics suggest that the poem can be seen as a quiet reflection on human sin and divine grace. The bird's initial act of biting the worm suggests a fallen world, while its final flight offers a glimpse of transcendence and spiritual release (Miller 243) [11]. Dickinson's emphasis on inward, private revelation reflects the Puritan tradition of individual spiritual experience, while also questioning its strictness.

Freudian and post-Freudian commentators have applied psychoanalysis to Dickinson's poetry to shed light on the clash between instinct and society. Freud's *The Ego and the Id* offers a way to read the bird as a symbol of basic instinct (the id) acting on natural impulses like eating and sensing danger, while the speaker's careful offer of a "crumb" symbolizes the civilizing ego trying to manage fear and create harmony (Freud 25) [8]. Likewise,

Civilization and Its Discontents discusses how society holds back instinct, indicating that the bird's retreat illustrates the struggle between instinctual freedom and the fear of social vulnerability (Freud 44) [8]. Psychoanalytic readings thus present the poem as a compact psychological drama rather than just a nature scene.

Though less common, recent criticism has started to view Dickinson through the lens of race, class and otherness. The Emily Dickinson Museum points out that Amherst's social landscape included African American servants and hired workers, prompting readers to think about how these realities influenced Dickinson's imagination ("*African Americans in Amherst*") [6]. Comparative literature methods open new possibilities. For example, examining the bird's cautious actions and flight alongside Frederick Douglass's account of escaping slavery highlights themes of freedom and the fear of pursuit (Douglass 92) [3]. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* uses the bird as a metaphor for both captivity and hope, providing a useful parallel for understanding Dickinson's bird as a figure navigating danger and freedom (Angelou 189) [1]. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* resonates with Dickinson's speaker, who observes but is never recognized, echoing Ellison's theme of social invisibility (Ellison 3) [4]. However, there is little sustained research that directly compares Dickinson's imagery with African American literary themes of freedom and coexistence.

Despite a rich body of criticism, three gaps stand out. First, most studies emphasize just one aspect, such as Dickinson's religious background, psychological insights, or nature imagery. Integrated approaches that combine all three are rare. Second, race-focused comparative work is still emerging and rarely connects "A Bird Came Down the Walk" with African American literature. Third, though Dickinson's Amherst context has been more thoroughly explored recently, few critics link this social history directly to her nature poems in a way that examines the ethics of coexistence.

This research addresses these gaps by offering a multifaceted reading that incorporates Puritan theology, psychoanalysis and racial studies. By merging these perspectives, the study argues that Dickinson's poem is more than an isolated personal reflection. It engages deeply with questions of morality, instinct and social coexistence-issues that continue to impact American literature. This approach positions "A Bird Came Down the Walk" as a connection between private experiences and public discussions, showcasing its ongoing

importance to readers grappling with fear, freedom and acceptance in the twenty-first century.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach to explore Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk" through three critical frameworks: Puritan theology, Freudian psychoanalysis and racial discourse in American literature. The poem is examined within the context of nineteenth-century New England Puritanism. Secondary sources, such as Perry Miller's *The New England Mind* help trace how Puritan plain style, moral introspection and ideas of grace shape Dickinson's imagery and tone. Freud's *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* provide a framework for interpreting the bird as a symbol of primal instinct (id) and the speaker as the ego, balancing curiosity, fear and empathy. Concepts like repression, sublimation and anxiety are used to uncover the psychological tension in the poem.

A comparative literary approach connects the poem's imagery to African American literature, including Douglass's *Narrative*, Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, to explore symbolic connections around freedom, fear and coexistence in a racially divided America. A detailed line-by-line analysis anchors these interpretations, focusing on imagery (bird, worm, and flight), tone (from casual to respectful) and symbolism (instinct, danger, liberation).

Critical essays on Dickinson, Puritan studies, psychoanalysis and race theory are woven throughout with citations. Insights from all three frameworks are combined to present a unified interpretation, demonstrating how the poem reflects psychological, spiritual and social struggles at the heart of American literature.

IV. DISCUSSION

Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk" seems like a simple poem about observing a bird, but it raises bigger questions about nature, human emotions and social meaning. The poem's short lines and clear images encourage us to pause and notice small actions. Once we do, the scene expands into ethical, psychological and cultural reflections.

The poem starts simply: "A Bird, came down the Walk / He did not know I saw" (ll. 1-2) [2]. This opening creates a quiet scene of watching. The speaker is a careful observer and the line "He did not know I saw" positions the reader as someone who watches without interrupting.

This line highlights two key aspects of the poem: the closeness of the observational stance and the ethical dilemma of watching another being unaware. Close readers often note Dickinson's control of tone here - calm, curious and slightly secretive - which sets the mood for the rest of the scene. Literary guides emphasize how Dickinson's careful word choice makes everyday life vivid and meaningful. [2]

Lines 3-4: "He bit an Angle Worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw"-present a sharp, almost startling image. The speaker describes the bird's eating in a blunt manner not softening the action: the bird "ate the fellow, raw." Critics often point out this moment as the poem's first morally charged image; nature is not always gentle and can be violent, a reality many humans prefer to overlook. By stating it plainly, Dickinson forces the reader to confront life's rawness. LitCharts and other commentaries stress that Dickinson turns a minor event into a reflection on the "beauty and brutality" of nature - an important duality present throughout the poem. [10]

The next lines - "And then, he drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass" (ll. 5-6) [2] soften the image. After the violence of eating, the bird's act of drinking dew evokes a sense of purity or refreshment. This quick shift-violence followed by gentleness - illustrates Dickinson's interest in contrasts: raw survival and delicate beauty coexist. Many readers interpret the dew as a moment of grace following a violent meal; it reads almost like a spiritual act, a natural ritual of renewal. This transition from brutality to delicacy introduces the Puritan angle in the poem. Dickinson often embeds ethical or spiritual questions within such contrasts (how to perceive suffering and grace in the same world). Scholars point out that Dickinson's New England background, influenced by Puritan thought, makes her particularly sensitive to small moments of moral or spiritual importance. [5]

The bird's next actions-"And then hopped sidewise to the Wall / To let a Beetle pass" (ll. 7-8) [2] add a sense of domestic politeness to the scene. The bird acts considerably by making room for another creature. Dickinson adds nuance here: the bird is both a predator and a polite neighbor. The speaker continues with precise details: "He glanced with rapid eyes, / That hurried all abroad / They looked like frightened Beads, I thought, / He stirred his Velvet Head. / Like one in danger, Cautious" (ll. 9-13) [2]. The language-"rapid eyes," "frightened Beads," "velvet head," "Like one in danger, Cautious"-portrays the bird as both vulnerable and alert. Critics often interpret this section as a moment of mutual awareness. The speaker recognizes the bird's fear and connects its instinctual alertness to human experience.

Close-reading guides suggest that the "frightened beads" line highlights the animal's primitive fear; the metaphor (eyes as beads) objectifies the bird while also evoking sympathy. [10]

When the speaker offers a crumb—"I offered him a Crumb" (l. 14) [2] the poem shifts to a human gesture of attempted connection. This simple act carries rich meaning. It suggests empathy and a desire to connect; it also hints at a wish to tame or assist the wild. The bird's reaction is telling: "And he unrolled his feathers, / And rowed him softer Home / Than Oars divide the Ocean, / Too silver for a seam, / Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, / Leap, plashless as they swim" (ll. 15–20) [12]. Instead of accepting the crumb, the bird flies away. Dickinson's description of the flight—"rowed him softer Home" and the extended similes-transforms the bird's movement into a quiet, beautiful image of escape. Critics highlight this as the final ethical and aesthetic moment of the poem: the bird's departure affirms its independence and the speaker's inability to control or tame it. [5]

Considering the poem through a Puritan lens helps explain Dickinson's moral sensitivity to small moments. Perry Miller's work on Puritan intellectual history indicates that New England Puritanism emphasized inner experience, plain style and moral seriousness-traits that shape Dickinson's writing style. In the poem, the moral questions are subtle and introspective: what does it mean to witness violence? How should we behave when facing nature's harshness? The bird's raw eating (ll. 3–4) [2] and the speaker's simple offer (l. 14) [2] can be viewed as a small test of conscience-do we judge the bird, help it or simply observe? Scholars of Dickinson point out that she often uses straightforward, concise language (a Puritan characteristic) to address spiritual questions without preaching; the poem's ethical weight arises from its restraint and careful observation. Perry Miller's insights into New England intellectual life support this interpretive perspective, revealing that Dickinson's cultural background encourages her to seek meaning in small moral acts. [11]

Puritan thought also sheds light on the tension between sin/violence and grace/beauty in the poem (the consumed worm and the sipped dew). The Puritan focus on a fallen world and the potential for inward spiritual experience helps us interpret the bird's actions and the speaker's sympathy as moral signs rather than just natural occurrences. The bird's "cautious" behavior (l. 13) and the speaker's offer (l. 14) [2] compel us to contemplate moral responsibility, even in seemingly small interactions. Critics who situate Dickinson within her Puritan context argue that this foundation is not about

moralizing; rather, it fosters a form of ethical awareness about ordinary life-the very approach Dickinson uses in this poem. [11]

Freudian concepts-id, ego and the tension between instinct and social restraint-provide another useful lens. Freud's model, as described in *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, helps us view the bird as an image of raw instinct (id): it eats, drinks and remains alert to danger. The speaker's restrained behavior-watching and offering a crumb without pressing-acts like the ego, balancing curiosity with social caution. The bird's refusal and eventual flight suggest that the ego cannot fully control the id; instinct prevails at crucial moments. Psychoanalytic commentators frequently note the poem's progression from observation to an attempted connection and then to frustration-mirroring the human psychological struggle between desire and fear of vulnerability. Freud's description of civilization as a structure of restraint highlights why the speaker's civilized gesture (the crumb) cannot compel the bird into submission. [9]

Examining the poem line by line through a psychoanalytic lens reveals intricate readings: the "rapid eyes" (l. 9) can signify panic or heightened instinct; "frightened Beads" (l. 11) [2] conveys the objectification of emotion; and the speaker's restrained gesture (l. 14) [2] symbolizes social control. The bird's unfolding feathers and graceful flight (ll. 15–20) [2] represent a release of instinct into unreserved movement-an image where energy transforms into artistic motion instead of raw consumption. Many psychoanalytic readings of poetry consider such changes meaningful: instinct becomes art or motion and the speaker's observation serves as a model for how culture navigates nature. [7]

Although Dickinson's poem does not explicitly mention race, comparing it with African American texts deepens its meaning by illustrating how the bird's actions resonate with themes of freedom, vigilance and refusal. Frederick Douglass's *narratives*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* all emphasize the relationships among observation, vulnerability and the pursuit of autonomy. For instance, when the speaker offers a crumb and the bird declines it, one might recall Douglass's careful, watchful steps toward freedom-actions that demanded vigilance and a rejection of false charity. Angelou's caged bird metaphor links bird imagery to racial confinement and longing for dignity; Ellison's invisible self echoes the theme of being seen but remaining separate. Critics who draw these comparisons suggest that Dickinson's bird represents a figure of independence that resists conformity-this

interpretation situates Dickinson within a broader American discourse about otherness and dignity. Researchers and historians studying social history in Amherst note the presence of African Americans and laborers; this context prompts readers to consider how Dickinson may have been aware of social hierarchies even in her everyday observations. [6]

Line by line, the poem supports this comparative interpretation: the bird's alertness and its rejection of the crumb (ll. 9–16) [2] can symbolize a commitment to self-possession over dependence. The speaker's respectful distance models an ethical stance toward freedom-offer assistance, but refrain from enforcing it. This connects to themes in Douglass (self-liberation), Angelou (the caged bird's song and flight symbolizing dignity) and Ellison (visibility and invisibility), making Dickinson's quiet lyric resonates with larger social discussions about freedom and acceptance. Critics of such cross-genre comparisons urge caution-they do not claim that Dickinson wrote explicitly about race-but they illustrate how literary images can connect across different traditions and histories. [13]

The poem's concluding similes-"Than Oars divide the Ocean, / Too silver for a seam, / Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, / Leap, plashless as they swim" (ll. 17–20) [2] elevate the bird's flight to a display of delicate mastery. Dickinson employs motion metaphors-oars, seams, butterflies-to transform the bird's departure into an aesthetic revelation. Critics commend these lines for how they elevate simple flight into a graceful, almost sacred movement; the bird embodies a living poem. From a Puritan perspective, this can signify a moment of grace (beauty following brutality); from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, it illustrates sublimation; and from a racial/comparative lens, it represents the affirmation of freedom. The convergence of these interpretations at the poem's end is what makes Dickinson's brief lyric so impactful: in fewer than twenty lines, she presents a moral question, a psychological conflict and a symbol of independence. [12]

Ultimately, the poem's ethical essence prompts us to consider how we-as observers-should interact with other beings. The speaker opts for a humble, non-intrusive kindness, while the bird chooses to fly away. Dickinson seems to suggest that true respect for others may not come from possession or control but from acknowledgment and the allowance of freedom. Critics who highlight Dickinson's restraint argue that this lesson-how to navigate a world filled with violence and beauty-is a key ethical contribution of her poetry. By integrating historical, psychological and social perspectives, this

poem reveals how a seemingly personal lyric invites universal inquiries about fear, freedom and compassion.

V. CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk" reveals how even a brief lyric can carry profound moral, psychological and social meaning. The poem reflects Puritan themes of morality and grace, explores the Freudian tension between instinct and restraint and resonates with ideas of freedom and coexistence found in American literature. Together, these perspectives show Dickinson's ability to engage readers on ethical, emotional and intellectual levels. Her simple observation of a bird becomes a meditation on human experience, proving her continued relevance as a poet who connects private reflection with universal questions.

REFERENCES

- [1] Angelou, M. (1969). I know why the caged bird sings. Random House.
- [2] Dickinson, E. (1960). The complete poems of Emily Dickinson (T. H. Johnson, Ed.). Little, Brown.
- [3] Douglass, F. (1845). Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave. Boston Anti-Slavery Office.
- [4] Ellison, R. (1952). Invisible man. Random House.
- [5] Emily Dickinson Museum. (2021). A Bird, came down the Walk (359). Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/a-bird-came-down-the-walk-359/]
- [6] Emily Dickinson Museum. (2021). African Americans in Amherst. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/african-americans-in-amherst/]
- [7] Freud, S. (1923). The ego and the id (J. Riviere, Trans.). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=3108181]
- [8] Freud, S. (1960). The ego and the id (J. Riviere, Trans.). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1923)
- [9] Freud, S. (1961). Civilization and its discontents (J. Strachey, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1930) Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://books.google.com/books/about/Civilization_and_Its_Discontents.html?id=AW3z38T3u7YC]
- [10] LitCharts. (2008). A bird came down the walk: Poem summary and analysis. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/a-bird-came-down-the-walk]

- [11] Miller, P. (1983). *The New England mind: The seventeenth century*. Harvard University Press.
- [12] Poetry Foundation. (2003). A bird, came down the walk – (359). Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56593/a-bird-came-down-the-walk-359]
- [13] Tearle, O. (2019). A short analysis of Emily Dickinson's "A Bird came down the Walk." *Interesting Literature*. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://interestingliterature.com/2019/01/a-short-analysis-of-emily-dickinsons-a-bird-came-down-the-walk/]



The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of Emotions as Weights and the Identification of a Sinthome in George Saunders' "Sticks"

Dr. Mehdi Morchid

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Received: 26 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 28 Sep 2025; Accepted: 02 Oct 2025; Available online: 05 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article offers a dual-perspective reading of George Saunders' short story "Sticks" (1995/2018) by combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) with Lacanian psychoanalysis. The study identifies a dominant metaphorical pattern whereby emotions are conceptualised as physical weights that must be externalised. The father's ritualistic behaviour of decorating a metallic pole in the yard frame joy, guilt, grief and love as tangible burdens offloaded through acts of dragging, suspending and fastening. Through Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome, the father's idiosyncratic relationship to the pole is interpreted not as a symptomatic expression of repressed desire, but as a sinthomatic practice, a singular knotting of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real that sustains his psychic survival. In this light, "Sticks" emerges as a focused depiction of a sinthome based on the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights.



Keywords— Literary criticism, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Psychoanalytic Analysis. Short Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

George Saunders' short story "Sticks" (1995/2018) compresses into two short paragraphs a complex portrait of a father who obsessively decorates a metallic pole in the family's yard. Narrated from the perspective of the son, the story focuses on the father's idiosyncratic behaviour, described as his "only concession to glee" (Saunders, 1995/2018, p. 29). The scholarship on George Saunders predominantly focuses on his representation of ethics and political philosophy (Coleman & Ellerhoff 2017), his deployment of **satire** to expose social hypocrisy (Neeper, 2016) and the minimalist yet impactful quality of his prose (Millen, 2018). Although Saunders' fiction attracts substantial academic attention, there remains a **dearth of studies devoted exclusively to "Sticks."** Mathew and Pandya's (2020) article, "Animate and Inanimate Love: Deciphering Carpe Diem in George Saunders' Sticks," is amongst the very few to focus on this text directly. Their study is **original** in combining Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love with Victor Turner's concept of

liminality to argue that the father's attachment to the pole constitutes "empty love" and a liminal existence, culminating in a *carpe diem* reading. Yet, this interpretation risks oversimplifying the text by reducing its complex narrative to a singular, didactic *carpe diem* message, especially that Saunders is emblematic of resisting facile moralising. Furthermore, limiting the story to as simple a message as "living in the moment" is atypical of the depth that literary analysis proffers. Such a reading undermines Saunders' deliberate ambiguity and stylistic minimalism. Additionally, although the invocation of Sternberg's love triangle is interesting, the article does not convincingly demonstrate how the father's connection to the pole fits within Sternberg's paradigm.

After reviewing the literature surrounding the work of Saunders, it appears that engagement with his metaphors and the psychoanalytic dimensions of his characters remain underexplored. This paper pursues two interconnected lines of inquiry. First, it examines the conceptual metaphors that structure the father's actions,

particularly the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights. Second, it situates the father's peculiar relation to the decorated pole within Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic distinction between the symptom and the sinthome (Lacan, 1975/2016). The central question is whether the father's behaviour is best understood as a symptomatic expression of repressed desire or as a sinthomatic practice sustaining his psychic coherence.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) framework (Charteris-Black, 2004) to analyse dominant conceptual metaphors in "Sticks." Charteris-Black's CMA provides a systematic and structured framework for a focused examination of metaphors. It integrates cognitive linguistics, especially Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, with discourse analysis to reveal how metaphor shapes meaning in context (Morchid, 2025). This paper employs CMA to identify all instances where emotions are metaphorised as physical weights, to reconstruct the cross-domain mappings between source domains and target domains and to interpret the conceptual entailment from the mappings.

The text was coded manually first by extracting all concordance lines related to the conceptualisation of emotions as weights. Then, each instance was subjected to analysis. The Pragglez Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (The Pragglez Group, 2007) was applied to determine whether each word within the lexical domain of physical weights was used metaphorically or literally. The MIP helped minimise subjectivity in determining metaphoricity. First, the text was read for overall understanding. Then, every lexical unit related to the semantic field of weight was extracted. Each unit was analysed by comparing its contextual meaning with its most basic meaning, especially one that involved concrete bodily or spatial movement. If the two meanings were sufficiently similar, the unit registered as non-metaphorical. If they differed, it registered as metaphorical. These steps made determining metaphoricity less reliant on subjectivity and imparted on the process rigour and replicability.

To interpret the psychoanalytic dimension of the father's behaviour in "Sticks," Lacan's theory (Lacan, 1975/2016) was applied with emphasis on his distinction between symptom and sinthome as developed in *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*. Applying Lacan's psychoanalysis to fiction follows Žižek's (1991) analysis of literary and cultural artefacts through a Lacanian framework. This approach moves beyond merely searching for hidden meaning to tracing how texts reflect the structures of human

subjectivity. Žižek's ideas were particularly important to this study, especially through his emphasis on how literary texts represent the impossibility of fully articulating the Lacanian Real (Žižek, 1991). Further secondary scholarship on Lacan was also pertinent to this study. For example, Fink (2017) and Homer (2004) were drawn upon to clarify how the father's behaviour in "Sticks" may be read analogously to Lacan's interpretation of James Joyce's writing as a sinthome.

2.1 Methodological Justification: combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Psychoanalysis

This study employs a hybrid analytic framework that integrates **CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)** with **psychoanalytic interpretation** (Lacan, 1975/2016) to capture a comprehensive account of the symbolic dimensions of George Saunders' "Sticks." The rationale for combining these approaches is threefold. First, **CMT offers a systematic method for** examining how emotions are metaphorically conceptualised in the text, enabling analysis of the underlying conceptual structures that shape meaning beyond the textual surface. Second, **psychoanalysis complements these findings by** addressing the affective and unconscious forces underpinning the father's idiosyncratic behaviour in "Sticks." While CMT focuses on how meaning is cognitively structured through language, psychoanalysis foregrounds the drives and desires that escape typical articulation. Third, the combination of the two approaches is justified because of their theoretical compatibility. Both presuppose that surface-level tokens mediate deeper structures of meaning that are accessible only through conceptual analysis. This methodological hybridity aligns with an established tradition of interdisciplinary literary studies that combine linguistics and psychoanalysis to access multiple layers of meaning (Žižek, 1991). By integrating the two approaches, the study demonstrates how Saunders' deceptively simple narrative encodes a complex mode of expressing emotions and configures it as a Lacanian sinthome.

III. THE METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF EMOTIONS AS WEIGHTS

A dominant conceptual metaphor in "Sticks" is **EMOTIONS ARE WEIGHTS**. The father does not verbalise his feelings. Instead, he externalises them through physical acts of dragging, draping, hanging, taping and fastening objects to the pole in his yard. Each action represents emotion as a tangible burden that must be offloaded, as it can be observed in the following concordance lines.

JOY IS A BURDEN.

He dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix (Saunders, 2018, p. 29).

The celebration of Christmas is an expression of joy. However, the father's sole manifestation of the emotion of joy is described as "dragging the Santa suit and draping it over a kind of crucifix." Joy is framed as a heavy weight that requires efforts to carry and transport. The destination towards which the costume is taken, the crucifix, emphasises the peculiarity of the father's behaviour. Christmas, which is a time of joy, is expressed by dragging a suit to a crucifix, a symbol of suffering.

PAST EXPERIENCES ARE ANCHORS.

Odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theatre tickets, old sweatshirts (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Past experiences become anchors that stabilise the pole. Referring to objects from the father's past as talismans conceptualises them as having supernatural protective powers. Positioning them around the base becomes symbolically more meaningful. They are anchors that protect the father's psyche from drifting into meaninglessness.

GUILT IS SUSPENDED WEIGHT.

He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Guilt is framed as a burden that must be displayed rather than concealed. It is suspended, and under this conceptualisation, suspension represents an ongoing presence. Guilt is thereby materialised as a tangible object, neither deposited nor buried, but held in suspension. The image communicates that the father's guilt lingers unresolved.

GRIEF IS A MONUMENT.

He dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

The father's grief over the loss of his wife is expressed by monumentalising it. He dresses the pole as death, embodying grief as a statue and supplementing this embodiment by photos of the deceased, thus transforming memory into visible objects.

GUILT IS A BURDEN + CONFESSION IS EXPOSURE AND CONNECTION.

He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all

written in a frantic hand on index cards. (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Confession is conceptualised as a performative act in which guilt is externalised through material tokens, letters suspended on strings that link a central structure to its extensions. The act of hanging these notes enacts the offloading of a moral burden. Additionally, his frantic handwriting reveals how guilt destabilises the father's body and mind, making the confession compulsive rather than measured.

LOVE AND THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS ARE PAINTINGS.

He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

The father materialises his emotions by inscribing notes on paper. Yet, only at the end of the story does he "paint a sign" rather than write a note. Painting requires greater effort and departs from the automatisms of muscle memory, rendering it more deliberate. By painting "LOVE" and "FORGIVE?" in uppercase, unlike the lowercase writing of earlier emotions, these expressions are framed as more significant than those previously conveyed. Moreover, painting rather than merely writing functions as a narrative signal. The bold uppercase letters evoke an epitaph and thus foreshadow both the conclusion of the story and the father's imminent death. The painted words mark the culmination of his externalisation of emotions as burdens

Through these metaphors, emotions are consistently treated as objects too heavy to carry internally and thus must be externalised. The pole becomes a scaffold of emotions, a structure for unloading burdens.

There are further expansions that can be drawn from the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weight. For example, the story's brevity, extending over only two paragraphs, reflects the father's reduction of complex emotions to physical objects. The analysis of the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights prefigures the examination of the father's idiosyncratic behaviour through Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome (Lacan, (1916/2010).

IV. SYMPTOM AND SINTHOMES

To interpret the father's reliance on the pole, Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome proves illuminating. Freud (1916/2010) defined the symptom as compromise, an unconscious urge expressed indirectly because its direct articulation would violate social or moral norms. Lacan extends this by linking the symptom to jouissance, a paradoxical mix of pleasure and pain (Lacan,

1975/2016). Symptoms in this sense are coded messages requiring interpretation.

However, the father's decorated pole resists reading as a symptom. It is not a veiled message awaiting decipherment but an idiosyncratic practice enabling psychic survival. Lacan's concept of the sinthome is more appropriate. For Lacan, the sinthome is not a puzzle to analyse away, but a stabilising knot that binds together the three registers of subjectivity, "the imaginary, the symbolic and the real" (Lacan, 1975/2016, p.8). The imaginary designates the self-image to which one aspires. The symbolic refers to the set of rules that an individual has no choice but to abide by, and the real is the inexpressible that can only be known through its effect. In the story, The imaginary is reflected in the father's decoration of the pole, where each arrangement corresponds to his emotional state and constitutes his attempt at constructing a self-image. The symbolic, the order of language, law and relational norms, is not fully accessible to the father. In lieu of integrating into these shared structures of meaning, he invents a singular practice of inscription and decoration, weaving the symbolic, the imaginary and the real into an idiosyncratic yet stabilising equilibrium. The real constitutes the locus of the father's unfathomable emotions which overwhelm the symbolic. Hence, the father's singular behaviour is a sinthome. It is the knotting that stabilises his psyche and allows him to remain functional and keep his grip on reality. The metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights corresponds with the interpretation of the father's peculiar behaviour as a sinthome whereby externalising weights is a survival mechanism.

There is a logical continuity between the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights and the interpretation of the father's ritualistic attachment to the pole as a sinthome. At work is an underlying conceptual metaphor that frames the psyche in corporeal terms. Emotions accumulate like physical burdens, entailing that the subject can bear only so much before reaching collapse. Within this framework, the father's peculiar behaviour emerges as a sinthome, and the pole functions as the site on which excess weight is discharged, thereby preventing psychic disintegration.

V. JOYCE'S EXPERIMENTAL WRITING AND THE FATHER'S OBSESSIVE HANDLING OF THE POLE IN "STICKS"

Lacan's analysis of James Joyce offers a useful parallel. In the absence of a paternal stabiliser, Joyce developed a unique writing style as a sinthome, a creative necessity rather than a pathology (Lacan, 1975/2016). Similarly, the father in "Sticks" relates to the pole

compulsively yet productively. His connection to it constitutes a private knotting of the three registers, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Lacan identifies Joyce's idiosyncratic writing as a sinthome and describes it as "utterly essential to Joyce's ego" (Lacan 1975/2016, p. 127). Just as Joyce's writing sustained his subjectivity (Lacan, 1975/2016), the father's compulsive decoration of the pole sustains his psychic survival. While for an external observer the pole remains meaningless, for the father it is indispensable. Its disposal by the new owners after the father's death underscores the radical singularity of the sinthome. Within this perspective, Saunders's short story resists reduction to a moral parable that merely imparts a lesson. Rather, it emerges as a meticulously woven narrative that illuminates the function of ritualistic idiosyncrasies as sinthomatic knots binding together the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (Žižek, 1991).

VI. CONCLUSION

A critical metaphor analysis of "Sticks" (1995/2018) shows that the story conceptualises emotions as weights. The father expresses his feelings by offloading them onto a pole, and later onto subsidiary poles. From a Lacanian perspective, the father's behaviour is not merely symptomatic but exemplifies what Lacan calls a sinthome, a creative knotting of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real that enables the father to sustain existence. Interpreting Saunders' short story through Lacan's reading of Joyce underscores the importance of idiosyncratic practices in preserving sanity, functionality and subjectivity. The father's pole, like Joyce's writing, demonstrates that what may appear as eccentric or pathological could, in fact, be the very condition of psychic survival.

REFERENCES

- [1] Charteris-Black, J. (2004). *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Neeper, L. (2016). To soften the heart: George Saunders, postmodern satire, and empathy. *Studies in American Humor*, 2(2), 280–299. <https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.2.2.0280>
- [3] Millen, A. (2018). Affective fictions: George Saunders and the wonderful-sounding words of neoliberalism. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59(2), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1378610>
- [4] Fink, B. (2017). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance* (e-book ed.). Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400885671>
- [5] Freud, S. (2010). *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis* (J. Strachey, [Trans.], W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1916)

- [6] Homer, S. (2004). *Jacques Lacan*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203347232>
- [7] Lacan, J. (2016). *The sinthome: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII* (A. R. Price, Trans.). Polity Press. (Original work published 1975–1976)
- [8] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- [9] Miller, M. C. (Ed.). (2017). *George Saunders: Critical essays*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [10] **Morchid, M.** (2025). Integrating conceptual metaphor theory and corpus-based data: A stepwise application of the single-lexeme model of analysis. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 10(4), 275–279.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.104.38>
- [11] Saunders, G. (2018). *Tenth of December*. Bloomsbury.
- [12] Coleman, P., & Ellerhoff, S. G. (Eds.). (2017). *George Saunders: Critical essays*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [13] Žižek, S. (1991). *Looking awry: An introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. MIT Press.



Who Broke the Rule? Emotion, Ethics and the Play of Criminality in Contemporary Indian Folktales for Children

Sreelakshmi R¹, Prof B. J. Geetha²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu, India

Email: sreelakshmir23@students.cutn.ac.in

²Professor and Head, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu, India

Email: geethabi@cutn.ac.in

Received: 31 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Sep 2025; Accepted: 03 Oct 2025; Available online: 07 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— What if a lie could be funny, a broken promise to be clever, and a criminal to be kind? In the world of modern Indian folktales, especially those produced after 2000s by platforms like Karadi Tales and Tulika Books, animated storytelling reimagines wrongdoing in playful and emotionally complex ways. This article explores how such visual narratives frame criminality not as a fixed moral failure, but as a site of humour, cleverness and even wonder. Rather than offering clear moral lessons, these folktales position the child as an active moral interpreter, invited to navigate shifting perspectives and emotional cues. Focusing on two animated stories, *The Lion's Feast* (2006) and *Paati's Beats* (2018) this analysis examines moments of mischief, deception, and ethical ambiguity without clear resolution. What counts as a crime - and who is the criminal - often depends on narrative framing and viewer response. In parallel, it draws on Narrative Positioning Theory (Davies and Harre 1990; Kayi Aydar 2019) to explore how children are invited to take up roles such as hero, trickster, or bystander. Ultimately, this study attempts to show how animated folktales encourage children to think about justice, not as a rulebook, but as a story to feel their way through.



Keywords— Animation, Criminality, Folktales, Indian, Narrative positioning

I. INTRODUCTION

Children's stories have always done more than mere entertainment. They shape young reader's understanding of right and wrong, model social behaviour and invite emotional engagement. Traditional scholarship on folktales has largely emphasized their role in transmitting cultural norms and clear moral messages. Research on Indian children's literature, has extensively documented how such collections reinforced ethical binaries, offering children a singular moral framework to follow.

More recent work in children's media studies, however, highlights the child as an active interpreter, capable of navigating ambiguity and responding to emotional cues. While there is growing attention to the ways children interpret narrative and morality, few studies have

examined how criminality and wrongdoing are framed in contemporary Indian animated folktales, or how children are positioned to negotiate ethical complexity within these stories.

This paper addresses that gap by tracing historical shifts in Indian children's literature, from didactic moral instruction to contemporary folktales that blend playfulness, mischief and ethical ambiguity. It examines how acts of mischief, deception and criminality are represented in these narratives and how children are invited to interpret them. Using Narrative Positioning Theory, this study analyses the ways young viewers are positioned as active participants in the story world, navigating shifting moral landscapes. The purpose of this paper is to explore how modern Indian animated folktales encourage children to think about

justice not as a rigid rulebook, but as a story to feel their way through, highlighting the ethical and emotional complexity embedded in contemporary storytelling.

II. HISTORICAL SHIFTS IN MORAL FRAMING

2.1 From Clean Binaries to Curiosity

In Indian children's storytelling, the idea of crime – or more broadly, right and wrong – was once quite clear-cut. Stories traditionally acted as moral compasses: teaching, warning and guiding young readers with firm distinctions between good and bad. Ancient collections like the *Panchatantra Tales* (originally composed c. 3000 BCE; Pai, 2008) were filled with clever animals, tricky situations and crystal-clear morals. For example, in one tale, a jackal's cleverness helps him rise in power, but his arrogance leads to downfall – a direct caution against pride. This moral structure continued into the mid-20th century with the emergence of *Amar Chitra Katha* (est. 1967) which adapted Indian mythology, history and folklore into comic form. These stories, too, were built around dichotomies of virtue and vice: kings who lied were punished, demons were defeated, and brave, honest heroes triumphed. Narration was often from a singular voice, offering little room for alternate perspectives. Justice always prevailed, reinforcing a singular ethical framework.

However, over the past two decades, a quiet yet unmistakable shift has transformed the landscape of Indian children's storytelling. Beginning in the early 2000s, a new generation of publishers has reimagined folktale narration in ways that remain culturally rooted, but feels fresher, playful, and open to curiosity. One of the earliest players in this transformation was *Karadi Tales* (est. 1996) which combined Indian folktales with immersive audio storytelling. Their narratives feature background music, expressive narration and sound effects delivered in Indian voices and accents. Whether in classroom or at bedtime, the stories feel like being read to by a family member – a storytelling experience rich in rhythm, warmth and cultural familiarity.

Tulika Books (est. 1996) emerged alongside *Karadi*, introducing multilingual, multicultural narratives. Stories span across geographies and include local expressions, dialects, food, attire, and familial customs. Whether it is a story set in the hills of Himachal or the backwaters of Kerala, children recognize elements of their daily lives – the polka-dot skirts oily braids with red ribbons, banana leaf meals, and exclamations like “Aiyoo (Oh No!)” or “Arre waah!” (wonderful). Illustrations of Tulika is deeply enhanced by local artist collaborations, mimicking handmade feel to the pages. Pratham Books

revolutionized accessibility with the launch of *Story Weaver* in 2015, offering free picture books in over 50 Indian languages. A child in Assam (North-East state of India) and a child in Tamil Nadu (Southernmost state of India) can read the same story in their mother tongue. These stories reflect urban and rural childhoods - cricket in narrow alleys, buses full of chatter, potholed roads, and schoolyards with broken swings (*Karadi Tales*, 2006).

Publishers like Tara Books, Ektara Publishers and Magic Box continued this revival, blending old storytelling forms with new perspectives. Tara Books, for instance, pairs traditional Indian art styles like Madhubani, Warli, Gond – and pairs them with contemporary retellings. These books are part story, part art piece, maintaining the rich visual traditions of Indian oral culture. What sets these publishers apart is their deliberate choice not to imitate Western storytelling formats. Instead, they centre brown-skinned children, cotton saree-clad grandmothers and uncle fixing old scooters. Steel tiffin boxes, neem trees, barred windows, and marigolds populate the background.

This visual world acts as an “Image bank” that helps Indian children relate story to self. Importantly, the storytelling voice has changed. Dialogues mimics real-life speech – siblings' squabble, grandparents scold gently, and regional expressions abound. Characters no longer speak in formal, stilted tones but in natural, familiar ways, preserving linguistic diversity. Yet, the most significant change lies in the treatment of morality. While stories of *Panchatantra* or *Amar Chitra Katha* emphasized fixed punishments for dishonesty or disobedience, newer stories explore ambiguity. Modern tales are built around minor mischiefs: hiding a sibling's toy, sneaking sweets or fibbing to avoid homework. These are not presented as crimes, nor are the characters always punished. Instead, readers are encouraged to empathize, reflect, and sometimes laugh. Resolutions are less about punishment and more about understanding. The aim is not didacticism, but engagement. Children are asked not simply, “What is right?” but “Why did they do that?” or “Could the villain have had a reason?”.

2.2 Folktales Reimagined

For centuries, Indian folktales have been mainly oral stories – narrated under banyan trees, and passed down through generations, with rich regional variations in language, imagery and tone. *The Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, *Hitopadesha* and other collections became foundational texts where everyday wisdom, humour and moral insight is combined in animal fables. These tales were not confined to written texts; they were embodied in performance, puppetry, song, and communal retelling – an evolving tradition rather than a fixed set of morals. In recent decades, as children's literature in India expanded through the

printing press and new publishers emerged, folktale forms were adapted into modern media: comic books, puppetry series and illustrated books embraced regional aesthetics while retaining the openness of storytelling. These formats preserved the elastic moral form and cultural specificity which is prevalent identity of folklores.

The last two decades have seen a further transformation: Indian folktales are now presented through animation, digital platforms, and multilingual editions. While many stories remain ancient, the folklore tradition is not static. Contemporary animated tales often emulate features of folktale – episodic rhythm, playful repetition, local colour – while adapting to their form of visual and auditory impact. Folklore remains central but is now used to spark imagination, question morality, and explore identity. Tales of trickster jackals, greedy kings, or magical forests are told with humour or from multiple perspectives. A formerly one-dimensional villain may now be shown in a sympathetic light, and children are positioned not just as learners, but as interpreters. The child reader or viewer is encouraged to feel their way through justice, rather than following a strict rulebook.

The Lion's Feast is based on a well-known Tamil folk narrative, updated through visual humour and music, but still structured around classical tropes of deception, hospitality and reversal. *Paati's Beats*, through an original story, echoes the folktale mode through its episodic rhythm, exaggerated characters, intergenerational setting, and oral-style narration. In both, there is no central moral preached, but a world revealed – through repetition, rhythm and delight in everyday mischief. These stories do not aim to teach one fixed truth. Instead, like folklores, they invite retelling, adaptation and interpretation.

By positioning the child viewer as both insider and outsider to the world of the story, they uphold the folktale tradition as a living, breathing form – where even an elderly woman chewing betel leaf or a lion waiting for his meal can become part of a shared cultural imagination. Thus, folktale as a genre in India today includes both age-old narratives and newly crafted stories that draw on the folktale aesthetic: community-rooted, emotion-rich, adaptable, and open-ended in meaning. These are not just retellings; they are folktales reimagined for contemporary child audience.

III. PLAY OF CRIMINALITY IN FOLKTALES

3.1 Guilt, Empathy and the Shape of “Wrongdoing” in Children’s stories

In children’s literature, the idea of crime is not always what adults associate with court, theft or physical harm. Instead, wrongdoing is often framed through disobedience,

deception, mischief, or unintended harm. These stories rarely involve law enforcement or legal consequences but focus instead on emotional and ethical concepts like guilt and empathy. The emotional resonance of such moments often determines how young readers interpret these acts, particularly when characters are shown experiencing guilt or regret.

Maria Nikolajeva can be drawn, a pioneer in children’s literature, offers insight into this process. In her 2012 article “Guilt, Empathy and the Ethical Potential of Children’s Literature”, she argues that children’s books function as emotional laboratories where young readers can explore complex feelings like remorse, forgiveness, and moral uncertainty in a safe space. When characters act unethically or ambiguously, literature encourages children to engage in perspective-taking, practicing empathy without real-world consequences. Contemporary Indian visual folktales like *The Lion's Feast* (Karadi Tales), *Paati's Beats* (Tulika Books), and digital stories from Pratham’s Story Weaver platform embody this shift from moral clarity to moral curiosity. In *The Lion's Feast*, an elderly couple deceives a lion to save themselves. Although they lie and break a promise, the tale prompts laughter rather than judgement, subtly inviting readers to question whether deception can be justified or even compassionate. This complexity aligns with Nikolajeva’s notion that children do not require rigid moral rules; rather, they benefit from narratives that ask them to understand and empathize with morally ambiguous characters.

Similarly, in *Paati's Beats*, the story centres on an elderly woman whose love for rhythm and everyday joy is met with disapproval. Paati, who has no teeth, finds pleasure in grinding paan on a stone pestle and thus making music with her hands – a daily act that irritates her husband, Thatha. His frustration is not rooted in logic, but in habit and discomfort with her expressions of vitality. The conflict here is domestic and emotional rather than legal or moral: Thatha excludes her, subtly policing how joy is allowed to manifest. As Paati’s rhythms eventually draw the neighbourhood into celebration, the story repositions her from nuisance to nurturer. Readers are gently invited to empathize with Paati and recognize that exclusion – especially within intimate spaces – is a quiet but significant form of wrongdoing. The resolution arrives not through punishment but through recognition and emotional transformation. These stories help young readers feel discomfort, joy, and even doubt. And this is the ‘emotional education’ that Nikolajeva highlights.

3.2 Understanding Guilt: More Than Just Saying Sorry

According to Nikolajeva, guilt is not a simple feeling. Its complex because it involves more than just knowing a rule has been broken – it requires understanding *why* it was wrong and *how* that action may have hurt someone else. This emotional insight is not always easy for young readers, who may not yet have the social or psychological tools to grasp what a character is truly experiencing. Take a simple scenario: a child in a story lies to an adult. If the story merely states, “He feels guilty,” it leaves too much unsaid. Is the child guilty because he got caught? Because he hurt someone? Or is he simply afraid of being punished? Nikolajeva argues that literature becomes far more powerful when guilt is shown through emotions and behaviours – what scholars call “emotion discourse” or “emotion ekphrasis”. This might look like a character avoiding eye contact, falling silent, doing something kind to make up for a mistake, or even having a nightmare.

In stories for young readers, these subtle signals help them emotionally navigate ethical situations. They might begin to ask: *What would I do? Would I forgive this character? Do they deserve it?* This is where the real ethical power of children’s stories lies: they do not always provide clear answers. Instead, they invite young readers to explore uncertainty and empathy for themselves. In contrast, older Indian stories like *Amar Chitra Katha* often presented morality in black and white. Heroes and villains were sharply divided, and readers were not encouraged to empathize with the villain. In the mythological story of Ramayana, the character Ravana kidnapped Sita, who is the wife of Rama. In this scenario, Amar Chitra Katha comics present Ravana as bad – full stop. There was little room to explore his motives or feelings of guilt. But contemporary stories allow children to dwell in that ambiguous middle ground. Maybe someone makes a selfish choice for a kind reason. Maybe a lie ends up saving someone. Maybe a child rebels – not because they are “bad”, but because they are protecting a friend or asserting their identity.

Nikolajeva suggests that such stories challenge readers to think more deeply. They prompt not just the question “What happened?” but also “How did that feel?” and “What would I do in that situation?”. It is in these quiet, emotional reckonings that children begin to grapple with complex ethics – not by being told what is right, but by *feeling* it.

1. Narrative Positioning through Folktales: Emotional Complexity in Crime

Every compelling story positions us emotionally. We laugh, we worry, we admire cleverness, or we pause when something feels just a bit off. These reactions are not spontaneous – they are carefully shaped but the way a story invites us to take up certain roles, perspectives and values.

Narrative Positioning Theory offers a framework to understand how stories do more than entertain. They align audiences with characters and moral stances, subtly shaping how actions, emotions and ethical dilemmas are interpreted. This is especially important in stories involving wrongdoing or moral ambiguity. In children’s storytelling, these themes are presented with care. Rather than instilling fear or punishment, visual folktales often provide emotional entry points for children to explore the boundaries between right, wrong and the in between.

Take *The Lion’s Feast*, for example. On the surface, it is a humorous tale about an elderly couple tricking a lion. But a closer look reveals how narrative positioning works at multiple levels. The couple is initially shown as vulnerable – old, trembling and confronted by danger. This invites the audience to align with their fear. As they devise to plan to outwit the lion, our emotional alignment shifts from concern to admiration. Their cleverness reframes the act of deception not as cruelty, but as ingenuity. The lion, introduced as a threat, is progressively repositioned. His exaggerated expressions and comic tone render him less frightening and more laughable. When he returns to find no feast, his animated anger fades into disappointed confusion. A flicker of sympathy might arise, but it is quickly replaced by humour when he discovers only a burp is left behind. Through these tonal shifts, the viewer moves fluidly between emotions – never firmly judging, but always feeling. What’s striking is that the story never condemns or praises the couple outright. They move from victims to tricksters to comic heroes. The lion shifts from predator to punchline. These fluid positions allow children to explore ethical complexity without the need for moral instruction. Wrongdoing, in this case deception, is framed as a survival strategy, softened through humour and framed by emotional nuance.

Paati’s Beats, a musical folklore told by Jeeva Raghunath, also makes use of shifting narrative positions to explore social conflict and emotional transformation. The story centres on Paati, a toothless grandmother who loudly grinds and chews her paan. The rhythmic noise initially sparks laughter, delight and playful participation. Through exaggerated animation and sound design, children are invited not just to witness the humour, but to engage with it physically and vocally. Soon, the narrative introduces tension: Paati’s husband, Thatha, grows irritated. His frustration is never aggressive but presented as familiar and almost endearing. This introduces dual alignment – children empathize both with Paati’s joy and Thatha’s discomfort. As Thatha seeks help, the situation spirals into absurdity. Animals were brought in to mask the noise, each adding their own sounds to the household. This escalating chaos creates layers of engagement: amusement, disbelief and

curiosity. Here, too, the story avoids fixed moral categories. Thatha's actions are silly but relatable. Paati remains unapologetically herself. Neither character is fully right or wrong. The emotional shift prompts viewers to experience contradiction: annoyance alongside affection, disruption alongside delight. The emotional climax arrives when silence finally returns. Thatha, now used to the vibrant chaos, finds the quiet unsettling. When Paati resumes her chewing, the sound that once annoyed him becomes comforting. This reversal is not achieved through didacticism but through emotional repositioning. The viewer, having travelled this journey, also reinterprets the sound – not as nuisance, but as love.

Through this arc, *Paati's Beats* demonstrates how stories can generate ethical reflection not through explicit judgement, but through layered emotional engagement. Like *The Lion's Feast*, it resists easy moral binaries. Noise is not inherently bad, nor is silence always good. Trickery is not evil, and discomfort is not always a problem to be solved. Instead, these tales offer complexity: sound, identity, and affection are shown to be entangled, and the viewer is positioned to explore those entanglements through feeling. In both stories, the audience is never positioned as passive recipients of a moral message. Rather, they are invited to realign their sympathies, reconsider their responses, and question simple judgements. These folktales operate as emotional laboratories, echoing Maria Nikolajeva's argument that children's literature functions as a space for practicing ethical emotions such as empathy, guilt, and forgiveness. What makes these narratives so effective is not their message, but their method. They do not preach. They prompt reflection by immersing children in emotional tension and resolution. Narrative positioning becomes the tool through which young viewers feel their way through ethical ambiguity. Together, *The Lion's Feast* and *Paati's Beats* reveal how Indian visual folktales craft rich emotional landscapes where children are not taught what to feel, but how to navigate what they are feeling. Through humour, rhythm, conflict and reconciliation, they cultivate ethical awareness without rigid rules. In doing so, they prepare children not just for storytelling, but for life's moral complexity – where joy and discomfort often coexist, and where resolution lies not in certainty, but in understanding.

IV. CONCLUSION

Stories told to children are never just stories – they are emotional landscapes where laughter, wonder, fear, irritation and affection converge. In today's animated visual folktales, especially those drawing from Indian traditions do not remain as theoretical relics, but function as vibrant tools

for emotional storytelling and becomes a subtle, yet powerful narrative strategy. Tricksters are not always punished, elders are not always wise, and children are not always obedient. Through this, the stories invite the viewers to enter complex moral worlds without the pressure of fixed judgements.

Narrative Positioning Theory positions the child viewer as an active interpreter of shifting roles, moods, and outcomes; and audiences are invited to laugh, wonder, doubt, or sympathize – all within the space of a few minutes. This interplay fosters a form of narrative literacy, where children learn to navigate not only the surface plot but also the deeper social and emotional cues embedded in the story. In the end, perhaps the greatest lesson these tales offer is that it is okay not to have all these answers – as long as right questions are asked, and the doors are kept open for laughing a little along the way.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd. (n.d.). *Amar Chitra Katha*. <https://www.amarchitrakatha.com>.
- [2] Baron, N. S. (2021). *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Digital Readers*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Blaschke, E. (2009). From the Picture Archive to the Image Bank. *Études Photographiques*, 24, <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3435>.
- [4] Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990) Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x>.
- [5] Frosh, P. (2003) *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture and the Visual Content Industry*. Berg.
- [6] Karadi Tales. (2016). *The Lion's Feast*. <https://karadi.world/flip-audio-books/the-lions-feast-5/>. [Accessed: 21 June 2025].
- [7] Karadi Tales Company Pvt. Ltd. (1996-present). *Karadi Tales*. [Online]. <https://www.karaditales.com> [Accessed: 19 June 2025].
- [8] Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019). Narrative Texts for Positioning Research. In. H. Kayi-Aydar (Ed.), *Positioning Theory in Applied Linguistics: Research Design and Applications*, (pp. 123-145), Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97337-1_6.
- [9] Magic Box. (n.d.). *Magic Box Stories*. <https://www.magicboxstories.co.uk>.
- [10] Narayana. (2007). *The Hitopadesa* (A. N. D Haskar, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- [11] Nikolajeva, M. (2012). Guilt, Empathy and the Ethical Potential of Children's Literature. *Barnboken - Journal of Children's Literature Research*, 35. <https://doi.org/10.14811/clr.v35i0.139>.
- [12] Nodelman, P. (2007). Decoding the Images: How Picture Books Work. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *Understanding Children's Literature* (2nd ed., pp 128-140). Routledge.

- [13] Pai, A. (Ed.). (2008). *The Jackal and the War-drum: Panchatantra Stories of Courage and Curiosity*. Amar Chitra Katha pvt Ltd.
- [14] Pratham Books. (n.d.). Storyweaver. <https://www.storyweaver.org.in>.
- [15] Tulika Publishers. (1996-present). Tulika Books. <https://www.tulikabooks.com> [Accessed: 23 June 2025].
- [16] Tulika Publishers. (2018). *Paati's Beats*. <https://soundcloud.com/tulika-publishers/paatis-beat-by-jeeva-raghunath>. [Accessed: 26 June 2025].
- [17] Wolf, Maryanne. (2018). *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. Harper Collins.
- [18] Wonder House Books. (2019). *The illustrated Jataka Tales: Classic Tales from India*.

Research on the hierarchical protection path of citizens' personal information in the data age by criminal law

Chen Jiankai

Department of Law, Hangzhou Normal University, China

Received: 31 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Sep 2025; Accepted: 03 Oct 2025; Available online: 07 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract—With the rapid development of modern science and technology and the acceleration of digital transformation in society, the era of big data has brought convenience as well as new crimes, and information crimes have become the focus. With the convenience of digitalization, the collection, processing and use of personal information are extensive and in-depth, and information interaction and exposure increase, and criminals illegally use it to infringe on personal and national interests. In the data age, the category of citizens' personal information is huge and the connotation is expanding, and the criminal behavior is diversified, which is difficult for the traditional criminal law protection model to cope with. We should further classify citizens' personal information, coordinate the relationship between criminal law and pre-law, and try to bring new criminal acts into criminal law regulation in order to build a perfect protection system.



Keywords— big data, citizens' personal information, criminal law protection, hierarchical protection

In today's world, a new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation is in the ascendant, a new generation of digital technology has been vigorously developed and deeply applied, and human society has accelerated into the digital age. The advent of the digital age has brought great convenience to human social life. With digital technology, we can realize fast payment of transactions, fast boarding of vehicles, integrated control of multiple devices, intelligent statistics and distribution of data, etc. However, the foundation of digital convenience is also the collection, calculation and analysis of a large amount of information. The advent of the era of big data has also increased the interaction speed and exposure frequency of citizens' personal information.

Applications installed on mobile phones read and monitor different personal information in the background, and institutions such as schools store a large amount of citizens' information for convenient management. Citizens have gradually become "transparent people" in the digital age. At the same time, the number of crimes committed by criminals using citizens' personal information has increased sharply, and the criminal means are diversified. The traditional criminal law has exposed some limitations in protecting personal information and cracking down on new information crimes, and the criminal law protection of personal information needs to be further explored.

I. CITIZENS' PERSONAL INFORMATION IN THE ERA OF BIG DATA

1.1 The era of big data

Today's society is developing at a high speed and technology is developed. The era of big data is no longer a new and unfamiliar term, but it is already our era. In the era of big data, the efficient integration and in-depth application of data information and intelligent technology not only significantly enhances the accuracy and efficiency of personal and commercial applications, but also strongly promotes the comprehensive optimization and sustainable development of emerging cities in terms of planning and layout, construction and implementation, management and operation.^①In the major commercial and economic fields, with the help of algorithms, cloud technology, Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, etc., information data can be accurately analyzed and processed, and accurately delivered to the target group. Personal information no longer only carries personal privacy and personality, but also reflects great economic value. In the era of big data, personal information no longer stays in traditional information such as names, home addresses and contact numbers that can be easily obtained, but also covers more secret and sensitive information such as whereabouts and property status. They are stored in different systems in the form of electronic data in different ways, just like storing natural persons directly in a library. In the era of big data, citizens' personal information has a clear directivity, and its connotation and extension have been extended. This also shows that while information and data interact and circulate at high speed in the data age, it also leaves hidden dangers of "targeted illegal use" at different levels.^②. With the increase of illegal use of information by criminals, more unknown risks lurk in the era of big data and the information society, and the protection of citizens' personal information has become an important topic of contemporary rule of law protection and data order maintenance.

^① Gao Fuping: "On the Purpose of Personal Information Protection —— Focusing on the Differentiation of Interests in Personal Information Protection Law", *Law and Business Research*, No.1, 2019.

^② Yang Nan: *Functional Errors and Amendments in Criminal Law Regulation of Personal Digital Footprints*, *Journal of Anhui University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No.4, 2019.

1.2 Personal information of citizens

Personal information refers to a collection of symbols related to individuals, which reflects the facts or state of individuals, has the structural and hierarchical characteristics of information, and can be felt and recognized by people.^③That is, a recognizable symbol system that is associated with people and reflects individual characteristics.^④In the era of big data, in order to better realize the special protection of criminal law, it is first necessary to clarify the legal interests of citizens' personal information. There have been different views in theory and practice.

Some people think that citizens' personal information mainly belongs to the legal interests of property rights, similar to those stipulated in the civil law, and citizens have the corresponding rights to possess, use, benefit and dispose of their personal information. We should admit that with the development of emerging technology and information society, citizens' personal information presents unprecedented economic value. Information holders can legally process and analyze the information to identify it, and then integrate it and sell it to the corresponding enterprises. Enterprises can use the processed information to find their customer groups and provide them with accurate services, so as to obtain huge commercial profits and form a win-win cycle model. However, the limitation of this view is that it does not realize the personality right attribute contained in citizens' personal information, and only treating information as a property attribute will damage personal personality and be suspected of materialization. Although there are individual differences among citizens, the value of their personal information will also show different differences, but it should be equally protected under the law. Some scholars believe that the legal interest attribute of citizens' personal information protected by criminal law belongs to privacy.^⑤ The theory holds that citizens' personal

^③ Gao Fuping, Wang Wenxiang: *The Boundary of Criminalization of Selling or Providing Personal Information of Citizens*, *Politics and Law*, No.2, 2017.

^④ Wang Liming: *On the Position of Personal Information Right in Personality Right Law*, *Journal of Suzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, No.6, 2012.

^⑤ Cai Jun, *Rational Analysis on Legislation of Crime of Infringement on Personal Information —— Reflection and Prospect on Legislation of this Crime*, *Modern Law*, No.4, 2010.

information belongs to the category of privacy and can effectively resist illegal interference, intrusion and utilization by others. However, in the era of big data, citizens' personal information is relatively dynamic, which will change its attributes with different scenarios, and the scope of privacy is difficult to define. Too much emphasis on the legal interest attribute of privacy will also lead to some citizens' personal information not being protected as it should be.

There is also a view that nowadays, citizens' personal information has both personality and property attributes, and the right to personal information should be protected as an independent right. The right of personal information is the basis of citizens' personal information protection, and the protection of personal information itself is the protection of citizens. From the generation principle of personal information, personal information represents the externalization of citizens' personal attributes, that is, the extension of citizens' individuals. Although this right has not been clearly listed in China's Civil Code, it can be inferred that this right belongs to a separate right through system analysis.^① On the basis of determining the right of personal information, it is proposed that the legal interest of criminal law in protecting citizens' personal information is the right of information self-determination under the right of personal information. Citizen's authorization of information is the fundamental source of information's right to be used in the subsequent circulation process, and the existence of information's right to self-determination is the absolute premise for information to be used reasonably and to ensure the reasonable distribution of interests of all parties.^② Citizens have the right to decide what to do with their information. The right to information self-determination is the basic legal interest protected by the crime of infringing citizens' personal information. The scope of citizens' authorization for personal information determines the extent to which illegal use of personal information should be regulated, and at the same time provides a legitimate basis for social information

governance and a pre-existing basis for maintaining the circulation order of personal information in society.^③ The author believes that the theory based on the right to self-determination of information in the era of big data can provide a more accurate and comprehensive protection path in the face of different types of information, and provide corresponding legal protection for citizens' personal information while adhering to the principle of modesty of criminal law. It also reflects that we should build a hierarchical protection system for citizens' personal information in criminal law, that is, protect personal information at different levels, not just focusing on unilateral rights, so as to better play the role of regulation and protection of criminal law.

II. THE DILEMMA OF CRIMINAL LAW PROTECTION OF CITIZENS' PERSONAL INFORMATION IN THE DATA AGE

2.1 the convergence of criminal law and pre-existing law is not smooth

In the current legal framework for the protection of citizens' personal information, the protection of criminal law should focus on the coordination and connection with the pre-law. With regard to the connection between pre-law and criminal law, the provisions of pre-law cannot be directly used as the basis for judging whether an act constitutes a crime in criminal law. Specifically, the prohibitive provisions in the pre-law, as a supplement to the openness of criminal law norms, have become one of the key bases for evaluating whether an act constitutes a crime. At the same time, the upper limit of liability set by the pre-law and the lower limit of liability set by the criminal law should be connected in a reasonable and organic way, that is, through the theory of legal interests: only when the relevant illegal acts identified by the current law infringe on the protection interests under the criminal law norms can they be identified as crimes. This process ensures the consistency and rationality within the legal system and helps to better safeguard the personal information security of citizens. Therefore, the normative

^① Liu Yanhong: Protection Benefits of Crimes against Citizens' Personal Information in the Context of Civil Code Compilation: Right to Information Self-determination, *Journal of Zhejiang Gongshang University*, No.6, 2019.

^② Ma Yongqiang: Confirmation of the Legal Interest Attribute of the Crime of Infringing Citizens' Personal Information, *Global Law Review*, No.2, 2021.

^③ Zhao Tong: Circle-type Criminal Law Protection of Personal Information under the Structure of Double Legal Interests, *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No.4, 2024.

relationship between the prohibitive provisions of the preceding law and the norms of criminal law can be summarized as follows: if the act that violates the prohibitive provisions of the preceding law does not infringe on the protection interests of the criminal law norms, the actor will only bear civil or administrative responsibilities; If the behavior that violates the prohibitive provisions of the preceding law infringes on the legal interests protected by the criminal law norms at the same time, the behavior can be included in the scope of criminal law regulation, and the actor can bear criminal responsibility.

China's Civil Code clearly distinguishes personal information from private information in the compilation of personality rights. Later, the Personal Information Protection Law clearly divided citizens' personal information into general personal information and sensitive personal information, and specially protected sensitive personal information. However, the Criminal Law does not further distinguish personal information, and the Interpretation of the Two Highs only defines "citizen's personal information" as "all kinds of information recorded by electronic or other means that can identify a specific natural person or reflect the activities of a specific natural person alone or in combination with other information, including name, ID number, communication contact information, address, account password, property status, whereabouts and so on. In order to maintain the unity of legal order, better protect personal information and establish a perfect preventive mechanism, it is an urgent practical problem how to protect personal information in criminal law.

2.2 The scope of criminal law protection of personal information is limited.

Although the criminal legislation on the protection of personal information was made earlier in China, the crime of infringing citizens' personal information stipulated in Article 253 of the Criminal Law of China: "Whoever sells or provides citizens' personal information to others in violation of relevant state regulations, if the circumstances are serious, shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not less than three years but not more than seven years, and shall also be fined ..." However, this article does not limit the scope of personal information accordingly, that is,

all citizens' personal information shall be protected by criminal law from the perspective of literal interpretation. The subsequent Interpretation of Two Highs further explains this. Article 5 of this Interpretation divides citizens' personal information into three levels: the first level is track information, communication content, credit information and property information; The second level is other accommodation information, communication records, health and physiological information and transaction information that may affect personal and property safety; The third level is the personal information of other citizens. However, the author believes that in the era of big data, not all personal information should be generally included in the protection of criminal law. The purpose of criminal law is to protect interests, but not all legal interests are protected by criminal law, and only when they are violated by "out of the scope of social life order and worthy of punishment" are they protected by criminal law.^①

Under the background of information society, the utility of personal information becomes more and more prominent. In the information age, we not only deeply realize the value attribute of information itself, but also emphasize the great benefits and positive influence that the rational use of information can bring to society. However, emphasizing information utilization does not mean that we only need to focus on the protection of sensitive information and ignore general information. Whether it is general information or sensitive information, it is an important part of personal privacy and rights, and it needs to be equally valued and properly protected. It is precisely because of the social openness of general information that rational utilization can quickly enhance social benefits and promote economic and social development that the era of big data can be established. At the same time, from the perspective of protection cost, the amount of general information is numerous and not all of them have protection value. If excessive protection is carried out, it will not only be difficult to achieve the protection effect, but also bring huge loss of judicial resources. If citizens' personal information is indiscriminately protected by criminal law, it will also hurt the prestige of criminal law.

^① Wei Hantao: Deviation and Rectification of Criminal Law Protection of Citizens' Personal Information, Law Review, No.4, 2024.

On the contrary, weak protection of general information is beneficial to the development of the information subject itself. For example, the information subject can obtain the content it needs in time, and the utilization and value are greater than the protective demand.

Sensitive information needs criminal law protection. Sensitive personal information is closely related to major rights and interests. Once sensitive information is leaked or infringed, it often directly touches the core of citizens' personal dignity. The main goal of protecting citizens' personal information in criminal law is to protect their personal rights and property rights. Different types of personal information are closely related to citizens' personal and property rights, so violations of different types of personal information will not show different social harmfulness.^① Because sensitive personal information is closely related to personal dignity, personal rights and property rights, sensitive personal information should appear in the field of criminal law protection. Non-sensitive personal information, such as the personal height and weight of citizens, has relatively limited use value directly presented or indirectly identified, and it is difficult to become the target of infringement by criminals. Even if this information is infringed, the potential harm is relatively small, and it can usually be effectively handled and regulated at the civil and administrative levels. The protection of this kind of information is important, but because of its low risk, at the legal level, it depends more on civil and administrative regulations for management and prevention, and criminal law can invest more resources to protect other information with higher risks.

2.3 the limitations of the traditional mode of collateral protection

For the protection of personal information, the criminal law of our country stipulated the crime of infringing citizens' personal information earlier. In view of the low popularity of the internet at that time, citizens were more exclusive about their personal information, and the degree of distinction between personal information and other types of information was not high. At this time, the security of personal information was indirectly protected

through macro-order protection. However, in the era of big data, the right to personal information has been separated from the right to privacy and has become a new personality right. It cannot be ignored that the formation and development of personal information right is closely related to the theoretical framework of privacy right. In the traditional legal system, personal information has long been included in the category of privacy and regarded as an important dimension of privacy. With the advent of the information age, the connotation and extension of personal information are constantly expanding, and its position in legal protection is gradually prominent. The emergence of personal information right is the concrete application and logical extension of privacy right under the background of information age, and there is a close relationship and interaction between them.^② After the promulgation of the Personal Information Protection Law, China's current laws have clearly defined the right to privacy and the right to personal information as two coexisting personality rights.^③ From the nature of rights, the right to privacy is an absolute right, which is manifested in the absolute control of personal privacy and the right to exclude illegal interference from others, while the right to personal information is more focused on a positive right, such as the right to know, the right to delete, the right to block, etc., which is the balance and control of individuals in the use and protection of their information.^④ At present, the connotation and extension of personal information have changed. With the scene changing, it presents different properties and has independent value. In the past, the incidental protection mode can no longer regard privacy and exclusiveness as the proper characteristics of personal information, and personal information forms an independent characteristic of non-exclusive and public sharing, which is different from privacy. Personal information cannot be protected simply by the regulation means of privacy or exclusiveness as the core.^⑤ Secondly,

^② Shi Jiayou: Rethinking the Relationship between Privacy and Personal Information, *Journal of Shanghai University of Political Science and Law (On the Rule of Law)*, No.5, 2021.

^③ Cheng Xiao: On the Relationship between Personal Information Rights and Privacy, *Contemporary Law*, No.4, 2022.

^④ Baiyun: The Legal Nature of Personal Information Rights, *Credit Information* No.2, 2020.

^⑤ Li Jie: How to Protect Privacy in Criminal Law — Comment on the Personal Information Protection Clause of Criminal Law Amendment (IX), *Journal of Jinan (Philosophy*

^① Liu Xianquan: Research on Special Protection of Sensitive Personal Information in Criminal Law, *Law Review*, No.3, 2022.

in the data age, personal information presents the types of sensitive information due to information exchange and other reasons. Sensitive information does not necessarily belong to private information, and there is some overlap between them. However, the extension of sensitive information is larger and more flexible, and it is difficult for the traditional mode of incidental protection of criminal law to cover the protection of different types of information in the data age. Furthermore, the criminal means and subjects of information cases are diversified, and it is difficult to incorporate some new types of behavior into the current norms of criminal law, such as the "abuse" of massive information, which may lead to a series of chain risk consequences. Faced with such a situation, criminal law needs to protect personal information at different levels, and at the same time, re-examine the control strategies of various behaviors, adjust the regulation path of criminal acts accordingly, and explore new information protection models.

III. THE CONSTRUCTION OF HIERARCHICAL PROTECTION PATH OF DATA INFORMATION IN CRIMINAL LAW

3.1 to strengthen the coordination and convergence with the pre-method

Regarding the protection of citizens' personal information, China has successively promulgated the Civil Code and the Personal Information Protection Law in the civil and administrative fields, and there is already a relatively perfect pre-existing legal system. Although the criminal law and other departmental laws have different legal relations and different emphases, in order to maintain the unity of legal order and consolidate the protection foundation of citizens' personal information, the criminal law needs to realize the coordinated relationship with the pre-law on the premise of adhering to modesty. The Civil Code adopts the definition of personal information and private information, and the Personal Information Protection Law, as an important pre-law, adopts the dual classification protection mode of sensitive information and general information. However, neither the Criminal Law nor the Interpretation of the Two Highs have made

significant provisions on the classification of personal information.

The author believes that the Criminal Law should also adopt the dichotomy between sensitive information and personal information to build a special protection system, which can adopt the following two paths: one is to add the relevant provisions of the crime of infringing citizens' personal sensitive information, so as to reflect the special protection of sensitive information in a more targeted way. The second is to add "citizens' personal information includes citizens' general personal information and citizens' sensitive personal information" to the crime of infringing citizens' personal information in Article 253 of the Criminal Law, so as to realize the corresponding connection with the Personal Information Protection Law, define the scope of citizens' personal information in a consistent way, and at the same time highlight the criminal law's attention to sensitive information. However, in contrast, the first path is simple and rude, but it needs more consideration. For example, if new types of information are derived in the process of continuous development in the era of big data, adding and modifying criminal law charges at will will damage the prestige of criminal law, while the second path can also achieve better results by fine-tuning the existing charges.

Under the coordination of macro-pre-law, it is also a feasible starting point to improve industry rules and self-discipline, which can help the pre-law and criminal law to protect citizens' personal information more coherently. The industry self-discipline standard is a set of professional and perfect rules formed by the industry itself, which is self-restraint and regulation of the relevant industry subjects within the scope of private law. It has a certain binding effect on the practitioners in the relevant industries. In the case of immature law, it takes into account the modesty and lag of criminal law and sets a strong protective barrier for preventing citizens' personal information crimes. In the era of big data, citizens' personal information is often collected and stored in various business units, and depends on the analysis and processing of these subjects. Although the industry self-discipline rules are not mandatory, they can achieve good protection results at a good economic cost. At the same time, it is more helpful to include the obligations and

judgment rules of employees in professional industry self-discipline standards in the scope of measuring the harmfulness of behavior. On the one hand, related industries can formulate more targeted and detailed guidelines for the protection and utilization of personal information according to the principles of the current pre-law, combined with their actual business conditions and specific work needs. These guidelines can not only provide more convenient, comprehensive and high-level protection for information subjects, but also ensure that enterprises can better carry out business activities on the basis of legal compliance. On the other hand, the autonomous supervision mechanism implemented through the unique flexibility, synergy and technological innovation of the Internet industry can make up for the possible supervision gaps in legal norms to some extent. Through the continuous improvement of industry rules and the support of improving the level of industry self-discipline, criminal law will be able to achieve an effective connection with the pre-law more smoothly and jointly build a more sound and efficient personal information protection system.

3.2 Emphasis on classified protection of information

As mentioned above, in the era of big data, there are different types of information, and different types of information need different degrees of protection. On the basis of pre-law, criminal law should also establish a hierarchical protection system for information. In the Interpretation of the Two Highs, the "serious circumstances" of the crime of infringing citizens' personal information have made different provisions on the classification of different kinds of information, such as the requirement of information quantity, which also shows that there is a momentum of information classification protection in criminal law. Sensitive information is highly related to citizens' personal dignity and personal property safety, so it should be emphasized to take sensitive information as the starting point for hierarchical protection. Some scholars argue that the protection of sensitive personal information should be cancelled because its importance will change with different scenes.^① However,

the author thinks that the primary and secondary logic of this view is vague. No matter how the scene changes, it is necessary to judge the real risk of sensitive information, rather than deciding whether to protect it by the scene. On the contrary, this is the original intention of establishing hierarchical protection.

Just because different types of sensitive personal information are subjected to illegal acts does not mean that different sensitive personal information is used to infringe citizens' personal rights and property rights at the same risk. According to the governance jurisprudence of risk crime, the higher the risk of infringing on legal interests, the lower the threshold of conviction; or vice versa, Dallas to the auditorium^② For personal information with high protection requirements, a heavier penalty and a lower conviction threshold are stipulated. On the contrary, for personal information with low protection requirements, a lighter penalty and a lower conviction threshold are adapted. Such graded protection requirements not only emphasize the special protection of certain information, but also reflect the adaptation of crime and punishment. Furthermore, the fundamental reason why citizens' personal information has attracted much attention is that the risk of personal information being abused increases in the data age, and classified protection of information is necessary and the general trend. The author thinks that we can improve the existing provisions in the Interpretation of the Two Highs to better construct classified protection. One is to clarify the specific criteria for judging two levels of sensitive personal information, so as to define the protection scope of different levels of personal information more accurately. For low-sensitive personal information, it can be summarized as "personal information that, once leaked or illegally used, is relatively easy to cause personal dignity of natural persons to be violated, or poses certain harm to their personal and property safety". Although the sensitivity of this kind of information is relatively low, once it is leaked or abused, it may still cause some troubles and losses to individuals. For highly sensitive personal information, the judgment standard is stricter, which can be summarized as "those personal information that, once leaked or illegally used, can easily lead to serious

^① Liu Xianquan: Research on Special Protection of Sensitive Personal Information in Criminal Law, Law Review, No.3, 2022.

^② Wei Hantao: Reflection and Reconstruction of the Relationship between Crime and Punishment, Politics and Law, No.4, 2019.

violations of the personal dignity of natural persons or pose a major threat to their personal and property safety". This kind of information usually involves the core privacy and rights of individuals, and once it is leaked or abused, the consequences will be unimaginable. In this way, the information classification is clear, which provides a basis for further refinement. Secondly, the Interpretation of the Two Highs stipulates the provisions of "serious circumstances" and "particularly serious circumstances", but it may be inappropriate to take 10 times the standard of the number of convictions as the standard for upgrading the statutory punishment, because in information crime cases in the information age, the number of information is often thousands or tens of thousands or even worse, and the standard of 10 times is difficult to distinguish between ordinary crimes and serious crimes, which will also make the perpetrator suffer heavier punishment without causing actual damage, which is contrary to the punishment of guilt.

3.3 the "abuse" behavior into regulation

In the era of big data, with the continuous updating and changes of criminal means, the traditional mode of incidental protection of criminal law has been difficult to meet the needs of the times. In the theory of hierarchical protection, information protection means is also an important angle to be considered. In the case of information crimes in the data age, actors such as enterprises, telemarketers and server managers often control a huge amount of information, which easily leads to "abuse" behavior patterns. However, in the crime of infringing citizens' personal information, the Criminal Law only stipulates two behaviors: selling and providing information, and the Interpretation of the Two Highs does not include the common behaviors of information abuse in the data age. "Abuse" refers to the indiscriminate or excessive use, which often follows the act of selling and providing, such as wantonly spreading citizens' personal information for telecom fraud. Under the norms of pre-law, this behavior type can not be well regulated. From the perspective of civil law, when personal information is abused, civil law cannot accurately determine the standard and scope of compensation, and it is difficult to effectively deal with the widespread fears and risks caused by it,

which makes victims face many difficulties in king relief.^①. On the other hand, although administrative law norms can curb information "abuse" to a certain extent, their deterrent power is far less than that of criminal law. If the criminal law regulates "abuse" means and sets strict punishment measures, it can more effectively stop the behavior of potential criminals. Once potential offenders realize that they will face severe criminal responsibility, they usually reconsider and finally decide to give up such behavior. This powerful deterrent effect is difficult to achieve by other departmental laws.

The author thinks that criminal law can further refine the behavior of this crime and classify "abuse" into criminal law regulation. First of all, according to the Interpretation of the Two Highs, "abuse" behavior cannot be included in serious circumstances. The category of "serious circumstances" and "abuse" cannot be included in it by using literal interpretation methods or similar interpretation rules. Secondly, abuse, as a common behavior in the data age, is quite harmful to the "acquisition" and "sale" of citizens' personal information, and should be restrained and regulated. Furthermore, as the second-order behavior of "acquisition" and "sale", the subject of "abuse" may be separated, and the citizen information at this stage may be highly sensitive, which may easily lead to some panic, such as maliciously changing the face of relatives and friends through intelligent technology to commit fraud, which will not only cause serious harm to individuals, but also have a negative impact on the whole society. Incorporating "abuse" into the criminal law is conducive to cracking down on the industrial chain of information crimes, further improving the protection mechanism of information classification protection, and protecting sensitive information and safeguarding social order and citizens' rights and interests.

IV. CONCLUSION

Citizens' personal information is closely related to their personal freedom and dignity. In the era of big data, the amount of information is larger than in the past,

^① Yang Chunran: On the Criteria for Dividing Criminal Law Boundaries, China Journal of Criminal Law, No.8, 2012.

information processing and interaction are more frequent, and the value of citizens' personal information is also increasingly prominent. With the development of science and technology, the types of information crimes are frequent, and the criminal means are diversified. The security of personal information has become an important issue. From the addition of the crime of infringing citizens' personal information in the amendment to the promulgation of "Two High Interpretations", China's criminal law has been committed to the protection of personal information, but there are still some problems to be solved urgently. For example, how to balance the relationship between coordination and prepositional law in criminal law when the existing prepositional law is relatively perfect; In the information society, personal information presents different types, and the criminal law has not yet formed a perfect hierarchical protection system; How to adjust the protection path and bring "abuse" into the scope of regulation in the case that the traditional criminal law incidental protection model is difficult to cover modern information protection. In the data age, it is difficult for us to predict the real trend in the future. We need to start from more breakthrough points and improve the protection system of citizens' personal information in criminal law.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gao Fuping: "On the Purpose of Personal Information Protection —— Focusing on the Differentiation of Interests in Personal Information Protection Law", *Law and Business Research*, No.1, 2019.
- [2] Yang Nan: Functional Errors and Amendments in Criminal Law Regulation of Personal Digital Footprints, *Journal of Anhui University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No.4, 2019.
- [3] Gao Fuping, Wang Wenxiang: The Boundary of Criminalization of Selling or Providing Personal Information of Citizens, *Politics and Law*, No.2, 2017.
- [4] Wang Liming: On the Position of Personal Information Right in Personality Right Law, *Journal of Suzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, No.6, 2012.
- [5] Cai Jun, Rational Analysis on Legislation of Crime of Infringement on Personal Information —— Reflection and Prospect on Legislation of this Crime, *Modern Law*, No.4, 2010.
- [6] Liu Yanhong: Protection Benefits of Crimes against Citizens' Personal Information in the Context of Civil Code Compilation: Right to Information Self-determination, *Journal of Zhejiang Gongshang University*, No.6, 2019.
- [7] Ma Yongqiang: Confirmation of the Legal Interest Attribute of the Crime of Infringing Citizens' Personal Information, *Global Law Review*, No.2, 2021.
- [8] Zhao Tong: Circle-type Criminal Law Protection of Personal Information under the Structure of Double Legal Interests, *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No.4, 2024.
- [9] Wei Hantao: Deviation and Rectification of Criminal Law Protection of Citizens' Personal Information, *Law Review*, No.4, 2024.
- [10] Liu Xianquan: Research on Special Protection of Sensitive Personal Information in Criminal Law, *Law Review*, No.3, 2022.
- [11] Shi Jiayou: Rethinking the Relationship between Privacy and Personal Information, *Journal of Shanghai University of Political Science and Law (On the Rule of Law)*, No.5, 2021.
- [12] Cheng Xiao: On the Relationship between Personal Information Rights and Privacy, *Contemporary Law*, No.4, 2022.
- [13] Baiyun: The Legal Nature of Personal Information Rights, *Credit Information* No.2, 2020.
- [14] Li Jie: How to Protect Privacy in Criminal Law —— Comment on the Personal Information Protection Clause of Criminal Law Amendment (IX), *Journal of Jinan (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No.12, 2016.
- [15] Liu Xianquan: Research on Special Protection of Sensitive Personal Information in Criminal Law, *Law Review*, No.3, 2022.
- [16] Wei Hantao: Reflection and Reconstruction of the Relationship between Crime and Punishment, *Politics and Law*, No.4, 2019.
- [17] Yang Chunran: On the Criteria for Dividing Criminal Law Boundaries, *China Journal of Criminal Law*, No.8, 2012.



Challenges of ICT Policy Implementation in ELT: A Case Study in a Vietnamese Province

Vu Hung Le

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam

Email: vulh_nn@hub.edu.vn

Received: 30 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Oct 2025; Accepted: 05 Oct 2025; Available online: 08 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Enhancing English teaching is always a top priority for the Vietnamese government. Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg on Approving the Project “Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the National Education System period 2008 and 2020”, as a result, is a national policy that mandates the use of ICT in ELT nationwide. This study, therefore, aims to explore how a particular town in Vietnam has complied with the national demand through its ICT policies in ELT. An interpretivist qualitative design was adopted for this study. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of 16 teachers of English, and analysis was guided by Fullan’s Educational Change Theory (2015) and Rogers’s Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2003). The results revealed many hindering factors burdening public schools and teachers at the local level, including poor infrastructure, inadequate training for teachers, and a lack of technical support. The findings of this study can be used as a guideline for minimizing obstacles in future improvements in ICT-related policy.



Keywords— English Language Teaching, ICT, ICT in ELT, ICT Integration

I. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is a key policy priority in many low- and middle-income countries (Nakamura et al., 2023) because this universal lingua franca (Mendes de Oliveira, 2024) is not only useful for communication but also for culture, diplomacy, education, science, and trade (Xue & Zuo, 2013). Many international organizations have adopted English as an official language for global communication, including the International Civil Aviation Organization (Kara, 2014), the International Maritime Organization (Kelly, 2012), and the International Olympic Committee (Jimson, 2015). As a result, many people around the world have to learn this global language, although English is not an official language in most countries (Graddol, 1997; Victoria et al., 2025).

In Vietnam, English has become a major foreign language since 1986, when the government underwent a political reform to accept free trade (Ngo & Tran, 2023). English is now taught at all public schools at the primary level (Dinh, 2015). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has

initiated many policies at the national level to ensure the effectiveness of English teaching since the early 2000s, the “tech-boom” era in Vietnam (Le & Le, 2022), including the adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in English language teaching (ELT) for its ability to “complement, enrich and transform education for the better” (Dhital, 2018, p. 3215) and to address limitations of traditional approaches (Le, 2018). The crucial role of integrating ICT in ELT has been highlighted by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2018).

In particular, Resolution 49/CP issued by the Executive Branch in Vietnam introduced the use of computers for administrative tasks (Vietnamese Government, 1993). Then, the Vietnamese National Assembly passed a legislative bill, Resolution No. 40/2000/QH10 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2000), which mandated the teaching of ICT at all grades in public schools. However, ICT was a standalone subject; the integration of ICT in ELT was not applicable at this time until Prime Minister of Vietnam

initiated Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, which set ICT in ELT as a national policy in 2008 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008) with an expectation that all public schools would have ICT integrated in teaching by 2020, also known as Project 2020. The creation of the national policy, in turn, mandated subordinate educational agencies at the provincial level, known as the Educational and Training Services (ETS), to develop suitable ICT policies in each province to enable ICT in ELT, including providing ICT training to English teachers, constructing ICT facilities, establishing ICT support teams, and developing ICT regulations.

In Ben Tre province, the local ETS issued two official documents, the ICT Training Policy (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016a) and the ICT Integration Policy (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016b). The training in Ben Tre province was quite quintessential because not all teachers could receive ICT training at once; instead, a few English teachers from a few schools were drafted for each training course (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016a). At the same time, ICT-untrained English teachers had to improvise their ICT lectures because the integration could not be postponed.

The above unique characteristics have made Ben Tre province the choice for a research site, alongside a first-hand account as a local native. This case study aims to investigate how policies have been enacted in Ben Tre province and how policies can determine the outcome of the transition from traditional teaching to the use of technology to foster a more engaging learning environment via the use of ICT to improve learning outcomes (Abraham et al., 2022).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of ICT

ICT is defined variably across sectors (Zuppo, 2012; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024). In education, ICT means digital technologies used in the school environment (Livingstone, 2012). This research study refers to ICT as computer-based and Internet-based tools used for English teaching and learning (Davies & Hewer, 2009).

2.2 ICT Policies

Records show that the first discussion of the integration of ICT in teaching dates back to 2002 through the National Strategy for Information and Technology for Vietnam (Nhu et al., 2019), followed by the Law on Information Technology Application in 2006 (Dinh, 2015). Both emphasized the importance of ICT in education, which resulted in the introduction of Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg on Approving of the Project “Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the National Education System period 2008

and 2020 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008), which demanded the integration of ICT in ELT to take advantage of technology in enhancing teaching and learning experience.

Having a national policy is beneficial for the transition from traditional teaching to a more modern and effective method (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2011). The old-fashioned approach, on the one hand, cannot help students communicate effectively in authentic situations (Yede, 2020). On the other hand, teachers can easily introduce real-world experiences into classrooms by using ICT (Laius & Presmann, 2024). For instance, the use of videos and graphics can improve students’ engagement (Rashid & Asghar, 2016), which, in turn, leverages their interest in exploring more about the topic (Alkamel & Chouthaiwale, 2018). Additionally, students, when learning with ICT, are no longer passive learners but active co-creators. Specifically, ICT improves attitudes and engagement by matching tools to learners’ strategies and using rich multimedia; It also helps teachers manage materials and enables authentic communication with speakers across the world (An et al., 2021; Bradley, 2021; Ngo & Eichelberger, 2019)

As a result, Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg provides a milestone for public schools to make necessary preparations to integrate ICT in ELT; however, the whole process appears to be challenging.

2.3 Factors Affecting the Integration of ICT in ELT

First and foremost, the deadline set by Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg may cause difficulties in some provinces (Hoang, 2013). The innovation of using ICT in ELT, in addition, is risky because there is no guarantee for success regarding this “concept of change”, while policymakers in Vietnam have not conducted sufficient research on the effectiveness of using ICT in ELT (Vo & Le, 2014; Dinh, 2015; Ngo, 2016). In case of failure, the traditional teaching method will be resumed (Luong & Quan, 2020). Furthermore, educational administrators at the provincial level may not fully support the adoption of ICT into classrooms because they must comply with mandatory requirements rather than their willingness. Without support from leadership, the importance of ICT may not be recognized properly (Raman & Thannimalai, 2019; Schmitz et al., 2023). A study conducted by the British Council (2015) reports that leadership is responsible for the improper maintenance of ICT tools at many schools.

Secondly, training and support are important factors regarding the adoption of ICT in ELT. According to Bordbar (2010), teachers’ competence in using ICT tools can determine the success of the whole integration because competency helps strengthen teachers’ confidence in using

technology (Sipilä, 2014; Moradi, 2025). Competency, moreover, is the motivation for teachers to develop new approaches during teaching (Burns & Kurtoglu Hooton, 2016). However, such competency cannot be obtained without training and support. Training, for one thing, can build a strong foundation in ICT competence which boosts teachers’ confidence in enhancing teaching experience (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015). In contrast, a lack of training may cause a reluctance to adopt ICT in ELT (Aslan & Zhu, 2018). Similarly, teachers may be discouraged and frustrated from taking ICT into teaching if support is unavailable (Mirzajani et al., 2016). These negative impacts, overall, may contribute to a sense of resistance to technological change among teachers (Lawrence & Tar, 2018; Chou et al., 2019).

Lastly, infrastructure and technological devices can affect the use of ICT in ELT. The lack of adequate ICT tools, including equipment and computer applications, is a key problem that many schools are encountering, especially those that are in remote locations (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015). In addition, Internet connectivity is a major obstacle affecting the use of ICT in teaching and learning (Yu et al., 2024). Besides, how these tools are used is also important. A study conducted by Msambwa et al. (2024) showed that most schools were fully equipped with the latest ICT equipment, yet it was for administrative tasks rather than being applied in teaching and learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework helps organize ideas for the research question in a logical way (Abend, 2008). As this study aims to investigate related policies in education change from traditional teaching to the use of ICT in ELT, the Theory of Educational Change (ECT) (Fullan, 2015) stands out to be the most appropriate framework to guide this case study research using the proposed objectives from collecting data through interviews and observation as well as the data analysis.

Even though ECT offers clear scopes for the research process, this theory is unable to explain why a change is adopted in the first place alongside other rejected factors. Therefore, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DoIT) (Rogers, 2003) is added to explore technology adoption in educational settings (Medlin, 2001). DoIT, through the exploration of Persuasion, explains whether an individual (or another decision-making unit) favors or disfavors the innovation.

The combination of ECT and DoIT, as a result, will establish the Findings and Discussions of this study in which ECT is responsible for the “what” factor while DoIT helps explain the “how” and “why”.

3.2 Research Design

This research study was developed using ontological and epistemological interpretivism in a qualitative approach as the research philosophy to construct an inductive approach to the collected data via interviews and observations for a case study. The choice of interpretivism, instead of positivism, did not require a pre-establishment of a theory (O'Donoghue, 2006). It also helped achieve the purpose of this research by relying as much as possible on the participants’ perspectives of what was being researched (Creswell, 2013).

3.2.1 Participants

The choice of participants was under the influence of a sampling technique (Burns, 2000). A total of sixteen English teachers with different ages, genders, teaching experiences, and ICT backgrounds were invited from four secondary schools in four different administrative zones in Ben Tre province with different degrees of ICT integration.

Due to ethical considerations, the four secondary schools were labeled as City School, District School, Village School, and Remote Village School, whereas City School was the most ICT-advanced research site as opposed to Remote Village School with very limited ICT equipment. Similarly, teachers’ names were replaced with pseudonyms as described in the table below.

Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (Year)	Experience (Year)
City School			
An	Female	44	23
Hoa	Female	47	26
Lan	Female	43	22
Tha	Female	46	24
Thu	Female	47	27
District School			

En	Female	40	17
Nho	Female	29	08
Phung	Female	39	17
Sao	Female	40	18
Tan	Female	48	27
Village School			
Diem	Female	40	18
Lin	Female	47	25
Ngoc	Male	48	26
Quynh	Female	42	20
Vu	Male	43	21
Remote Village School			
Tuan	Male	43	17

These sixteen English teachers participated in sixteen first-round face-to-face interviews and another sixteen telephone interviews for cost-saving (Frey & Oishi, 1995) in the second round to gather additional information which could have been missing during the first interviews. In addition, the second interview helps establish the “audit trail” to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Carcary, 2020) of the collected data.

Besides, sixteen semi-structured observations took place in the classrooms “to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 456). With the permission of all participants, two video camcorders were used in which one camcorder captured students’ interactions while the other captured the participants.

3.2.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from participants. The session began with pre-established key questions for all participants; then, open-ended questions were asked to obtain more opinion-based feedback (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Observations were the second method used for the data collection in “gathering data through vision as its main source” (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 229). Specifically, observation is the way to study untold stories effectively (Cohen et al., 2011).

Finally, the process of data collection using both methods warranted credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Carcary, 2020) to deliver trustworthiness for the research.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The main theme of this whole study was the investigation of ICT policy. Therefore, the Thematic Coding Analysis is

the most appropriate method to analyze the collected data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involves six phases, namely Familiarizing with the Data, Generating Initial Codes, Searching for Themes, Reviewing Themes, Defining and Naming Themes, and Producing the Report.

The collected data, thus, were coded as Policy: National, Policy: Provincial, and Policy: School. During the coding process, local characteristics emerged as a new theme as the ICT Integration Policy and ICT Training Policy in Ben Tre province were quite quintessential. Local characteristics, furthermore, helped explain why ICT was integrated differently between the four research sites.

IV. FINDINGS

The extracted data validate the importance of having a national policy in intensifying the use of ICT in ELT (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2011). Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam has mandated all provincial institutions in Vietnam, or the Education and Training Service (ETS), to implement the use of technology in teaching (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008). The EST in Ben Tre province, as a result, has drafted two ICT-related policies, namely ICT Training Policy and ICT Integration Policy (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016a, 2016b).

4.1 ICT Training Policy

The ICT Training Policy issued by EST in Ben Tre province offered an opportunity for English teachers to receive ICT

training officially (An, 45a)¹. The training course “took about three months with eight-hour classes every weekday” (Hoa, 33b) over a wide range of topics. An interviewee from a City School named Tha stated:

“I have been trained with the use of multi-media. For example, I have been trained to embed audio into a typical document. This means a reading lesson can be converted into a listening exercise” (Tha, 26a, 26b, and 26c).

For another City School teacher, “the training courses cover dedicated software for pronunciation” (Thu, 10a). The training course, in general, “are exciting and effective” (Hoa, 33c), “ICT training courses are helpful” (Hoa, 34d), and “the training courses provide a lot of benefits for teachers in applying ICT into teaching” (An, 13b).

However, not all participants highly praised the effectiveness of the training course. According to a Remote Village teacher,

“The training courses should concentrate on one specific topic or one application, instead of covering a lot of applications at the very basic level” (Tuan, 26a)

And “current training courses have made it impossible for teachers to use any [computer] application fluently” (Tuan, 26d). Another City School teacher suggested the necessity for frequent training and that it would be better if teachers could participate in the ICT training annually (Hoa, 36d) so

“teachers can update their knowledge in new applications as well as website resources” (Phung, 31a). A Remote Village teacher, in addition, believed “teachers should receive additional training in order to keep up to date with the latest software for education” (Tuan, 23d). Eventually, A District School teacher suggested, “ICT classes should be open for any teacher who may participate at any time to learn whatever they desire” (En, 35d).

Furthermore, the ICT training policy contained some negative drawbacks. For instance, many teachers believed it would be more appropriate if the ICT training courses were held in the summer when teachers were free from teaching (Hoa, 30c; Thu, 30a). In contrast, the existing training courses posed several problems not only for the participants who were on leave for training but also for many other teachers. According to a City School teacher,

“It [the ICT training course] causes a burden not only for the teacher who receives the training, but it also affects the teacher who takes over classes in the absence of the participating trainee” (Tha, 36a).

Moreover, many teachers had to queue up for the training (Vu, 25b) because each school could only appoint one or two teachers at a time (Diem, 13a; En, 24c). Diem, added, “I think all teachers will receive the training in the future, but it is still pending in the meantime” (13e).

At the time these interviews took place, several English teachers had never received any proper ICT training, as summarized in the table below:

Table 2: Trained versus Untrained Interviewees

Participants	Have Trained	Reference
City School		
An	No	An, 43a
Hoa	Yes	Hoa, 32a
Lan	Yes	Lan, 12a
Tha	Yes	Tha, 26a
Thu	Yes	Thu, 23a
District School		

¹ The extracted interview data will be formatted as Participant’s Name + Question Number + the Part of the Question, e.g. (Lan, 1a) means Question 1, Part a, by a

participant named Lan. Observation references will be Observation + Name, e.g. (Observation Lan) means the observation of a participant named Lan.

En	No	En, 7b
Nho	No	Nho, 6a
Phung	Yes	Phung, 1b
Sao	No	Sao, 17a
Tan	Yes	Tan, 17a
Village School		
Diem	No	Diem, 13f
Lin	No	Lin, 21a
Ngoc	No	Ngoc, 37a
Quynh	Yes	Quynh, 21a
Vu	Yes	Vu, 18a
Remote Village School		
Tuan	Yes	Tuan, 7b

According to the above table, seven out of sixteen, or 44%, interviewees had not received proper ICT training at the time this study took place. Regionally, the City School had one untrained participant. The District School and Village School had three untrained participants for each school. The Remote Village had no untrained teacher; however, this school had only one English teacher (Tuan, 1a).

The inability to provide ICT training courses in the summer or all year round reflected the shortage of budget for education (Ngoc 25a) which explained the overcrowded classrooms, as indicated by many participants (Hoa, 24b, Lan, 32a, Sao, 18b).

The way schools appointed participants was yet another setback. For schools with many teachers, the waiting time to attend the training course was longer because each school could only nominate one or two candidates at a time (Diem, 13a; En, 24c). On the contrary, a Village School teacher had participated in the training three times (Vu, 18a), despite three of the five teachers at this very same school had not received any training, as shown in Table 2. The extracted data also revealed a malpractice in appointing candidates for the ICT training. In particular, a Lan (36e) informed that the ICT training course was only for teachers with the B2 Level of the Cambridge First Certificate in English, but schools often disregard this qualification because “some [school] districts may not have any [qualified] attendees at all” (Tuan, 35b). This practice also led to a case in which experienced teachers might have participated in the ICT training several times, while teachers under the B2 Level were not assigned (Tuan, 34b). The Remote Village teacher, Tuan, also suggested basic computer training because the

ICT training course should be dedicated to ICT rather than basic computer training (Tuan, 24a and 24b).

Finally, the ICT training course did not show trainees how to troubleshoot problems. The necessity for technical training was described by a City School teacher:

“Incompatibility actually occurs and it often happens that I have to conduct my own research to prepare my lessons because the training courses are insufficient. I have been discouraged a lot of times in self-discovering solutions to use ICT in my class because of my limited ability. Actually, I have skipped several problems to continue my lectures, using what I am capable of” (Lan, 14a - 14f).

The ICT Training Policy, in conclusion, contained many drawbacks in the training content and in predefining qualified candidates. With nearly half of the ICT-untrained teachers, the integration of ICT in ELT could not be postponed because of the dictates of another policy, the ICT Integration Policy, which will be described in the next section.

4.2 ICT Integration Policy

The ICT Integration Policy officially dictated the use of ICT in ELT at all public schools throughout Ben Tre province (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016b). Funds, as a result, were distributed to each school to equip necessary equipment. The extracted data confirmed the use of ICT by English teachers at all research sites, as described in the table below.

Table 3: ICT Integration in ELT

Research Site	ICT Integration	Reference
City School	Yes	An (7a); Hoa (1a); Lan (1c); Tha (1b); Thu (1a)
District School	Yes	En (1a); Nho (2c); Phung (1a); Sao (1d); Tan (1a)
Village School	Yes	Diem (1a); Lin (1c); Ngoc (1a); Quynh (1a); Vu (1c)
Remote Village School	Yes	Tuan (1c)

This policy, however, required the use of ICT in ELT for only two credit hours per school year (Lin, 41a; Quynh, 44a). English teachers at City School did not discuss this quota; instead, they only hinted at the active use of ICT (Hoa, 28a). At District School, ICT was very proactive as teachers were required to use ICT for 50% of all teaching (Nho, 10a). A similar practice was also found at Village School, where ICT was used weekly (Ngoc, 1a). In contrast, ICT was used very limitedly at the Remote Village School, where ICT was only used once every two or three weeks (Tuan, 1c).

The integration of ICT, moreover, faced a conflict between the training course and the schools' regulations. According to an interviewee, the ban on mobile phones affected students dramatically,

“Besides, most teachers use mobile apps, but students are banned from phones. Although misuse occurs, ICT's benefits are evident. The ban also discourages parents, limiting online tasks and leaving only offline methods available” (Thu, 21e - 21j).

The same interviewee added, “the training courses, for one, involve a lot of online applications, while offline is the only option at this school” (Thu, 22a) for which “many teaching opportunities have to be skipped. As a result, my knowledge may sink into oblivion” (Thu, 22c, and 22d).

Besides, the outdated concept of quietness for a formal classroom should be changed as explained:

“Management is also an important factor. For example, effective teaching [including ICT] often comes with noise, as students proactively participate. However, management considers a noisy class as an out-of-order class. For this reason, most teachers prefer to keep their class as

quiet as possible, which means students cannot participate much” (Thu, 27c and 27d).

Even though EST should not interfere with the school's activities, the lack of indications for public schools concerning the effective use of ICT in ELT, such as recommendations for the removal of the ban on mobile phones and the outdated concept of a quiet classroom, was evidence of an ineffective approach to ensure the practical integration of ICT in ELT throughout the province. This lack of preparation also grew bigger as many obstacles brought by local characteristics were overlooked.

ICT was implemented without considering blackouts as a common threat. In the city, blackouts were considered an “obstacle” (Tha, 29a) even though they did not occur regularly (Tha, 30a). However, in the village, “teachers are afraid of using ICT because of frequent blackouts” (Ngoc, 19c), and they were “the most serious obstacle [to ICT integration] because they are totally out of our control” (Ngoc, 34a). In one observation footage, a blackout occurred in the middle of a class session at the Village School. The teacher had to revert to the traditional teaching methods (Observation Diem). Other participants admitted that they always had traditional teaching on standby in case of blackouts (Lan 46b; Tha 47b; Phung 38b). The interviewee at the Remote Village School, on the other hand, did not treat blackouts as a serious threat because ICT was rarely applied in teaching (Tuan, 1b).

Blackouts yet highlighted a larger issue due to the lack of funding in Ben Tre province. In education, overcrowded classrooms were a direct result of underfunding. Observations at four research sites with sixteen participants confirmed this fact in the table below.

Table 4: Number of Students per Classroom

Observation Name	Students per Class
City School	
An	43
Hoa	42
Lan	41
Tha	40
Thu	46
District School	
En	35
Nho	38
Phung	38
Sao	37
Tan	37
Village School	
Diem	41
Lin	39
Ngoc	42
Quynh	37
Vu	43
Remote Village School	
Tuan	35

A Village School teacher admitted, “It is impractical for a teacher to use ICT tools which are designed for twenty students in a classroom with forty” (Diem, 20b). Thus, “teachers find it very difficult to deliver their lessons” (Diem, 11b). Many teachers believed the capacity should be reduced (Diem, 10c; Hoa, 31b; Sao, 26a) to approximately twenty students per classroom (Hoa, 24e; Lan, 34e; Sao, 18c).

The lack of funding also prevented schools from hiring additional teachers. According to a City School teacher,

“This school has recommended to the higher authority for additional teachers; however, this has not been applied yet Perhaps funding is the obstacle in this matter” (Tha, 14d - 14e).

The shortage of teaching staff at the Remote Village School was even worse. The sole English teacher at this school stated that he had to teach all grades at his school (Tuan, 1a) because “the Board of Administrators has denied the idea of having additional teachers” (Tuan, 20b).

The integration of ICT in ELT, furthermore, was very challenging due to the lack of funds for upgrading equipment. For example,

“There is a control panel installed beneath each desk for students to answer multiple-choice questions, but these panels no longer function. Replacement of these panels has been requested but it is still awaiting funding” (Tha, 17a - 17b).

A District School teacher added,

“I would love to see more projectors, but I do not think the Board of Administrators would approve my request because these projectors are very expensive” (Phung, 15b).

The situation was quite similar at Village School where,

“Speakers are one of the many devices that seriously need upgrades, but it is impossible to replace all speakers at once, due to limited budgets” (Ngoc, 23b - 23c).

According to another teacher at Village School, other tools should be introduced in teaching, but he doubted,

“I have seen a lot of these devices, which could be helpful for listening. However, it is hard to request school funding to purchase these devices” (Vu, 14c).

Lastly, the only English teacher at the Remote Village School suggested,

“The Education and Training Service should make funding available for the Board of Administrators to purchase a larger, 65-inch television to provide better visibility for everyone in the classroom” (Tuan, 23a).

These findings, according to interviews and observations, indicated the effectiveness of all ICT policies in Ben Tre province. The next chapter will investigate how and why such obstacles have existed under the theoretical framework before finalizing a conclusion of whether things could have been done in a different, yet better, way, alongside recommendations in the last chapter.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The British Council suggested in its report that ICT integration should receive support from all government levels (British Council, 2015). ICT policies in Ben Tre province, however, have been a burden for teachers, according to one participant:

“It causes a burden not only for the teacher who receives the training, but it also affects the teachers who take over classes in the absence of the participating trainee. Teaching schedules, thus, have to change entirely” (Tha, 36a, 36b).

Having the training course in session during the school year, instead of the summer break, is not an ideal choice for teachers (Hoa, 30c; Thu, 30d; Nho, 22a) because other teachers have to cover classes left by those who participate in the training (Thu, 30b). As a result, “all teachers are overworked when one is attending a training course” (Hoa, 30d). This burden is even more difficult for older teachers, as fatigue seems unavoidable. According to one participant,

“It is about the inappropriate time [of which] training is given, which conflicts with my teaching. I have to provide extra teaching hours to compensate for my absence while participating in the training courses.” (Hoa, 30a - 30e)

It is, therefore, challenging, if not impossible, for overloaded teachers to maintain high standards in teaching. Additionally, switching the training course to the summer should have been done. However, the lack of a local

university in Ben Tre province, paired with the shortage of funding, has led provincial administrators at the EST to propose this arrangement. First, the EST must recruit ICT experts from universities in nearby provinces to act as instructors for the ICT training course. The hiring during school terms would be much less compared to the cost of recruiting during holidays because funding is always an obstacle (Ngoc, 25a).

The lack of funding also explains the overcrowded classroom that makes ICT integration ineffective because “it is impractical for a teacher to use ICT tools which are designed for twenty students in a classroom with forty” (Diem, 20b) in which “teachers find it very difficult to deliver their lessons” (Diem, 11b). Instead, the number of students per classroom should be reduced (Diem, 10c; Hoa, 31b; Sao, 26a) to approximately twenty students per classroom (Hoa, 24e; Lan, 34e; Sao, 18c). Furthermore, administrators, through the design of the ICT training course, cannot propose effective solutions to overcome obstacles brought by no Internet connectivity and blackouts. According to one interviewee, “the training courses, for one, involve a lot of online applications, while offline is the only option at this school” (Thu, 22a). Other participants confirmed that they always had traditional teaching on standby in case of blackouts (Lan 46b; Tha 47b; Phung 38b). The shift to traditional teaching which is based heavily on grammar competence (Xiaotong, 2014) means it is less suited to helping students learn to communicate effectively in authentic situations (Yede, 2020), or it means the student-centered pedagogy.

The above external obstacles validate the difficulties brought about by administrative structures and infrastructure, as highlighted by Ntorukiri et al. (2022) and policies related to ICT use (Gonfa, 2024). All attempts at integrating ICT in ELT, in addition, are consistent with Peeraer and Van Petegem (2011) regarding the benefit of having proactive policies at a national level – Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg in this particular study. The EST in Ben Tre province, hence, adopts this change in education despite the shortage of funding.

According to the theoretical framework, hosting the ICT training course during the school year is associated with the Fund–Policy factor in the Initiation Decisions stage of ECT (Fullan, 2015). As teachers are overloaded with work brought by the training course (Hoa, 30a - 30e; Tha, 36a, 36b), the stage of Initiation Decisions is not supported by the Teacher Advocacy factor. This hardship, for this reason, leverages the degree of Complexity in the Implementation stage, or Stage 2, of ECT (Fullan, 2015). The degree of Complexity is also a concern with blackouts which forces teachers to convert to traditional teaching. Therefore, the

degree of Quality/Practicality, also an element in the Implementation stage, is not fulfilled.

The Complexity element of ECT (Fullan, 2015) is also equivalent to the Complexity element in the Second phase of DoIT (Rogers, 2003). With higher Complexity, two other elements of DoIT, Relative Advantage and Compatibility, are negatively impacted. For instance, the integration of ICT in ELT is inconsistent because many teachers have never participated in the ICT training course, according to Table 2. All of these elements, in turn, are driven by local characteristics of Ben Tre province, or the Socio Economic Characteristics elements in Phase 1, of DoIT which helps explain the shortage of funds as associated with the Fund-Policy factor of ECT (Fullan, 2015).

If external obstacles are unavoidable, the ICT Training Policy shows several disadvantages that are created internally. The way teachers are selected to participate in the training course is a major setback. For example, experienced teachers might have participated in the ICT training several times, while other teachers remain untrained (Tuan, 34b). This ineffective practice, in turn, can affect teachers' confidence in using technology in teaching (Sipilä, 2014; Moradi, 2025). Besides, Arokiasamy et al. (2015) propose the role of leadership regarding how ICT use adopted and used within a school community. Some school's restrictions, such as the concept of a quiet classroom (Thu, 27c and 27d) and the ban on mobile phones (Thu, 21e - 21j), are clear evidence of how leadership may become a problem, regardless of how supportive (Ngoc, 35a).

These internal obstacles, under the scope of the theoretical framework, are similar to the external counterpart as described earlier. The Fund-Policy factor in Stage 1 of ECT (Fullan, 2015) is still a major indicator in examining schools' restrictions which dramatically affects the Quality/Practicality factor in Stage 2. In addition, the number of ICT-untrained teachers, as shown in Table 2, is yet another factor that impacts the Quality/Practicality factor because the Access to Innovation factor in Stage 1 is not equally accessible between teachers.

The Quality/Practicality factor in Stage 2 of ECT is equivalent to the Relative Advantage element in Phase 2 of DoIT (Rogers, 2003). The low degree of Relative Advantage, as a result, leads to a low degree of Compatibility while increasing the level of Complexity. Unlike external obstacles which are unavoidable, administrators could propose better approaches to prevent these problems. This indication reflects the Personality Variables element in Phase 1 of DoIT. This very element is also the scope to explain the Observability elements in Phase 2 as administrators who lack the administrative skills

have overlooked the necessity of making necessary changes to ensure a proper ICT training course and an effective integration of ICT in classrooms.

The examination of Fund-Policy and Access to Innovation factors of ECT (Fullan, 2005) helps identify external and internal obstacles while Socio Economic Characteristics and Personality Variables elements of DoIT (Rogers, 2003) explain why funding is the underlying problem and how administrators can influence the process of integration of ICT in ELT.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The use of Education Change Theory (ECT) (Fullan, 2015) and Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DoIT) (Rogers, 2003), paired with Thematic Coding Analysis (Clarke, 2006), allowed the investigation of current ICT policies, the ICT Training Policy (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016a) and the ICT Integration Policy (Ben Tre Educational Service, 2016b), to determine how policies can determine the outcome of the transition from traditional teaching to the use of technology.

The Findings indicated that existing ICT policies contained two types of obstacles, external and internal. If external factors seemed out of control for administrators at the Education and Training Service (EST) and schools in Ben Tre province, internal obstacles, on the contrary, reflected the lack of administrative skills among these policymakers. In addition, the use of ECT (Fullan, 2005) and DoIT (Rogers, 2003) helped explore and explain the root of these obstacles as well as how and why they existed.

External obstacles, on the one hand, were closely associated with local characteristics in Ben Tre province, in which educational funding and infrastructure were two major factors. For one thing, the lack of funding prevented all teachers from participating in the training course at once. Instead, each school could only appoint one or two candidates per course (Diem, 13a; En, 24c; Vu, 25b). Insufficient funds also prevented all training sessions from taking place during the summer break when teachers were at work. The practice of assigning other teachers to cover classes for those who left for the training course, in fact, created a burden for all teachers within the school, as strongly criticized by one interviewee:

"It causes a burden not only for the teacher who receives the training, but it also affects the teachers who take over classes in the absence of the participating trainee. Teaching schedules, thus, have to change entirely" (Tha, 36a, 36b).

This problem was even more challenging as the shortage of teachers was not rare. Many interviewees mentioned the

request for hiring additional teachers (Tha, 14d - 14e; Tuan, 20b). Shortage of funding was also the cause of overcrowded classrooms which made the use of ICT very difficult because “it is impractical for a teacher to use ICT tools which are designed for twenty students in a classroom with forty” (Diem, 20b). External obstacles, furthermore, accounted for frequent blackouts for which “teachers are afraid of using ICT because of frequent blackouts” (Ngoc, 19c). Traditional teaching was always on standby, and teachers had to revert to this outdated approach if power outages occurred (Lan 46b; Tha 47b; Phung 38b). Therefore, the purpose of using technology to create a more interesting learning environment through the use of ICT to in order to improve educational achievement (Abraham et al., 2022) was not always guaranteed.

On the other hand, administrators who lack administrative skills were responsible for internal obstacles in implementing the ICT Training Policy and the ICT Integration Policy. For instance, the way in which teachers were selected for the ICT training was a setback because experienced teachers might have participated in the ICT training several times while others had to wait (Tuan, 34b). In contrast, another interviewee suggested “ICT classes should be open for any teacher who may participate at any time to learn whatever they desire” (En, 35d). Moreover, the lack of administrative skills could be found in outdated policies at schools. For example, the concept of a quiet classroom was a barrier for an effective ICT class (Thu, 27c and 27d). Likewise, the ban on mobile phones was considered inappropriate to embrace technology in teaching (Thu, 21e - 21j). These internal obstacles were a direct result of leadership (Ngoc, 35a).

By using a theoretical framework, the scope for investigation was obvious. ECT (Fullan, 2015), through Local Characteristics, could identify that Fund-Policy and Access to Innovation were the two associated factors for all external factors. Similarly, the Socio Economic Characteristics and Personality Variables elements of DoIT (Rogers, 2003), through a relationship between Complexity and Relative Advantage, explained why administrators could influence the outcome of the ICT integration in ELT. Finally, it has been a few years since this study took place. The integration of ICT in ELT in Ben Tre province could have been improved. For example, most teachers, if not all, could have received ICT training. However, the findings remain valid if new technology is added, such as the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Unless administrators can improve their administrative skills, especially in tackling obstacles brought by local characteristics, these problems will remain quintessential in any future integration of

technology in Ben Tre province. And this makes this research study unique.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank four headmasters and sixteen English teachers at the four secondary schools in Ben Tre Province, whose participation made the data collection process smooth and effective. This study would not have been completed without their outstanding cooperation. The author would also like to acknowledge his teachers, colleagues, and friends who directly and indirectly contributed assistance and support to this study. Additionally, special thanks are given to Mr Le Van Hoang Mrs Le Dao Thanh Binh An for their invaluable support and professional editing of the transcripts of the interview data.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abend, G. (2008). Two main problems in the sociology of morality. *Theory and Society*, 37(2), 87–125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-007-9059-1>
- [2] Abraham, M., Arficho, Z., & Habtemariam, T. (2022). Effects of training in ICT-assisted English language teaching on secondary school English language teachers' knowledge, skills, and practice of using ICT tools for teaching English. *Education Research International*, 2022(1), 6233407. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/6233407>
- [3] Alkamel, M. A. A., & Chouthaiwale, S. S. (2018). The use of ICT tools in English language teaching and learning: A literature review. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(2), 29–33.
- [4] An, Z., Wang, C., Li, S., Gan, Z., & Li, H. (2021). Technology-assisted self-regulated English language learning: Associations with English language self-efficacy, English enjoyment, and learning outcomes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 558466. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.558466>
- [5] Arokiasamy, A. R. A., Abdullah, A. G. K., & Ismail, A. (2015). Correlation between cultural perceptions, leadership style and ICT usage by school principals in Malaysia. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 176, 319–322. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.470>
- [6] Aslan, A., & Zhu, C. (2018). Starting teachers' integration of ICT into their teaching practices in the lower secondary schools in Turkey. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 18(1), 23–45.
- [7] Ben Tre Educational Service. (2016a). Official correspondence 1601/SGD&DT-GDTH on the providing of the training course for English language and IT teachers.
- [8] Ben Tre Educational Service. (2016b). Official correspondence 2782/SGD&DT-KTQLCLGD&CNTT on the enhancing ICT use in e-learning.

- [9] Bordbar, F. (2010). English Teachers' Attitudes toward Computer-Assisted Language Learning. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 4(3).
- [10] Bradley, V. M. (2021). Learning management system (LMS) use with online instruction. *International Journal of Technology in Education*, 4(1), 68–92. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijte.36>
- [11] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- [12] British Council. (2015). *Technology for Professional Development: Access, Interest and Opportunity for Teachers of English in South Asia*. British Council: New Delhi.
- [13] Burns, R. B. (2000). *Introduction to research methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
- [14] Burns, A., & Kurtoglu-Hooton, N. (2016). Using action research to explore technology in language teaching: International perspectives. British Council.
- [15] Carcary, M. (2020). The research audit trail: Methodological guidance for application in practice. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 18(2), 166–177. <https://doi.org/10.34190/JBRM.18.2.008>
- [16] Chou, C. M., Shen, C. H., Hsiao, H. C., & Shen, T. C. (2019). Factors influencing teachers' innovative teaching behaviour with information and communication technology (ICT): The mediator role of organisational innovation climate. *Educational Psychology*, 39(1), 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2018.1520201>
- [17] Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. R. B. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). Routledge.
- [18] Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- [19] Davies, G., & Hewer, S. (2009). Introduction to new technologies and how they can contribute to language learning and teaching. In G. Davies (Ed.), *Information and communications technology for language teachers (ICT4LT)*. Thames Valley University.
- [20] Dhital, H. (2018). Opportunities and challenges to use ICT in government school education of Nepal. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Computer and Communication Engineering*, 6(4), 3215–3220.
- [21] Dinh, H. (2015). Factors influencing English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' use of information and communication technology (ICT) in classroom practice: A mixed methods study at Hanoi University, Vietnam (Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University). RMIT University. <http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:161364>
- [22] Frey, J. H., & Oishi, S. M. (1995). *How to conduct interviews by telephone and in person* (Vol. 4). Sage Publications.
- [23] Fullan, M. (2015). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- [24] Ghavifekr, S., & Rosdy, W. A. W. (2015). Teaching and learning with technology: Effectiveness of ICT integration in schools. *International Journal of Research in Education and Science*, 1(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.21890/ijres.23596>
- [25] Gonfa, M. H., Birhanu, A. L., & Gendo, K. M. (2024). Review on practice and challenges of ICT integration as pedagogical tools in Ethiopian primary school curriculum implementation. *Discover Education*, 3(1), 88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00184-w>
- [26] Graddol, D. (1997). *The future of English?: A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. British Council.
- [27] Hasumi, T., & Chiu, M. S. (2024). Technology-enhanced language learning in English language education: Performance analysis, core publications, and emerging trends. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2346044. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2346044>
- [28] Hoang, S. H. (2013). Những khó khăn và hạn chế khi sử dụng công nghệ thông tin vào dạy học [Challenges and limitations of ICT integration in teaching]. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from <https://text.123doc.net/document/1210460>
- [29] Jimson, L. (2015, April 28). Why are English and French the official Olympic languages? *Speedendurance*. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from <https://speedendurance.com/2015/04/28/why-are-english-and-french-the-official-olympic-languages>
- [30] Kara, K. (2014, March 21). What is the universal language of the skies? *Mental Floss*. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/55677/what-universal-language-skies>
- [31] Kelly, S. (2012, August). For safety, everyone must understand the same language. *Professional Mariner*. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from <http://www.professionalmariner.com/August-2011/For-safety-everyone-must-understand-the-same-language/>
- [32] Laius, A., & Presmann, M. (2024). The pre-service teachers' perceptions of integrated teaching, inquiry learning, using ICT and real-life examples in science classes. *Science Education International*, 35(2), 92–101.
- [33] Le, Q. C. (2018). Tại sao dạy tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam không hiệu quả? [Why is English teaching in Vietnam ineffective?]. *Giáo dục Việt Nam*. Retrieved July 15, 2025, from <https://giaoduc.netvn/giao-duc-24h/tai-sao-day-tieng-anh-o-viet-nam-khong-hieu-qua-post193491.gd>
- [34] Lawrence, J. E., & Tar, U. A. (2018). Factors that influence teachers' adoption and integration of ICT in teaching/learning process. *Educational Media International*, 55(1), 79–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523987.2018.1439712>
- [35] Livingstone, S. (2012). Critical reflections on the benefits of ICT in education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(1), 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.577944>
- [36] Luong, T., & Quan, T. (2020). Khắc phục những khó khăn khi dạy học trực tuyến [Overcoming difficulties when

- teaching online]. *Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*. Retrieved July 15, 2025, from <http://dangcongsan.vn/ban-doc/y-kien-ban-doc/khac-phuc-nhung-kho-khan-khi-day-hoc-truc-tuyen-552299.html>
- [37] Medlin, B. D. (2001). The factors that may influence a faculty member's decision to adopt electronic technologies in instruction (Doctoral dissertation). Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- [38] Mendes de Oliveira, M. (2024). English as a lingua franca and interculturality: Navigating structure- and process-oriented perspectives in intercultural interactions. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 24(2), 105–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2023.2254285>
- [39] Mirzajani, H., Mahmud, R., Fauzi Mohd Ayub, A., & Wong, S. L. (2016). Teachers' acceptance of ICT and its integration in the classroom. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 24(1), 26–40. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-06-2014-0025>
- [40] Moradi, H. (2025). The role of language teachers' perceptions and attitudes in ICT integration in higher education EFL classes in China. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04524-5>
- [41] Msambwa, M. M., Daniel, K., & Lianyu, C. (2024). Integration of information and communication technology in secondary education for better learning: A systematic literature review. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 10, 101203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101203>
- [42] Nakamura, P., Molotsky, A., Zarzur, R. C., Ranjit, V., Haddad, Y., & De Hoop, T. (2023). Language of instruction in schools in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 19(4), e1351. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1351>
- [43] Ngo, H., & Eichelberger, A. (2019). College students' attitudes toward ICT use for English learning. *International Journal of Education and Development Using Information and Communication Technology*, 15(1), 1–12.
- [44] Ngo, M. T., & Tran, L. T. (2023). Current English education in Vietnam: Policy, practices, and challenges. In *English language education for graduate employability in Vietnam* (pp. 49–69). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4338-8_3
- [45] Ngo, V. G. (2016). Towards an effective integration of ICT in an EFL setting in a Vietnamese higher education context (Doctoral dissertation, University of Adelaide). University of Adelaide. Retrieved July 23, 2025, from <http://hdl.handle.net/2440/103499>
- [46] Nhu, P. T. T., Keong, T. C., & Wah, L. K. (2019). Issues and challenges in using ICT for teaching English in Vietnam. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal*, 20(3), 140–155.
- [47] Ntorukiri, T. B., Kirugua, J. M., & Kirimi, F. (2022). Policy and infrastructure challenges influencing ICT implementation in universities: A literature review. *Discover Education*, 1(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-022-00019-6>
- [48] O'Donoghue, T. (2006). *Planning your qualitative research project: An introduction to interpretivist research in education*. Routledge.
- [49] Peeraer, J., & Van Petegem, P. (2011). ICT in teacher education in an emerging developing country: Vietnam's baseline situation at the start of 'The Year of ICT'. *Computers & Education*, 56(4), 974–982. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.11.015>
- [50] Prime Minister of Vietnam. (2008). Decision No.1400/QĐ-TTg on approving the project "Foreign language learning and teaching in the national education system period 2008 and 2020". Retrieved June 15, 2025, from http://vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&_page=1&mode=detail&document_id=78437
- [51] Raman, A., & Thannimalai, R. (2019). Importance of technology leadership for technology integration: Gender and professional development perspective. *Sage Open*, 9(4), 2158244019893707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019893707>
- [52] Rashid, T., & Asghar, H. M. (2016). Technology use, self-directed learning, student engagement and academic performance: Examining the interrelations. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 604–612. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.084>
- [53] Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- [54] Sarantakos, S. (2013). *Social research* (4th ed.). Macmillan.
- [55] Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.
- [56] Schmitz, M. L., Antonietti, C., Consoli, T., Cattaneo, A., Gonon, P., & Petko, D. (2023). Transformational leadership for technology integration in schools: Empowering teachers to use technology in a more demanding way. *Computers & Education*, 204, 104880. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2023.104880>
- [57] Sipilä, K. (2014). Educational use of information and communications technology: Teachers' perspective. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 23(2), 225–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475939X.2013.813407>
- [58] UNESCO. (n.d.). ICT in education. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/ict-education>
- [59] Victoria, M., Xu, F. H., & Pilcher, N. (2025). English as a lingua franca: Intercultural interaction in the context of Asian 'third space'. *Asian Englishes*, 27(1), 159–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2024.2405278>
- [60] Vietnamese Government. (1993). Resolution 49/CP on development of information technology in the country in the 90s. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from http://vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&mode=detail&document_id=1968
- [61] Vietnam National Assembly. (2000). Resolution No. 40/2000/QH10 on renovating the program of general

education. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from <http://vbpl.vn/TW/Pages/vbpqen-toanvan.aspx?ItemID=47>

- [62] Vo, K. H., & Le, X. M. (2014). Factors affecting secondary-school English teachers' adoption of technologies in Southwest Vietnam. *Language Education in Asia*, 5(2), 198–215. https://doi.org/10.5746/LEiA/14/V5/I2/A03/Le_Vo
- [63] Xiaotong, H. E. (2014). An analysis of communicative language teaching methodology and its application on language learning in China. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 6(3), 100–105.
- [64] Le, X. M., & Le, T. T. (2022). English language teaching pedagogical reforms in Vietnam: External factors in light of teachers' backgrounds. *Cogent Education*, 9(1), 2087457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2087457>
- [65] Xue, J., & Zuo, W. (2013). English dominance and its influence on international communication. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 3(12), 2267–2271. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.12.2267-2271>
- [66] Yede, F. S. (2020). A comparative analysis of traditional methods and communicative language teaching in relation to students' academic and communicative achievement. *European Scientific Journal*, 16(13), 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n13p13>
- [67] Yu, J., Bekerian, D. A., & Osback, C. (2024). Navigating the digital landscape: Challenges and barriers to effective information use on the internet. *Encyclopedia*, 4(4), 1665–1680. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia4040109>
- [68] Zuppo, C. (2012). Defining ICT in a boundaryless world: The development of a working hierarchy. *International Journal of Managing Information Technology*, 4(3), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.5121/ijmit.2012.4302>



Positive Psychology in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

Dr. V. Vijayalayan

Associate Professor of English, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Chennai, India

Received: 29 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 01 Oct 2025; Accepted: 04 Oct 2025; Available online: 09 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— War often reduces people into empty shells, indelibly draining them of their hope and will to live. Yet at times it also gives rise to narratives of relentless courage and optimism in the form of individuals who simply refuse to give into its appalling atrocities. Ibrahim Nurri the protagonist of Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is one such extraordinary individual. Deprived of practically everything that makes life worth living by the Syrian civil war, and condemned to become a fleeing refugee, Nuri nevertheless insists on fighting against all odds with the avowed objective of retaining life and hope. The paper marks an attempt to appraise his character through the research lens of the American psychologist Martin Seligman's concept of positive psychology, particularly his PERMA model of well-being. The ultimate goal is to set forth how Nuri's unconquerable resilience is at its core shaped and inspired by essentially the elements that make up Seligman's well-being theory.



Keywords— Positive psychology, PERMA, well-being, character development, hope

Introduction

In the annals of world literature, few remarks exhort the ideal of unyielding fortitude more forcefully than Hemingway's assertion from his classic *The Old Man and the Sea*, "But man is not made for defeat... A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (77). Yet stirring as it is, the reality is that most people confronted with adversity are likely to find the exhortation too exacting to uphold. The protagonist of Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* Ibrahim Nuri is however unlike most people. A native of Syria, Nuri is leading a serene and fulfilling life, when the harmony of his existence is irrevocably shattered by the outbreak of the civil war. The war devastates his home and livelihood, separates him from his friends, blinds his wife, and claims the life of his only son. In spite of enduring such profound losses, Nuri does not succumb to despair. Rather he puts up a valiant struggle for survival by embarking on a perilous journey to England in the hope of procuring asylum. Apparently personal tragedies cannot break him, hardships fail to efface him, and overwhelming odds of failure simply does not register with him. The critical question is what epitomizes the avowed catalyst

that fuels this extraordinary streak of resilience in Nuri? The answer is the idea of positive psychology advocated by the American psychologist Martin Seligman. On the face of it of course the proposition might impart an impression of being extremely hypothetical and tenuous to reckon with. Yet as it would subsequently suffice upon scrutiny, it is not just plausible but compelling. However, in order to arrive at this understanding, it is required that we take stock of the theoretical framework underlying Seligman's conceptualization of positive psychology in the first place.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is "a scientific and professional movement" (FL I) initiated in 1998 by Seligman during his presidency of the American Psychological Association (APA). Seligman initiated the movement as a reaction against the traditional practices in psychology particularly their undue emphasis on the topic of mental illness and its treatment. Thus positive psychology as initiated by him takes as its subject the exploration of the enabling aspects that promote the flourishing of life with the view to foster

them. Its ultimate goal is well-being, which as theorised by Seligman is comprised of five elements. These are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, PERMA for short. It is vital to stress here that well-being in Seligman's perception essentially exemplifies a "construct" (FL 6). The five elements that comprise it are therefore mutually exclusive of each other and as such contribute individually to the overall structure of well-being. A brief account of the elements would bear out this point clearly.

PERMA Model

The first element positive emotion signifies those impulses that underpin the experience of happiness or satisfaction in life. Seligman categorizes them into three distinct types. These are those directed to the past such as "satisfaction, contentment, pride, and serenity" (AH 48), those oriented to the future like "optimism, hope, confidence, trust, and faith" (AH 48), and finally those associated to the present which he further classifies into two namely those relating to the body as "delicious tastes and smells, sexual feelings, moving your body well, delightful sights and sounds" (AH 228), and those pertaining to a higher plane of significance as "ecstasy, rapture, thrill, bliss, gladness, mirth, glee, fun, ebullience, comfort, amusement, relaxation, and the like" (AH 88). The second element of well-being engagement denotes a condition in which an individual becomes so absorbed in an activity that all sensations of consciousness and felt emotion are blocked from present experience. Seligman characterises this state as being in "flow, the state in which time stops and one feels completely at home" (AH 229). For Seligman it is not the nature of the activity but the deep psychological impact it has on the senses that accounts for engagement. Hence practically any activity we love doing such as "reading, rock climbing, dancing, good conversation, volleyball, or playing bridge" (AH 93) could induce flow.

The third element meaning is different from the first two in that its orientation is not restricted merely to the realm of personal contentment. Rather it invokes a sense of purpose, value and significance in life that compels one into identifying or committing to a cause or service beyond self-interest. As Seligman puts it, meaning affirms the idea of "belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self" (FL 8). The fourth element accomplishment alludes to gaining a sense of achievement through successfully pursuing and attaining set goals. It is however important to note that accomplishment as envisioned by Seligman is not necessarily pursued with the professed objective of winning tangible recognitions as external appreciation or material prosperity. It is in fact

frequently pursued as an end in itself than anything else. To quote Seligman himself, It describes "what human beings, when free of coercion, choose to do for its own sake" (FL 9). The fifth element relationship points to forging and sustaining meaningful ties with others. In Seligman's view relationships is not an option but an imperative. As he envisages, "very little that is positive is solitary" (FL 10). It is in fact as he asserts our kinship with others that ultimately determines the quality of one's life. "When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy... Even without knowing the particulars of these high points of your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people" (FL 10). The PERMA model of well-being as Seligman's theory of positive psychology is often dubbed, ultimately consists in actively cultivating these five elements. As each typifies a mutually independent entity, they ought to be developed individually with intent. This is exactly what Nuri does in the novel, without of course being consciously aware of doing so. What ensues is an analytic illustration of how he goes about it, which in his case warrants exceptional praise considering what he has endured.

Positive Emotion

Positive emotions are hard to experience when you are a refugee on the run. Add to this the loss of family members and friends, and the prospect of ever experiencing positive emotions becomes next to nothing. This is precisely the scenario Nuri is compelled to endure in the novel. Nuri has to flee Syria if he wants to save his life, which is in itself a formidable challenge. The fact that he has to take along with him a blinded wife and carry in his heart the indelible scar of his son's loss, renders it virtually a mission impossible. Somehow through sheer grit and determination he manages to accomplish this enterprise, only to be cast into a vortex of uncertainty as an asylum seeker in the UK. If this is not enough, he is also unsure about the whereabouts of his cousin Mustafa, the one pillar of hope he is counting on. In spite of all these shortcomings, Nuri manages to experience positive emotions, which though subdued and sporadic, provides him the much-needed sense of strength to cope with his embattled circumstance. The principal source of inspiration for him in this connection are the memories of beekeeping from his earlier life in Aleppo. The son of a fabric merchant, Nuri takes up beekeeping through Mustafa. Though his choice proves to be immensely disappointing to his father, for Nuri himself it turns out to be his life's calling. "There were so many bees, and they made me feel alive. When I was away from them it was like a great party had ended" (Lefteri 11). All throughout his stay in the BNB, Nuri constantly reminisces about his

beekeeping days in Syria which fills him with a feeling of blessed contentment. Beside the memories of beekeeping, he also recalls moments spent with Mustafa's family that adds to his relief in the present.

"Every Saturday we would go to Mustafa's house for dinner. Dahab and Mustafa would cook together, Mustafa measuring every ingredient, every spice, meticulously on the scales, as if one tiny mistake would ruin the whole meal" (Lefteri 13).

Thus, though it might appear that positive emotions are absent indeed inaccessible to Nuri considering his desperate situation, the fact is they are very much alive in him. Perhaps one might say they exist in a muted form, but the truth is Nuri through conscious effort sustains them, and in doing so gives himself a chance of flourishing.

Engagement

Experiencing flow is not so straight forward as one might think. Identifying an activity that engages one completely to the extent of becoming oblivious to felt emotions, does not happen so readily. Several factors such as fortune, enterprise and daring, play a vital role in enabling flow to materialize. In Nuri's case all these factors fall into place, at least while he is in Aleppo. Set to take up a dreary job as a fabric merchant, fate intervenes happily in Nuri's life in the form of his cousin Mustafa who introduces him to beekeeping. Nuri soon discovers beekeeping is not just a probable professional option to consider, but an avocation that fills him with flow.

"In the mornings I would wake up early, before the sun, before the muezzin called out for prayer. I would drive the thirty miles to the apiaries and arrive as the sun was just rising, fields full of light, the humming of the bees a single pure note. The bees were an ideal society, a small paradise among chaos" (Lefteri 9-10).

This ideal condition of existence however becomes irrevocably shattered at the outbreak of the civil war. After this, Nuri goes through a phase of disillusionment in which all senses of flow are drained out of him, as he tries desperately to come to terms with his many losses. The lost sense of flow nonetheless gradually returns to him when he realizes the imperative to flee Syria. The realization spurs him into embarking on a perilous quest to reach UK, a conviction he resolves to carry out regardless of his wife's indifference to the idea. "I'm going," I said, 'whether you come or not.' (Lefteri 52). Thus resolved Nurri becomes increasingly obsessed with the expressed goal of reaching England. It imbues him with a feeling of

flow rendering his senses immune to any conscious feeling of dread or obstacle. It must be acknowledged that the sensation of flow that Nuri experiences as a beekeeper and that of a fleeing refugee are markedly distinct. Yet the fact still remains that both these activities underpin his desire to continue with life with passion, albeit in different ways.

Relationship

Flourishing is not feasible in fact utterly inconceivable without relationships. The will to attain well-being simply ceases to exist in a person left with no meaningful ties to sustain. This is true for everyone, but particularly a forlorn refugee like Nuri. Violently stripped of his home, livelihood and any promise of a hopeful future, all that Nuri has is his wife and his cousin Mustafa. However, as long as these ties remain, he not only wants to go on but dares to hope. The fact that Mustafa is still alive and settled in England is specifically critical in this regard. "I know that I have a long journey ahead. Some days I think I cannot take another step, but I have a dream in my mind of meeting you in England" (Lefteri 101). This dream however would not have been so emboldening for Nuri if not for the presence of Afra by his side. It is indeed true that Afra is the one who delays Nuri's plans to flee Syria, and Nuri himself threatens to leave her behind if she is not willing to go along. Yet one cannot but wonder whether Nuri would have carried out his threat if Afra had refused to comply. It is highly unlikely for with Sami dead and Mustafa gone; the only relation Nuri is left with is his wife. Amply Bearing testimony to this point is the transition that their relationship undergoes in the course of the journey. Nuri did love Afra passionately even while in Aleppo, but it was more inspired by her physical attributes.

"She cried like a child, laughed like bells ringing, and her smile was the most beautiful I've ever seen. She could argue for hours without ever pausing. Afra loved, she hated, and she inhaled the world like it was a rose. All this was why I loved her more than life" (Lefteri 20).

Her son's death emotionally devastates Afra and the shock of it blinds her. This coupled with the many hardships she had to undergo with Nuri on their journey to England inevitably takes a toll on her looks. Still Nuri continues to love her, but now his love is more directed towards the person and what she means to him. Their relationship as a whole matures into a higher plane of significance.

"I want to lie down with you," she says, and what she means is, 'I love you. Please hold me.' There is an expression

on her face I recognise from years ago, and it makes my sadness feel like something palpable, like a pulse.” (Lefteri 133).

Christopher Peterson one of its pioneers was asked to describe positive psychology in two words or less. His simple answer was “other people” (FL 10). Nothing could be more succinct, and Nuri's story of desperation and survival affords an ideal case in point.

Meaning

The motivation to involve oneself in a common cause that is not self-serving, is inherently felt only by a handful of humanity. The fact is that even when provided with secure and comfortable circumstances, humanity feels aroused into purposeful action only if the enterprise caters to personal interest. So, people who genuinely participate in a cause or action serving a purpose beyond subjective gratification, do not merely represent a rare but a noble breed. The rarest and noblest among these are those who rise above their self-interest in spite of their own life situation being dire. This is precisely the factor that makes Nuri's character ineffably noble and invests his life with a much-needed aspect of meaning. Nuri's actions while staying as a refugee in a park in Athens bear ample testimony to this point. Himself a fleeing exile burdened with the physical and emotional baggage of a blinded wife, the last thing that Nuri needs is more responsibility to bear. Yet this is what he takes up during his stay in the park, when he realizes Nadim is a human trafficker and decides to follow him secretly to learn about the whereabouts of the teenage twins.

“At ten o'clock on the dot Nadim got up and went into the woods. Three minutes later the boys followed. I got up and followed them too, trying to keep enough distance between us so that they would not see me, while at the same time staying close enough so that I would not lose them” (Lefteri 257).

The attempt proves to be very nearly fatal for Nuri.

“I felt intense pain across my wrist. He'd slashed me with his knife. I held my arm up like a wounded bird, the blood coming out fast, dripping onto my trousers. I rushed away from him, stumbling over to Afra, pleading with her to wake up” (Lefteri 259).

He manages to survive, and does not try to repeat his actions. However, it is not so much fear for his own life that restrains Nuri, but the fact that his wife needs him.

“The twins had not returned since last night and I wanted to go and find them. I contemplated going back to the empty well to see if they were there or to ask if anyone had seen them, but fear was stopping me from venturing into the woods again. I needed to stay alive for Afra” (Lefteri 10).

Though Nuri is unable to track down the twins, the fact that he took the effort to save them is significant. It clearly conveys that in spite of all the pains and predicaments he himself has to shoulder; Nuri still cares about others and is prepared to do his utmost to help them.

Accomplishment

The liberty to perform an activity with no apparent reason or purpose in view save the pleasure of doing it, is probably the greatest luxury that life offers any of us. However, it is certainly not a luxury afforded to all, definitely not if you happen to be a refugee fleeing for your life like Nuri. From the time he begins his journey indeed from the very outbreak of the civil war, everything that Noorie does is done out of the compulsion to keep himself and his wife alive. The situation does improve upon reaching England but the bottom line remains precarious as ever. As a result, he is required to be extremely careful about what he does so that his chances of winning asylum are not jeopardized. In the midst of all the uncertainties however, he is offered eventually one opportunity to do something out of his own freewill, without any strings attached or purpose to fulfil.

“On the ground by my feet there is a bee. When I look closely, I see that she has no wings. I put my hand out and she crawls onto my finger, making her way onto my palm – a bumblebee... She is crawling over the back of my wrist now so I take her inside with me and sit in the armchair and watch her as she nestles into my hand, preparing to sleep” (Lefteri 28-29).

Nuri knows full well that tending to the bee is of no practical utility to him in his current circumstance. yet he does it.

“She's a fighter,’ I say, ‘and it was raining last night. She won't survive out there though, not for long, if she can't fly.’ I take the bee back outside, put her on a flower and I go to bed with Afra” (Lefteri 59).

So ultimately taking care of the injured be is something that Nuri does for its own sake. Nevertheless, it proves to be critical for it takes his mind off his predicament at least for a short while and enables him to do something that he has control over. In this regard it briefly restores to him a sense of self which he has been robbed off ever since the civil war and provides him with a feeling of accomplishment. The fact that Nuri has managed to flee Syria and reach England successfully is no doubt a great achievement. However, this achievement does not provide him any well-being for his situation still remains unresolved even in England. What does actually provide him a sense of well-being is the tending of the injured bee, which not only makes it possible for him to relive his happy beekeeping days from the past but also replenishes him with a hope for the future.

CONCLUSION

The inclination that invariably comes over one and all in the face of adversity is to simply surrender and be done with it. For someone like Nuri who has suffered profound losses and setbacks, such an inclination would indeed feel immensely overwhelming. Nuri nevertheless does not even betray any impression of wanting to give up in the narrative, let alone actually doing so. His perseverance thus is so extraordinary that many might be tempted to construe it as superhuman to the point of being impracticable. The fact however is that it is by no means idealized, and this precisely is the point that scrutinizing his character development through the lens of Seligman's theory makes clear. Unlike conventional approaches in psychology that prioritise "relieving the states that make life miserable" (AH i), Seligman's insists on "building the states that make life worth living" (AH i). The PERMA model operationalises this alternative conviction by propelling individuals toward prosperity in life, then simply arresting trauma from escalating. This orientation advanced by the PERMA model is what that Nuri exemplifies in the novel. Engulfed with so much misery, Nuri is not just looking for a way to reconcile himself to his calamitous situation in the hope of obtaining consolation. Of course, given his circumstances, no one could blame him for doing so, but opting not to do so is what that makes the decisive difference in his instance. The point is Nuri does not think in terms of traditional psychology and seek mere relief, instead he does so in terms of positive psychology and strives for renewal. Nuri himself is of course not conscious of the psychological and theoretical implications underlying his choice, but his lived experience vividly bears out the transformative potential of the PERMA model. If somebody like Nuri in

the depths of despair could practice the principles of practical psychology without deliberate awareness, then those fully cognizant of its utility could practice it more readily and effectively in the face of adversity. Hemingway's exhorting words quoted at the start of this paper, are after all not so exacting to uphold as it might seem.

ABBREVIATIONS

AH - Authentic Happiness

FL – Flourish

REFERENCES

- [1] Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man And The Sea*. B.K. Publications Private Limited: India, 2023.
- [2] Lefteri, Christy. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. Manilla Press: Great Britain, 2019.
- [3] Seligman, Martin. *Authentic Happiness*. Free Press: New York, 2002
- [4] Seligman, Martin. *Flourish*. Random House: Australia, 2011.



Game-Based Instructional Design for Beginner Chinese: Constructing a Classroom Game Activity Database

Trieu Khiết Loi

Currently a Master's degree candidate in Chinese Language Pedagogy, specializing in Theory and Methodology of Teaching Chinese, at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam

Received: 31 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Oct 2025; Accepted: 06 Oct 2025; Available online: 09 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— With the rapid development of international Chinese education, enhancing learner engagement and motivation in beginner-level Chinese classes has become a major focus. Based on Embodied Cognition Theory and the concept of game-based learning, this study proposes a systematic framework for constructing a “Classroom Game Activity Database” for beginner Chinese teaching. It designs 24 games covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, integrating pre-class warm-up, new content presentation, review, and consolidation stages. Through modular database design and scientific game classification, this research not only improves resource accessibility for teachers but also provides practical, engaging, and goal-oriented classroom activities. The paper highlights principles of database construction, scientific approaches to game design, and application of an incentive mechanism, while introducing an “Experience-Reflection-Transfer” model for classroom integration. Findings suggest that the designed game activities effectively enhance learner motivation, improve communicative competence, and promote classroom interaction, offering innovative models and practical references for Chinese language teaching.



Keywords— Beginner Chinese Teaching, Classroom Games, Embodied Cognition, Game-based Learning, Instructional Design.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Significance

With the continuous advancement of international Chinese education, the number of beginning learners of Chinese has been steadily increasing year by year. However, at the beginner stage, learners commonly face challenges such as limited vocabulary, difficulty in understanding grammar, and lack of fluency in oral expression, which often lead to decreased motivation and insufficient classroom participation. Although traditional lecture-based teaching is efficient in terms of knowledge delivery, it has clear limitations in stimulating learners' enthusiasm and promoting communicative competence. In recent years, gamification in education has gradually become an important trend in language teaching. Its core idea is to make learning activities both challenging and engaging

through task-driven designs and fun mechanisms, thereby enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation.

The Embodied Cognition Theory argues that cognition does not rely solely on brain computation but is closely related to bodily activity and situational experience. This theory offers a new perspective for language teaching: learning is not only a matter of symbol manipulation but also an interactive process involving bodily participation. Therefore, integrating the concept of embodied cognition into gamified classroom design can help activate learners' sensory experiences and enhance the authenticity of language processing and use.

Against this background, this study focuses on beginner-level Chinese teaching, exploring how to construct a systematic database of classroom game activities and design engaging games aligned with teaching objectives to improve both teaching effectiveness

and the learning experience. This research not only fills the gap in systematic design for gamified teaching in beginner Chinese classrooms but also provides replicable and scalable solutions for international Chinese language teaching practice.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study is guided by three interrelated research questions. First, it asks how a scientific, systematic, and searchable database of classroom game activities can be constructed to meet the practical needs of beginner-level Chinese teaching. Second, it explores how game activities can be designed with both entertainment value and pedagogical significance, taking into account the dual dimensions of teaching stages and language skills. Third, it investigates how such game activities can be effectively applied in beginner Chinese classrooms and how a sustainable mechanism for continuous refinement and optimization can be established.

In response to these questions, the study sets out three main objectives. The first objective is to build a database framework that clearly defines classification dimensions—including teaching stages, language skills, and game types—and specifies database fields and retrieval logic. The second objective is to design and develop a set of 24 classroom games that comprehensively cover the four core language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with explicit teaching objectives, step-by-step procedures, and motivational mechanisms. The third objective is to propose a practical model for classroom application that integrates the principles of embodied cognition theory with gamification in learning, ultimately forming a pedagogical process characterized by “experience–reflection–transfer.”

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF A DATABASE FOR CLASSROOM GAME ACTIVITIES

2.1 Research Approach and Overall Framework

The core objective of this study is to construct a classroom game activity database tailored for beginner-level Chinese teaching, thereby enabling the systematic management and intelligent application of teaching resources to enhance classroom interaction and instructional efficiency. The research design follows a logical pathway consisting of the following components:

(1) Theoretical Foundation: Anchored in Embodied Cognition Theory, the study emphasizes an integrated learning model of “experience–action–cognition,” while also incorporating the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach and the PPP model (Presentation–

Practice–Production) to ensure that game activities are deeply integrated with the teaching process.

(2) Needs Analysis: Drawing on questionnaire surveys of both teachers and learners, the study identifies the key pain points in the use of classroom games, namely the lack of systematic resources, difficulties in aligning games with instructional objectives, and the extended time required for lesson preparation.

(3) Database Construction: The database is designed with multidimensional classifications, including a skills dimension (listening, speaking, reading, writing), an instructional stage dimension (warm-up, presentation of new material, practice, production), and a task type dimension (task-based, competitive, collaborative, creative).

(4) Intelligent Retrieval and Incentive Mechanism: By means of keyword matching and weighted ranking, the database enables rapid filtering of game activities, while the integration of a points and badge system serves to enhance learner motivation. The overall framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

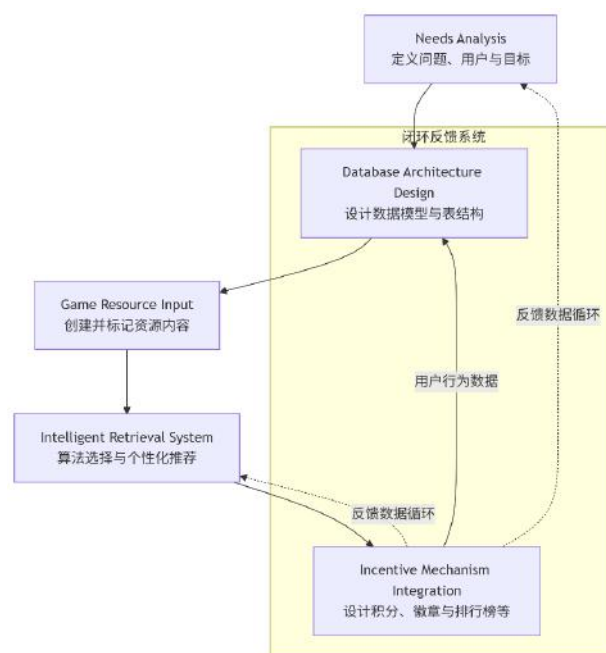


Fig.1: Framework for Game Activity Database and Incentive System

Needs Analysis → Database Architecture Design → Game Resource Input → Intelligent Retrieval System → Incentive Mechanism Integration.

2.2 Database Architecture and Field Design

To ensure resource-oriented, structured, and scalable development, this study adopts a modular database design. The database is composed of three core modules:

Resource Module: Stores essential information about classroom games (e.g., name, targeted skills, teaching stage, gameplay, required materials, etc.).

Retrieval Module: Supports multidimensional filtering based on skills, teaching stages, types, and other criteria.

Incentive Module: Records students’ classroom participation data, such as points, badges, and achievements, thereby creating individual learning profiles.

In addition to the modular architecture, the system is further specified at the level of database fields. The field design ensures that essential information can be effectively stored and retrieved. Table 1 illustrates some of the core fields, along with their data types and example values:

Table 1: Game Activity Database Field Design

Field Name	Data Type	Example Value
Game ID	String	WU-L-TSK-001
Game Name	String	Listening and Drawing Game
Skill Category	String	Listening
Teaching Stage	Array	["Warm-up", "Presentation"]
Game Type	String	Task-based
Core Objective	String	Improve detailed listening comprehension
Materials	Array	["Paper", "Pen"]
Estimated Time	String	6–8 minutes
Procedure	Text	Teacher describes picture → students draw → presentation
Scoring Rules	Text	Scored by speed + accuracy
Related Badges	Array	["Detail Listening Master"]

2.3 Classification and Organization Strategy

To enhance the usability of the database, this study adopts a classification strategy that combines two primary dimensions with an additional task-type dimension. Specifically, the database organizes game activities along the dimensions of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and instructional stages (warm-up, presentation, practice, and production), while also categorizing them by task type (task-based, competitive,

collaborative, and creative). This multi-layered classification not only addresses teachers’ diverse needs in instructional design but also enables the intelligent retrieval system to perform multi-condition combined filtering, thereby improving both efficiency and precision in game selection.

In terms of coverage, the database is designed to comprehensively represent the four core language skills, with six representative games assigned to each skill area, producing a total of 24 prototypical games. The details are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Game Coverage by Language Skill

Skill Category	Representative Games
Listening	Listening and Drawing; True-or-False Judgment; Vocabulary Bingo; Number-Word Guessing; Move on Command; Listening Puzzle
Speaking	Relay Whisper; Role Interview; Describe and Guess; Vocabulary Chain Circle; Taboo Description; Mini Scenario Theater
Reading	Match the Title; Detail Tracking; Text-Picture Connection; Reverse Reading; Keyword Search; Cloze Test
Writing	Collaborative Writing; Picture-Based Paragraph Writing; Class Newsletter; Revision and Optimization; Creative Letter Writing; Dialogue Rephrasing

2.4 Integration of Incentive Mechanisms

To further enhance learner engagement, this study embeds a points–badges–leaderboard incentive mechanism into the database. The design highlights are as follows:

(1) Points Acquisition: Learners can earn points through completing game tasks, demonstrating active participation, and engaging in effective collaboration.

(2) Badge Rewards: Specific achievements are recognized with badges, such as “Pronunciation Master” (awarded after obtaining full marks in five pronunciation exercises), “Chinese Character Hero” (awarded after successfully identifying 100 character components), and “Cultural Ambassador” (awarded after completing three cultural comparison activities).

(3) Privilege Unlocking: The acquisition of certain badges unlocks exclusive resources, such as advanced pronunciation games or customized practice templates.

Table 3: Badge Criteria and Privileges

Badge Name	Criteria for Awarding	Privileges Unlocked
Pronunciation Master	Achieve full marks in pronunciation practice five times	Access to advanced phonetic games
Chinese Character Hero	Identify 100 character components successfully	Customized character practice templates
Cultural Ambassador	Complete three cultural comparison activities	Exclusive cultural activity resources

The incentive module not only enhances the overall enjoyment of classroom activities but also encourages learners to sustain participation and maintain long-term commitment.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has constructed a systematic model of a classroom game activity database, specifying its data structure, classification strategy, retrieval mechanism, and incentive module. The database not only addresses the traditional challenges of scattered and difficult-to-manage classroom game resources but also improves the convenience and engagement of teaching applications through intelligent recommendation and motivational mechanisms. In doing so, it provides both the technical and theoretical foundation for the game design presented in Chapter Four.

III. DESIGN AND CATEGORIZATION SYSTEM FOR CLASSROOM GAME ACTIVITIES

3.1 Design Concepts and Principles

The design of classroom games is not merely a tool for entertainment but an essential component of teaching strategies. This study adheres to the following principles in game design:

Principle of Relevance: Each game must be closely aligned with the instructional objectives and serve the development of language skills.

Principle of Systematic Coverage: The games should encompass the four core skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and correspond to different stages of instruction (warm-up, presentation of new content, practice, and production).

Principle of Operability: Materials should be simple, steps clearly defined, and time manageable, allowing teachers to apply the games directly in class.

Principle of Interactivity and Motivation: Group collaboration, point rewards, and competition mechanisms should be integrated to stimulate students’ engagement and enthusiasm.

Principle of Cognitive Support: Game design should incorporate Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive objectives, addressing not only the mastery of linguistic knowledge but also its application and creative use.

3.2 Game Classification Framework

To ensure systematic management, classroom games in this study are categorized into four major types, each containing six representative games, resulting in a total of 24 activities. The classification framework is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Game Classification Framework

Skill Category	Number of Games	Instructional Stages	Typical Task Types
Listening	6	Warm-up / Presentation / Practice	Task-based / Competitive / Collaborative
Speaking	6	Warm-up / Presentation / Production	Creative / Task-based / Collaborative
Reading	6	Presentation / Practice	Strategic / Task-based / Competitive
Writing	6	Practice / Production	Creative / Task-based / Project-based

To ensure both diversity of classroom activities and the systematic achievement of learning objectives, the following sections provide detailed descriptions of six representative games for each skill type, including instructional objectives, required materials, teaching procedures, and scoring rules.

3.3 Listening Skill Game Design

This category of games is designed to develop students’ auditory discrimination, information-capturing, and collaborative comprehension skills, while also incorporating physical actions to embody the concept of embodied cognition.

3.3.1 Game 1: Drawing by Listening

Instructional Stage: Warm-up / Presentation

Type: Task-based

Core Objective: To train students' listening comprehension of spatial relations, numbers, and object features.

Materials: Blank paper, colored pens

Procedure:

The teacher describes a scene (e.g., "There is a big tree beside a house, and in front of the house, a red car is parked.").

Students listen and draw the corresponding scene on paper.

Students present their drawings, followed by teacher feedback and detail checking.

Scoring Rules:

Completeness of details: 1 point for each correct element

Accuracy of spatial relations: 2 points

Bonus point for coloring

3.3.2 Game 2: True or False?

Instructional Stage: Review

Type: Competitive

Core Objective: To improve comprehension of both main ideas and details.

Materials: Short story text, True/False cards

Procedure:

The teacher reads a short story aloud.

A set of judgment sentences is presented; students raise cards (True/False).

Points are awarded, and the correct answers are announced.

Design Highlights:

A time limit can be added to increase excitement.

Group competition can be introduced to foster teamwork.

3.3.3 Game 3: Vocabulary Bingo

Instructional Stage: Warm-up / Review

Type: Competitive

Core Objective: To review vocabulary and reinforce word recognition through listening.

Materials: Bingo cards (9–16 words), markers/tokens

Procedure:

Each student receives a Bingo card with vocabulary items.

The teacher randomly calls out words; students mark the corresponding items on their cards.

The first to complete a line shouts "Bingo!" and wins.

Variants:

Increase difficulty: Teacher reads word meanings, and students find the corresponding terms.

Integrate character recognition: Teacher reads pinyin or meanings, and students circle the correct Chinese characters.

3.3.4 Game 4: Guess the Word by Number

Instructional Stage: Presentation / Review

Type: Creative

Core Objective: To cultivate reasoning ability and keyword-based listening strategies.

Procedure:

The teacher provides hints such as the number of letters or strokes and the semantic category (e.g., "This is a six-letter profession word related to healthcare.").

Students discuss in groups and propose possible answers.

IV. CONCLUSION

Grounded in Embodied Cognition Theory and oriented toward the instructional needs of beginner-level Chinese classrooms, this study proposes an optimization scheme for teaching through classroom game activities. It further develops a database architecture, establishes a game classification system, and designs representative game activities. The research process not only emphasizes comprehensive coverage of language skills but also stresses the rational integration of instructional stages with engaging and interactive elements.

The core conclusions are as follows:

Systematic Game Database: A structured database was proposed that integrates the four core skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while aligning them with instructional stages and activity types, thereby improving the precision of resource retrieval.

Design of 24 Core Classroom Games: Each game is specified with clear instructional objectives, required materials, and operational procedures, ensuring that teachers can readily implement them in practice.

Introduction of Incentive Mechanisms: By incorporating points, badges, and leaderboards, the system fosters autonomous learner participation, strengthens classroom interaction, and enhances motivation.

Application of the Experience–Reflection–Transfer Model: Games are elevated beyond their entertainment function to become an effective pathway for facilitating deep learning.

The practical significance of the study lies in several aspects. For teachers, it offers standardized and

modular gamified teaching solutions that reduce preparation workload while increasing classroom interactivity and enjoyment. For students, games serve as effective learning tools that enhance contextualized language use and sustain learning engagement. For the field of international Chinese education, this research provides both theoretical foundations and practical models for pedagogical innovation.

Looking ahead, the study may be further advanced in three directions:

Technological Implementation: Developing an application platform for the database to enable intelligent retrieval and personalized recommendation.

Instructional Validation: Conducting large-scale empirical studies to evaluate and optimize the effectiveness of the designed games.

Cross-Cultural Adaptability: Exploring differentiated strategies for game design across diverse cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my sincere gratitude to the editorial team and the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback and suggestions, which have greatly contributed to the development of this article. Additionally, I am deeply thankful to my friends and family for their continuous encouragement and support throughout this journey.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] Victor Sye Bao, Si Huan Bao, & John Tian. (2010). *中文游戏大本营——课堂游戏100例* (上册). 北京大学出版社.
- [2] Victor Sye Bao, Si Huan Bao, & John Tian. (2010). *中文游戏大本营——课堂游戏100例* (下册). 北京大学出版社.
- [3] 刘革平, 陈笑浪 & 黄雪. Liu, G. P., Chen, X. L., & Huang, X. (2023). *审美动机：教育游戏的张力与困局——破茧而出的自主学习新纪元*. 华东师范大学学报, (6).
- [4] 黄贵 & 苏永军. Huang, G., & Su, Y. J. (2012). *张宗麟幼儿游戏观研究*. 体育学刊, 19(4).
- [5] 秦晋芳 & 李雪. Qin, J. F., & Li, X. P. (2016). *幼儿游戏教学的热点和发展趋势研究——基于 CNKI 数据库的文献计量及可视化分析*. 西昌学院学报(自然科学版), (3).
- [6] 霍华德·加德纳. Gardner, H. (2013). *智能的结构*. 浙江人民出版社.
- [7] 亚伯拉罕·西尔伯沙茨 Silberschatz, A., Korth, H. F., & Sudarshan, S. (2016). *数据库系统概念* (第6版). 机械工业出版社.
- [8] 杨渺. Yang, M. (2020). *探析游戏教学法在对外汉语教学中的应用*. ENGLISH ON CAMPUS·职业教育研究, (36), 528.
- [9] 史婷婷. T. (2021). *游戏教学法在对外汉语教学中的应用*. 山西青年, (4).
- [10] 李琰. Li, Y. (2018). *游戏教学法在对外汉语教学中的应用*. 文化创新比较研究, (11).



The Impact of Societal Expectations among Characters in the Novels of Somerset Maugham: Feminine Attributes

Ms. Sujata Sinha

Ph.D Scholar (English), Sanskriti University, Mathura, UP, India

Received: 06 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 04 Oct 2025; Accepted: 07 Oct 2025; Available online: 10 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This research paper intends to examine the complexity of female characters in five selected novels of William Somerset Maugham and their evolution against their historical, social, and psychological contexts. The prominent themes of personal freedom vs struggle behind perfection, survival vs stability from inner strength, feminine consciousness of working women, self-prioritization vs others' wellbeing, and superficiality to reality, have been uncovered by comparing the motives and characters of the female characters of "Cakesand Ale," "The Painted Veil," "Of Human Bondage," "Liza of Lambeth," and "The Razor's Edge." The results highlight how the evolution of female characters are correlated with Maslow's need hierarchy and how the complex interaction among characters shed light on the expression of female emotional needs in defiance against the accepted Victorian moral codes. The paper notes through textual analysis that the social pressures prompted evolution of these female characters between different stages of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Despite being stereotyped, these female characters exhibit an unfathomable resilience and an incomparable survival instinct inviting a re-definition of femininity.



Keywords— Maugham, Feminine Attributes, Cakes and Ale, The Painted Veil, Of Human Bondage, Liza of Lambeth, The Razor's Edge.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novels of William Somerset Maugham set in the late 19th and early 20th century, consistently explore themes of materialism, love, extramarital affairs, spiritual quests, and romance. His unparalleled talent for weaving peculiar and distinct characters from real-life people adds realism to his novels. Being a firm believer in freedom against social convention, his characters are portrayed in various phases of either fighting, surviving, or breaking free from social and personal pressures (Maugham, *Cakes and Ale*; Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth*; Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*; Maugham, *The Painted Veil*; Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*). Researchers have expounded on his literary proficiency and exemplary narration, which, amidst historical changes, makes it both profound and lucid (Chelliah, 5). His characters are found negotiating with individual aspirations versus social constraints, often showcasing rebellion, resilience, and self-discovery often

enough succumbing to temptations and spiraling into grey shades of alcoholism, challenging marital norms and at times culminating in death (*Liza of Lambeth*). Maugham's characters, especially women, often challenge traditional gender roles, and he presents them with a mix of independence, intelligence, and emotional depth. Anna Gazdzinska in her essay "A Woman Imprisoned Analysis of Formal Inferiority of Women in Selected Novels of W. S. Maugham" (2002) notes, 'women'..., "feature prominently in Maugham's works and can often be described as centers around which the action of the book is woven". The present paper examines the "feminine attributes" and complexities of prominent female characters taken from five selected novels of Maugham, including "Cakesand Ale," "The Painted Veil," "Of Human Bondage," "Liza of Lambeth," and "The Razor's Edge."

The "Feminine" in feminine attribute is a social construct that varies across cultures and time. So,

"feminine attribute" is something which is constantly scrutinized and is evolving and being redefined. It basically refers to the evolving roles of women in various social spheres. This evolution is evident in their behaviour, goals, and choices that females traditionally or culturally engage in, which vary due to the influence of historical periods, social classes, traditions, significant historical events, and individual perspectives. In the historical context, females have traditionally been limited to domesticity, marriage, family, and child rearing, which include etiquette, needlework, conversational charm, painting, and skills that enhance social circles (Dewitt et al, 3). Apart from this, they were expected to support their husbands or be involved in philanthropy. In contemporary contexts, feminine started evolving to encompass career achievement, personal development, advocating for radical social change, health and fitness, travel and exploration, and fostering diverse, meaningful relationships and community building (Trifan,76).

Gradually, the spotlight fell on the psychological and personal dimensions of female personality. A special focus was placed on emotional outpourings - leading to fostering and nurturing empathy, intuition, self-discovery, empowerment, and authenticity - as it became prominent that femininity thrived and the feminine attributes found fulfillment in these spaces (Crasta and Dmello, 316).

In assessing Maugham's characters, this paper aims to understand the motivations, ambitions, and journeys of female characters. Thus, the five novels are discussed individually and collectively within a specific theme, and their connection and evolution are explored in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to establish a connection between the feminine attributes. Also, the female characters of each story are compared to gain more insight.

Objectives

The female character arcs are devoid of internal dialogue that showcases their motivations due to the masculine narrative in the existing body of literature. This prompts the study of understanding and unravelling of feminine pursuits and layered traits in female characters of Maugham.

II. METHODS

The roles of the female characters are studied in-depth and compared with those of other similar and contrasting characters within the theme of the chosen novels. Further, this comparison has been drawn through the lens of the progressive themes of evolution stated under Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory that proposes human motivation progresses through five levels of needs—physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—where lower-level needs gain prominence over higher-level needs because they pertain to safety and security of self. Maugham's novels are an exploration on portraying female characters in myriad shades, seeking to fulfill their emotional needs; however despite the historical context occasionally his female characters attempt to attain the higher order need of self-actualization as mentioned in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

III. RESULT

Significant evolving themes have been identified, along with the conflicts the female consciousness has faced in the novels, as discussed in this section.

(1) Quest for Personal freedom vs Struggle behind Perfection

As suggested, "*Cakes and Ale*" revolves around celebration, enjoyment, and indulging in the finer things of life, in this novel the narrative revolves around two female characters that are parts typical Victorian/Edwardian social settings cast in their socially endorsed feminine roles. The two ladies however are juxtaposed in contrasting female attributes, *Rosie and Amy Driffield*, who navigate societal expectations in the early 20th century. It is worth noting that these two characters are seen through the lens of the quintessential narrator of Maugham's works in the shape of *Ashenden*. The reader looks at the complexity of both these female characters through the male lens of *Ashenden*.

Rosie is the first wife of *Edward*, whose personal quest for freedom and affection makes her subvert the marital norms of a dutiful, devoted wife of early 20th Century. She is someone "*who gave herself as naturally as the sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume.*" (Maugham, 249) but her pursuit of pleasure in her relationships, could be viewed as promiscuity and not as a woman's right to choose her happiness and relationships. Her "*childlike innocence*" or "*naïveté*" aside, *Rosie* breaks out of her mold as a graceful lady to exhibit avowed male traits when she discusses issues related to trade breaking the stereotypes, and making *Ashenden* rather uncomfortable as he is not accustomed to females discussing topics like trade. In a society where, "*if you play your cards right you ought to marry well*" (Maugham, 85)., we get glimpses of the inner working of a woman's mind that comes from the humble beginnings of a war-beaten father but in a sharp contrast from her alleged "*lovey, sweet*" presence displays her sheer grit and presence of mind, much like a business-woman. She left

her barmaid life behind her to seek a better future through marriage depicting her foresight, sound mind, and intelligence. Even when she plays the cards with the gentry at her home, she is shown to be "quick", "alert", and "vulnerable" in her conversations. *Mary Anne*, who did not like *Rosie*, soon gets charmed by her when she visits her impromptu. *Rosie* could connect with people around her; for those who belonged to different strata of society, this is an astounding trait for a woman in a class governed society. *Rosie's* positive presence is acknowledged by *Ashenden*, who finds her, "friendly without being patronizing and familiar without being impertinent"(Maugham, 5), here it can be observed that her life's choices and a search for deeper meaning in life elevate her needs beyond just first and second stages of physiological and safety needs to third stage of love and belonging.

In contrast to the colourful character of *Rosie* is *Amy Driffeld*, the second wife of *Edward*. She is known for her devotion, dedication, alertness, and precise care of her husband, who was his nurse first and became his wife only later. She is lauded for all her qualities, which is also evident in *Rosie* at distinct times but is not perceived by others as such. Upon delving deeper, it is evident that *Amy's* life revolves around her distinguished husband and maintaining him, often shielding his eccentricities from the world. *Rosie*, who married *Edward* in his 60s, depicts his adventurous spirit before fame while *Amy* nurses him as an octogenarian public figure. From the conversation between *Ashenden* and *Alroy*, we get an inkling of how *Amy* is simply a socially acceptable mask to an eccentric and liberated *Edward*, indicating the fractured morality of society where soiled pasts are concealed with veneers of propriety and social standing.

Hidden beneath the bitter scrutiny of her morality, *Rosie* seems to be grieving the loss of her 6-year-old daughter to brutal meningitis. She compares her infidelity with that of a husband who cannot bear his wife's labour and sleeps with other women, seldom in love with them. There is a layered sheer grit in her character, likely inherited from her veteran father, who taught her that she could earn her living, while coping up with her loss. This refutes her indulgence in luxury or men, as suspected by *Ashenden*. Rather, it is obvious from her confession that her only pursuit was of relief, plain relief from her grief, "I wanted to laugh", "I wanted to get away from all Ted was feeling", "the child's cot was still there and I couldn't look at it" she says(Maugham, 263). Her childlike openness and smile amidst jealousy, derisive comments, and scrutiny carry her inherent need to be free, to rest in mirth, unlike the ill fate of her screaming daughter. While *Edward* poured his agony into a novel, *Rosie* was not awarded with

such grace. Her pursuits have been simpler and more apparent in her choice of relocation and marriage to *George Kemp*, whom she had liked since her youth. Maugham's characters often operate in morally ambiguous spaces, where the lines between right and wrong are blurred. "*Rosie Driffeld*, the most striking character of the book, is interesting principally because of her surprising ability to be sexually promiscuous and at the same time remains a perfectly self-possessed, integrated character. The world expects one set of actions from her and gets another"(Ross p-118)

(2) The vile gut of Survival vs the Stability from Inner strength

Similarly, one of the pivotal characters in "*Of Human Bondage*", *Mildred Rogers*, is constantly in and out of *Philip Carey's* life, structuring and defining her pursuit. *Mildred Rogers* serves as a training ground and cautionary tale in his journey. She is known for her indifference, materialism, vanity, and callous nature, especially towards *Philip*. Even though *Philip* tries to cheer her up, her destitution keeps her embroiled in self-pity and cynicism. Her outbursts are often filled with contempt when she breaks off with *Philip* and says, "it used to make me sick when I had to let you kiss me"(Maugham, 600) This is extended to her baby as well, where she takes one look and remarks, "Funny looking little thing, isn't it? I can't believe it is mine".(Maugham, 438) It not only indicates her rapid detachment but also her insipidity and selfishness, which are completely lacking in maternal attachment. Much of her conversation revolves around her financial needs and expectations due to her precarious financial situation. Her search is for financial security making her prioritize herself over the human emotions of affection and love shown by *Philip* towards her. When he shares his concern about baby's upbringing, she is quick to negate it by saying, "Don't, be silly. That's when you give woman a sum down to look after a baby".(Maugham, 440). She goes on to elaborate and justify the financial needs more than a child's emotional wellbeing. There is a departure from the normal depiction of women of that era, since emotions and compassion are not her virtues; her personality appears harsh, callous, manipulative and mostly lacking remorse (Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*). Emotions become her weapons which she uses to manipulate *Philip* repeatedly. Her apathy towards her maternal role and her relationship with *Philip* make her an incredibly complex character. Financial security concerns are central in the lives of both *Rosie* and *Mildred* yet they choose alternate paths to resolve their needs, we find *Rosie* from "*Cakes and Ale*", making efforts to earn money, but *Mildred* remains a victim of her financial circumstances. Both characters do

not shy away from promiscuity, shunning the existing moral codes of the Victorian Age, choosing alternate paths to navigate their reality. *Mildred* slips back to her old ways falling into oblivion after removing herself from *Philip's* life, as it remains her only means of security. This depicts how she is stuck in safety needs of Maslow's Hierarchy Needs.

Norah Nesbit poses as a foil to *Mildred Rogers*, bringing wry humour, intelligence, and a supportive presence that not only encourages *Philip* to study but also instils self-awareness over his self-destructive tendencies. She is a divorcee and financially faring well from being a writer, which allows her intellectual exploration and stability. Her affection towards *Philip* is described to be infused with maternal instinct, much like “petting” and loving a pet. Probably, she took pity on *Philip* because of his clubbed foot, but she brings it up for discussion, empathically trying to dilute its impression on people (Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*). In contrast to *Mildred's* pragmatism, *Norah* is realistic, mature, and grounded, primarily attributed to her divorce experience. From *Mildred's* indifference to *Norah's* supporting role, the feminine attributes shift from materialistic security to social needs – under Maslow's Hierarchy Needs. Here, social needs refer to intimacy, friendship, and love, even if it is unrequited on *Philip's* part. She is intellectual even in romantic pursuits, as depicted in the interaction where *Philip* wants to revert her support. She is deeply perceptive of emotional struggles and is not aggressively intervening. Rather, she uses insightful remarks, probably from her own profound experiences. Maugham uses *Norah* as a foil to *Mildred* to develop *Philip's* character arc, and despite her healthier character, her romantic pursuit with *Philip* remains unfulfilled. Post rejection from *Philip*, she is not found pining for him or reeling in dejection, rather her intellectual sensibilities help her move on to a better and reciprocal match in *Mr. Kingsford*. This reflects a shift upwards in the Maslow's need hierarchy from the character of *Mildred* to *Norah*.

Another significant character who eventually marries *Philip* is *Sally Athelney*, a young girl who is often calm and domestic, and regards everything with quiet efficiency. *Sally's* discretion with boys is reiterated in the novel. *Sally* lacks theatrics and overt romanticism when she agrees to marry *Philip*. Her attitude towards life is practical, which could have been honed by the thriftlessness of her father and the tiresome domestic life of her mother. She grows into a headstrong, young, feminine woman with a great sense of humour. It seems that she has always favoured *Philip* as she does not address him as “Uncle Philip”, unlike her younger siblings. Mature beyond her years, she quietly takes in the

opinions of others without compromising her sense, and at times, she finds amusement in observing others. She possesses an inner strength and intelligence that was not fully acknowledged by *Philip*.

(3) The Split in the Feminine Consciousness of Working Women

In ‘*Liza of Lambeth*’ Maugham portrays *Liza*, *Sally*, and *Mrs. Kemp* as individuals battling survival, marriage, and consumption in the face of limited opportunities within a working-class environment (Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth*). Set in the harsh realities of 19th-century slums of London, *Liza* grapples with her low economic status of a typical slum dweller, for sustenance, she works in a factory which helps her to take care of her old and alcoholic mother. *Liza* is portrayed as direct, defiant, and high-spirited. Among his female characters, “*Liza* was considered a shockingly out-spoken heroine” (Colegate p. 17), she is very expressive during her dances, here she vocalizes her pure sensations of enjoyment in “*This is a jam!*”, and then “*swaggers*.” (Maugham, 6) Other times, her confidence converts to triumph in “*Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road!*” and her jaunty retort addressing *Bill*, “*Ave yer bought the street, Bill?*” (Maugham, 5). *Liza's* assertiveness is rather unusual; highlighting her individuality she is most unlike Maugham's other heroines who normally belong to middle classes. When *Liza* is teased about her dress, she fiercely defends it making her point clear by saying, “*Garn! I'll swipe yer over the snitch if yer talk ter me...*” (Maugham, 7). She is quick-witted and proud of her earning capacity, much like *Rosie*, here her confidence and enthusiasm are overt. The independence of *Liza*, her capability to manage her finances adds deeper layers to her personality when she seeks the forbidden path of falling in love with a married man not to be mistaken for a beguiled beauty, she is capable of being assertive enough to follow her heart and her needs extend from the simple safety and security to love and belonging.

It is difficult to infer whether Maugham is more sympathetic to *Liza* or *Rosie*. However, Maugham introduced *Sally*, *Liza's* friend, who is embroiled in an abusive marriage, as a realistic depiction of women of that era. Her persona and needs are not self-driven but rather an utterance of societal expectations, within which *Sally* is actively battling. Trying to preserve the picture-perfect image of a “good wife” drives her to endure the regular abuse at the hands of her husband. She is too ashamed to disclose that she is abused by her husband providing an insight into the life of women in the slums of London and the family pressure which women were subjected to. This gives rise to a subtle pursuit of endurance and evolves into

camaraderie, as she later confides in *Liza*. The need for solidarity in working-class women hints at Maslow's social needs. This character can be compared with *Amy Driffield*, who was keen on projecting herself as a "good wife". The conflict in *Sally's* character is rather apparent and profound than the linear character arc of *Amy*. *Sally's* pursuit for companionship, starting from an initial blissful marriage to a close confidant in *Liza*, entails her social needs for bonding. It not only highlights the invisible influence of societal perspectives regarding the choices of women in the face of adversity but also pitches itself as a parallel pursuit for a search for identity and agency.

Essentially, since women began contributing economically, their plates have dwindled, and the pressure seems to remain mounting. Feminine consciousness has suffered a classic split between pursuing a career and running a household (Porter, 283). The "perfect homemaker" versus the "perfect career woman" pushes working-class women into identity crises, stripping them of any sense of adequacy in either sphere. The lines blur in the pursuit of "having it all" and gender competency traps that push guilt, shame, and frustration into the mix. Maugham, by introducing *Sally*, opens the spilt wider and allows space for companionship and solidarity amongst women. *Liza's* mother, who is a drunkard, is a typical representation of an elderly working class woman who succumbs to alcoholism without remorse.

(4) The Conflict of Self-prioritization vs Others-wellbeing

Maugham's *Isabel* in "*The Razor's Edge*" is an affluent American socialite whose desires centre around her financially comfortable upbringing. She values wealth, social standing, and an abundance of material comforts. Her materialism is practical to her due to her lifestyle and is depicted in the following lines. "You're impractical. You don't know what you're asking me to do. I'm young, I want to have fun. I want to do all things that people do..." (Maugham, 76). Her upper class status is highlighted when she asserts that "one can't live on three thousand a year" (Maugham, 75). Her need for materialistic wealth and status overshadows her capacity to experience genuine love from *Larry*, who is more inclined towards his spiritual quest. Though she breaks off with *Larry*, *Isabel's* feelings for him remain. Her needs are neither intellectual nor spiritual; instead she has a self-assured identity. She is satisfied with the privileges of her life; hence, her pursuit is not of wealth but a subtle comfort in her life that affords her "power, influence and social consequence." These comforts are provided by her father's wealth, creating a certain show of class as shown in "It would mortify me that you shouldn't be perfectly dressed." (Maugham, 61).

According to her, it is natural to earn a living to fulfil materialistic desires, which is why she tried convincing *Larry* to take the job offer from *Maturin*. She is emotionally expressive and yearns to know what ails *Larry*, as she gets teary-eyed in trying to understand him. Her clear understanding of the existing societal norms prompts her to marry *Gray Maturin*, a wealthy businessman. Despite choosing *Maturin Isabel's*, love for *Larry* remains undiminished, her possessiveness for *Larry* moves her to the extent of sabotaging *Sophie's* engagement with him. She manipulates *Sophie* out of jealousy, and in a calculated move, she slyly puts alcohol to tempt her, fully aware of her addiction. *Larry* confronts her, but she struggles to grasp her digression. Compared to *Larry's* spiritual fate, *Isabel* settles into an "assured position backed by a substantial fortune" (Maugham, 343).

On the other hand, *Sophie, Isabel's* friend, a tragic character, is experiencing grief from losing her husband and child to a car accident. Her descent into despair led her to alcohol addiction, drug abuse, and involvement in extra-marital engagements. Here, we can draw parallels with *Rosie* from "*Cakes and Ale*," who engages with several men in her life as a means of coping with her grief. *Sophie*, unlike *Isabel*, does not display an emotional resilience falling into oblivion, from which *Larry* attempts to rescue her leading to her recovery. She is emotionally fragile and gravely tempted by alcohol that offers an escape from pain. In this regard, she is like *Mrs. Kemp* from "*Liza of Lambeth*", in choosing an emotional weakness, succumbing to circumstances leading to self-destructive tendencies. She dies from a violent cut to her throat depicting the destructive power of societal insensitivity towards women who choose paths not defined as normative. (Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth*)

"*The Razor's Edge*" is a quest of a man to unearth spiritual purpose; however women are shown to abide by the societal norms of pursuit of wealth and status. Spirit essentially means 'soul' and 'life', which gives a sense of fulfilment (Jung & Hull, 319). The novel highlights values of spiritualism, being contrasted with materialism, where wholesome fulfilment is afforded only through spirituality (Dahanayake, 314). Materialism only affords temporary happiness that needs constant tending, which is why it requires socializing and putting in deliberate effort. The novel's title suggests that the spiritual quest is challenging and requires sharp attentiveness and balance. However, for women, are shown to choose the alternative pursuit of materialism, where the eternal pursuit of life remains unfulfilled due to societal expectations of gender roles. It restrains women and keeps them financially dependent on men with little personal freedom or free will. *Isabel's*

needs of financial security make her bury her need for love and belonging.

(5) Piercing the Veil of Superficiality

Maugham, in "*The Painted Veil*", finally penned a female character who forges through illusion and finds reality. *Kitty Fane* is not only a female counterpart to *Larry* from "*The Razor's Edge*", but also a redeeming character from all five novels included in this paper as she ends up pursuing as well as achieving spiritual attainment in her journey (Maugham, 293). In the beginning, her security needs, much like *Isabel's*, led her to pursue a good marriage, not out of love, but for social standing. All the key female characters in Maugham's novels have been starkly aware of societal norms rather than following the need for love and belonging, when making life's choices they always chose marriage except *Liza*.

The need for social acceptance drives the feminine consciousness to superficiality. In that folded reality, women seek pleasure and excitement that their marriage fails to provide leading to extra-marital affairs and infidelity. *Kitty* marries a bacteriologist, *Walter Fane*, with whom she never feels fulfilled, and then has a clandestine affair with *Charles Townsend* solely for satisfying her physical desires. There are fleeting moments of validation and happiness, and hence, her unfulfilled reality remains stark. She wants to be admired in her circle through gossip and appearance. She has been found to be constantly looking at herself from other's lens. Nestled in the illusion of happiness, she tumbles into self-deception. Avoiding confrontation with her feelings due to a lack of connection with *Walter*, she painted over the *veil*. The said "*veil*" is the restrictive social appearances that keep her limited in constant discontent and disconnected from the true reality. When *Walter* discovers her affair and takes her to remote cholera-affected place in China, she is thrust into a world of poverty and death, devoid of any means of social gratification. This allows her the space to confront both the external and internal vagaries of life. She questions her moral bankruptcy, which draws in pain and sends her into pursuit of self-awareness (Wang et al., 700). Her lens transforms as she watches and begins to admire her husband for his selfless dedication. This way, she lifts the *veil* as she starts to explore her emotions for *Walter*. Nearing his death, she realizes that she loves him, as depicted in these lines "*She now thought not of herself but only of him*" (Maugham, 225). She rises from her physiological needs to follow higher order needs of care for other self.

Death and grief touch her soul and gift her with compassion, love, and tenderness that were missing in her materialistic confines. The spiritual awakening in this

character is mesmerizing and humbling, as depicted by her realization- "*She felt in herself the strength to accept whatever was to come with a light and buoyant spirit.*" (Maugham, 293). Compassion and empathy flow through her as she joins the French nuns in the orphanage. Her altruism opens the door for seeking meaning beyond superficial pleasures. Reconciling with forgiveness of her past self, she frees herself from guilt and makes space for human complexities (Liu, 3). She realized that the world on the other side of the *veil* is the world of authenticity that she pursues for personal integrity (Bailian and Guilian, 218).

IV. CONCLUSION

The female characters of Maugham provide an interesting landscape for character studies and the play of emotional frailty in face of circumstances. Maugham's women occupy the central space in the plots and themes of his works. Though belonging to late Victorian and early Edwardian era his women portray different stages of following their inner self, pursuing different stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He even ventures to depict women pursuing higher order needs of self – actualization as in case of *Kitty Fane* from *The Painted Veil* and *Rosie Driffield* from "*Cakes and Ale*", even in case of *Liza* she rises above the simple safety and security needs to attempt a quest for love and belonging although meeting a tragic end in the process. In each case women are peripheral to the story and each has her own way of countering the mounting social pressure.

This paper has tapped into the larger themes of survival, resilience, authenticity, connection, spirituality, and self-discovery within the evolving feminine attributes. However, it is important to note that in going through Maslow's Hierarchy of needs feminine pursuits are not disjunct from masculine pursuits. They often intersect and influence each other as they share a common journey. In fact, in Maugham's "*Liza of Lambeth*", the emotional connection between the characters serves as a revelation of the central strength and guiding principle of feminine attributes, as women are forced to take up traditionally masculine pursuits. In the pursuit of self-discovery, femininity is being redefined not by how it contributes to the collective journey but by its essence, as shown in the evolution of *Kitty*, who was out of society and devoid of a partner. Thus, it is justified to state that feminine attributes are ever-evolving and societal pressures and other factors only instigate further evolution, either directly or indirectly.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bailian, Yang, and Wang Guilian. "Kitty's Awakening of Female Consciousness in the Painted Veil." *Sino-US English Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 7, 28 July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8072/2020.07.004>. Accessed 8th June. 2025.
- [2] Chelliah, S. Somerset Maugham's Narrative Skill As Something Remarkable Illuminating The Depth of Truth and Human Nature. punereseach.com/media/data/issues/60a158a56d896.pdf. Accessed 22nd June 2025.
- [3] Colegate Isabel, "From Detachment to Further Detachment", Issue 99 2004 – *THE THREE PENNY REVIEW*, Accessed, 27th Nov 2024<threepennyreview.com/99_f04/>
- [4] Crasta, Anil, and Laveena Dmello. "Empowering Women: An Analysis of Needs and Preferences for Self-Discovery, Self-Esteem, and Positive Attitude Development Training." *Zenodo*, vol. 1, no. 2, 27 Oct. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13998702>. Accessed 11th June 2025.
- [5] Dahanayake, Nishanathe. "Spirituality and Suffering." *World Futures*, vol. 78, no. 5, 18 Apr. 2022, pp. 311–338, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.2022.2050341>. Accessed 9th June 2025.
- [6] Dewitt, Sunita, et al. "Family Dynamics and Relationships in Female Entrepreneurship: An Exploratory Study." *Journal of Family Business Management*, vol. 13, no. 3, Nov. 2022, pp. 626–44, <https://doi.org/10.1108/jfbm-01-2022-0013>.
- [7] Liu, Meiru. "Reexamination of Orientalism by the Protagonist's Psychological Interiority in Concert with Setting Description in the Painted Veil." *SHS Web of Conferences*, vol. 148, 2022, p. 02014, <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202214802014>. Accessed 10 June 2025.
- [8] Maugham, W Somerset. *Cakes and Ale*. New York, Pocket Books, 1951.
- [9] ---. *Liza of Lambeth*. London, Heinemann, 1976.
- [10] ---. *Of Human Bondage*. London, Heinemann, 1973.
- [11] ---. *The Painted Veil*. London, Heinemann, 1934.
- [12] Maugham, W Somerset. *The Razor's Edge*. London Vintage Books Zwischen Und, 2012.
- [13] Porter, Marilyn. "Standing on the Edge: Working-Class Housewives and the World of Work." *Work, Women and the Labour Market*, edited by Jackie West, Routledge, 1982.
- [14] Carl, Jung, and R F C Hull. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 8: Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche*. Princeton University Press, 2014. pp. 319–337. Accessed 11th June 2025.
- [15] Ross, Woodburn O. "W. Somerset Maugham: Theme and Variations." *College English*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1946, pp. 113–22. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/371434>. Accessed 27th Nov. 2024.
- [16] Trifan, Elena. "Searching for Authenticity: Critical Analysis of Gender Roles and Radical Movements in Personal Development Practices in Contemporary Society." *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1st June 2023, pp. 75–101, <https://doi.org/10.2478/subbs-2023-0003>.
- [17] Wang, Yunhan, et al. "Analyzing the Problem of "Otherness" in the Painted Veil—based on Beauvoir's Existential Feminism Theory." *Transactions on Social Science Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 11, 20 Aug. 2024, pp. 697–703, <https://doi.org/10.62051/k1pw1q76>. Accessed 9th June. 2025.



The generation and mutual learning of global symbols: Ritual practice and community imagination of the international communication of Dongpo culture

Chen Jiliang

Master Candidate, School of Journalism, Communication and film and television, Hainan Normal University Hainan 571158, China

Received: 10 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 05 Oct 2025; Accepted: 08 Oct 2025; Available online: 12 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Taking the cultural phenomenon that *Le Monde* of France selected Su Shi as the "Millennium hero" as the breakthrough point, combined with James Carey's theory of communication ceremony, this paper systematically analyzes the international communication status and practice path of "Dongpo culture" from the dual perspectives of symbol construction and symbol interaction. The study found that: in the international communication, there are differences in the symbolic meaning of Dongpo culture between China and the West - the western media focus on Su Shi's "free soul" as a literary hero, while China's mainstream media endow it with the symbolic meaning of confidence in Chinese culture through themes such as poetry, festivals, food, etc., to report the development of historical sites and IP brand construction of cultural tourism in Huangzhou, Huizhou and Danzhou, and transform Dongpo culture into a concrete cultural landscape and urban spiritual symbol; International social media, on the other hand, promotes Dongpo culture to break through the barriers of context and form a global "top stream" phenomenon with the strategies of image narration, cross-cultural theme reconstruction and emotional resonance. The research further reveals the dilemma of the international communication of Dongpo culture, and puts forward the optimization strategies of constructing the Multi-Agent Coordination Mechanism, the decentralized communication path and technology empowerment. It provides a theoretical and practical reference for the global dissemination of Chinese cultural symbols, highlighting its role as a cultural link in the construction of a community of shared future for mankind.



Keywords— Dongpo culture; Sudongpo, the hero of the millennium; Symbolic communication; International Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Su Shi (Dongpo), as the epitome of Chinese literature and thought in the Song Dynasty, his achievements in poetry, calligraphy, and painting, and his ups and downs of life together created the unique cultural symbol of "Dongpo culture". In 2000, *Le Monde* of France listed it as the only

"Millennium hero" selected in the world and called it the embodiment of "free soul". This event not only marked the turning point of Dongpo culture from local classics to international top class, but also reflected the transmission tension of Chinese traditional culture in the context of globalization. Based on James Carey's concept of

communication ceremony as the theoretical framework, this paper focuses on the symbolic communication practice of Dongpo culture: gathering the two main bodies of domestic mainstream media and international social media, the research aims to respond to two core issues: first, how is the symbolic meaning of Dongpo culture interpreted and recreated differently in the context of China and the west? Second, how to realize the transition of traditional culture from "going out" to "integrating into" through technological empowerment and Path Innovation in the digital age? The exploration of this issue not only provides a practical paradigm for the international dissemination of Chinese culture but also injects the cultural gene of "harmony but difference" into the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Since the 1970s, James W. Carey's "communication ritual view" has become an important theoretical paradigm to break through the limitations of the traditional communication "transmission view". Kerry believes that communication is not only the spatial transmission of information, but also the process of maintaining social and cultural order through symbolic interaction and shared meaning. This theory takes religious rites as a metaphor and emphasizes the participation of communication, the function of cultural representation, and the construction of social community. [1] In recent years, domestic scholars have carried out multidimensional discussions around Kerry's theory, especially in the field of cultural symbol communication, media ritual practice, and cross-cultural communication, which has provided important theoretical support for this paper's analysis of the international communication path of "Dongpo culture". Dongpo's poems, festivals, and other elements have been transformed into symbols carrying the identity of Chinese culture through communication practice, which reflects the core logic of Kerry's so-called "building a meaningful world through symbol interaction".

In July 2000, in the special column "Millennium hero" of *Le Monde*, France. As the only Chinese selected, Su Shi ranked 11th (1037-1101 years of birth and death). Although he lived in the 11th century, a little later than the turn of the Millennium set in the column (about 1000 A.D.), he basically met the selection criteria of "having a far-reaching impact on the millennia of future generations", which

attracted widespread attention at home and abroad. [2] As far as "Heroes" are concerned, one is their actions, and the other is their influence on future generations. Editorial board member Jean Pierre Langriyer elaborated on the connotation of Su Shi as a literary Hero: Su Dongpo was a fusion of poet, thinker, painter, and politician. Even though he experienced ups and downs in his official career, he always maintained his independence from power. Its important way is to pursue the unity of nature and man through the art of calligraphy and painting, and to explore the inner law and defend spiritual freedom, which is a powerful manifestation of its heroic characteristics. [3]

Swedish linguist Ferdinand de Saussure divided symbols into signifier and signified as the connection between the exterior and the interior. According to the theory of modern semiotics, all things can be classified as symbols. Dongpo culture is regarded as a unique and representative cultural symbol in China, and the cultural connotation is expressed by the specific IP image (signifier) of Dongpo and the spirit (signified) of Su Shi's philosophy and art.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses Dow Jones database to retrieve news using the keywords of "(sushi or) and Sudongpo" and "(sushi) or Sudongpo" respectively. It takes the past three years, from 2022 to December 2024 as the time slice, and limits the countries and regions. A total of 216 news reports were collected. Based on the data scale, the subject analysis and comparative study were carried out.

In terms of time, the number of published papers shows an upward trend. In 2022, there were 43 relevant reports from five media, 85 in 2022, and 88 by December 2024. On the basis of "subject" and frequency of occurrence, the themes related to Dongpo culture are classified. The artistic value of Dongpo culture includes the artistic characteristics and achievements of poetry, calligraphy, painting and other works (65), Dongpo's urban culture and tourism (56), festivals (48), catering culture (32), celebrity news (10), and other topics.

III. DISCUSSION

Poetry painting: from classic text to era symbol

Su Shi's poetry and painting are a treasure of Chinese traditional culture. Its "broken circle" communication not only depends on the deep excavation of cultural value, but also needs the help of the multiple innovations of modern media strategy. Based on the reporting practice of mainstream media, its breaking path can be divided into the following two strategies. First of all, the mainstream media endows Su Shi's art with modern value connotation, breaks through the unity of traditional cultural narrative, and endows his works with economic value and political value. In 2022, China Daily reported that the painting of dead trees and rocks by Su Shi was auctioned for HK\$450 million, attracting the public's attention to traditional art with the label of "sky-high price". For example, the overseas edition of the people's Daily quoted the orange of "I hope people will live long and share the beauty of a thousand miles" in the report "poems, cakes together in mid autumn" on the celebration of the Mid Autumn Festival by the Chinese and American embassies in 2023, aiming to build an emotional community of "poetry+Festival". Dongpo culture has been brought onto the world stage through poetry, and has become one of the symbols of the times in China.

From the tip of the tongue to the heart: the taste narration of Dongpo cuisine

Everywhere Sudongpo went in his life, he was closely related to food. Dongpo meat, Dongpo elbows, Dongpo cakes, and other delicacies are full of color, flavor, and taste, and these delicacies also contain Dongpo's understanding of life and optimistic attitude. China's mainstream media take this as a starting point to spread China's unique food culture to the world through Dongpo food. In the Song Dynasty poem Su Shi's appetite for exotic foods, it introduces the origin of Dongpo meat, so that foreign audiences can feel the unique exotic flavor. The mainstream media also broke through the rigid label of "regional cuisine" by mining the cultural commonality of Dongpo cuisine and associating it with universal values. For example, Xinhuanet focused on jixiangju in the streets of Paris. With the concept of "Chinese stomach" Ji "rescue car", it improved the stick and praise with pickles, which not only satisfied the curiosity of overseas audiences about "exotic customs", but also touched the feelings of Chinese with "crisp taste" and "hometown flavor". This strategy upgrades Dongpo cuisine from "taste experience" to "cultural experience", which fits

the curiosity of overseas audiences about Oriental philosophy and life wisdom.

Symbol construction in the changes of urban culture and Tourism -- Huangzhou, Huizhou, Danzhou

Su Shi's life trajectory is all over the north and south of the river. Wherever he goes, his poems, paintings, and food narratives have been turned into cultural symbols and deeply ingrained in the city. Compared with poetry and ode, the external reporting of urban culture and tourism is more acceptable to foreign audiences and reduces cultural barriers. Dongpo's works in Huangzhou, Huizhou, and Danzhou are favored by news reporters and scholars at home and abroad. His years in these three places are the peak of his literary creation, witnessing the change of Su Shi's temperament and his literary achievements. [4]

The development of urban cultural tourism with the help of historical celebrities' IP can not only stimulate people's respect for outstanding figures, but also enhance the radiation of relevant cultural symbols. [5] Li Lin, a scholar, believes that Su Shi formed the Dongpo culture during the period of Huangzhou. [6] In "companies in solidarity", the Global Times paid attention to the characteristic Huangzhou red cliff. This paper discusses how to integrate the core meaning of Dongpo culture into the renewal of historical blocks in Huangzhou to create a "historic urban landscape". [7] In "Huizhou looks to upgrade its industrial mix", the Global Times pointed out that Huizhou will expand the creation of "Dongpo landscape" to the construction of cultural and tourism brands, combining economic benefits with social benefits. [8] Compared with Huangzhou and Huizhou, Danzhou's Dongpo culture research started late. In 2022, the China Daily Book shed new light on the classic poem's famous ode at Hainan Temple, paying attention to Dongpo's poems in Hainan, such as "zongbi" and "farewell to Hainan Li Min Biao". Compared with other regions, Dongpo's poems in Hainan are often paid little attention, which requires the media to speak out at home and abroad.

Daily Dongpo: the connotation of "Dongpo culture" on the international social media platform

To understand the international view of Dongpo culture and the communication effect of mainstream media on Dongpo culture, it is necessary to analyze the trend of international social media, research and use the crawler

technology, and take the relevant information of Su Shi (Su Dongpo) as the main statistical object. During this statistical period, 21000 pieces of relevant information were generated. From January 16, 2021, to December 31, 2024, 21195 network information related to Su Shi (Sudongpo) was monitored. Among them, 10510 tweets; 6808 websites; YouTube 3366; Facebook 431; TikTok 43; Gettr 37. It can be seen from the analysis of information sources that Twitter is the main communication platform for information related to monitoring topics.

The core function of ritual communication is to convey specific emotions to build an "imagined community", rather than simple information sharing. [9] Dongpo culture is characterized by more pictures and fewer words on overseas social media. It attracts overseas audiences with rumors, anecdotes, food culture, and other content. It carries out cultural exchanges and responses in posts and comment areas, and puts more emphasis on Dongpo's daring to challenge and being a literati and gourmet. Su Shi's life situation when he was an official was the concern of foreign audiences, because it was full of uncertainty and challenges, but Su Shi could always respond optimistically and explore the local fun. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory showed that western countries tended to tolerate risk-taking behavior because of its low uncertainty avoidance. Netizens commented that "he is a genius, a child and a madman." in the face of political pressure, he chose not to yield and rose up to resist. In the face of demoted adversity, he worked hard like a child to find his own fun, but in these circumstances, he also exercised his cultural talent, which can be described as an all rounder. This this point coincides with the characteristics of Western adventurous and humorous, which explains why Su Dongpo's pioneering and challenging spirit can arouse overseas resonance. Su Shi's personality charm has deeply attracted foreign audiences.

Most of the comments or posts of Dongpo culture are presented in the form of pictures and essays, and most of them are pictures, which greatly reduces the understanding cost for foreign audiences. Unlike China, whose only meaning can not be expressed in words, the West has a high degree of direct acceptance of information, and is not willing to spend more money to understand the meaning. Especially in the production of Dongpo food, Japanese netizens pay attention to Dongpo meat. "Dongpo meat, with

bright red color and rich flavor, is delicious and melts in the mouth. It is worthy of being one of China's famous traditional dishes." Porpoise meat "makes" Chinese cuisine "a Chinese food made of Dongpo meat and pork, using food graphics to arouse the appetite of foreign audiences. Not only that, Japanese netizens also explored what kind of image Dongpo is: a beautiful teenager or a kind old man? Most overseas audiences' understanding of Dongpo's character image also comes from their posts. Based on the picture of Dongpo bamboo hat in Danzhou, Hainan, a kind old man with a cane and a bamboo hat has become the most widely recognized and widely disseminated character image in foreign countries.

IV. SUGGESTION

Building a multi subject Dongpo cultural communication mechanism

Although the folk and mainstream media are different in content and form, they can learn from each other to form a joint force to maximize the dissemination of China's excellent traditional culture. [12] On the one hand, the mainstream media can introduce and interpret the contribution of Dongpo culture to the construction of the community concept in many fields, such as government foreign affairs visits and regional summits. The 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt is a good example. The friendship between the two countries, "thousands of miles together," makes the world understand Dongpo's poems. On the other hand, the power of the folk multi-subject can not be underestimated. Domestic colleges and universities can actively develop academic forums that reflect common consciousness from the perspective of international audiences and ideological and literary works based on Dongpo culture. Local enterprises can use the Dongpo culture IP to attract domestic and foreign tourists and boost the development of local culture and tourism. For example, the first Dongpo noodles conference held in Huizhou used litchi as the media to create a Dongpo culture-themed party integrating audio-visual and interactive activities, bringing an immersive experience to the audience. The relationship between the two countries lies in the affinity between the people, and the affinity between the people lies in the connection between the hearts. The general public can start

from ordinary individuals and use individual cases to narrate, such as taking photos of Su Shi's scenic spots and interpreting Su Shi's poems combined with their own experience, so as to provide clear clues for foreign audiences to understand Dongpo culture.

Carry out regional and mass communication

From a regional point of view, cultural language, geographical environment, historical background, and so on may become cultural conflicts and communication obstacles. Therefore, Dongpo culture is often blocked in Western countries, mainly in the United States and Europe. However, in areas with similar cultures, the spread of the past is twice as effective as half the effort. For example, in Southeast Asia, there are more Chinese groups in these areas with convenient communication and high recognition of Dongpo culture; In addition, the Chinese media and other media have been providing assistance for the dissemination. There are also Japan and South Korea, which have deep historical ties with China and often carry out exchanges and studies. Su Dongpo's poems and characters have long been popular among the people, and have carried out exchanges and cooperation activities between countries many times. [13] Some scholars believe that Southeast Asia can also be called the "third Han cultural circle". They are deeply influenced by traditional Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism, and Su Shi happens to be a typical figure of the three cultures. By setting up a model, it is convenient for the dissemination of culture and thought. In the future, the dissemination of Dongpo culture can take the lead in choosing these regions to complete the construction of Dongpo symbols.

Optimize communication content and strengthen audience communication with technology

Using science and technology to strengthen the international dissemination of traditional culture is one of the main ways in the world today. [14] By using the latest technology and innovating Dongpo's cultural style, Sudongpo, the first 3D realistic digital person in the country jointly created by Zhongguancun Shijingshan park culture and technology enterprise diting vision and Zhonghua Book Company, landed on CCTV's 2023 "Chinese poetry conference" to have a dialogue with the contestants across the ages; At the forum of "inspired China's digital Dongpo" in Sichuan, the whole process was hosted by suxiaomei, a

digital person; The "Dongpo live shopping at the consumer Expo" launched by the new media of Hainan Daily allows Su Dongpo to travel through time and space, talk with the mascot "mechanical ape" of the consumer Expo, and use live broadcast and VR to take you online to the consumer Expo in real time. Such cultural practice shortens the distance of the audience, produces a "sense of companionship", and reduces the cost of cultural exchange. Audiences no longer need to go to the scenic spot to enjoy the products of Dongpo culture, thus completing the construction and interaction of ritual scenes.

V. CONCLUSION

As a typical representative of Chinese cultural symbols, Dongpo culture shows a unique cross-cultural communication tension in the context of globalization. This study reveals the differences of symbolic interpretation of Dongpo culture in different contexts of China and the west through the theory of the concept of communication ceremony: comparing the two main bodies of China's mainstream media and international social media. The western media constructed Su Shi as a literary hero symbol of "free soul", while China sublimated it into a multidimensional symbol of cultural confidence and urban spirit through concrete carriers such as poetry, festivals and food. The research also shows the paradigm transformation of cultural communication in the digital age. With the help of image narration, emotional resonance and cross-cultural theme reconstruction, the international social media platform makes Dongpo culture break through the context barrier and form a global top stream phenomenon. The global communication practice of Dongpo culture shows that when the traditional cultural symbols and modern communication technology form a resonance, and when local knowledge is transformed into universal value, the world narrative of Chinese culture can truly realize the mutual learning picture of civilization of "each beauty has its beauty, beauty and common".

REFERENCES

- [1] James Carey As the communication of culture: a collection of papers on media and society [M]. translated by Ding Wei Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2019.
- [2] Les heros de L'an mil[n].le Monde, 2000-07-18 (1)

- [3] Jean Pierre Langelier Sudongpo: a hopeless scholar -- a commentary on the global "Twelve heroes of the Millennium" [M]. translated by Shu Xing Cultural studies of the Song Dynasty (Volume 20), 2013 (00)
- [4] Hou County Army "Ask about your lifetime achievements, Huangzhou Huizhou Danzhou" [N]. Huizhou daily, March 24, 2023 (004)
- [5] Pengkai Research on Historical Product Development [J]. Beauty and Times (Part 1), 2022 (05): 8-12
- [6] Li Lin Reflections on Dongpo culture's contribution to the construction of Huanggang's famous cultural and tourism city [J]. Journal of Hubei University of Economics (HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES), 2023, 20 (09): 106-111
- [7] Wangqipeng A review of Su Shi's research on the inclusion of Hui [J]. Journal of Huizhou University (SOCIAL SCIENCE EDITION), 2013, 33 (01): 15-21
- [8] Luyongmei, Xi Shaomin Research on the interactive development of cultural industry and tourism economy in the context of cultural tourism integration -- Taking Huizhou new "four East culture" as an example [J]. time honored brand marketing, 2020, (03):13-14
- [9] Mengxianchao China in Classics: let thick classics fly into the homes of ordinary people [J]. digital media research, 2021, 38 (10): 10-12+21
- [10] Lin Hanzhang "Chinese spirit" and the composite identity of overseas Chinese [J]. cultural aspects, 2022 (6)
- [11] Liujingxi Viewing the construction of local discourse system with the value of "community with a shared future for mankind" [J]. Qiushi journal, 2019 (5)
- [12] Chen Sitian The concept of a community with a shared future for mankind from the perspective of external communication: value connotation, communication status and future path [J]. Journal of the Party School of the CPC Chengdu Municipal Committee, 2023, (02): 57-68+110-111.
- [13] Hulizhong, wangweimin East Asian cultural circle: inheritance, fission and Reconstruction -- a review of the international academic conference "East Asian Han cultural circle and China relations" and the 2004 annual meeting of the society for the history of Chinese foreign relations [J]. international observation, 2004 (2)
- [14] Biming Building a community with a shared future for mankind: from symbiosis of interests to cultural consensus [J]. reform and opening up, 2019 (10)



Exploring Women's Mental Health in the Yellow Wallpaper: A Medical Humanities Perspective

Sweena Sweetlin .A , Vidhyavassni .M

Received: 09 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 06 Oct 2025; Accepted: 09 Oct 2025; Available online: 13 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study examines the complex portrayal of women's mental health and the treatment of mental illness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", based on the principles of medical humanities. The study contextualizes the protagonist's struggle in the social and medical landscapes of the late 19th century. The story unfolds against the backdrop of prevailing gender norms and the rise of the medical profession, particularly the controversial "rest cure" for women. Analyzing the Imprisonment of the main character in a room decorated with yellow wallpaper, the study reveals the layers of meaning and symbolism. From the lens of medical humanities, the study sheds light on gender bias in diagnosis, the ethical dimensions of medical procedures, and the impact on caregivers, especially the dual role of the protagonist's husband as both physician and husband. Additionally, the study links historical attitudes toward women and mental health to contemporary debates about mental health stigma, gender bias in medical diagnosis, and patient narratives. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the intersection of medicine, gender and social expectations. It provides insight into the issues of women in relation to historical health care settings and responds to the health care debates of today.



Keywords— rest cure, imprisonment, gender bias, medical diagnosis, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1800s, a period marked by limited medical understanding and entrenched gender roles, women's mental health was often oversimplified and misunderstood. "The Yellow Wallpaper" provides a literary snapshot of this era, offering a nuanced depiction of the protagonist's mental struggles within the constraints of societal expectations. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a compelling narrative that explores women's mental health within the framework of medical humanities. The backdrop of the late 19th century, the story weaves together elements of literature, history, and medical practices, portrays the complex interplay of societal norms, gender expectations, and the evolving landscape of healthcare's title "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a symbolic manifestation of the protagonist's deteriorating mental state and the broader confinement of women in a patriarchal society. The evolving patterns in the wallpaper mirror the protagonist's descent into madness. The story raises questions about autonomy, agency, and the societal

expectations that stifled women's voices and contributed to their mental distress. Written in 1892, the long story or a novella serves as an allegorical portrayal of female repression and is a significant and influential work of feminist literature.

Beyond its historical context, "The Yellow Wallpaper" remains relevant in contemporary discussions on women's health. Medical humanities lens allows to bridge the temporal gap and draw parallels with present-day challenges in understanding and addressing mental health issues, particularly those affecting women and Gilman here explain the battle with postpartum depression and the doctors she dealt with during her illness inspired her to write "The Yellow Wallpaper."

HYSTERIA – THE FEMALE MALADY:

The term "hysteria" has a deep historical connection to women's mental health, and in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores its impact on the protagonist within the framework of medical humanities. Hysteria, derived from the Greek word uterus, has a long

history in medical discourse, particularly in the context of women's health. The large part of the suffering of women was classified in a term called hysteria, which could basically mean nervous illness, nervous breakdown and hysteria is seen as a female malady. Hysteria was considered as a pseudo symptom, a pseudo disease and not a real disease and different kinds of treatment which were given to female hysterics. There was a list of female writers who suffered from hysteria, and they wrote their experience and Gilman's book is one of them and we have Virginia Woolf who wrote a series of writing, on her experience with nervous illness and how she was essentially mistreated by the medical industry.

In the story, the protagonist's descent into hysteria is intricately tied to her confinement and the oppressive environment she finds herself in. The isolated room, coupled with the relentless scrutiny of her doctor husband and the insidious presence of the complex yellow wallpaper, and that becomes a crucible for the manifestation of her mental distress. From the context of medical humanities, the characterization of hysteria as a "female malady" reflects the intersection of societal expectations and medical narratives. The societal roles imposed on women during this era constrained their autonomy, stifled intellectual pursuits, and contributed to mental distress. The term "female malady" encapsulates the gendered lens through which mental health issues were perceived and treated. The designation of hysteria as a female malady is not just a historical artifact but an exploration of power dynamics and challenges to women's autonomy. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' the protagonist's agency is gradually eroded by both societal expectations and the medical advice of her husband, illustrating the broader theme of how women's mental health was understood and controlled. From a medical humanities perspective, the story prompts reflection on how far we've come in understanding and addressing women's mental health.

In the realm of medical humanities perspective, the protagonist's character provokes reflection on how far we have come in understanding and treating women's mental health. Although progress has been made, challenges remain, and the term "women's malady" is a reminder of historical baggage that continues to influence contemporary conversations. Essentially, Gilman's examination of hysteria in *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the context of the medical humanities is a profound commentary on the historical medicalization of women's mental health. This book challenges readers to critically consider how social expectations and medical narratives intersect and influence perceptions of mental health and autonomy, promoting empathy and patient-centered care.

POSTPARTUM PHYSCOSIS IN THE NINETEEN CENTURY:

Gilman's experience of postpartum psychosis examines the intersection of mental health, motherhood, and societal expectations. This exploration within the realm of medical humanities draws parallels between the protagonist's struggles in the late 19th century and the contemporary landscape surrounding postpartum mental health.

In those days, the understanding of postpartum mental health was rudimentary, often ruined by misconceptions and stigmatization. The protagonist's descent into psychosis mirrors the lack of awareness and empathy surrounding postpartum mental health during that era. Gilman uses the deteriorating mental state of the protagonist, affected by postpartum psychosis, as a metaphorical expression of societal constraints on women. The confinement to the room with the oppressive yellow wallpaper mirrors the confinement of women's roles in both domestic and medical spheres.

THE REST CURE DILEMMA:

In the late 1800s, the rest cure gained popularity as a response to perceived nervous afflictions, especially prevalent among women. The treatment aimed to alleviate symptoms through physical and mental rest. However, it often meant confining women to a prescribed set of activities, restricting intellectual engagement and social interactions. It was systematized by Silas Weir Mitchell, the rest cure, as portrayed in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' reflects a patriarchal medical approach that curtailed women's agency. Gilman over here gives the description of treatment in form of confinement, a selective diet, forbidden to write and forced to rest and the term claustrophobia is produced out of confinement, so the place of confinement plays a very important role. It reduced them to passive recipients of treatment, reinforcing societal expectations of women as submissive and devoid of intellectual capabilities. While the rest cure was intended to heal, its restrictive nature exacerbated mental distress. "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores various themes, including the crisis of communication, particularly within the context of gender roles and mental health. Here are some aspects related to the crises of communication in the story:

SUPPRESSION OF WOMENS VOICE AND EXPRESSION OF THOUGHTS:

The protagonist, a woman suffering from mental distress and trauma, experiences suppression of voice becoming a powerless entity in the hand of her husband. Her husband John, the physician, controls her and dismisses her in an alienated space refraining her from physical activity including writing. The societal expectation of women in the 19th century often led to their voices being stifled, especially

regarding matters of mental health. The protagonist's attempts to communicate her experiences with the wallpaper and her declining mental state are consistently dismissed by her husband, who employs a dismissive and gaslighting approach. The crisis of communication arises from the inability of those in authority to understand or accept the woman's perspective. The protagonist resorts to secret writing to express herself without direct confrontation. This act is both a coping mechanism and a response to the communication barriers imposed by societal norms. The protagonist's isolation in the room with the yellow wallpaper intensifies the crisis of communication. She lacks a support system and is deprived of meaningful interaction. In addition, her loneliness and her state of idleness and inactivity deteriorated her mental health.

The yellow wallpaper itself becomes a symbol of the barriers to effective communication. Its chaotic patterns represent the disarray in the protagonist's mind, and her attempts to communicate this are consistently ignored. The story reflects on the power dynamics in relationships and how these dynamics impact communication. In essence, "The Yellow Wallpaper" underscores the challenges women faced in expressing themselves, particularly in matters related to mental health, during a time when societal norms and gender roles were restrictive.

HALLUCINATION: THE RESULT OF IMPRISONMENT

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," hallucinations play a central role in portraying the protagonist's deteriorating mental state. The yellow wallpaper in his cell became the catalyst for hallucinatory experiences. The isolation caused her no good. Her isolation has exacerbated her trauma, intensifying its impact. The narrator focusing on the intricate patterns of the wallpaper, believed that there are women trapped behind it, reflecting her own feelings of being trapped. As the story unfolds, the main character's hallucinations intensify, deteriorating the difference between reality and her distorted perceptions. The connection between hallucinogens and yellow wallpaper highlights the psychological impact of prescribed rest cures and the oppressive gender norms prevalent in the late 19th century. It manifests the protagonist's silent pain, echoing larger themes of female autonomy and mental health.

This connection highlights how physical and metaphorical confinement in the story contributes to the protagonist's descent into madness, highlighting the detrimental effects of social expectations on an individual mental health. Also, it remains as a powerful exploration of the intersection between mental health, gender roles and social constraints, resonating with readers as a poignant commentary on the mind. In a contemporary context, "The

Yellow Wallpaper" resonates with its themes of mental health struggles and social pressures that persist to this present day. The yellow background, symbolizing the main character's descent into madness in the original story, can be seen as a metaphor for the challenges which are being faced by individuals in navigating mental health amid the expectations of this modern society.

In recent times, hallucinations are not only limited to the common understanding of mental disorders; but also extends to societal pressures, the digital realm, and the relentless pursuit of perfection. The constant bombardment of curated images and ideals on social media platforms can be seen as a contemporary counterpoint to the protagonist's fixation on yellow wallpaper. The virtual world becomes a distorted reflection, contributing to a sense of disillusionment and distortion of reality. Additionally, the expectations placed on individuals, especially women, to conform to certain norms and roles persist. The fast pace and demanding lifestyle of the modern world can cause a kind of social illusion, in which individuals may feel obligated to maintain a façade of success and happiness, despite the potential difficulties. It provokes reflection on the impact of external pressures, both historical and present, on individual well-being and the urgency to promote a more compassionate and understanding society in the face of challenges that keep changing.

PATRIARCHAL MEDICAL SYSTEM:

The story opens through the perspective of a woman suffering from postpartum depression, locked in a room by her husband who is a doctor by profession. This confinement becomes a metaphor for the broader social constraints imposed on women. The patriarchal medical system is evident in the husband's authoritative role as a caregiver and a decision maker. He overrules the narrator's instincts and locks her in a room, prescribing rest, a common treatment at the time. This remedy reflects the widespread belief that women's mental health problems could be cured by leaving them in isolation and inactivity, and sheds light on the patriarchal attitude towards the medical establishment. The protagonist's husband, her physician, epitomizes the patriarchal medical system that dismissed women's concerns. This dynamic view raises ethical questions about the intersectionality of gender and medical care, opening avenues for exploring the power dynamics within healthcare settings. The wallpaper itself has become a symbol of an oppressive medical system. When the narrator is haunted by her role model, it reflects women's bondage to societal expectations and intricate norms. The gradual descent into madness reflects the harmful effects of a medical system that disregards and disconcerts women's autonomy which eventually silences

them, turning them into powerless and helpless human beings.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM HISTORY, SHAPING ETHICAL MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES

Acknowledging the historical impact of the rest cure prompts a critical examination of current mental health practices. The narrative in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' serves as a cautionary tale, urging mental health professionals to adopt ethical and patient-centered approaches that empower individuals rather than confine them. In today's context, discussions around mental health strive to destigmatize conditions and promote holistic well-being. The rest cure narrative reinforces the importance of recognizing individual agency, addressing the root causes of mental distress, and fostering open dialogues that consider diverse perspectives.

In the present day, awareness and understanding of postpartum mental health have evolved, yet challenges persist. Medical humanities prompt an exploration of how societal expectations and stigmas still affect women navigating the complexities of motherhood and mental health. The narrative of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' remains relevant, urging us to reflect on the progress made and the work yet to be done in destigmatizing postpartum mental health issues. While specific cases of postpartum psychosis and individuals affected by it may not always be publicly disclosed or documented, postpartum mental health challenges, including psychosis, are recognized and experienced by women globally, including in India. It's important to approach such topics with sensitivity and respect for individuals' privacy. In India, where maternal mental health is an emerging area of concern, efforts are being made to address postpartum mental health issues. Public figures and celebrities have shared their experiences with postpartum depression, contributing to awareness and reducing stigma. However, specific cases of postpartum psychosis may not always be publicly discussed.

The Intersectionality of gender and medical narratives comes to light in both historical and contemporary contexts. The societal expectations of women as nurturers and caregivers intersect with medical perspectives, influencing how postpartum mental health is understood and addressed through this novella. Medical humanities encourage critical examination of these gendered narratives, fostering empathy and advocating for patient-centered care.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gilman, C. (1892). *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, pp. 1-15.

- [2] <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/healthhumanities/Definitions>
- [3] <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2022/09/092922-anand-beyond-the-yellow-wallpaper-medical-gaslighting#:~:text=Such%20is%20the%20plight%20of,recover%20from%20her%20hysterical%20tendencies>.



Analysing loan blends and code mixing as main strategies to promote African languages in *Chimamada Ngozie Adichie's Americanah* (2013) and *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Matigari* (1987)

Sènamì-Fifa Blandine Araba, Charles Dossou Ligan, Abossèdé Paulette Okpeicha

Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin

Received: 08 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 06 Oct 2025; Accepted: 11 Oct 2025; Available online: 15 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This research work aims at describing the way with which « loan blends » and « Code mixing » are used as one of the strategies, among other ones, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Matigari* (1987) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* (2013) refer to so as to valorize and promote their mother tongues. Despite the huge linguistic diversity of the African continent, most of literary works are still written in foreign languages. Facing this issue, there is a good reason for which people can get worry on the threatening depreciation of indigenous African languages. To boost a better analysis of bilingualism effects in literary works under study, this research focuses on key notions and theories some linguists like Hoffmann and Holmes have worked on. Indeed, the study mainly focuses on loanblends and Code Mixing/Code switching. From the results obtained, it has been discovered that some African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie definitely use a variety of strategies – including loanblends and code mixing – to valorize their local language leading thus to the preservation of the cultural identity of the African continent.



Keywords— Loan blends, code mixing, African languages, strategies, valorization.

Résumé— Ce travail de recherche vise à décrire la manière avec laquelle les « loan blends » et le « Code mixing » sont utilisés comme l'une des stratégies, parmi tant d'autres, utilisées par Ngugi Wa Thiong'o dans *Matigari* (1987) et Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie dans *Americanah* (2013) pour valoriser et promouvoir leurs langues maternelles. En dépit de l'immensité de la variété linguistique du continent africain, la plupart des œuvres littéraires sont encore écrites en langues étrangères. Face à cette constatation, il y a de quoi craindre la dépréciation menaçante des langues autochtones africaines. Pour booster une meilleure analyse des effets du bilinguisme au niveau des œuvres en étude, la présente recherche se focalise sur les notions clés et les théories de certains linguistes ayant travaillé dans ce domaine notamment les manifestations du loanblends, Code Mixing et du Code switching à savoir Hoffmann et Holmes. Des résultats obtenus, il est découvert que certains auteurs africains tels que Ngugi Wa Thiong'o et Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie utilisent résolument une variété de stratégies - y compris loanblends et code mixing – pour valoriser leurs langues locales amenant ainsi à la préservation de l'identité culturelle du continent africain.

Mots-clés— Emprunts linguistiques, code mixing, langues africaines, stratégies, valorisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

African literature is influenced by various factors, including the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the continent, the colonial impact, the political and social struggles, and the experiences faced by the African people. To impact their literary works on a large audience, African writers and their publishers need to write and publish their work in the language of the colonizer - which is obviously more known thus more profitable than the local language. This fact puts aside or is very far to favor the valorization of the author's indigenous language. But it is noticeable that a range of African writers are actively working to upset this linguistic situation since languages, thus cultures, are not preserved. Among those brave or courageous writers, we may cite Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Paul Hazoumè... Only thinking and writing/expressing his emotions, ideology, ideas, concepts in a foreign language may mean expressing just a part of ourselves or still implicitly being under the leadership of the colonizer. Many writers are aware of this. As proof, the renowned Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who believes that African literature should be written in African languages, explains in his book *Decolonizing the mind* that writing in the language of the "oppressors" is just another form of neo colonization. One of the major debates in African literature and criticism is language choice. African writers are not then unanimous on the theme related to the choice of the language of the African literature. So, there are works in which some African writers choose their indigenous languages, denying foreign languages to produce their proper literature whereas others, however, still write in European languages for a wide cover.

It is obvious that most African writers are bilingual and this fact easily explains the phenomenon of bilingualism in their work. In fact, Wolfson (1989) states: "People who are bilingual often switch from one of their codes or languages to the other without being in the least aware of it". Anyway whatever how it may be viewed, there is something like an emergence of African languages through literature from Africa.

In the field of indigenous language preservation through literature, various scholars have investigated on the implicit ways used by authors that include Code mixing/Code switching and loan blends.

So in their research paper entitled "Code mixing and code switching as foregrounding techniques in Ojo-Ade and Sanusi selected novels, Otegbale, Emmanuel, & Ubiri (2023) specify that Code switching and code mixing are writing techniques that are used to pinpoint particular aspects of texts. The aim of their paper is to investigate the role of code mixing and code switching as foregrounding

techniques in Ojo-Ade and Sanusi' novels. They proceeded by close reading for the data collection. These data interpreted by Arnold's twentieth century theory of foregrounding has been used for the methodology of the data study and analysis. It is found that in the creation of texts, there is English and Yoruba single linguistic units and expressions also appearing under the form of proverbs reflecting socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political realities. The conclusion of this research is that insertion of other languages in writing texts at the level of code mixing and code switching not only as stylistic instruments for the cohesion and thematic issue foregrounding as well as the exposure of the author but also as aesthetics of the text.

In the same line, Haruna, Christopher & Halim (2016) has worked on Code mixing As a Sociolinguistic Device in Hausa Contemporary Literature. In their paper, it is recalled that the Nigerian country has a diverse linguistic system comprising over 170 million people and that the Hausa language is one the three major ones of the country. They also specify that Nigeria has many literary writers in both southern and northern part of the country. Therefore, the study aims at analyzing the role of code mixing in selected Hausa novels from writers of Hausa origin. Employing a quantitative method for the analysis of the selected code-mixing parts in the three novels under study, the scholars found that code mixing is one of the linguistic tools which are used for communicative purposes between characters in Hausa literary texts.

On the basis of these previous research works, this study examines how the strategies of loanblends and code mixing/code switching help highlighting African languages through a literature that is said to be African and is written in non-African languages! This fact leads to the main hypothesis which supposes that African writers contribute to the promotion of African languages by adopting implicit strategies in their works. More specifically the detailed hypotheses are stated as follows:

- There exists many demonstrations of African languages in literatures written in colonial languages.
- Post-colonialism African writers despite the linguistic policy, contribute to the improvement of indigenous languages status.
- Many strategies particularly Code mixing/Code switching and Loan-blends are noticed in African writings favouring the promotion of African indigenous languages.

With regard to the objectives, they are the following:

- to determine the reasons of including African languages in the writing

- to analyze how Code mixing/Code switching and Loan-blends are used as channels to promote and vulgarize African languages works in European languages.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Several African literary works are written in foreign languages. This is what is generally noticed for most of African works especially the most renowned ones recommended for schools curricula. For example, most of the literary works which have been studied in secondary school and at university are written in French or English; but in a way or somehow they are reflecting African culture through the use of local African languages by the authors. The question now is to know how African writers succeed in mixing codes within their work. First of all, a glance on the history of languages in Africa may help in this field. Colonization consisting in establishing colonies is a historical fact which seems to have impacted many aspects of the African continent especially its cultural and linguistic development. As evidence for most African countries, the official language remains English, French or Spanish. Official languages seem to be like a reference, a tool to many areas (economy, politic, religion...) and the only way to empower people. Therefore, post-colonialism has emerged as an intellectual movement around the 20th century. It focuses more on the cruelty of the colonizer and the sad state of the colonized African people. The aspects that have covered by post colonialism are politics, history... and literature. Talking of African literature, one of the major issues is the language choice in the postcolonial literature. In the fear to avoid that African cultural, social, economical and religious matters be transmitted in literature in western languages, some linguistic attitudes or styles are adopted by African authors.

This situation leads to the following research questions:

- Why do they promote African languages and culture through their works?
- How do some African authors contribute to the African languages promotion?

II. METHODOLOGY

To find answers to the objectives of this study, analyses of the two novels will be made followed by detailed discussions of the findings. In fact, analyses will be based on loan-blends and code mixing cases revealed in the novels. In a nutshell, all the linguistic strategies used by some African authors to make known and valorize African culture. The methodological approach adapted in this work is the mixed approach through which there will be a critical reading of the two novels under study here followed by a

data collection, analyses, interpretation and discussion. The choice of the two novels is based on the fact that the intention is to study two different literary works from different periods, origin, sex and authors just to check if the strategies for valorization of languages depend on any of the characteristics just mentioned above.

The corpus in this research study will serve as sampling since the study is focusing on one case among many others. Obviously, the main objective of this research methodology is to find figures, ways, proofs, examples...to find answers to the questions raised. With regard to the search of appropriate answers or findings to issues raised in the problem statement, the two ways a researcher use is to focus on the previous works other scientists have made to redeem a likely conclusion and undertake one's own research on the basis on these gatherings to try to reinforce the proposed justification or explanation. To provide genuine key answer, organization of data collection and analysis is important.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This part of the work defines the key notions/aspects related to literature and language used in literary works. The notions studied provide with clear view on the basic elements related to Code, Code mixing, Code switching and Loan-blends noticeable in African works particularly in *Americanah* and *Matigari*.

Therefore, the linguistic aspects studied in the two literary works are related to **loan blends and code mixing** among many other strategies, defined here as mechanisms, to promote, protect, valorize and perpetuate African languages. The study will demonstrate how African languages are valorized through lists of strategies cases and comparison of the density of these cases in each novel under study.

3.1. Bilingualism

It is thought and also said that "nowhere records only one spoken language". (Wolfson, 1989: 257). The Bilingualism literally means "two languages" i.e. two languages are in contact. Bilingualists are then people who can speak two languages fluently. Most of literate people are said to be bilingualists as they master their mother tongue in addition to the language of the official language. Moreover bilingualists are people who have been taught two languages and are able to peak them (the two languages). Bilingualism generally leads to the concepts of Code mixing and Code switching. Before going further in the two concepts, let us have a glance on what code is. Therefore, bilingualism involves languages mixture which explains this affirmation of Ayeomoni (2012): "However, despite government and individual efforts to plan and

allocate distinct role to each of these languages in well stated domains the phenomena of borrowing, interference, code switching, domestication of foreign languages particularly the English language are still a hindrance”.

3.2. Code

A code is the set of signs forming a message transmitted from one point to another to convey an idea. In communications, a code is a rule for converting a piece of information (for example, a letter, word, or phrase) into another form or representation, not necessarily of the same sort. (Hasan, 2019:3). By the way, a view of the meaning of Code mixing and code switching will also be very helpful.

3.3. Code mixing

Code mixing, as the term refers to, is the use of one or more languages from one language into another. According to Muysken (2000), a mixed code is a way of speaking which shows evidence of substantial amounts of morpho-syntactic and/or lexical material from at least two different languages. It is a linguistic form and socio-cultural meaning code mixing. Code mixing is the change of one language to another in the same utterance or in the same oral or written text. This phenomenon is common in societies in which two or more languages are in use.

3.4. Code switching

Hasan (2019) defines Code switching as “the juxtaposition of elements from two (or more) languages or dialects”. While code mixing deals with the change of morpheme, word and phrase, code switching deals with the change of clause, sentence and utterance. Code mixing takes place without change of topic and may involve various language levels of language such as phonology, morphology, grammatical structures or lexical items. Code mixing and code switching are sometimes used interchangeably.

3.5. Hoffman’s theory of Code mixing

Charlotte Hoffman, a reader of Sociolinguistics at the University of Salford in United Kingdom (1991), distinguishes code mixing through syntactic pathways which are intra sentential code mixing, intra-lexical code and a change of pronunciation. More precisely, there are six types of Code switching which are: intra-sentential switching, intra lexical switching, (involving a change of pronunciation), inter sentential switching, emblematic switching, and establishing continuity with the previous speaker. Hoffmann’s theory on Code Mixing/Code Switching

3.6. Loan-blends

They are combined words from both English and Ibo. According to “In such a nominal group, the English word functions as the head word while the Igbo item

functions as the modifier” (Koussouhon, 2009: 86). This style of writing favors the mixing of two languages in contact and therefore two cultures.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION

The implicit immersion of loan blend and code mixing/code switching is really noticeable through the two novels. There is a mixture of cultures thus Igbo/Yoruba and English from one side and Kikuyu/Swahili and English from the other side. The results obtained when applying Hoffmann’s theory on *Americanah* and *Matigari* are as follow:

4.1. Applying Hoffmann’s theory for the Analysis of Code mixing/Code switching in *Americanah*

4.1.1. Intra - sentential switching: Code-Mixing

Chimamanda inserts many Igbo words or expressions in the novel promoting the Igbo language. She starts referring to her language of origin at the very beginning part of her literary work in the dedication which goes like this:

“This book is for our next generation, ndi na-abia n’iru: Toks, Chisom, Amaka, Chinedum, Kamsiyonna and Arinze”. Here, “ndi na-abia n’iru” precises what she previously said in English. It means: “the generation in front, that is coming”.

Intra-sentential switching characterized by insertion of words or expression from another language (L2) into the same sentence previously made in (L1) is then well noticed throughout the novel. Here are the cases found:

Kedu in “Ceiling, *kedu*? Hope all is well....” (p 19).

kedu ebe I no in “Darling, *kedu ebe I no*?” (p 21).

dashiki in “.....hungry-looking in his worn *dashiki*, and wondered how much....” (p. 40)

Ama m atu inu in “*Ama m atu inu* I even know proverbs” (p 61).

Voodoo in “Before too much *voodoo*” (p.13); *Voodoo* is also used in “You better not kill my dog with *voodoo*” (p 152).

oga in “God bless you, *oga*!” “*Oga*” is also used in the following pages in the novel: pp 76, 77, 84

kobo in “Mummy, but you know Auntie Uju is not paying one *kobo* to live there.” (p 49). Another case is on (p 91).

ma in “Thank you , *ma*” p 69; *ma* is also repeated many times in the novel. (pp 71, 72, 73).

chelu in “Mummy, *chelu*, let’s hear” (p. 71)

“*mumu*” in “Why are you looking like a *mumu*?” (p 81)

“Okada” in “Obinze got on the next *okada* and was...” (p 65).

“*mechago*” in “Dike, I *mechago*?” (p 109)

“*gonnas* and *wannas*” in “Ifemelu sensed, from...his *gonnas* and *wannas*”. (p 115)

obi ocha in “Obinze often used to describe the people he liked: *obi ocha*”. (p 147)

acata in “Nigerians call us *acata*, right?” (p. 319)

Aunty” has been used throughout the novel like “*ma*”.

4.1.2. Inter-sentential switching: Code Switching

In the same way, inter-sentential switching characterized by the shift from a previous language (L1) to another language (L2) between two sentences or phrases has also been noticed in *Americanah*. The cases of inter-sentential switching found are:

Ha, o di egwu, in “Ha, o di egwu, for where?” (p 24).

Asa! Ugo! in “Sunshine in the evening! *Asa! Ugo!*” (p 22)

O di egwu! in “you should have heard your father’s big word now! *O di egwu!*” (p. 47)

Ngwa in “Ngwa, go and iron it” (p 49)

Ndo in “Ifem, I don’t know what got into me. *Ndo*” (p 83).

Adi m ime in « *Adi m ime* », she said simply. (p 83)

gini in “What? *gini*? Ifemelu asked”. (p 119)

The recapitulation of the findings with regard to the different types of code switching/code mixing in *Americanah* is displayed in the following table:

Table n° 1: different types of code switching/code mixing in *Americanah*

N°	TYPES OF SWITCHING	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Intra - sentential switching	16	69.56
2	Inter-sentential switching	07	30.43
	Total	23	100

The representation of the results obtained from the table above is shown in the graph below:

Types of Code Switching/Code Mixing in Americanah



Graph n°1: Code Switching/Code mixing in *Americanah*

4.2. Applying Hoffmann’s theory for the Analysis of Code mixing/Code switching in Matigari

4.2.1. Intra - sentential switching: Code mixing

Ngugi mixed in this version of *Matigari*, Gikuyu and English. So intra-sentential switching under the form of loan or borrowing words have been noticed throughout the novel. The cases of this type of code switching or code mixing are as follow:

Ugali in “*Ugali* and Roast Meat and Stew; Greens and Maize...” (p 23) and in “The other policeman cooking *ugali*”. (p. 80).

Lasso in “...her flower-patterned *lasso* around her shoulders...” (p. 28).

Mzee in “Hey, *mzee*, the Black man shouted...” (p 44).

Matatu introduced in “He travelled in *matatu*...lorries” (p 84) and in “If we can find a bus or a *matatu*, we can first.....nightfall.” (p. 144). *Matatu* has also been used on p. 145.

Uvumi in “*Uvumi*-rumour...” (p 104).

Sababu in “They may arrest anyone...without *sababu*”. (P 125).

4.2.2. Inter - sentential switching: Code switching

In the same way, inter-sentential switching has also been noticed in *Matigari*. The cases of inter-sentential switching found are:

Shauri Yako in “Their voices were partly drowned blaring out a song: *Shauri Yako*” (p. 25).

Wewe mwenda wazimu in “*Wewe mwenda wazimu*, the policeman with the dog told...” (p 32).

Hakuna Njia! in “*Hakuna Njia*. Ha, ha, ha...” (p 44).

Wapi ule mwivi in “*Wapi ule mwivi?* One of the.....asked”. (p 51)

Ni ule mzee! Ni ule mzee! in “*Ni ule mzee! Ni ule mzee!* One...said” (p 51).

Wewe punda milia! in “*Wewe punda milia!* One ...him” (p 52).

“*Lakini Watona cha mtema kuni*” (p. 108)

“*Kiama Kiria Kirathana*” (p 119).

Mbwa Kali in “At each gate... *Mbwa Kali*” (p. 149).

Maendeleo ya muafrika maendeleo ya wanawake in “*Maendeleo ya muafrika maendeleo ya wanawake And that is not the end of the story.*” (p. 153)

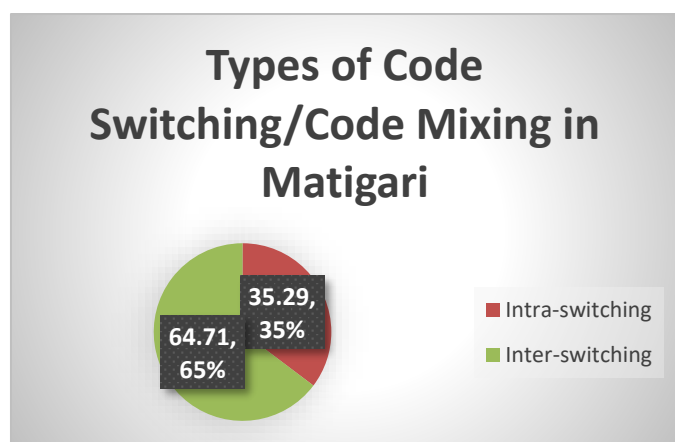
Sisi mbwa kali in “A few others were growling *Sisi mbwa kali*” (p. 174).

The recapitulation of the findings with regard to the different types of code switching/code mixing in *Matigari* is displayed in the following table:

Table no 2: different types of code switching/code mixing in *Matigari*

N ^o	TYPES OF SWITCHING	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Intra - sentential switching	06	35.29
2	Inter-sentential switching	11	64.71
	Total	17	100

The representation of the results obtained from the table above is shown in the graph below:



Graph n° 2: Code Switching/Code mixing in *Matigari*

4.3. Loan-blends cases in the two novels

Apart from intrasentential and intersentential code switching, there is also other cases of borrowings characterized by the combination of local languages with the foreign language to provide a cultural connotation to the compound words. It is the case of loan-blends.

Some cases of loan-blend cases are noticeable in the two novels under study.

4.3.1. Loan-blends in *Americanah*

There are two cases of loan-blend finds in *Americanah* which are:

Onugbu soup in “.....for pounded yam and onugbu soup....”. (p 28).

Aje-butter! in “Aje-butter! University boy!...” (p 41)

It is important to note that “*Onugbu*” here just gives precision on the type of soup described in the text and indicates thus a type of Nigerian typical meal.

4.3.2. Loan-blends in *Matigari*

The cases of loan-blends that occur in *Matigari* are as followed:

mûgumo tree in “...I buried my weapons under the roots of a *mûgumo* tree.” (p. 62).

leleshwa bush in “...Gûthera and Mûriûki were sitting under a *leleshwa* bush trying in vain...”. (p. 136).

Esso filling-station in “*Matigari* hurried towards the *Esso* filling-station...” (p 158).

The name “*mugûmo*” is attached to the English noun “tree” which is a strong tree that dominates other trees and is immortal. This tree is a traditional symbol of Kikuyu society. *Mugumo* trees are places for religious ceremonies, home to ancestral spirits and under which elders worship the Kikuyu God whose name is Ngai. It is under this type of tree that *Matigari* buried his weapons.

Leleshwa refers to the name given to a bush, in Kenya, to particularize the area all the events occur.

Esso refers to the filling station which is located in Kenya. Its name fully indicates it and puts the readers in the universe of any Kenyan street.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Linguistic study of the two novels under study definitely shows that some African authors use a variety of strategies to valorize their local languages leading thus to the preservation to the cultural identity of the African continent to reveal more the meaning of the story Chimamanda is conveying to her readers. Therefore, the context of culture is largely valorized through a set of relevant linguistic features.

Among these strategies, there are: code mixing and various strategies including, loan-blends and Words borrowing (loan words). Implicitly, African local languages are known by millions of readers in Africa and all over the world.

5.1. Why do African writers promote African languages and culture through their works?

Language is one of the major issue regarding African literature but it seems authors write in the language that the majority may understand. African writers most of the time write in foreign languages. Some of them, willing to promote their local languages, mix them strategically in their works. African writers include African languages in their writing for the following reasons:

- Firstly, English, French and Spanish (which are the main foreign languages) have long been and are till now (and for long time again) being valorized to the detriment of indigenous languages. As said above, when a language dies, its culture dies too. No one, no people would like to lose its language, the language of his ancestors. So everyone tries to "save" his language and even wishes to see the local language emerged. This is one of the main reason which motivates African writers to include their local language in their works.

- Secondly, another reason is the willing to raise indigenous languages up. This complex of languages inferiority seems to put back African culture which is in a way or another, very rich. Africa is a linguistic and culturally rich continent. Literature which is a channel of transmission of values, history, etc and culture. Since literature is a carrier of culture, African authors take advantage of it to drive through the insertion of local languages words/expressions words in written works thus the valorization and promotion of these language. A promoted language favours its culture promotion. African authors contribute to the African language promotion by putting their readers in the sociocultural context of Africa.

Thirdly, authors use and valorize their indigenous languages for some purposes including a well description of the physical environment of the scene where the action occurs.

Authors find it judicious to refer to languages inferences to well describe the African contexts. To reach this purpose, they refer to the words of their language to show things and describe how things are in African areas. Let's take this example of places description in Arrow of God of Chinua Achebe.

"His *obi* was built differently from other men's huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right as you entered. The eaves on this additional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch that part of the sky where the moon had its door." (p.1)

The word "*obi*" which is an Ibo word has been "borrowed" by Achebe and I inserted into the English text in the process of a place description. Far in the sentence, Achebe uses the word hut which helps guessing the meaning of "*obi*". Hut means a very simple house built in campaign and made up with local building materials. The Ibo name used reinforces this context: the context of village. Village life living is proper to Africa.

Sometimes, even if there is not any language mixing or interferences, the description itself is done such a way reader may easily find themselves in the context of typical African villages. When there is an inclusion of words from the local language then the readers is fully involved in the context so desired by the writer. Here is an example drawn *Think Fall Apart*. "All cooking pots, calabashes and wooden bowls were thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortar in which yam was pounded". (p.26).

5.2. How do some African authors contribute to the African languages promotion?

Many strategies are used by some African writers to include, valorize and promote their languages in the African literature. Some of them in study in this research paper are more explained below:

✓ The use of Code mixing/Code switching caused by bilingualism.

As examples of bilingualism, let's study this example:

- "Ifemelu: "Dike, I mechago?"
- Aunt Uju: "Please don't speak Igbo to him." Aunt Uju said. "Two languages will confuse him".
- Ifemelu: "What are you talking about, Aunt? We spoke two languages growing up."
- Aunt Uju: "This is America. It's different." (Chimamanda, 2017:109)

Here Chimamanda organises her novel in such a way that when dealing with conversations between Nigerians or while relating the part of the story in the Nigerian context, she relays on both her local language which is Ibo and the foreign language which is English. This part above firstly shows the bilingualism culture in Nigeria which is part of education. This conversation takes place in America, of course far from Nigeria. But the interactants are Nigerians: Aunt Uju and her niece Ifemelu. It is a familiar context favourable for a language mixing due to their bilingualism status. Both the interactants are used to this type of language since their childhood: the indigenous and foreign languages that make more sense. Ifemelu and her aunt are Ibo, they grew up in Ibo family and Chimamanda shows it well in her writing. Through this way, she wants to focus on the familiarity aspect among the family members. Ifemelu consider Dike like her son. So there is a strong feeling between Ifemelu and Dike. Even if Dike is not her son, Ifemelu considers him as hers. The son of my brother or sister is my son. There is then a strong familiarity among them. This is the African mentality and culture.

Since Igbo is their local language, Ifemelu automatically mixed the two language: “Dike, I mechago?” (p.109).

Speeches are made in the novel depending on the context. Indeed, Chimamanda adopts a language mixing style with the interactants from Nigeria more precisely from Ibo area. Ifemelu, the main character of the novel, interacts differently according to the origin of her respondent.

Chimamanda expresses here the impact of Ibo culture on young Nigerian students when they are together sharing ideas in a very familiar way.

However, when the context changes, the language style changes too. As example in the following passage, Ifemelu is talking to her first husband Curt (from his real name Curtis). Curt is a White American from Potomac who loves in Baltimore. So no more Nigerian context. Chimamanda reports conversations in the couple in a formal English. No more mixing or language interference since Ifemelu now deals with someone from different nationality and culture.

Curt told her, “Stop stressing, babe. It’s a really cool and brave look.”

“I don’t want my hair to be brave.”

“I mean like stylish, chic.” He paused. “You look beautiful.”

“I look like a boy”. (p.209).

It is the same case in the following example in which Ifemely is talking with her second boyfriend, a Black American whose name is Blaine. They are both (Blaine and Ifemelu) Black but from very different origins or areas, then

from different cultures! In such situations, Chimamanda reports their conversations in formal English even in their intimate moments like with Curt.

“She wanted to say, “Blaine, people lie.” But she said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He was looking at her as though she had reached in and torn away his innocence, and for a moment she hated him, this man who ate her apple cores and turned even that into something of a moral act.

“I don’t know why, Blaine. I just didn’t feel up to it. I didn’t think you would mind too much.”

“You just didn’t feel up to it?”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you about the lunch.”

“How is this lunch suddenly so important? You hardly even know this Boubacar’s colleague!” he said, incredulous. (p. 345).

However, when Ifemelu faces her formal boyfriend, Obinze from Nigeria, the style of conversation changes as they are both Ibo! They are coming from the same area and are like brothers! In Africa, when you meet someone who tells you that he/she comes from the same village or area with you, there is automatically a feeling of brotherhood. In exchanges, speaking habits are shared, languages mixed or same languages spoken to express more easily facts. So then when the author of *Americanah*, shows this fact in her novel with examples of familiar conversations between Ifemelu and Obinze which are more familiar than the unilanguage exchange presented above:

✓ The use of loanblends

Loanblends which are compound words made up with words from two different languages have special role to provide a specific connotation or meaning to the overall designated aspect. The linkage of two words from different languages leads to two cultures union. When the loanblend “egusi soup” is considered for example, the word “soup” is well understood by the reader who is used to read in English since he or she is reading a literary work in English. At this level, the reader can be native or not. However, its association with “egusi” will require more thinking even curiosity to understand the type of soup for non-igbo or non-African readers. By this way, one will undertake research in this field if he is so desire. Go ahead to the discovery of Igbo, African culture!

The various answers provided to the research questions implicitly bring elements that confirm the different assumptions. In fact, the ideas developed show that it really exists a range of demonstrations of African languages in

African literature written in western languages. When including by all ways their languages in their writings, post-colonial authors contribute to the improvement of the status of these languages which are being neglected to the benefit of western languages.

VI. CONCLUSION

African writers through their works have the « power » to valorize their local languages. This has started with a range of authors who use various strategies to show, valorize, maintain and thus promote African languages. The study of some literary works reveals the wonderful and huge aspect of the African culture through the usage of words. Facing this critical situation of language use in African literature, how to do to solve this issue? Based on the different analyses, comments and interpretation made on the findings related to loanblend, code mixing/code switching cases in *Americanah* and *Matigari*, it can be concluded that various strategies are used by African writers based on the purpose of their writings, the target readers, and other factors. It seems times have come to give chance to African languages to be taken into account in the arena of foreign languages use in colonized countries. Is it not time to consider all languages the same way? What hinders indigenous languages to move ahead? The possible ways to put or consider these languages in the key parts of the society like Administration, schools, services are to be aware of this fact and as proof and engage in a continuous sensitization. A language represents a whole community, the history of a nation, the culture of a nation, a region or a whole continent. There is no reason to put aside any of languages which are by the way very dynamic.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ayeomoni, M.O. (2012). The Languages in Nigerian Socio-political Domains: Features and Functions. Canadian Center of Science and Education. Vol. 5. N° 10. Doi: 10.5539/elt.v5n10p12.
- [2] Haruna, A., Christopher, A. A. & Halim, R. (2016). "Code-Mixing As a Sociolinguistic Device in Hausa Contemporary Literature". *Journal of Applied Linguistic and Language Research*. Vol. 3, No 3. pp. 154-161.
- [3] Hasan, R. (2002). Ways of Meaning, Ways of Learning: Code as an Explanatory Concept. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Vol. 23. N° 4. Pp. 537-548.
- [4] Hoffman, C. (1991). *An introduction to bilingualism*. London: Longman.
- [5] Koussouhon, L. (2009). Lexico-pragmatic transfer in Anglophone African fiction: a linguistic and sociolinguistic reappraisal with a theoretical underpinning. *Geste et Voix* N° 6 pp: 76-100.
- [6] Muyken, P. (2000). *Bilingual speech: A typology of code mixing*. Cambridge university press. U.K.
- [7] Tabe, C. A. (2023). Code-Mixing and code switching in Camerron social media. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies*. Vol. 4, No 1. pp. 47-61. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i1.279>
- [8] Ubiri, E. V. & Ufuoma, O. T. (2023). Code-Mixing and Code-Switching as foregrounding techniques in Ojo-Ade and Sanusi selected novels. *International Journal of Arts, Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*. Vol. 12. N°. 3.
- [9] Otegbale, E. S. et al. (2023). "Code-Mixing and Code-Switching as Foregrounding Techniques in Ojo-Ade and Sanusi selected novels". *International Journal of Arts Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*. Vol.12, No. 3.
- [10] Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Pennsylvania: Newbury house Publisher
- [11] Adichie, C.N. (2013). *Americanah*. Ibadan: Farafina
- [12] Thiong'o, N.W. (1987). *Matigari*, Kenya: Heinemann Kenya LTD



Climate Change and Male Migration in Ganges River Basin of Bhojpur District of Bihar: Climate Adoption and Feminization of Agriculture

Amrit Lal Jaiswal

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Jagjiwan College Ara Bihar, India

Received: 11 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 08 Oct 2025; Accepted: 12 Oct 2025; Available online: 15 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper discusses the effect of extreme weather especially rains resulting to floods on male migration. Directly and indirectly many socio-economic situations emerge in areas of Ganga basin due to this extremity of weather. People in this region face floods in monsoons and respectively droughts in the next summer which affect their livelihood and well being. Due to continuous recurrence of this situation agriculture is no more beneficial for them, not even for survival. So men are migrating towards cities for better job and livelihood. But this extreme weather situation, a by-product of climate change affects the men and women in different ways. Men migrate from villages and women remain at home. Absences of male counterparts push women to take part in agriculture activities as cultivators or agriculture labours. In other words climate change affects the women adversely because now women work in agriculture with household activities. Due to this change women are participating more compare to male and this situation is known feminization of agriculture which is happening in Ganga basin region of Bhojpur district of Bihar. Various other socio economic changes are happening due to this climate change like changing form of agriculture land, crop pattern, and changing farmers' role. Finally this paper concludes different potential policies to minimise the affect of climate change and tackle with emerging situations.



Keywords— Climate change, Floods, Migration, Feminization of agriculture, Ganga Basin

I. INTRODUCTION

Climate change affects the whole world, and India is feeling it too. India's location and its economy, which depends a lot on farming, make it very vulnerable to climate change. This leads to more severe and unpredictable problems for its people. India faces floods, heatwaves, weak monsoons, and unexpected rain. These extreme weather events make India the fourth most affected country in the Global Climate Risk Index (Sönke et al, 2016: 7). The National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) says that women might suffer more from climate change (Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2008). This edition of the Review of Women's Studies looks at why this policy is important by studying how women deal with the challenges of climate change.

The Ganga River is very important for Bihar. It flows for approximately 445 km through the north-central part of the state. The river affects most of the area with its water supply. The Ganga enters Bihar from the west in the Buxar district. It then flows through Bhojpur, Patna, Saran, Vaishali, Munger, Bhagalpur, Katihar, and other districts of Bihar. After moving through eastern Bihar, the Ganga moves towards West Bengal.

People in Bhojpur face problems with too much or too little water because of climate change. It is important to understand these problems. They mainly deal with two weather issues: floods during the rainy season and droughts in summer. These problems affect people differently based on gender, caste, and class. The difference in access to resources between men and women affects how they handle these problems.

This study, based on comprehensive fieldwork conducted in Bhojpur, situated in north Bihar, investigates several critical issues. A notable deficiency in the current body of research is the limited examination of the micro-level effects of adaptation strategies. Typically, non-farming rural households are often neglected in broad analyses of climate change impacts. One prevalent adaptation strategy is male migration; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all such migration can be directly attributed to climate change.

Objective of the study

- Analyzing the impact of climate change on agriculture.
- Analyzing the impact of climate change on migration.
- Explain the changing role of female in agriculture due to climate change

II. METHODOLOGY

Methods like group talks, interviews, watching participants, and walking through areas were used to collect main data. Looking at both physical and social factors made the analysis better. The research was done in Bihar's Bhojpur district from February to July 2025 in four villages. Each village had a different situation: frequent floods, a new flood area, floods from building projects, and being far from government help. All these villages are inside the Ganga embankments. These villages, located up to 1.5 km from the left bank of the Ganga River, are low-lying and experience frequent flooding and water logging for two to three months annually.

Climate Change in Bhojpur

Bhojpur district, situated in the western region of Bihar, has Arrah as its administrative centre. Geographically, it is positioned between the Ganga River to the north and the Son River to the east, which contributes to its fertile land, ideal for farming. Spanning approximately 2,400 square kilometres, the district is part of the Gangetic plain. The climate is tropical, characterized by hot summers, moderate monsoon rains, and cool winters. The alluvial soil deposited by the rivers makes the area highly productive for crops such as paddy, wheat, pulses, maize, and sugarcane. Economically, Bhojpur is largely agricultural, with the majority of its population involved in farming and related activities. Agriculture forms the backbone of the district's economy, and irrigation from canals and rivers boosts productivity. In addition to agriculture, the district hosts small-scale industries like rice mills, oil mills, handloom weaving, and brick kilns. Bhojpur is recognized for its vegetable production and

floriculture, which are gradually expanding. Although industrial growth is limited, the district holds potential due to its fertile land and proximity to key markets like Patna and Varanasi. Migration to other states for employment is also common, highlighting the need for more local industrial development.

Climate change has become a significant concern in Bhojpur. Historically, the district experienced minimal annual flooding during the summer monsoon season, which was beneficial for enhancing soil fertility. However, with the expansion of the city to encompass parts of the Ganga and Sone rivers, the depth and duration of flooding in certain areas have increased. Previously, the region was characterized by consistent, low-intensity rainfall, with the Ganga swelling to double or triple its size due to heavy rains in Nepal. This pattern has shifted to persistent rains during the monsoons, resulting in sudden floods followed by prolonged dry periods. The monsoon season, which traditionally commenced in June and concluded in September, now often begins in the last week of May, with floods occurring as early as June. In rural areas, floodwaters previously receded within a week, but now the land remains waterlogged for a month, adversely affecting the kharif (monsoon) crops. In some parts of Bhojpur, waterlogging persists for three months or more

Agriculture and climate change

Historically, annual flooding was an important feature of the region. Farmers waited for it and used the fertile silt to cultivate crops. Water logging was not a part of this process. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the colonial administration built numerous embankments in the area ostensibly to protect the city and its surrounding areas from floods, but, in the process, destroyed the natural drainage (Nevill 1909; Gupta et al 2013). Such measures coupled with the usurpation of numerous water bodies in the region led to perpetual water logging, destruction of livelihoods, and uprooting of households. A typical example is the displacement of fishers (Nishads and Kewats), especially of Ramgarh Tal in the city, whose livelihoods were destroyed due to rampant encroachment of lakes in the city, including by the state. In 2010, only 40% of the fishers depended on the lakes for a livelihood. The rest had been forced to leave their traditional occupation and work as casual wage labour (Mitra 2010).

These communities seek to diversify their livelihoods as casual daily wage labour, painters, and carpenters in urban areas.

Those that stay back need cash for food security. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and distribution of food through the public distribution system helps those who cannot migrate,

such as women, the elderly and children who cannot work. For many of the small and marginal farmers, one option in the face of failing crops and lack of remunerative prices is to sell their land and migrate to the city. Such land transfers are boosted by the increased demand for land for housing societies in peri-urban areas. Sometimes, especially in the short run, the women and those who cannot work stay behind in the homestead. The scenario is rather complex and needs to be analyzed in its nuances. In the next section, the phenomenon of migration spurred by climate change, especially of the men, is discussed.

Most literature on the impacts of climate change fails to make the fundamental distinction between the landed and the landless. In this region, there is tremendous heterogeneity in the social and occupational structures. The artisanal class (potters, ironsmiths, washers, fishers, and boatmen) has almost disappeared, having migrated to towns, sometimes leaving behind their family in the short run. However, while not all of the migration of the artisanal class is because of climate change, it has to be noted that a general agricultural crisis has an impact on the agrarian economy as a whole, lowering the wages and demand for casual labour (Himanshu 2006). Indeed, Indian agriculture has seen a general decline in agriculture and a gradual withdrawal of the state from the sector, especially since 1990. In "economically backward districts, agricultural policy supports from the state are defined more by their absence than presence" (Mitra 2015: 288).³ In real terms, this has meant massive shifts in the structure of the agricultural workforce.

Thus, between the 2001 and 2011 Census, rural cultivators in Bhojpur declined by 35.96% and rural agriculture labourers increased by 55.95%. This in itself is an indicator of the decline of agriculture due to state policies and subsequent pauperization accentuated by climate change.

The overall decline of agriculture affects the non-landed classes who survived by servicing agriculture and agriculturists, like potters, ironsmiths and flayers. Many of them have joined the agricultural labour force while others have migrated to cities and towns.

Migration and Climate Adaptation

Migration, particularly among men, as a response to adverse local conditions, is a prevalent characteristic of small peasant economies. During the colonial period, Bhojpur and the broader region of southern Bihar served as significant sources of indentured labor for British colonies in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the West Indies, recruited by agents known as *arkatis* (Mitra and Singh 2011: 2). These laborers were enlisted through the infamous indenture system initiated by colonial authorities

in 1834 and were referred to as *girmityas* due to the agreements they signed for an initial five-year term. This system was abolished in 1920 (Mitra and Singh 2011: 1). It is noteworthy that while some individuals from upper castes became *girmityas* due to unforeseen circumstances, the majority were from lower castes, compelled to migrate to escape "the clutches

Essential municipal services critical to the city's functioning, such as sewer maintenance, are predominantly performed by individuals from lower caste groups, including primarily marginal farmers and landless laborers. A significant number of these individuals do not possess adequate housing in their rural communities (Mitra and Singh 2011: 12-20).

At the local level, the concept of climate change is not widely recognized. Consequently, when discussing the reasons for migration, no one attributed it to climate change. Instead, a significant majority (81.3%) pointed to *garibi* (poverty) as the primary cause. The respondents linked poverty with food insecurity, which they believed stemmed from a lack of job opportunities. Notably, food insecurity and unemployment were identified as the second and third most significant factors driving migration (Mitra and Singh 2011: 24).

Migration is driven by multiple factors, with climate change intensifying the phenomenon. The geographical features of eastern UP render it particularly vulnerable to flooding. Over recent decades, both the frequency and intensity of floods have markedly increased, now occurring every three to four years. In certain regions, flooding has become an annual event, adversely affecting livelihoods. To evaluate the influence of climate change on migration, respondents were queried about flooding, riverbank erosion, land infertility, and the region's susceptibility to drought (Mitra and Singh 2011).

Migration, particularly among men, as a response to adverse local conditions, is a prevalent characteristic of small peasant economies. During the colonial period, Bhojpur and the broader region of southern Bihar served as significant sources of indentured labor for British colonies in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the West Indies, recruited by agents known as *arkatis* (Mitra and Singh 2011: 2). These laborers were enlisted through the infamous indenture system initiated by colonial authorities in 1834 and were referred to as *girmityas* due to the agreements they signed for an initial five-year term. This system was abolished in 1920 (Mitra and Singh 2011: 1). It is noteworthy that while some individuals from upper castes became *girmityas* due to unforeseen circumstances, the majority were from lower castes, compelled to migrate to escape "the clutches

Essential municipal services critical to the city's functioning, such as sewer maintenance, are predominantly performed by individuals from lower caste groups, including primarily marginal farmers and landless laborers. A significant number of these individuals do not possess adequate housing in their rural communities (Mitra and Singh 2011: 12-20).

At the local level, the concept of climate change is not widely recognized. Consequently, when discussing the reasons for migration, no one attributed it to climate change. Instead, a significant majority (81.3%) pointed to *garibi* (poverty) as the primary cause. The respondents linked poverty with food insecurity, which they believed stemmed from a lack of job opportunities. Notably, food insecurity and unemployment were identified as the second and third most significant factors driving migration (Mitra and Singh 2011: 24).

Migration is driven by multiple factors, with climate change intensifying the phenomenon. The geographical features of eastern UP render it particularly vulnerable to flooding. Over recent decades, both the frequency and intensity of floods have markedly increased, now occurring every three to four years. In certain regions, flooding has become an annual event, adversely affecting livelihoods. To evaluate the influence of climate change on migration, respondents were queried about flooding, riverbank erosion, land infertility, and the region's susceptibility to drought (Mitra and Singh 2011).

Climate change and changing role of women in agriculture

Gender affects how people adapt to changes. Men and women deal with changes in their lives, and these are shaped by gender roles, class, caste, age, education, job, and where they live. Studies show that poor people face many daily risks and stresses (Rao et al., 2017). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's fifth report noted that risks from climate change are linked to other factors like geography, farming, and economy. These factors make some people more vulnerable to climate change (Field et al., 2014).

People often confuse climate variability with climate change. Climate change means more extreme weather over a long time. Climate variability happens in the short term. Adaptation is how people and systems adjust to climate change. In nature, adaptation happens after changes occur. In human systems, it can happen before or after changes, and both private and public groups can do it (Mitra 2008a: 2). In India, adapting to change involves individuals, society, and farming. It's important to look at gender roles and how climate change affects different farming systems, social groups, and relationships.

Many small farmers are leaving farming and selling their land because of climate change. This is happening because more people want land for houses as cities grow. Land prices near Bhojpur city have gone up a lot. Even in areas that flood, the price is ₹50,000 to ₹60,000 per decimal. Farmers have sold some of their land because they can make money and farming is hard to continue. Some people have also been cheated in land deals in this area (Mitra et al. 2015: 21).

In these areas, women have changed farming a lot. Many women grow and sell vegetables because their husbands work in cities. Women in this area earning 15000 to 20000 from farming and dairy production. They bought electronics items and turned her mud hut into a two-story brick house with marble floors. They told their husband to collect milk from neighbors and sell it in the city, making a profit of 15 per liter.

Studies have shown that men and women see land use in peri-urban areas differently (Haller 2014; Rakodi 2014). In the outskirts of Bamako, Mali, men were unhappy about farmland being turned into housing because they did not benefit from it. On the other hand, women saw more chances for business. They have had trouble getting land but are good at small trade. The demand for garden products is growing, and women are in a good spot between rural growers and city buyers (Bah et al 2003).

Most of the women rented irrigated land to grow vegetables. These deals, called *hunda*, are made verbally for fixed cash rent. These women got the lease because they knew the landowner, who did not want to lease it to her husband. They also rented out their own non-irrigated land to someone else in the village. The money from her vegetable farming help them support their family, which includes their children and other members. Even with their new role, traditional male-dominated values are still strong.

In the area, women often rent small pieces of irrigated land to grow vegetables and use machines while the men are away. Some old methods, like mixed cropping and three-tier farming are being used again. Vegetable farming is usually done along with dairy and poultry work. However, none of the women own land in their names. As a result, only 10% of Indian women have land registered in their names (Mitra 2008b; Brule 2012), and many of them do not know they own it.

Challenges and policy implication

Women's role in farming is affected by religion, caste, and class. Climate change affects everyone in an area, but how people deal with it depends on their social and economic status. In the villages near Bhojpur, many small Muslim

farming families face problems. Changing weather, flooded fields, and crop failures make farming hard.

In the Muslim community, women usually cannot work in public places. Some women tried to work as farm laborers in a nearby village, but the community leaders did not allow it. Farming is not allowed at all. The community believes that education is very important for children because it is seen as the only way to escape poverty. They survive on their earnings and by renting out land.

Many women have started growing vegetables to deal with climate change. However, the state does not see them as farmers because they do not own land and have informal, spoken agreements. This lack of recognition affects their access to support and loans. Current support services are not enough, do not cover vegetable farming, and often leave out women. Only 5% of small farmers in India get these services, which is about half of what bigger farmers get. About 40% of support jobs are unfilled, especially in poorer areas where small or tribal farmers live. People from seed, fertilizer, and pesticide companies often act as support workers, but they usually do not focus on vegetable farming.

Women who farm do not have access to loans from banks. Small farmers, whether alone or in groups, should be able to get cheap loans from public banks using Kisan Credit Cards (KCCs). However, in villages near cities, people mostly use informal loans. The days of big, unfair moneylenders are over, but farmers, both men and women, still borrow from family, friends, and sometimes local moneylenders. Some farmers get money in advance from traders. No one mentioned using KCCs.

There is a lot of talk about MGNREGA. Many women and men say they do not get benefits even though they have job cards.

III. CONCLUSION

Ahmed and Fajber (2009) contend that incorporating gender considerations into adaptation policies and programs goes beyond merely including women's issues. It necessitates a deep understanding of gender-specific vulnerabilities and a more robust allocation of resources—financial, technical, and human—to address particular gender-related priorities. In this regard, it can be asserted that SHGS in the IBD have adopted gender mainstreaming. They have facilitated the economic independence of rural women and significantly improved their socio-economic status, leading to poverty alleviation and aiding their adaptation to evolving conditions. The WSHGs examined in the study were managed by NGOs as an alternative to conventional financial institutions to serve

the marginalized sections of society. These groups play a crucial role in helping the community adapt to climate change by providing additional income for families. Therefore, in the current climate change scenario, it is increasingly vital to bolster the WSHGS to significantly reduce women's vulnerability, especially in the context of widespread male migration.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arora-Jonsson, Seema (2011): "Virtue and Vulnerability: Discourses on Women, Gender and Climate Change," *Global Environmental Change*, Vol 21, PP 744-51.
- [2] Bunce, Anna and J Ford (2015): "How Is Adaptation, Resilience and Vulnerability Research Engaging with Gender?" *Environmental Research Letters*, Vol 10, No 12, <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/10/12/123003>.
- [3] Field et al (2014): "Summary for Policymakers," *Climate Change 2014 Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability Summaries, Frequently Asked Questions, and Cross-Chapter Boxes A Working Group II Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Field et al (eds), Geneva: World Meteorological Organization.
- [4] Heyer, Judith (1989): "Landless Agricultural Labourers Asset Strategies," *Institute of Development Studies, IDS Bulletin*, Vol 20, No 2, pp 33-40.
- [5] Kandiyoti, Deniz (1988): "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society*, Vol 2, No 3, pp 274-90.
- [6] MOEF (2008): "National Action Plan on Climate Change," Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Government of India, viewed on 22 June 2017, http://www.moef.nic.in/mod-ules/about-the-ministry/CCD/NAP_E.pdf.
- [7] O'Brien, Karen, Siri Eriksen, Lynn P Nygaard and Ane Schjolden (2007): "Why Different Interpretations of Vulnerability Matter in Climate Change Discourses," *Climate Policy*, Vol 7, No 1, pp 73-88.
- [8] OHCHR (2016): "Half-day General Discussion on 'Gender-related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change,'" Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, viewed on 6 December 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/ClimateChange.aspx>.
- [9] Rao, Nitya (2014): "Migration, Mobility and Changing Power Relations: Aspirations and Praxis of Bangladeshi Migrants," *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol 21, No 7, pp 872-87.
- [10] (2017): "Assets, Agency and Legitimacy: Towards a Relational Understanding of Gender Equality Policy and Practice," *World Development*, Vol 95, pp 43-54.
- [11] Rao, Nitya, Elaine T Lawson, Wapula N Raditloaneng, Divya Solomon and Margaret N Angula (2017): "Gendered

- Vulnerabilities to Climate Change: Insights from Semi-arid Regions of Africa and Asia," *Climate and Development*, doi: 10.1080/17565529.2017.1372266.
- [12] Sönke, Krefte, David Eckstein and Inga Melchior (2016): "Global Climate Risk Index 2017: Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Weather-related Loss Events in 2015 and 1996 to 2015," briefing paper, German Watch, Bonn.
- [13] Agarwal, Bina (1994): *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Vol 58, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- [14] Adger, W Neil (1996): "Approaches to Vulnerability to Climate Change," *Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment*, Working Paper GEC 96-05, East Anglia.
- [15] Adger, W Neil et al (2003): "Adaptation to Climate Change in the Developing World," *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol 3, No 3, pp 179-95.
- [16] Adhikari, Jaganath and Marry Hobley (2011): "Everyone is Leaving-Who Will Sow our Fields? The Effects of Migration from Khotang District to the Gulf and Malaysia," *Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation*, Kathmandu.
- [17] Bhatia, Siddharth, Guru Balamurugan and Annu Baranwal (2014): "High Arsenic Contamination in Drinking Water Hand-pumps in Khap Tola, West Champaran, Bihar, India," *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, Vol 2, No 49, pp 1-10.
- [18] Dankelman, Irene (2010): *Gender and Climate Change: An Introduction*, Abingdon: Routledge. DAWC (2013): "Hazard, Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment," *District Administration of West Champaran*, Government of Bihar, Bettiah.
- [19] Denton, Fatma (2002): "Climate Change Vulnerability, Impacts, and Adaptation: Why Does Gender Matter?" *Gender and Development*, Vol 10, No 2, pp 10-20.
- [20] Farbotko, Carol and Heather Lazrus (2011): "The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu," *Global Environmental Change*, Vol 22, No 2, pp 382-90.
- [21] FMISC (2011): "Flood Report 2011," *Flood Management Improvement Support Centre*, Department of Water Resources, Government of Bihar, Patna.
- [22] Ghosh, Tuhin and Anirban Mukhopadhyay (2014): *Natural Hazard Zonation of Bihar (India) Using Geoinformatics: A Schematic Approach*, Springer.
- [23] Gilson, Erinn (2013): *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- [24] Gol (2011a): "District Census Handbook-Paschim Champaran," *Census of India 2011-Bihar: Village and Town-wise Primary Census Abstract*, Directorate of Census Operations Bihar, Government of India.
- [25] Agarwal, Bina (2011): "Twelfth Plan Working Group on Disadvantaged Farmers Including Women: Final Report," submitted to the Planning Commission, Government of India, http://planningcommission.gov.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/agri/wg_Final_Report_sent.pdf.
- [26] Ali, Ahmed (1979): "The Indenture Experience in Fiji," *Bulletin of the Fiji Museum*, No 5, Fiji Museum, Suva, Fiji.
- [27] Mitra, A, S Wajih and B Singh (2015): "Wheezing Ecosystem, Depleting Livelihood Services and Climate Change Resilience: The Saga of Gorakhpur City, Uttar Pradesh, India," *Asian Cities Climate Resilience*, Working Paper Series 18, International Institute for Environment and Development, London.
- [28] Mitra A, B K Singh, A K Singh and S Katyal (2017): *India's Peri-urban Crises: The Lack of an Eco-systems Approach*, Gorakhpur: Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group



The Phonetics-Phonology Interface and Overlap: A Brief Article Review

Asst. Lect. Ina'am Abdul-Jabbar Abdul-Kadhim

Ministry of Education- Thi-Qar Education Directorate
inaam.a@utq.edu.iq

Received: 08 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 07 Oct 2025; Accepted: 11 Oct 2025; Available online: 15 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— The word "phonetics" is notoriously difficult to pin down since, right from the start, this subfield of linguistics has dealt with two distinct but related concepts: phonemes and speech sounds. To put it simply, phonology is the scientific study of phonemes. There are three points of contact between phonology and phonetics. To begin, phonetics is a tool for characterizing unique traits. Additionally, numerous phonological patterns can be explained by phonetics. Some have referred to these two interfaces as phonology's "substantive grounding." Lastly, phonological representation is put into practice by phonetics. This interface suggests some areas that should be investigated in both disciplines: In the overlap theory, no one's identity is lost; just as land and water are distinct, so too are phonetics and phonology. A cognitive representation of language-specific information is the "output" of the phonological module, which is the specification that interfaces with phonetics. In contrast, the exemplar theory posits that when we compare new information with instances we already know, we tend to group things into preexisting categories.



Keywords— Phonetics, phonology, interface, overlap.

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous ideas about the interface within the broad churches of phonetics and phonology since they can and have been defined in a wide variety of ways. It is preferable to attempt to determine some of the more general underlying principles that trigger specific models rather than cataloguing and contrasting these in any detail, and then sketch some broad families of interface types.

While language is the distinctive feature of human beings, phonetics comes to be the 'systematic study' of the speech sounds of this language, where sounds could be described as "mechanical pressure waves" of word pronunciation. It is "physical and directly observable" (Ogden, 2009, p.1). One of phonetics' basic paradoxes is that observing individuals to learn something about the behaviour of groups of people. This is beneficial for both our immediate surroundings and ourselves as examples of various groupings. The linguistic and phonetic study of a language, the relationship of phonetics with other disciplines of linguistics, involves determining how the sounds of

language (the phonetic part) are used to convey meaning (this is what distinguishes it from a study of the sounds human bodies can make), including how words are formed, it could be referred as the relationship between phonetics and semantics. How words are put together, how similar (but different) strings of sounds can be distinguished (such as "I scream" and "ice cream") - indicating the relationship between phonetics and phonology. How specific shades of meaning are conveyed, this is where phonetics meets pragmatics, and how the specifics of speech relate systematically to its inherently social nature (phonetics and sociolinguistics). Moreover, Phonetics is one of the basic branches of linguistics, naturally it is closely connected with the other linguistic disciplines. The connection of phonetics with grammar, lexicology and stylistics is exercised first of all via **orthography**, which in its turn, is closely connected to phonetics. Through the system of rules of reading, phonetics is connected with **grammar** and helps to pronounce correctly singular and plural forms of nouns, the past tense forms and past participles of English regular verbs.

Additionally, phonetics is closely linked to stylistics through intonation and its components: speech melody, utterance stress, rhythm, pausing, and voice tone, which serve to convey emotions and differentiate attitudes of the author and speaker. Often, the writer helps the reader interpret ideas using specific words and remarks such as: a pause, a short pause, angrily, hopefully, gently, incredulously. Phonetics also relates to stylistics through the repetition of words, phrases, and sounds; this repetition forms the basis of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration. Special attention should be given to the relationship between phonetics and the social sciences. The functioning of phonetic units in society is examined by sociophonetics, which analyzes how pronunciation interacts with social factors. In other words, it studies how phonetic structures change in response to different social functions. Phonetics is also closely linked to several non-linguistic disciplines that explore various aspects of speech production and perception, such as physiology, anatomy, and physics (acoustics). In phonetic research, they use tools like mathematics, statistics, and computer science. There is another area closely connected with phonetics: the study of non-verbal means of communication.

Phonology, on the other hand, “examines language sounds as mental units, encapsulated symbolically... and focuses on how these units function in grammars”. From the phonological perspective, sounds are particular units that integrate with other specialized equipment and simulate sound waves. The behaviour of these sounds within a system is what phonology examines (Odden, 2013, pp. 4-11). However, there is no clear-cut separation between phonetics and phonology, just as it is, in some ways, difficult to make a principled separation between physics and chemistry, or sociology and anthropology. Although they both deal with language sound, phonetics and phonology focus on various facets of sound. Phonetics, which focuses on acoustic waveforms, formant values, and measurements of duration measured in milliseconds, of amplitude, and of frequency, deals with “actual” physical sounds as they appear in human speech. Phonetics also examines the physiological underpinnings of sound generation, such as the resonances of the vocal tract and the muscles and other articulatory structures that produce those resonances. On the other side, phonology is an *abstract cognitive system* that deals with rules in a mental grammar: ideas from unconscious “thought” that are connected to language sounds.

The lines separating the fields of phonetics and phonology, however, are not fully distinct until going deeper still into the fundamental issues of phonology. Taking these areas in advance, it has become clear that taking phonetics into account is necessary for a better understanding of many

phonological concerns, just as a phonological analysis is necessary for the phonetic study of language.

The Domain of Phonetics and Phonology

The study of sound units and how they are arranged inside morphemes, words, and expressions in languages is known as **phonology**. These units are *abstract* because phonological units might belong to the same category despite having a wide variety of phonetic details. The phonetic realization of these units is symbolic in that it is a *concrete* illustration of these more ethereal concepts. Moreover, the study of how languages differ is a central issue in phonology, as one language varies from another in their particular inventory of these categories, as well as from the certain restrictions they set on their arrangement, such as language restrictions different types of consonants in different words. The phonological unit of analysis is called **phoneme**, among other units of analysis, it is notable, abstract and observable. Phonetics, on the other hand, centralizes on the “analysis of physical and physiological dimensions of human speech” (Kennedy, 2022, p.683).

As an aspect of interface, both phonetics and phonology address the function of articulation and acoustics in language. The phonology of acoustic and articulatory patterns is still treated as a system of categories rather than a formalization of phonetic effects. Studies on typology and acquisition provide additional support for the hypothesis that phonetic influences on phonological systems exist. For instance, some phonemes are present in many languages, if not almost all of them, while others are found in considerably fewer languages, a phenomenon that is probably related to their distinctiveness and learnability. The phonetic characteristics of abstract phonemes are connected to the phonological characteristics of visible manifestations. The use of articulatory (Chomsky & Halle, 1968) and subsequently acoustic (Jakobson et al., 1952; Fant, 1960) phonetic descriptors to define and categorize phonemes is of special relevance in this context. In these concepts, [+nasal] units are subject to place assimilation, much like in Malay. Phonology was able to grow as a science independently of experimental or measurement-based phonetics thanks to the emphasis on phonemic inventory and distribution during the early stages of feature-driven inquiry.

A significant observation concerning the contrast of analysis in both domains is that the “tools of phonemic analysis and representational modelling in phonology are distinct from the instrumentation and measurement used in phonetics” (Kennedy, 2022, p.688). Phonetics, as it has been mentioned before, deals with the physical aspects of speech, while the abstracted component of symbols in phonology is

frequently conceivable as the imposition of categories on continuous phonetic dimensions, according to the analysis of boundaries in phonetic dimensions (689).

Phonetics/ phonology Interface and Overlap

In linguistics, the idea of an interface suggests a relationship between two independent theoretical fields, each of which is focused on a particular subset of linguistic events. If the domains are different, the purpose of interference is to state the necessary connections between them; otherwise, if these domains share a great deal in common, the purpose of interface is to provide theoretical competition between the two to support specific theories of modular demarcation (Scobbie, 2005, p.1).

The phonetics/phonology interface is argumentative, where the question lies in explaining the prior spectacle in the sound system from either phonetic or phonological perspective. To put this in question: what is the nature of the Phonological data? What gets into surface structure in the first place? Different theories of constraints and constraint interaction will be needed depending on the forms of allophonic variation present in the surface structure. The main revitalization of interest in the theoretical importance of the interface to phonology has come from the relatively small number of researchers who are interested in understanding quantitative data, even though phonological theory is completely dependent on the inclusion or exclusion of specific phenomena from the set of relevant data. However, if the surface representation that phonological theory seeks to produce is random and faultless, then the implications for phonology go well beyond the purely technical question of whether or not a low-level phenomenon is given an analysis. The crucial point here is how many phonetics\ phonology interfaces are there? - According to Kingston (2007, p.401):

Phonetics interfaces with phonology in three ways. First, phonetics defines distinctive features. Second, phonetics explains many phonological patterns. These two interfaces constitute what has come to be called the 'substantive grounding' of phonology ...Finally, phonetics implements phonological representations.

The interface within definitions, "Phonetics aims to study patterns and systems in a normalized physiological/ mental setting, using evidence drawn from specific examples of learning in childhood, application in production and perception, and storage in the brain". The phonetic data is of physical aspect of real space and time. While phonology goes beyond phonetics towards abstract relations between contrastive units (Scobbie, 2005, p.5).Traditionally, distinctive features could be defined phonetically with a particular value of the phonological representation of an

utterance. Distinctive feature values are differently realized within different languages, contexts, speaking styles, and even speakers.

Explanation is the second dimension of the interface. The Phonetic explanations of phonological patterns are built from physical, physiological, and/or psychological properties of speaking and listening. For example, /g/ is missing in Dutch and Thai but not /b/ or /d/ because it is much harder to keep air flowing up through the glottis when the stop closure is velar rather than bilabial or alveolar. This dimension of interface demands a phonetic explanation of the inventory content each language has, for example, explaining vowel inventories in each language and then classifying them into patterns to be discussed.

The third dimension of interface is implementation. Phonetics implies phonological representations in two ways: when phonetics is placed with markedness. For example, when a coronal stop sound is followed by non-coronal stop sounds (t,k, d,g), the coronal articulation becomes briefer and reduced. The second one is categories and gradients. Phonology is commonly thought to deal in categories, while phonetics deals instead with gradients (Kingston, 2007, 412-433).

So, it could be suggested that almost all phonetic processes to be phonologized or grammaticized since they have a cognitive representation under an explicit control of the speaker and then turned to be the physical representation which is speech (Zsiga, 2020, p.18-19).

Assuming that both "phonology and phonetics are learnt, language-specific and cognitively represented, then the dividing line is not between linguistics and non-linguistics, but between different parts of linguistics," it is easier to understand the interface argument. It is possible to think of phonology and phonetics as distinct language modules, each equally important but addressing distinct phenomena with distinct basic ideas and procedures. The modules of linguistic theories were connected through a derivation: the phonology's output was the phonetics' input, and the syntax's output was the phonology's input. By the end of the twentieth century, this was very much the general consensus. "Where is the dividing line?" is the fundamental definitional question in a modular approach to phonetics and phonology. What distinguishes the phonetic module from the phonological module? According to Scobbie (2007), this line can be thought of as a fence or a boundary, and each fact about sound patterns must be positioned on either side based on how well its features align with the fundamental attributes of that module. Important research problems include defining the definitional aspects of phonetics and phonology and identifying the precise features of specific alternations or rules.

In summary, there is a significant interface difference between phonology and phonetics: Linguistics includes both phonetics and phonology. Phonology is qualitative and conceptual, focusing on the correspondence between sound and meaning. Phonological laws can be understood by introspection and are formal, syntactic, and algebraic. On the other hand, phonetics deals with quantifiable, physical data that cannot be accessed through introspection and is described by physics and continuous mathematics.

Approaches to the Interface

Saussure's distinction

The concept of a division of labor between two distinct fields in the study of speech sounds—disciplines that more or less resemble what is taught in university courses on phonetics and phonology at the start of the twenty-first century became ingrained in linguistic theory at the start of the twentieth century, with scholars like Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in Switzerland and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (born in France) and others. Saussure's distinction in the speech circuit of speech sounds stages: five stages: "two psychological, two physiological, and one physical". He insists on two distinct approaches to analyzing speech sounds: one is "linguistics proper" and focuses on how "sound image" relates to meaning; the other is completely unrelated and does not focus on how sound pictures are physically implemented in the body. Claiming that it would be "fanciful" to view language and speaking from the same perspective (Zsiga, 2020, pp. 7-9).

Saussure defends Baudouin's concepts about phonetics, which were called "anthropo-phonetics" and became known as simply "phonetics", and what he called "psycho-phonetics" became "phonology". Like Saussure, Baudouin de Courtenay wanted to shift the focus of linguistics from historical reconstruction to "pure linguistics, whose subject is language itself". He also insisted on the separation of the physical and the psychological in the study of speech sounds, which he described in terms very similar to Saussure's (though without the clever diagrams). He wrote, "two elements are inseparably linked in language: a physical and a psychological a natural science . . . anthropo-phonetics, closely related to mechanics (dynamics, kinematics) and physics (acoustics, optics), and psycho-phonetics, which is a 'humanistic' science closely related to psychology and sociology". To anthropo-phonetics he assigned the study of articulatory, auditory, and "cerebral" structures and functions, noting that these were not "truly psychological or linguistic" (Stankiewicz 1972b: 278, Cited in Zsiga, 2020, p.9). To psycho-phonetics, he assigned the study of all psychological aspects of language, including abstraction, generalization, and particularly of the phoneme (a term which he was the first to use in its modern sense),

which he defined as "the psychological equivalent of physical 'sound,' the actual and reproducible unit of linguistic thought".

Phonological Structures VS. Phonetic Substance

1- Trubetzkoy Distinction

Different scholars distinguish the concrete and specific "speech event" from the abstract and general "system of language", inseparably linked and should be considered two aspects of the same phenomenon, language. But they are different and need to be studied differently. For phonology, they use the term (abstract) while (concrete) referring to phonetics. A phonological analysis will begin with a phonetic transcription as data, and with consideration of phonetic factors as a starting point, linguists must realize that "higher levels of the phonological description, that is, the systemic study and the study of combinations, are quite independent of phonetics".

2- Spair's distinction

Linguists are increasingly familiar with the idea of the "phoneme," which is a functionally significant unit in the rigidly defined pattern or configuration of sounds unique to a language, as opposed to the "sound" or "phonetic element," which is an objectively defined entity in the articulate and perceived totality of speech. As it becomes increasingly clear that no entity in human experience can be sufficiently described as the mechanical sum or product of its physical properties, the difficulties that may still seem to exist in differentiating between the two must finally vanish. (Zsiga, 2020, pp. 12-13).

A general model of the generative interface

This broad model states that phonology and phonetics differ in two ways, which are frequently combined in any particular model. The cognitive (or social) and physicalistic instantiation of sound systems is one dimension that clearly illustrates the a priori motivation for the modularisation of phonology and phonetics. Since phonology and phonetics must describe abstract relationships (usually thought of as cognitive systems of mental representation) while the former must deal with events in the physical world, they are represented as labels for two distinct and non-overlapping domains. Discrete transduction (T) and relative concreteness (C) are two examples of this kind of interface (Scobbie, 2005, p.7). Because phonological symbols must somehow be translated into physical actions and back again, the interface can be thought of as a transducer or translator. Studying the interface entails studying how this is accomplished.

The interface from a modular perspective

There is an organization based on a limited number of categorically distinct modules within a domain-and-interface model of grammar. This architecture does not appear to be unmanageable if the number of modules is kept to a minimum. However, given the number of sub-modular (i.e., comparatively independent) theories that are specific to stress, intonation, feature theory, constraint interaction, perception, production, sociophonetics, and phonemics, the number of modules may be very large. There will be more interactions if phonology has sub-modules, and there will also be more "border disputes" with phonetics. Explaining phonologization as the distinct transfer of phonetic phenomena over the interface into phonology is the aim of modularity.

Kennedy's (2022) Characterization of Phonetics/Phonology Interface The following is a concise account of Kennedy's characterization of the phonetics-phonology interface:

- 1- Experimental Phonology: Phonetic Evidence for Phonological Constructs. Instead of relying solely on perceptually distinct allophones and proof-elicited data, the search for phonetic evidence for phonological constructs focuses on finer instrumental measurements designed to find perceptually subtle phonetic correlates of phonological differentiation. Recent laboratory-derived phonological research, organized by types of phonological phenomena to which phonetic research bears relevance:

A- Vowels

The phonology of vowels is notable for its reliance on placing abstract Categories of height, backness, rounding and length over gradient phonetic dimensions.

B- Consonants

Consonant phonology also contains several phonological dimensions in which abstract categories such as place, manner, sonority and voicing are imposed over continuous phonetic correlates. Moreover, as with vowels, consonant phonology may invoke scenarios where a segment shares some feature with an adjacent unit, or where a structure-changing process seems attributable to phonetic pressures. Each of these can be investigated with laboratory methods.

C- Laryngeal Features

The role of voicing and other laryngeal behaviours arises in many other patterns where the phonetics of phonation interacts with phonological dimensions. The process of voicing assimilation is a prime example of how phonetic data informs phonological research.

D- Syllable Structure

Beyond segmental analysis, other phonological research explores how segments are organized into the abstract grouping of syllables and metrical structure, as well as how morphological structure interacts with the realization of phonemes. Hence, it is an empirical question whether the same phonological category may present differently in different syllabic or morphological contexts.

For example, Davidson and Roon (2008) compare the durations of adjacent consonants with and without intervening morphological boundaries in Russian. Since segment duration is affected in slight ways by morphological context, we can infer that their phonetic form reflects a more abstract level of morphophonological representation. Sugahara and Turk (2009) employ a similar methodology for English. Phonetic support for phonological claims about prominence and syllable position is also widespread.

1- Tone & Prosody

The phonology of tone and intonation is another area in which to explore the interplay between abstract categories and phonetic dimensions. As a physical dimension, tone and pitch are a function of f_0 , corresponding to the rate of cyclical vibration of the vocal folds. Fundamental frequency is employed contrastively in tone languages, where the relative pitch that accompanies segmental strings serves as a phonological contrast. Despite the inherently gradient nature of f_0 within and across speakers, tone languages impose categories across the pitch spectrum, and these categories are determined relative to a speaker's baseline register and to position within a phrase or utterance.

2- Linguistic Phonetics

Somewhat distinct from phonetically based phonological theories stands another thread of research that, for lack of a better term, we can call linguistic phonetics, in opposition to experimental phonology. In the place of attributing phonological processes to formal principles that encode phonetic pressures, these approaches subsume the explanatory work of traditional phonological analysis with enriched conceptualizations of phonetic knowledge. Through this lens, the distribution of sounds within and across languages is a function just of phonetic principles, without any additional abstract phonological processes invoking or imposing categories over phonetic dimensions.

3- Best Practice for Teaching and Learning in Linguistics Pedagogy

There is a range of contexts in which the phonetics/phonology interface arises as a topic in university coursework. It is a rich enough field that it could fill a

curriculum for a graduate or advanced undergraduate research seminar. Indeed, even a single area of experimental phonology (e.g. segmental assimilation or tonal phonology) is sufficiently rich to provide a basis for coursework while providing models for advanced students to pursue similar questions. The best pedagogical practices in such a scenario include an emphasis on sound phonetic methodology combined with steps to ensure that experimentally derived phonetic effects are attributable to the phonological conditions that they are intended to test. Even in such an empirically oriented instructional context, and despite the breadth of research that so closely intertwines phonetic and phonological analysis, my own pedagogical intuition here is to remind students recurrently of the distinct purviews and goals that separate phonetics and phonology as fields of inquiry.

4- Future Directions

We have seen that, as fields of linguistics, phonology and phonetics both have long philosophical and methodological traditions and have progressed in parallel over time, with increasing attention to the mutual influence that phonological and phonetic patterns have on each other. The range of theoretical orientations for exploring their interface is itself quite wide, but regardless of where one draws the line between phonetics and phonology, any such exploration must wrestle with linking the continuous physical dimensions of phonetic science with the abstract cognitive categories and rules of inventory, combination and sequencing that typify phonological models.

The potential for expanding the scope of research that investigates the phonetics/phonology interface is certainly very broad. **First**, more data will add to our understanding of the interface itself, **and** so the myriad of questions about relationships between phonological constructs and their phonetic counterparts can continue to be extended to a wider range of examples and languages.

The overlap Hypothesis

In the transition area between phonetics and phonology, the interface blends elements of discrete modularity with non-modularity. According to overlap hypothesis, this realm encompasses both land and sea, as well as the physical and cognitive spheres. The land and the sea, as well as phonetics and phonology, are not the same; therefore, overlap in this sense does not "imply loss of identity." Significant progress has been made in both theoretical and experimental methods as a result of important works in the phonetics-phonology interface that have attempted to accomplish the goal of bridging the gap between the two disciplines. All works on the phonetics-phonology interface have relied rather heavily on theoretical assumptions provided by phonological models that have

been tested using fairly basic experimental designs and data analysis tools, even though one of the main goals of research in this area is to provide novel experimental data that can test widely held assumptions about phonological structure in languages (Romero & Riera (eds., 2015, p.xv-xviii). (Romero. & Riera (eds., 2015, p.xv-xviii).

An example to propose the nature of the interface is the idea that Language has a specific phonology, while phonetics is universal:

The "output" of the phonological module, i.e. the specification which interfaces with phonetics, is a cognitive representation of language-specific information. Once universal phonetic detail is added, the transduction interface can be the same in every language. This proposal expands phonology downwards a bit: the formal phonological mechanism necessary for contrast would be used to express all language-specific sound system generalisations from the most phonetic-like to the most morphophonemic (Scobbie, 2005, p.15).

It is simple to compare language-specific phonetic and (morpho) phonological events within the grammar when it is assumed that all language-specifics fall under the category of "phonology."

The Interface as an Object of Inquiry

The phonetics/phonology interface has hence emerged as a robust and coherent subfield of phonological inquiry. This type of interface appears to be a subject of research in both fields. Some of these recent research areas are the following (Kennedy, 2022, pp. 690-700):

- 1- Themes of design: comparisons of the phonetic properties of instances of the same abstract category under different phonological conditions in a given language, and comparisons of phonetic properties of ostensibly equivalent structures across languages. Either angle seeks concrete measurement as evidence of the configuration of abstract units, and for such questions, the full range of phonetic methodology is available to seek phonetic support for phonological claims. For example, finding an instrumental measurement intended to detect subtle phonetic correlates of phonological differentiation drawn from data.
- 2- Expanding the Scope of research

More data will add to the understanding of the interface itself, and so the myriad of questions about relationships between phonological constructs and their phonetic

counterparts can continue to be extended to a wider range of Examples and languages. A wider knowledge base is becoming more and more achievable as computer technology, data storage, and phonetic instrumentation advance in capabilities, performance, and cost. Particularly, the increasing viability of MRI and ultrasound imaging leads to the expansion of articulatory research paradigms. Similar to how Praat (Boersma, 2001) is now widely available, and thanks to the expansion of an academic community honing its use with appropriately designed analytical scripts, acoustic analysis is now a very approachable byproduct of descriptive linguistics and phonetics research.

3- . Language documentation

As a field within linguistics, language documentation is developing swiftly and as it has grown, phonetic and phonological protocols have been more heavily incorporated. Thus, phonological analysis should both drive and be directed by rigorous phonetic data collection. Additionally, language documentation practices have changed to include more speakers and community members as cooperative researchers, academicians, and authorities on their own languages. The investigation of issues surrounding the phonetics/phonology interface may be best left in the hands of community members who have been recruited and trained as scholars and have an intellectual stake in the documentation and care of the languages of their communities, because modern documentary practices involve a wider range of discourse styles and levels of linguistic analysis.

CONCLUSION

The true intricacy of the meaning of the term "phonetics" stems from the fact that, since its inception as a discipline of linguistics, it has been concerned with two different entities: phonemes and speech sounds. These two entities are related to each other in the same way as content and form are related to each other. Phonology is the branch of science that is responsible for the study of phonemes. There are three different ways in which phonetics interacts with phonology. To begin, the field of linguistics known as phonetics is concerned with the identification of distinguishing characteristics. Secondly, phonetics explains a large number of phonological patterns. Phonology is said to be "substantively grounded" by these two interfaces, as it has come to be known. Last but not least, phonetics brings phonological representation to life in the form of sound. Certain elements to be investigated in both domains are suggested by this user interface: Overlap theory, in which there is no loss of identity, states that the

land and the sea are not the same, nor are phonetics and phonology.

The output of the phonological module, that is, the specification that interfaces with phonetics, is a cognitive representation of information that is peculiar to a particular language. In contrast, the theory of exemplars argues that humans classify items by comparing new information to instances that they have previously memorized

REFERENCES

- [1] Johnson, K. (2005). "Decisions and mechanisms in exemplar-based phonology". UC Berkeley Phonology Lab Annual Report.
- [2] Kennedy, R. (2022). "The Phonetics/Phonology Interface". In Knight, R. & Setter, J. (eds.) (2022). *The Cambridge Handbook of Phonetics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Kingston, J. (2007). "The phonetics-phonology interface". Researchgate.com.
- [4] Odden, D. (2013). *Introducing Phonology*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Ogden, R. (2009). *An Introduction to English Phonetics*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- [6] Romero, J. & Riera, M. (eds.) (2015). *The Phonetics-Phonology Interface. Representations and Methodologies*. John Benjamins B.V.
- [7] Scobbie, M. (2005). *The Phonetics-Phonology Overlap*. Speech Science Research Centre.
- [8] Zsiga, E. (2020). *The Phonology/Phonetics Interface*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
<https://vikiidalka.ru/2-90661.html>.



Breaking the Cycle of Stagnation: Grief of Single Motherhood and Emotional Healing in Shashi Deshpande's *My Beloved Charioteer*

C. Lalmalsawmtluangi¹, Dr. Rafat Khanam²

¹Ph.D. scholar in English, Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, UP, India

²Associate Professor (English) & in-charge of English and Foreign Languages, Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, UP, India

Corresponding author: rafat.su201400059@subharti.co

Received: 06 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Oct 2025; Accepted: 13 Oct 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study examines *My Beloved Charioteer* by Shashi Deshpande from the perspective of emotional stagnation and how it affects single parenthood. The article explores the connection between widowed mother Aarti and her daughter Priti, highlighting how unresolved grief may lead to a never-ending cycle of emotional paralysis. The significance of familial support in attaining emotional emancipation is demonstrated by the grandmother Ajji's pivotal role in interrupting this cycle through intervention and instruction. The article highlights how loss affects generations and how self-realization and familial ties can lead to healing and fresh starts.



Keywords— Emotional Stagnation, Single Motherhood, Intergenerational Relationships, Grief and Loss, Emotional Liberation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande was born on 19 august, 1938 in Dhawarka, Karnataka. She was born into an intellectual and literary family. Her father, Adya Rangacharya, was a renowned Kannada writer and dramatist, and her mother, Sharada Adya. Her exposure to literature at a young age had a profound influence on her and sparked her passion for writing. She received her education in Bangalore and has the degree with law and economics and in Mumbai, she studied journalism at the Vidya Bhavan and worked for a few months as a journalist for the magazine 'Onlooker'. Shashi Deshpande married D.H. Deshpande. Together, they have two children. Deshpande's experiences as a wife and mother greatly influenced her writing, particularly in how women navigate personal roles and societal expectations. Shashi Deshpande wrote 13 novels, four children's books, memoir and collected essay. She is the winner of sahitya academy award in 1990 for the novel *That Long Silence* and received Padmashri award in 2009. Her novel *Shadow plays*

was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary prize in 2014. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978 and published her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* in 1980. Shashi Deshpande's published her first collection of short stories in 1978 and *My Beloved Charioteer* is one of her short stories which depicts the life of mother as a single parent, it deals with the relationship between mother and daughter moreover the life of widow and the different perspective on their life.

II. DISCUSSION

The theme of ending the cycle of stagnation is deftly examined in Shashi Deshpande's *My Beloved Charioteer* through the dynamics of mother as a single parent, especially in the relationship between Aarti, the widowed mother, and her daughter Priti. The story focuses on the effects of unresolved grief on family relationships, especially between mothers and daughters, and the

emotional paralysis that results from it. Deshpande emphasizes the possibility of emotional freedom and development by deftly illustrating Aarti's battle with widowhood and her incapacity to let go of the past. In order to help Aarti escape the cycle of emotional stagnation, the grandmother, Ajji, is crucial, proving that healing is a family process as well as an individual one. This essay's central idea is breaking the emotional stagnation. The story's protagonist, Aarti, is a widow who is following the death of her husband, finds herself emotionally unfulfilled. She clings to memories of her once-happy marriage because her grief has prevented her from moving on. Aarti becomes emotionally paralyzed by her incapacity to accept her new life to become mother as a single parent. Her relationship with her daughter Priti suffers greatly as a result of this stagnation. Given that Aarti's grief shows up as a lack of emotional availability and communication, the emotional distance between mother and daughter is evident. Consumed by her memories and the anguish of loss, Aarti grows more and more alone, erecting an emotional wall that keeps her from interacting with her daughter to the fullest extent possible. The stagnation is reflected in her incapacity to move past her grief. Aarti's relationship with her daughter, Priti, is significantly impacted by the cycle of emotional stagnation, which is especially prevalent in single motherhood. Priti is unavoidably impacted by her mother's emotional state, even though she is not yet experiencing the same grief. Priti's life is emotionally empty as a result of Aarti's retreat and her incapacity to face her loss because the unresolved grief of one generation affects the emotional development and well-being of the next, Deshpande hints subtly that emotional stagnation can be passed down through generations. One of the main conflicts in the narrative is this intergenerational stagnation, which emphasizes how the incapacity to deal with loss can limit emotional development and impede the formation of positive family bonds that is shown in these 'Do you remember your Papa?' Aarti had asked her one day with a sudden harshness.

'Papa?' There had been a moment's hesitation. Then she had replied, 'Yes, I remember.' 'No, you don't. Don't lie to me.'

The child had stared at her with a frightened face feeling she had done something wrong, though she didn't know what it was. When Aarti left us, she burst into sobs, clinging sobs" (p.186)

Ajji, plays a crucial role in breaking the cycle of emotional stagnation while Aarti is still deeply entrenched in her grief. Despite going through the agony of loss, Ajji, a widow herself, has been able to move on with her life. Ajji demonstrates emotional intelligence, resilience, and a more

well-rounded view of widowhood in contrast to Aarti's emotional paralysis. In sharp contrast to the tense and emotionally distant relationship between Aarti and herself, she has an open, loving, and understanding relationship with her granddaughter, Priti. The granddaughter, Priti's role as the future is to symbolize the potential for a fresh start. She is the new, unrealized potential to end the cycle of stagnation, even though she is growing up in a home characterized by loss and emotional strife. "I SMILE AS I hear them at last, the sounds I am waiting for. A rush of footsteps, the slam of the bathroom door and then, bare feet running towards me" (p.181) Priti's relationship with Ajji is still open and full of possibilities and unlike her mother, she is not yet burdened by the emotional scars of the past. The tense relationship between Aarti and herself is contrasted with Ajji's relationship with Priti, which is free of unresolved emotional baggage. Priti and her grandmother's relationship turns into a representation of hoping a chance to start over, get better, and move on "Happiness can mean different things to different people. For me, it is this—the beginning of a new day with this child." (p.182). In this way, Priti represents the family's future, one in which the emotional barriers of previous generations are recognized but do not limit her capacity for emotional growth. With the help and direction of sage, emotionally developed family members like Ajji, Deshpande implies through Priti that every new generation has the capacity to overcome the cycles that have held the preceding one back. In order to help Aarti face the unpleasant realities of her past and overcome the emotional stalemate that has characterized her life since her husband's passing, Ajji's viewpoint becomes crucial. Breaking the cycle of stagnation in the family is heavily dependent on Ajji's role as the matriarch and emotional mentor because of her personal experiences with loss and grief, Ajji knows how important it is to let go of the past in order to move on. She gently urges her daughter to cut the emotional bonds to her past because she understands the negative consequences of Aarti's unresolved grief. An important turning point in the story is Ajji's intervention, which initiates both Aarti's emotional awakening and the family's healing process. Aarti can learn from Ajji's emotional clarity and wisdom, which show that even in the face of severe loss, emotional development and healing are achievable. The grandmother Ajji provides a more resilient and introspective perspective on widowhood and motherhood than Aarti, who exhibits emotional stagnation. Even though she has also lost a spouse, Ajji has accepted the role of a guiding matriarch rather than one who is mired in the past by allowing herself to grieve and move on. This insight is revealed when Ajji chooses to step in after realizing her daughter is emotionally paralyzed. Her relationship with her granddaughter Priti turns out to be

crucial in resolving the family's emotional stalemate. The grief that characterizes Aarti's relationship with Priti does not affect Ajji's relationship with her despite her own loss, Ajji fosters and treasures her relationship with her granddaughter, teaching her the value of moving on in spite of the hurt caused by the past. Ajji's function as a link between generations is essential in demonstrating that emotional freedom is achievable and that, with the correct direction, the cycle of stagnation can be broken.

The act of facing grief and letting go is closely linked to the theme of emotional liberation in *My Beloved Charioteer*. Over the course of the narrative, Aarti experiences emotional release and epiphany. As she shares her own traumatic marriage and widowhood experiences, Ajji teaches Aarti the value of realizing how suffocating grief can be and how important it is to let go of the emotional burden of the past. The path to emotional release provided by Ajji's disclosures to Aarti necessitates her accepting the loss and letting go of its grip on her life. The cycle of stagnation that has characterized Aarti's life since her husband's passing is said to be broken by this act of facing grief. Aarti learns from Ajji's intervention that healing calls for more than time; it calls for an active engagement with the past and a readiness to let go of it. Aarti is able to re-engage with life and more significantly, to re-establish a healthier relationship with her daughter, Priti, thanks to this emotional release. One of the most important steps in ending the generational cycle of stagnation is the emotional liberation that Aarti starts to feel, which gives the family an opportunity to move on and heal. Although the main focus of the narrative is Aarti's battle to overcome emotional stagnation, the granddaughter Priti serves as a significant symbol of the possibility of a fresh start. The emotional burdens that impede Aarti's relationship with her mother are absent from Priti's relationship with her grandmother, which is one of respect and love. Future generations may be able to escape the cycles of emotional paralysis that have bound the previous ones, as Priti's emotional development is largely unaffected by the grief and stagnation that characterize her mother's life. Through Priti, Deshpande suggests that new generations can flourish emotionally without the burden of unresolved grief and familial stagnation if they receive the proper direction and emotional support.

III. ANALYSIS

Aarti's experiences as a widow and a mother as a single parent demonstrate how a family's cycles of stagnation can be sustained by the emotional isolation and grief that accompany losing a spouse. Aarti is unable to move on emotionally because she is a single parent. She is

unable to fully interact with her daughter or let her grow emotionally because she is unable to confront the reality of her marriage and her grief. Her daughter inherits this cycle of emotional stagnation and may later struggle with her own relationships and personal development. 'I always used to think I was very different from you. And look at us now, both of us alike. A pair of widows.' (p.184). Both Aarti and Ajji have experienced widowhood, and a large portion of their lives are shaped by their grief. Aarti's grief over her husband's passing and her incapacity to move on serve as a metaphor for how grief can consume a person and impede personal development. This theme also discusses how loss impacts a person's relationships with others, resulting in emotional conflict and feelings of loneliness. Aarti and Ajji are both impacted by widowhood, which is a major theme in the narrative. Ajji's more resilient approach to widowhood stands in contrast to Aarti's incapacity to deal with her husband's passing. 'Earlier I used to ask, 'Slept well?' And one day, she had put the cup down with a trembling hand and said, 'Slept well? No, I never do that. I haven't slept well since Madhav died. I'll never sleep well again all my life. I have to take something every night so that I can close my eyes for a few hours. Now never ask me again if I slept well.' (p.182) Deshpande examines how a woman's identity, sense of self-worth, and emotional state can be significantly impacted by the experience of losing a spouse through these two characters. The granddaughter of the grandmother (Ajji) is exemplified by Aarti. The emotional stagnation of Aarti depicts through these lines, "Aarti, after neglecting herself for days, suddenly dresses up, makes up her face and does up her hair. But it is her face that has the arid look of a desert; no smile, no happiness ever blooms there. Life has been cruelled to her. It was her father whom she had loved and he died, while I live. It was her husband she had loved even more than the child, and he died, while Priti is left to her" (p.184). She is emotionally stale as a result of her grief as a widow. She is stuck in her memories, unable to adjust to her new reality and unable to move past the loss of her spouse. Her inability to establish a deep emotional connection with her daughter Priti is a result of her tense and aloof relationship with her mother (Ajji). Additionally, this stagnation represents the larger idea that unresolved grief and emotional pain can impede future relationships and personal development. The suppressing effects of unresolved emotional burden is one of the main themes in Aarti's bitterness towards life "There is nowhere I want to go. Everywhere I see couples. I can't bear to see them. I could murder them when I see them talking and laughing" (p.185), which results from her widowhood. Her mother and her past, especially her marriage are the subject of unresolved emotional issues. The narrative emphasizes how unresolved feelings like grief

and rage can keep people stuck in the past and keep them from living fully and moving on. The way that characters like Aarti and Ajji are influenced by their pasts is greatly influenced by memory. While Ajji muses on her personal experiences with loss, love, and motherhood, Aarti is mired in memories of her blissful marriage and her bond with her father. The story illustrates how memories can affect people's current relationships and emotional states in both a comforting and limiting way. The story's central theme is 'letting go'. The grandmother learns the value of letting people move on in their own way from her relationship with Priti as she said in the story, "Happiness can mean different things to different people. For me, it is this—the beginning of a new day with this child" (p.182). The grandmother's actions reflect this theme, particularly as she tries to help Aarti get over her emotional paralysis and stifled marriage by demonstrating to her the importance of letting go of the past. It highlights the emotional necessity of escaping the confining hold of previous relationships and traumas. The story contrasts the loneliness Aarti experiences as a result of her emotional state with the friendship between Ajji and her granddaughter Priti. Grief and unresolved issues can lead to emotional isolation as demonstrated by Aarti's retreat into her memories and the gap between her and her mother. The relationship between Ajji and Priti, on the other hand, demonstrates the happiness and power that come from friendships particularly when it crosses generational boundaries.

The disruption of cyclical emotional patterns is a major theme. The narrative implies that there is always room for improvement and development, even though emotional stagnation can be passed down through families. Her grandmother (Ajji) is not only her grandmother but also her best friend in the house Ajji's intervention in Aarti's and Priti's life represents the potential for overcoming ingrained emotional patterns and achieving serenity and resolution.

In essence, *My Beloved Charioteer* touches on the complexities of family dynamics, grief, memory and the process of emotional healing all while navigating the delicate relationships between the generations. The examination of single motherhood and the theme of ending the cycle of emotional stagnation are intertwined in Shashi Deshpande's *My Beloved Charioteer*. The narrative emphasizes the intricacies of the bonds between a grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter but it also shows how these generations can be affected by emotional paralysis and unresolved grief, especially when the grandmother is a mother as a single parent. Emotional development is a major theme, especially when the grandmother realizes that Aarti's emotional stasis is caused by her inability to confront the reality of her marriage and her grief. The grandmother's journey, which ends with her

attempt to assist Aarti in moving on, serves as a metaphor for how crucial it is to face difficult realities in order to feel emotionally free and healed.

Ajji's intervention in her daughter Aarti's life is the primary act of breaking the cycle in *My Beloved Charioteer*. Ajji enables Aarti to identify the harmful patterns of grief and loneliness she has been caught in by disclosing the truth about her own stifled marriage and the significance of emotional liberation. As a result of Ajji's guidance, Aarti is able to confront her grief, come to terms with her past, and move on, which ultimately gives her the opportunity to improve as a mother to Priti and start the process of ending the cycle. Aarti's grief and widowhood combine to create a vicious cycle of emotional inactivity that hinders her ability to interact with people, particularly her daughter Priti. She is unable to reconcile her current reality as mother as a single parent with the pleasant memories of her marriage and her time spent with her late husband, so she keeps thinking about them. Since she projects her own unresolved pain on their relationship, Aarti's attachment to the past prevents her from fully interact with her daughter. The mother's emotional trauma may unintentionally become a barrier to developing a healthy, open relationship with her children, which is a common struggle in single motherhood. Aarti is unable to embrace the present and create a future of emotional development for herself and Priti because of her emotional paralysis, which is based on regret and unresolved grief. There is little space for the love or joy that could aid in the healing of both mother and daughter because of the emotional burden of her past. Aarti's incapacity to overcome her own emotional paralysis has a significant impact on her role as Priti's mother as well as her relationship with her mother. Motherhood is portrayed as a delicate balance between emotional well-being and nurturing, and Aarti's unresolved grief keeps her from giving her daughter her whole attention "But, Ajji, if I try to talk to her, she says, "Go to sleep, Priti, don't bother me." And she never sleeps at all; she just reads and smokes. And I don't like that smell." (p.184) By dwelling on the past, Aarti unintentionally inhibits her daughter's emotional growth rather than giving Priti the room she needs to develop emotionally and forge her own identity. The emotional barriers Aarti has put up around herself limit Priti's emotional development, which could have been encouraged in a healthy setting "But Mummy is with you." The child's face had fallen" (p.184). Since Aarti's incapacity to move on burdens her daughter, further entangling her in the same cycle of loss and grief, this dynamic emphasizes the generational impact of emotional stagnation. Unless a deliberate effort is made to break free, the generational effects of emotional paralysis can lead to a pattern where each new generation is burdened by the unresolve.

The Part Ajji Plays in *Breaking the Cycle* holds a value theme, Ajji, the grandmother, acts as a catalyst for the family's transformation and reconciliation. Despite having gone through widowhood and loss herself, Ajji takes a different route than her daughter. Ajji considers her own loss and history, but she refuses to let it completely define who she is. Because she understands the need to escape the emotional cycles of stagnation and grief, she has a more open and encouraging relationship with her granddaughter, Priti. Breaking the cycle of emotional paralysis that has afflicted the family is largely dependent on Ajji's strong bond with Priti and her readiness to step in and help her daughter. Ajji assists her daughter in realizing the necessity of self-liberation and emotional healing by pushing Aarti to face her emotional suffering and the realities of her oppressive marriage. This is essential to ending the cycle of inertia because it forces Aarti to face her unresolved feelings and move on as a person and as a mother. The granddaughter Priti stands for optimism and the potential to overcome the past. The next generation, represented by Priti, has the opportunity to start over and overcome the emotional stagnation that has afflicted her mother and grandmother, even though she has a strong bond with her grandmother. The emotional burden that afflicts Ajji and Aarti's relationship does not affect Priti's relationship with her grandmother. This implies that even though the cycle of stagnation is deeply ingrained, it need not go on forever.

IV. CONCLUSION

My Beloved Charioteer's healing theme emphasizes that ending the cycle of emotional stagnation requires a family effort as well as individual effort. The narrative demonstrates that although Aarti's path to recovery is extremely personal, she only starts to face and overcome her emotional paralysis with the help and intervention of her mother, Ajji. This family's joint endeavour serves as an example of how healing is only possible when there is love, understanding and a readiness to face up to difficult realities. The textual highlights that achieving emotional freedom necessitates the participation of people we love, who may either support or impede our path to self-realization. Future generations will be able to live more freely and fully as the family starts to heal as a whole as Ajji assists Aarti in overcoming the emotional stagnation of the past, the idea of ending the cycle highlights the need to allow emotional healing to occur as well as the transformative power of facing pain. Healing starts when we acknowledge and let go of our deepest hurts, as demonstrated by Ajji's encouragement of Aarti to confront the unpleasant realities of her marriage and emotional paralysis. Aarti's path is one of emotional development, and

with her mother's support, her readiness to face her past signals the possible end of the family's stagnation. The experience of being mother as a single parent and the generational dynamics within the family are closely linked to the theme of ending the cycle of emotional stagnation in *My Beloved Charioteer*. Ajji's insight and capacity to overcome her own grief provide a counterbalance to Aarti's grief and emotional paralysis, paving the way for Aarti to follow her emotional path. Through the grandmother's intervention and the potential presented by her granddaughter Priti, the story highlights the value of emotional freedom for both individual and family development as well as the potential to overcome the stagnation brought on by prior trauma. In the end, Deshpande's story shows that emotional healing necessitates both personal effort and family love and support, making ending emotional cycles a shared path to emotional freedom.

REFERENCES

- [1] Deshpande, Shashi. *Collected Stories*, Volume 1. Penguin Books Limited. February 2003, ISBN: 9789351184317.
- [2] Bhadani, Vishal. Khan, Imran. Lohani, Shabnam. Limbani, Bhautik 2022, *Shashi Deshpande, My beloved charioteer*. BAOU <http://192.168.2.196:4000/handle/123456789/483>
- [3] Banerjee, Sumita. (2015). *The theme of motherhood in contemporary Indian literature: A study of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Journal of South Asian Literature, 48(3), 66-80.
- [4] Bhattacharya, Sharmistha. (2007). *The representation of widowhood in Indian fiction: Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Feminist Literature Review, 13(2), 100-115.
- [5] Ghosh, Amitav. (2012). *Grief, loss, and memory: Exploring the emotional themes in Shashi Deshpande's works*. Indian Journal of Literary Studies, 22(4), 215-228.
- [6] Gokhale, Bharati. (2001). *The portrayal of women in Indian fiction: A study of Shashi Deshpande*. Indian Literature and Culture Review, 28(1), 115-128.
- [7] Jha, Sudhir. (2009). *Reconstructing the narrative of widowhood in contemporary Indian fiction*. Indian Feminist Studies Journal, 16(3), 143-158.
- [8] Kaur, Rupinder. (2010). *Widowhood and intergenerational relationships: A thematic study of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. The Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 17(2), 179-192.
- [9] Kaur, Rupinder. (2015). *The theme of emotional stagnation and healing in Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Indian Literature and Social Change, 29(3), 97-112.
- [10] Kumar, Shailendra. (2016). *Emotion and healing in Indian fiction: A critical analysis of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Indian Journal of Literary Criticism, 24(1), 110-125.

- [11] Mohanty, Sangeeta. (2014). *The complexities of family dynamics in postcolonial Indian literature: A case study of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Journal of Postcolonial Literature, 12(4), 160-175.
- [12] Nair, Padmini. (2013). *Grief and loss in Indian literature: A psychoanalytic reading of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Psychoanalysis and Culture Review, 41(3), 130-143.
- [13] Rao, Kalpana. (2008). *Motherhood and the cycle of emotional stagnation in Shashi Deshpande's works*. Indian Feminist Perspectives, 19(1), 82-97.
- [14] Ronak Jangid. (2021). 24052020065653-etext_mana_tv. Scribd.
<https://www.scribd.com/document/520427485/24052020065653-etext-mana-tv>
- [15] Rao, Madhavi. (2011). *Memory, grief, and the past: Exploring themes of emotional paralysis in Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. South Asian Literary Journal, 25(2), 175-190.
- [16] Shah, Neelam. (2004). *The role of intergenerational relationships in healing emotional trauma: A study of My Beloved Charioteer*. Journal of Contemporary Literature, 22(3), 98-113.
- [17] Sharma, Rajeshwari. (2006). *The emotional complexities of motherhood in Indian fiction: A study of Shashi Deshpande*. Feminist Studies in India, 30(2), 55-70.
- [18] Singh, Anju. (2010). *The intergenerational transmission of grief: A close reading of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Indian Journal of Psychological Studies, 23(2), 123-138.
- [19] Sinha, Vinod. (2007). *Exploring the theme of emotional stagnation in postcolonial Indian fiction: Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. South Asian Review, 19(1), 76-89.
- [20] Verma, Pradeep. (2012). *Healing and emotional freedom in Indian fiction: A feminist reading of Shashi Deshpande's My Beloved Charioteer*. Journal of South Asian Feminist Studies, 14(3), 91-106.



From Margin to Mainstream: Reeling Disability in the Cinematography of India

Sushovan Mishra, Dr. Brahmananda Padra

Assistant Professor, English, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, Odisha, India

brahmanandajnu@gmail.com

Received: 08 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 08 Sep 2025; Accepted: 20 Sep 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— One of the most powerful mediums for influencing audiences is thought to be cinema & filmography. India is the world's largest producer of feature films with a sizable international following, how any matter is portrayed in Bollywood, Tollywood, Kollywood etc with films and documentaries is especially unavoidable. Examining how disability is portrayed in movies is important because it influences how the public perceives, visualizes, and stereotypes people with physical disabilities in real life. The medical model of instructions, which inspects disability as a functional limitation, is the foundation of the dominant viewpoint on disability socially and psychologically. According to this set of norms, people with disabilities face a natural disadvantage in competitive social situations, which calls for medical intervention. On the other hand, the social model emphasises the inclusion and acceptance of people having disabilities within society and offers a contemporary alternative. According to this, society should remove the obstacles that limit disabled people's options. The purpose of this study is to examine how physically disabled characters are portrayed and told in current Indian cinematics. According to earlier research, Indian cinematic viewpoints have a tendency to depict characters with disabilities in a way that is complicated, fractured, dependent, and pitying in general though there were certain exceptions to it. However, it appears that the representation of disabled characters in films has changed since the inclusion of disability rights & bills to the mainstream dices.



Keywords— Disability, Indian cinema, stereotype, inclusivity, social stigma, mainstream, filmography

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, a person's disability is mostly perceived as the wrongdoings of their assumed previous lives. The notion of karma in determining societal attitudes toward disability has been highlighted in large portion of India's disability literature. People with disabilities view deformity as a form of punishment for their parents' transgressions. There are numerous disabled characters in ancient Indian texts like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, who are generally described as strong but crafty and mischievous. The mindset and pre-established conjectures are way beyond than the modern idea of practicality and often sparks debate around.

Disabled people are frequently treated insensitively in Indian society since the advent of major

myths of Indian classical literature like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and *regional folklores*. Incidents of ridiculing people with disabilities in everyday life are not taken seriously. It appears that prejudice against disabled people is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and thought. There was no discernible public discussion of disabled people's rights until the past ten years. Characters with disabilities have typically been portrayed subtly in Indian filmography over the past century, with a few exceptions. In light of this sociocultural and humanistic context, it appears that stereotypical depictions of disabled characters, particularly in public arena, have cultural roots that warrant careful examination.

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, learning or sensory

impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (United Nations 2006).

Physical disabilities can coexist with mental, neurological, learning or psychological disabilities. These disabilities include things like *dyslexia*, *dysgraphia*, *dyscalculia*, *dyspraxia*, *Asperger syndrome*, *autism*, *cerebral palsy*, *muscular dystrophy*, *amnesia* and more. In India, the *Disability Rights Movement (DRM)* is a relatively recent phenomenon in contrast to western nations. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it began as a few dispersed, individual attempts in various formats.

Cinema and filmography continue to be a powerful tool for educating, entertaining, and changing people's attitudes and behaviours despite the attached conflict between real-life and the fictional scape. The transformation of people's perceptions and the debunking of social clichés have been especially successful outcomes and courageous removal of stigmatised ideologies. In movies, disability is rarely depicted realistically; instead, it is either viewed as a sign of damnation or as a silly or frightening person if we view the earlier timelines from the first half of 20th century. Rather than educating about the lacking perspective and belonging with a raised awareness of the disability in terms of humankind, the storyline primarily puts disability for dramatic impact. Characters with disabilities are frequently used for financial benefit, to evoke fear, or as objects of sympathy and mercy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Interdisciplinary research on how people with disabilities are represented in media has been expanding, spanning disciplines like sociology, cultural theory, film studies, and disability studies. This topic has historically been marginalised in India, but recent advances in academia and film have sparked important discussions about the agency, voice, and visibility of people with disabilities in filmography. Two fundamental models form the basis of a large portion of the scholarly discussion on disability in film:

According to the Medical Model, disability of a person is a personal flaw or limitation.

According to the Social Model, systemic exclusion and social barriers cause disability.

According to academics like *Lennard Davis (2013)* and *Tom Shakespeare (2006)*, movies frequently support the medical model by showing disabled people as inspirational, charitable, or pitiful.

In the Indian context, the marginalisation of individuals with disabilities, which is frequently mirrored in

popular media, is shaped by deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and institutional frameworks, as criticized by *G.N. Karna (2001)* and *Anita Ghai (2003, 2009)*. With little regard for realism or lived experience, *Ghai* specifically contends that Indian cinema usually constructs the disabled body as a site of spectacle, pity, or miraculous cure.

Chatterjee (2016) examines how disabilities are portrayed in Indian cinema by concentrating on four Hindi films: *Koshish*, *Sparsh*, *Black*, and *Barfi*. In contrast to the conventional view of disability as evil or ungodly, his article claims that Bollywood's portrayal of disability appears to be more varied and inclusive.

In their exploratory study, *S. Venkatesan et al. (2015)* employ evocative techniques to awaken viewer recollections regarding representations of people with disabilities in Indian cinema. Focus groups, brainstorming sessions, and theme-based group discussions were conducted with a total of 27 non-disabled multilingual college students. The study's findings showed that female respondents most frequently remembered the representation of the "hero" as the protagonist who suffered from a mental illness. Images, themes, language, and terminology that are most commonly evoked still reflect the depressing, negative, struggling, agonized, or resentful stereotype of how people with disabilities are depicted in modern movies.

The democratization of content is gradually changing the narrative from tokenism to authenticity, according to studies by *Bhattacharya (2021)* and *Pradhan (2022)*. Even so, disabled audiences still face accessibility issues such as the absence of audio descriptions or captions.

Although Indian films have attempted to "enhance" society's "sensitivity," a *World Bank study titled "Disability Glare on Bollywood,"* which was commissioned by the Indian government, claims that the portrayals of disabled women in the "modern myth machine" of Bollywood are insufficiently strong. According to the study, Bollywood portrays a hero or heroine's disabilities as usually acquired after birth, thereby "normalizing" the actor. In addition to data from the *National Sample Survey of 2002* and the *Census of 2011*, *Philip Keefe*, a Social Protection Specialist at the World Bank, based this report on a survey that was carried out in numerous states.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The representation of disability in Indian cinematography is examined in this study using a qualitative content analysis framework. The method is interpretative and descriptive, with the goal of investigating the narrative patterns, character development and audience

reactions to movies with disabled themes or characters. Without directly comparing the texts, the analysis explores how these depictions either support inclusive cinematic discourse or perpetuate stereotypes based on specific disabilities represented, which are commonly seen in India. The study chooses a wide variety of Indian TV shows and movies from mainstream, regional, and over-the-top (OTT) platforms using purposive sampling. A thematic analysis of the chosen works is conducted using the narrative structure cum plotline, character portraiture and audience reaction. The chosen corpus includes 17 films and 2 television epics representing various genres, languages (Hindi, Bengali, Tamil), and time periods. Selection criteria include diversity of disability types, reach and popularity, mediums of distribution and in consideration of linguistic and regional discrepancy. The films and episodes themselves, as viewed on authorized over-the-top (OTT) platforms (Netflix, Prime Video, Hotstar, YouTube, etc.) comprise the primary data. Secondary Data includes panel discussions at film festivals, audience reviews, media coverage, interviews, and scholarly analyses pertinent to each filmography.

Unraveling and Dissection

Bollywood, the leading film industry in India, has historically used stereotypes to depict people with disabilities for example reference to *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003) as comical juncture, filmography like *Sadma* (1983) and *Anuraag* (1972) as metaphor for morality or divine punishment and to the iconic roles of (*Black, My Name is Khan*) as inhibited chronicles to be overcome. However, in terms of emotional intensity and acting range the actors have gone beyond the bar of expressions and understanding. Many critics claim that films like *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), and *Barfi!* (2012) are groundbreaking follow-ups with accurate representations of a situation with societal adjustments and genuine concerns. With the enhanced strategy and through the parlance of criticism director culture has been flourished with the rise of OTT platforms and new norms regarding censorship. In *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Laila*, the main character, has cerebral palsy. Her motor functions are problematic. She is a talented creative writer, a chess player, and a composer. She displays vitality, wit and humour. Even though she works, her mother must occasionally take care of her. Characters with physical disabilities are depicted fighting in many of the films, but this one is entirely different.

Recent biopics and the inclusion of debarred section of disabled have been included in the storytelling art of *Chandu Champion* (2024) and the upcoming one *Sitare Zameen Par* (2025) respectively. Visually, the contrast between gold-lit Paralympic arenas and dusty wrestling

grounds of Chandu Champion conveys both adversity and success. Boxing, swimming, and even a one-shot battle scene are examples of realistic sports scenes that showcase camerawork aimed at exposing the difficulties of disability beyond sentimentality. Although several critics believed it skipped over the physical retraining process, it normalises disability by portraying Petkar as an athlete ahead of a "differently-abled" person. Its photography, emotional depth, and Kartik Aaryan's metamorphosis were all acclaimed by critics, however some claimed it overused well-worn biopic clichés. The movie aggressively challenges the "*Bechara*" (pity) syndrome through direct monologues that challenge narratives that rely on sympathy. With real actors with disabilities, *Sitare Zameen Par* promises a more inclusive, ensemble-based story. A dispute over inventiveness versus faithful adaptation has been sparked by early comments that claims it is a scene-by-scene remake of *Champions*. Sudha Murty, however, labels it a "eye-opener" that challenges social conventions and demands sensitivity. Viewers now want representation that is genuine and unpitying, which is a change in audience sentiment. Real disabled voices should be included both on and off screen, and they want nuanced representations that steer clear of emotional clichés. Some view the remake format as a creative risk, with a flipped storytelling of adults helping the coach with disabilities issue in terms of eye-opening spirit, but it is riding optimism for heartfelt storytelling. But for the matter of fact a common concept is the "supercrip," a disabled person who triumphs over hardship to become an inspiration has been seen throughout the style and artistry of the makers.

Beyond focusing on the protagonist's journey to overcome his disability, *Srikanth* (2024) examines his shortcomings, ambition, and morally dubious moments, portraying his disability as an integral aspect of who he is rather than just a barrier. Pratham Mehta uses close-knit, realistic images all throughout the movie. Simply compassionate, focused framing that fits with daily living rather than producing spectacle—nothing too dramatic. By using natural lighting, everyday settings, and understated graphics to highlight his character's inner world rather than his infirmity, the camera reflects Srikanth's viewpoint. Ability is prioritised in the narrative over impairment. Not only is Srikanth blind, but he is also intelligent, ambitious, ethical, and yes, even egotistical. By focussing on the actual societal impediments rather than his vision disability, it promotes equality, empathy, and inclusivity. We witness the character's ascent, his shortcomings (his haughty phase), and his redemption, giving him more depth than a straightforward "hero overcoming disability" cliché. Positive reviews for Rajkummar Rao's highly embodied performance, which many have praised as genuine and

humanised instead of tokenistic. The Netflix edition lacked audio descriptions, which some believed went against the inclusive theme. Nevertheless, accessibility attempts were acknowledged, albeit incomplete. Realism and humility are the foundations of narrative depth, although they can occasionally veer into moralistic preaching. The portrayal of Rajkumar Rao, praised for its realism and restraint, continues to serve as the film's emotional fulcrum. More than 70 actors with disabilities were cast, which attracted particular attention. However, the official remake of the *Forrest Gump* (1994) in essence *Laal Singh Chaddha* (2022) faced strong backlash from the audience for repeated use of terms like "langda/langdi" ("crippled") and as exaggerated performance of the actor in terms of facial gestures yet the movie managed to carve out the struggles the character had to undergone with an insight into the lived experiences. Laal shares traits with neurodivergence or intellectual developmental delay, such as sluggish processing, literal interpretation of language, and social awkwardness, even if they are not mentioned in the movie. His moral purity, perseverance, and innocence are framed by these qualities, which make him an observer of India's social development. Dramatically stylised, the braces-breaking action represents "freedom from limitation" in a really mystical, cinematic manner. The slow motion and swelled background music used in this scene, however, have been criticised for being unduly emotional and clichéd, which reinforces the idea that "overcoming disability" is possible by sheer effort.

In the 2010 film *Guzarish*, cinematographer Sudeep Chatterjee uses a purposefully moving camera to contrast the protagonist's immobility with images of fishbowls and fluttering curtains to bring life to the wheelchair-bound magician *Ethan Mascarenhas*. The movie is about this quadriplegic, or paralysed from the neck down. The main source of contention is Ethan's wish to pass away with honor—not because he is depressed, but rather because he feels that life is not living without agency. The movie examines issues of freedom, bodily rights, and morality in addition to pity for people with disabilities. The portrayal of Ethan is one of humour, emotional intelligence, and dignity despite his physical immobility. In order to contrast Ethan's immobility, Sudeep Chatterjee employs sweeping, mobile camera movements; the environment around him is always moving and full of warmth and richness. Ethan's home is a riot of colour, sound, and dramatic light, reflecting his lively inner life and mind. Instead of using pathetic close-ups, the movie presents Ethan with empathy rather than sympathy by utilising aesthetic distance and visual grace. Ethan's prior physical freedom and current corporeal captivity are contrasted through flashbacks of him as a magician, but always

through an artistic rather than tragic lens. Instead of being a straightforward inspirational story, it centres on *paraplegia* and the right to *euthanasia*, giving *Ethan* agency in choosing death and posing a significant ethical conundrum. *Progeria* is viewed by Paa (2009) as a reversal of the father-son relationship, in which the child is the wise parent figure. Auro's disability doesn't determine his abilities or relationships; he is shown to be intellectual, humorous, playful, and emotionally mature. The movie stays away from the cliché of "overcoming" a disability. Rather, it normalises Auro's condition by demonstrating how he leads a fulfilling life despite his physical limitations. The narrative focusses more on love, parenting, and emotional development than it does on the illness itself, and his mother (Vidya Balan) raises him with confidence and independence. To immerse viewers in Auro's universe, cinematographer P. C. Sreeram employs organic framing and warm, genuine lighting. There aren't many pity shots on camera. Instead, it intimately and respectfully depicts Auro's everyday activities, school life, and emotional manifestations. Christien Tinsley, a Hollywood artist, created the prosthetics and cosmetics that were used to realistically portray progeria symptoms, striking a balance between sensitivity and acceptability. Instead of tragedy, the story examines humour, vulnerability, and dignity. *Iqbal* (2005) Photographed by Sudeep Chatterjee as well, the film uses sports-drama, grounded imagery, such as dusty village fields and close-ups of silent faces, to highlight *Iqbal's* will to overcome his deafness and quasi-muteness. *Iqbal* is presented as confronting societal barriers in belief and opportunity rather than as "overcoming" disability. His disability is secondary; his talent is paramount. He never romanticises his impairment; rather, it is viewed as a component of who he is, and the true struggle is with societal, not physical, restrictions. *Iqbal* practices diligently utilising visual cues, signs, and intuitive communication with the assistance of an alcoholic former cricket player named Mohit (Naseeruddin Shah), demonstrating adaptive learning and accessibility. *Iqbal's* modest environment is reflected in the handheld camera movements, natural light, and rustic rural scenes. *Iqbal's* lack of spoken conversation is made up for by close-ups, which highlight body language and emotional expression. Because they are grounded in grit and realism, sports scenes are dynamic without being unduly stylised, allowing the audience to concentrate on effort rather than magic. For "Best Film on Other Social Issues," it took up the National Film Award. *Iqbal* should not be shown as a "helpless victim," but rather as ambitious, wise, and resolute, avoiding dramatisation and clichés. regarded as a turning point in the mainstream cinematic portrayal of disabilities in India.

India's parallel and regional film scenes have demonstrated more sensitivity and realism than Bollywood, which has a tendency to commercialize disability. Filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam (*Anjali*), Satyajit Ray (*Kapurush*, *Sadgati*), and Shyam Benegal (*Ankur*) have examined disability with social critique and psychological nuance. *Chotoder Chobi* (Bengali, 2014), in which, Khoka, a dwarf, starts to doubt the system of exploitation that sees crippled people as entertainment. The movie questions the commodification of bodies that deviate from the so-called "normal" in the circus and entertainment industries. As is typical in Indian cinema, *Chotoder Chobi* portrays dwarfism with profound empathy and dignity rather than using it for comedy or compassion. Through its examination of romance, relationships, suffering, and financial difficulties, it demonstrates how emotionally complex persons with dwarfism are much like everyone else. The delicate and sensitive portrayal of Khoka's connection with Soma (the injured performer's daughter) challenges viewer assumptions about intimacy, love, and beauty standards. Intimate close-ups, tight framing, and natural lighting are commonly used in the movie to highlight feelings rather than physical differences. The subdued, somewhat documentary-style visual tone conveys the terrible facts of the individuals' lives without sensationalising or glamorising them. The true casting method, which used real dwarfs rather than prosthetics or computer-generated imagery. It spurred discussions on societal stigma, body politics, and representation in the entertainment sector. *Haridas* (Tamil, 2013), Autism is not shown as a terrible defect in the movie. Rather, the father uses it as a tool to change his own life by learning about love, patience, and emotional intelligence. The narrative highlights the disparity between the strict requirements of society and the compassionate inner world of a child with autism, illustrating how social institutions frequently fall short in accommodating neurodiverse youngsters. Amala Paul, a supportive instructor, plays a crucial role. She emphasises how inclusive education can empower autistic children when treated with care by utilising empathy and innovative teaching techniques. Haridas's development is steady, not magical, and based on sensitivity, routine, and emotional connection. Haridas's emotional sensitivity and remoteness are conveyed through close-ups of his face. A child who is overwhelmed by sensory noise can feel safe in a home and classroom that is kept warm and simple. It was recognised at international film festivals for its humanistic, non-patronizing approach to handicap and received the Tamil Nadu State Film Award for Best Film. Advocates for people with disabilities praised the educational value and nuanced storytelling, emphasising how it could change public perceptions of neurodivergent children in India, and

Peranbu (Tamil, 2018) Where Paapa is an adolescent who does not speak because she has cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects posture, movement, and motor skills. *Peranbu* doesn't sympathise with or romanticise Paapa. Rather, it highlights the agency, emotional complexity, and dignity of a disabled person—even if she is mute. Additionally, the movie breaks taboos around sexuality and handicap, which is a very uncommon issue in Indian cinema. Paapa's sexual awakening and her father's difficulty processing it are depicted, making the spectator face the way society trivialises those with impairments. Paapa is viewed as a burden by carers and institutions. As a single father of a girl with a disability, Amudhavan faces criticism. The movie raises issues of "normalcy" and who gets to define what constitutes a meaningful existence. Amudhavan frequently takes Paapa to serene outdoor locations, signifying liberty and non-judgment, as nature is a recurrent theme. The spectator is able to experience Paapa's universe without being overly dramatic thanks to the visual minimalism and extended silences. Even when Paapa is at a vulnerable or intimate moment, the camera respects her personal space and never objectifies her body, are recent regional films that have won praise from critics for their complex and multi-layered depictions of disabled protagonists. These movies frequently address intersectional issues, such as poverty, gender, and class, which gives the portrayal a stronger social reality foundation. Regional filmmakers seem more eager to transcend the "margins" and treat disabled characters as complete people rather than as symbolic devices, according to Banerjee and Rao (2020).

B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988–90, *Doordarshan*) became a cultural phenomenon and popularized the epic in a visual form. However, despite being true to some mythological texts, its portrayal of disability also exhibits regressive stereotypes and a lack of creativity in terms of the roles that disabled characters can play. Although it depicted the strong and manipulative characters like *Dhritarashtra* as an epitome of morale but with political incapacity and the cunning nature of limp and villainy of *Shakuni* as a part of deceitful observation with his physical traits and gestures with the low angles cinematics, the same direction ignored the sage like *Ashtavakra* who is physically deformed but intellectually brilliant and marginalized the content from the audience mainstream along with the minor characters like *Chyavana* whose disability can be framed with certain timelines.

In addition to being a television program, *Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan* (1987-1988) TV show was a religious and cultural phenomenon that had a profound impact on Indian culture. But because it is based on conventional narrative structures, its depiction of characters

with physical differences or disabilities exposes a strong undercurrent of ableism, moral symbolism, and gendered suffering. Through *Manthara's* crooked gestures, high-pitched voice, and unsettling background music, her body is visually and aurally associated with her cunning, jealousy, and manipulation. Because *Manthara's* motivations and background are not explored in the series, it reinforces her role as a one-dimensional villain and portrays disability as intrinsically suspicious and morally lacking. It promotes the damaging and regressive trope of judging characters based solely on their outward appearance. Similarly with the character of *Shurpanakha* though mutilated and monstrous still dealt with departure from dignity, social worth and female beauty. Her sexual desires with beastly casting acquired a disfigurement that seems a bit justifying in later parts with the violent uprising against the demons. The vision further breaks this sort of narrative with the character of *Trijata* who's empathy and emotions in the *Ashok Vatika*, *Lanka* holds an elderly or stooped figure who treats *Sita* with kindness.

One such film is *Sparsh* (1980), directed by *Sai Paranjpe*. The movie tells the story of a blind school principal who is a self-sufficient being. The filmography narrative illustrates the frustration that many disabled people frequently experience when society continuously doubts their abilities by stating that they do not want sympathy or needless assistance. With its genuine lighting and understated camera technique, the movie is personal and authentic. Instead of emphasising visual extravaganza, *Sai Paranjpe* uses a subtle, character-driven tale that concentrates on ordinary moments—touch, speech, and silence. In order to emphasise how *Anirudh* perceives the world by sensation and intuition rather than sight, the visual language is employed to heighten emotional textures through subtle sounds, speech pauses, and tactile encounters. Its character depth and delicate storytelling, a daring depiction of romance and handicap, a subject that is rarely handled so realistically in Indian cinema. The picture, which was praised for being ahead of its time, struck a chord with those seeking out clever, socially conscious narrative. Advocates for disability rights and filmgoers still point to *Sparsh* as a model for respectful, real representation.

Many people consider *Gulzar's Koshish* (1972) to be a seminal work in Indian cinema's depiction of disability. In order to demonstrate that a disability does not exclude happiness, conflict, intimacy, or emotional intelligence, the movie centres on the couple's emotional depth. The biggest obstacle facing the pair is not their disability per se, but society's resistance to change. A pivotal moment in the story occurs when the parents are faced with the question of whether to marry a crippled girl after their child develops

normal hearing and speech. A dramatic, introspective moment in the movie, this change illustrates how even those who live with disabilities can internalise ableist biases. *Gulzar* conveys emotion mostly through gestures, facial expressions, silence, and music, with very few words. Silence is a potent storytelling technique that draws the spectator into the characters' sensory world. In situations where words cannot convey emotion, sound designer *Madan Mohan* employs subtly evocative background music. *K.Vaikunth's* realistic and personal cinematography emphasises eye contact and facial expressions over spoken speech. At various points, the film adopts what could be considered an educational stance toward its audience by incorporating how a deaf person may participate economically and communicate. The film begins with the sign language alphabet in its credits. Despite this, the film exhibits both sympathy and apathy.

Based on the true tale of *Gauri Gadgil*, a girl with Down syndrome who plays herself in the film, *Yellow* (2014) is a touching Marathi film. The movie is a biographical drama that follows *Gauri's* journey from a young kid who struggled with social acceptance to a champion swimmer who was supported by a strong mother and a committed coach. Instead of showing her as a victim or a "patient," the movie shows her as a young girl with feelings, dreams, and uniqueness. She has learning disabilities, social anxiety, and speech problems, but she also has a lot of humour, love, and tenacity. As a reflection of the actual stigma associated with intellectual disability in India, *Gauri's* mother first experiences social pressure, embarrassment, and denial. Her father deserts them, underscoring the ways in which a disability can weaken family ties in a culture that lacks sensitivity and knowledge. *Gauri's* mother gradually comes to accept her for who she is and works tirelessly to develop her skills. Swimming is introduced to *Gauri*, and it turns into a healing and life-changing experience. The limitations placed on her in daily life are contrasted with the freedom that the sea offers. The fact that a disabled person is telling her own tale and enabling genuine, respectable depiction is a landmark moment in Indian cinema. Her organic performance, free of exaggeration, adds emotional nuance and realism. Her expertise utilised in swimming and personal development moments show hope, optimism, and inner fortitude. Details of *Gauri's* facial expressions makes her more than just her diagnosis. Restricted background music at poignant moments lets the silent speak and enables viewers to empathise with her in her battle. Smooth underwater photography in the course of swimming practice and competition stand for freedom and change. Disability is not framed by *Yellow* as a weakness, but rather as a difference that needs to be accepted and understood. The

story emphasises inclusion, tenacity, and acceptance over sympathy or miraculous treatments. Notwithstanding the difficulties she encounters, Gauri's lively attitude is encapsulated in the term Yellow, a colour that represents warmth, vitality, and brightness. The movie won praise from critics and struck a chord with viewers, particularly those who support disability rights, parents, and educators. It contributed to raising awareness of the significance of sports therapy, early intervention, and Down syndrome. Yellow is regarded as an example for appropriate handicap representation in Indian cinema and is frequently utilised in inclusive education seminars.p

One of the most devastating natural disasters in Indian history, the 1999 Odisha Super Cyclone, provides the backdrop for the gripping Odia film *Kathantara* (2005), which translates to "Another Story." Despite surviving the cyclone, Kalpana, a Dalit woman and widow, suffers from trauma, social humiliation, and institutional neglect. *Kathantara* presents disability as psychological, social, and structural rather than physical, which is consistent with contemporary conceptions of imposed and invisible impairment. She struggles to express herself, withdraws socially, and stays away from close or trustworthy connections. Although she never receives a specific diagnosis for her trauma, her actions are consistent with PTSD, a type of mental illness. Her participation in daily life is restricted by society, which also deprives her of her dignity and views her as a source of shame or charity. Systems prevent her from being autonomous, not because she lacks the capacity to obtain resources or take back her life. Kalpana is frequently invited to share her tale with bureaucrats, NGOs, and the media. However, none of these facilities offer emotional support or effective rehabilitation. Her identity is diminished to that of a "case study"-a disaster survivor, making her a symbolic victim rather than a real person. The act of objectification itself turns into a structural impairment and a kind of identity erasure. Slow tempo and extended silences reflect Kalpana's inner silence and detachment from the outside world. In-depth views of Kalpana's face stresses the importance of psychological tiredness and emotional distance. Subdued colour scheme reflects the desolation of her inner life and her shattered environment. Sequences that are repeated, such as going over the past show signs of trauma loops and mental stagnation. Images of individuals in camps, waiting helplessly and without basic dignity, represent either temporary or permanent handicap brought on by a tragedy. The film makes the argument that entire towns can become physically, psychologically, and socially incapacitated by natural disasters and insists that neglect can prolong disability and that recovery is not just physical but also social and emotional.

With the shift from later 20th century, recent concepts of 21st century which speaks of modern cinematics like *Ram Setu* (2022), *Adipurush* (2023), and series like *Asur* (2020–23) or *Karm Yuddh*, combine traditional stories with contemporary aesthetics. Mythological retellings have become more popular in Indian cinema and on streaming services (OTT) in the 2010s and 2020s. The science fiction drama *Zero* (2018) features stereotypical words like *Bauna* for repeated terms as a symbolic word for dwarfism. But the plotline introduces the onlookers to a broader arena of space science and research through the character of *R Madhavan* and *Anushka Sharma* where the lady cast is seen as a sufferer of cerebral palsy but the inherent courage and strength posits a dynamic viewpoint of being capable of getting into the scope of technology and inspires the co-acter who seems devoid of socially awkward and outcast character. And the climax results in the victory of *Bauua Singh* as an astronaut with a staunch belief upon himself discarding the societal criticism of the surrounding scape.

The Legend of Hanuman (2021–2024) symbolizes a milestone in Indian animation. It's cinematics, high quality VFX and CGI integrate comic inspired art and digital vector artists. Relatable characters with humanized figures are enhanced by mythic symbols with synchronized voice work. This OTT version though exists with temple art, animated book aesthetics feels like immersive and magnificent as global standards like *Miyazaki* or *LOTR*-level visuals. Despite their claims to be progressive in tone and visual language, these reimaginings- which are frequently wrapped in high-definition storytelling—continue to treat disabilities, both psychological and physical, with inherited biases. But the CGI has somehow distorted the assumed body postures and somehow deviated the original as described by the manuscripts. Particularly modern versions like *Siya Ke Ram* (*Star Plus*, 2015) where the Gods are presented with extended abdominal muscles (6/8 pack abs) but in terms of character portrayal *Manthara* for example is more layered- her motivations are well defined and not demonised outright.

An early psychological trauma and a misinterpretation of religious destiny shape the antagonist in the techno-mythological thriller series *Asur*. The show maintains the cliché of "difference as danger," but in psychological terms, by replacing overt physical disabilities with a metaphorical "moral and emotional deformity." Nonetheless, selective storytelling highlights how mainstream adaptations continue to favour binary visual contrasts over layered representations, such as fascination versus deformity and bravery versus depravity.

India's habits for consuming content have changed as a result of recent developments in OTT streaming services. A 2023 FICCI-EY report states that digital media surpassed television and film in India in terms of revenue contribution, with a notable rise in character-driven, niche, and socially relevant storytelling. Nuanced disability narratives that previously struggled for theatrical viability now have a place thanks to the decentralization of content. This rise challenges the tokenism frequently observed in earlier mainstream cinema by providing disabled protagonists and authentic narratives with increased visibility.

IV. CONCLUSION

The main goal of the study, which was to determine if Indian film has embraced inclusive and humanised representations of differently abledP in place of stereotypical ones, has been mostly achieved. While earlier representations frequently diverged into moral-symbolic or inspirational tropes, more recent narratives exhibit increased sensitivity and authenticity, according to the carefully chosen selection of texts, which range from mythological television series like *Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana* and *B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat* to modern films like *Margarita With A Straw*, *Chandu Champion* and *Srikanth*. The scope of this research is further expanded by the inclusion of regional films like *Peranbu (Tamil)*, *Chotoder Chobi (Bengali)*, and *Haridas (Tamil)*, which demonstrate how regional filmmakers have frequently taken the lead in dismantling ableist presumptions through emotionally stirring narratives. The study reveals a noticeable change in visual storytelling from the marginalisation of disabilities to their mainstreaming.

The study's main conclusion is that OTT platforms are increasingly playing a part in this shift. More experimentation with narrative formats, character-driven plots, and socially conscious themes have been made possible by the quick growth of India's digital content ecosystem. Films that might not have done well in traditional theatres, like *Laal Singh Chaddha* or *Margarita With A Straw*, have found more sophisticated and appreciative audiences online, as the number of OTT viewers in India is expected to surpass 500 million by 2023 and digital platforms account for a significant portion of content discovery. The mainstreaming of disability in Indian media has benefited from this democratization of content, which has made room for more varied narratives to the ground.

From the perspective of content analysis, all movies and television shows were used in the study in authenticated and legally sourced versions. Methodological

credibility has been ensured by the interpretations' adherence to well-established scholarly frameworks like media reception studies, narrative theory, and the social model of disability. A promising future for Indian cinema and the cultural representation of the disabled community is indicated by the continued expansion of the space for more inclusive, intersectional, and authentic stories of disability as digital platforms continue to redefine content boundaries.

REFERENCES

- [1] EY-FICCI. Window of Opportunity: India's Media & Entertainment Sector. FICCI-EY Report, March 2023.
- [2] Mehrotra, Deepti. "Disability and the Cinematic Imagination." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2015, pp. 55–62.
- [3] Chakravarty, Sumita S. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*. University of Texas Press, 1993.
- [4] Ghai, Anita. *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experience*. Sage Publications, 2018.
- [5] Scroll Staff. "OTT Boom in India: Who's Watching What and Why It Matters." *Scroll.in*, 4 Mar. 2023.
- [6] <https://scroll.in/reel/ott-boom-india-report-2023>
- [7] Rangan, Baradwaj. "Review: *Peranbu* is a Masterclass in Humanism." *Film Companion*, 2018.
- [8] <https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/tamil-review/peranbu-movie-review>
- [9] Barjatya, Ramanand Sagar. *Ramayan*. Doordarshan, 1987–88.
- [10] Chopra, B. R. *Mahabharat*. Doordarshan, 1988–90.
- [11] Aamir Khan Productions. *Taare Zameen Par*. Directed by Aamir Khan, performance by Darsheel Safary, 2007.
- [12] Barfi!. Directed by Anurag Basu, performances by Ranbir Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra, UTV Motion Pictures, 2012.
- [13] *Chandu Champion*. Directed by Kabir Khan, performance by Kartik Aaryan, Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, 2024.
- [14] *Chotoder Chobi*. Directed by Kaushik Ganguly, performance by Dulal Sarkar, Shree Venkatesh Films, 2014.
- [15] *Guzaarish*. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, performance by Hrithik Roshan, SLB Films, 2010.
- [16] *Haridas*. Directed by G. N. R. Kumaravelan, performance by Kishore, A.R.S. Films, 2013.
- [17] *Iqbal*. Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, performa...



Female Genital Mutilation as a Cultural Practice Controlling Women's Sexuality: A Study of Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Shubham Chavan R., Dr. Stella Steven

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad, Karnataka, India

Received: 11 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 06 Oct 2025; Accepted: 11 Oct 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Communities frequently hold on to their traditional and cultural traditions for centuries. Some habits are good for everyone, but others are bad for some groups, including women. One such practice that serves to suppress women's sexuality and maintain patriarchal power is female genital mutilation (FGM). Societal standards that uphold gender-based violence and place a premium on male gratification give rise to this behavior. Cultural justifications for female genital mutilation (FGM) abound, but at its core, FGM is a patriarchal society's attempt to maintain control over women's bodies and sexuality—a practice that has broader implications for gender power politics and reinforces male domination. Some African American women authors rise to the forefront, bringing Black women's attention to the truths of their traditions and helping them realize their own self-worth and identity via literature. Black women's emancipation is made possible by these authors' drawing attention to issues confronting their community. Alice Walker is a well-known author and activist who has used her platform to fight for the equality and freedom of oppressed women. The horrific practice of female genital mutilation is examined in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in this article. The author demonstrates the anguish that African women endure as a result of engaging in ritual mutilation for the enjoyment of males in the name of tradition. Walker highlights the need of challenging and abandoning such practices in the name of tradition and culture via the character of Tashi, who undergoes female genital mutilation. Through an analysis of Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, this article seeks to delve into the pain that African women have suffered for the sake of cultural preservation.



Keywords— Female Genital Mutilation, Controlling Agents, Female Sexuality, Trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

What some cultures see as the ultimate symbol of beauty and womanhood is the painful cultural practice and treatment known as "Female Genital Mutilation," or FGM. As a last necessary step, it confers religious and marital sanctity on females and forces them into the role of womanhood. From the moment of birth until adolescence, female genital mutilation (FGM) often takes place. Each nation and ethnic group has its own unique set of protocols. Countless nations around the globe observe it as a sacred rite to protect the sanctity of the female reproductive organ.

The practice includes the non-medical removal of female genitalia as part of a ceremony.

Infibulation is the most severe of three main forms of female genital mutilation, the others being sunna and clitoridectomy. Sunna involves slicing the clitoris, and clitoridectomy, sometimes called excision, involves completely removing it. The infibulation procedure involves the removal of the vaginal lips, narrowing of the vagina rather than expanding it, and the substitution of tiny holes for the usual vaginal and urine passages. In her incisive analysis of female genital mutilation (FGM), Alice Walker illuminates the devastating

impact of this practice on the lives of African women in her book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The cultural importance of female genital mutilation (FGM) and its function in limiting women's sexuality are examined in this article via the prism of Walker's book.

II. THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FGM

Immigrant communities in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia continue a practice that has persisted for 6,000 years, beginning with the ancient Egyptians. The practice is also practiced in twenty-eight African nations and parts of Asia. Individual cultural practitioners make sure the practice is carried on in its new home country even if it is illegal in so-called more "civilized" nations. Eighty million women in Africa and between eighty-five and eleven million women globally have the operation done annually, according to the World Health Organization.

As a method of controlling women's bodies and maintaining female purity, FGM is often rationalized. Girls are traditionally prepared for femininity, marriage, and motherhood by female genital mutilation (FGM) in many cultures. "[Infibulation] is the most powerful manifestation of the phallocratic system's control over female sexuality," and "its only purpose is to discourage girls from engaging in sexual relations prior to marriage" (Thiam 60, 72).

One way in which the patriarchal society seeks to restrict and suppress women's sexuality is via the practice of female genital mutilation. "European and American doctors used clitoridectomy as a cure for masturbation and so-called nymphomania" (407), according to Walley. An argument that "curbs the potentially excessive sexuality of females" is made by Joyce Russel-Robinson (55). Women in communities where polygamy is practiced are expected to be infibulated and relegated to the lowest social and human status imaginable. According to Bell (130), the World Health Organization acknowledges that these mutilations destroy women's libido. Gender power politics include the justifications for female genital mutilation, which include preserving the virginity of the female body, reining in a woman's supposedly excessive libido, respecting religious teachings, and, most importantly, ensuring male dominance over women.

In the places where female genital mutilation is practiced, it is important to note that traditionally, in both Eastern and Western human sexuality, heterosexual intercourse has primarily aimed at the gratification of the man. The only goal of African women is to satisfy their husbands, hence in nations where female genital mutilation is practiced, a woman's sexual pleasure is neither considered before nor after the surgery. They care only about their husband's enjoyment during intercourse, and they believe that a

woman's ability to offer him pleasure depends on how tightly she is sewed. Many women who experienced female genital mutilation see sexual activity to be an affliction; they engage in it just to satisfy their spouses and produce children.

Young girls are often the targets of female genital mutilation (FGM) because they are easier to control and so suffer less harm to their genitalia. And since they have no idea what's going to happen to them, the kids don't fight back either. Some people think that because a younger girl won't remember much about the procedure, it won't be as emotionally taxing on her. But Alice Walker is not on board with this idea; she thinks the operation causes a great deal of mental distress. The traditional belief is that female genital mutilation (FGM) makes women more feminine by decreasing their libido and making the vagina more narrow, which in turn makes men more satisfied sexually. That is to say, women are socialized to get pleasure from men's clitoris-related sex pleasure even if clitoris removal eliminates any possibility of physical sex pleasure for women.

It is also thought that the clitoris causes ejaculation and early resolution in males, or at least that it gives women cravings that men can't always fulfill. In many patriarchal civilizations, it is believed to be the source of domestic strife in both cases. This tension may be avoided if the man maintains dominance in the bedroom. In essence, removing the clitoris serves to stop a guy from ejaculating too early, allows him to have sexual relations in whatever way he wants (because the woman doesn't feel any desire or pleasure), and keeps domestic strife to a minimum. What this means is that women undergo or are coerced into FGM in order to improve men's sexual performance and avoid potential complications, even if it means sacrificing their own feeling of pleasure.

All of the aforementioned details are critical for grasping the many facets of this contentious procedure. Through the dramatized life narrative of Tashi, Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* provides readers with important data on infibulation, an ancient ritualized activity. The story delves into the massive fallout of this practice, illuminating the female victims' deceit and exploitation, their bodily pain and psychological shackling, health decline, and libido ruined.

III. FGM IN POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

There is no denying that female circumcision violates women's human rights and individuality. Walker's political stance is evident throughout the novel, and she is adamant that female circumcision, which involves cutting off the

clitoris, is a kind of mutilation. She insists that it is inconceivable to have such a practice at the end of the 20th century, even when there are arguments about preserving national and ethnic identity. Walker puts the rights of women and girls ahead of everything else, even when doing so puts her at danger of neocolonialism accusations. Gender is given more weight than culture in Walker's story. A young African lady named Tashi suffers through female genital mutilation (FGM) in Walker's book. Walker highlights the mental and physical suffering that women undergo as a result of female genital mutilation (FGM) via Tashi's story. The story shows female genital mutilation (FGM) as a way for patriarchal cultures to keep men in charge and keep the gender power gap wide open. As a witness to the severe repercussions of FGM, Tashi's issues with her identity, selfhood, and physical autonomy are evident.

The patriarchal culture of the Olinka subjugated the minds of all its members and turned the elders into complicit participants in the subjection and mutilation of African women by convincing them that a "uncircumcised vagina" was "a monstrosity" (Walker 121). Peer pressure and general ignorance made life much more difficult for uncircumcised women. All of Tashi's friends "jeered" at her and considered her "odd," as she says in her memoir (Walker 121). Tashi decides to undergo circumcision in order to be acknowledged as "a real woman by the Olinka people" rather than just "a thing," to put an end to their mockery of her, and to demonstrate that she is not betraying her culture or disrespecting Olinka tradition. Because the Olinka never broach the subject of circumcision—a traditional taboo—and Tashi's lack of knowledge about the topic, Walker reveals that she gives in to cultural pressure. She has the naiveté to think that becoming circumcised would make her "Completely woman. Authentically from Africa. Wholly Olinka, according to Walker (64). Even if the chiefs insist on it, Tashi tells the readers, circumcision is never broached. Dura, Tashi's beloved sister, "had bled to death" (Walker 8), but Tashi was obligated to keep her emotions in check and refrain from mentioning her when she was a tiny kid. While Dura was being tortured inside a hut, Tashi, who had been hidden in the grass, could hear her sister's "howls of pain and terror" (Walker 75). However, she was too young to intervene and was compelled to keep quiet about Dura's murder for a long time.

Walker aims to help readers accept that this brutal African initiation process is "not fiction but cultural hermeneutics" (Russell-Robinson 54) by depicting an African woman's physical, mental, and spiritual experiences with female genital mutilation. According to Russell-Robinson, the practice of clitoris or whole female genital genital mutilation removal is "a symptom of mere tradition,

conformity and cultural maladjustment" (54). As a result of patriarchal norms and the needs of males, African women are molded by men.

African women are subject to patriarchal tribal culture's control over their lives and bodies, as Walker mentions in a discussion between Tashi and M'Lissa. The boys are expected to "break into the woman's body" according to their gender role. Many times, they injure themselves while attempting (Walker 245). Socialization teaches boys that males should "like it tight" (Walker 245), even while they are unaware of the treatment of women. African females acquire this similar lesson; they would actively seek out a tsunga's services to be sewed tighter even after they become brides and mothers. There are ladies out there who have hired tsungas to make theirs even tighter than that, M'Lissa tells Tashi. They do it after the birth of every kid. This has happened to them more than once, twice, or even three times. According to Walker, "each time tighter than before" (245). For some African women, the need to show to males that they are beautiful, submissive ladies is so strong that they are prepared to mutilate their bodies and undergo painful treatments to achieve this goal. Rather than improving women's lives, this research contends that female genital mutilation (FGM), particularly clitoridectomy and infibulation, causes them tremendous suffering. Since male circumcision involves the removal of an undesirable portion of skin from the body, it contends that FGM cannot be compared to this procedure since it does not have any detrimental effects on a man's body.

As a result of her patriotism, Tashi travels to the United States after having infibulation done on her when she was a young lady. Without a clue about what lies next, Tashi proudly endures infibulation as a young lady. Women who have undergone female circumcision are highly esteemed and respected in Walker's African microcosm, Olinka, Tashi's homeland. Since female circumcision is considered the most vital attribute of femininity by patriarchy, the hardships endured by women as a result of patriarchal authority are either ignored or downplayed. The story of Tashi's life exemplifies how patriarchal societies' mothers readily have their daughters circumcised without discussing the procedure's consequences or the risk of death. Because patriarchal traditions are so deeply ingrained in our culture, mothers often feel pressured to pass on their suffering to their daughters at the expense of their own health and happiness. In this culture, it is taboo for women to talk about their struggles, and just as their mothers did, they pass their suffering on to their daughters. Throughout the book, Walker portrays the act of passing on one's suffering and embracing it as a symbol of womanhood as a noble and honorable one.

After experiencing her sexuality with her lover-husband Adam as a child, Tashi gets the operation as an adult, and the experience brings morbidity to her life and sexuality. The chasm that opened up in her eyes following the procedure's side effect is a metaphor for the emotional, mental, and personal decline she's experienced throughout her life. Tashi knows now that her decision to have the operation was completely wrong and that the pain associated with it is the worst kept dark secret of patriarchy and its enforcers after she has had irregular periods for over two weeks, urinated for over twenty-five minutes each session, and had an abnormal delivery that damages her child's brain. She struggles with the recurring psychological trauma she endures throughout her life and regrets her own choice, undergoing psychotherapy for decades. This study presents the argument that the outcome of female genital mutilation is kept a secret in culture by manipulating women emotionally and mentally into undergoing the surgery. Though the procedure's chaos may seem to be a minor cultural problem to some, the aftermath—which causes males to surpass many women and seize power in a society—is never seen as the most negative part of gender politics, despite being the most crucial factor that determines success or failure. Adam and Tashi have a broken baby, but they can't go back to the carefree love they once had. Every day, she feels trapped by the weight of regret over bearing a unique kid, but she knows she can't change the past. A new horror unfolds every day for her kid. She has physical, mental, and emotional pain as a result of her recurrent vaginal tears. Every day, she deals with the effects of marital strife. The traditional practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the psychological manipulation that led up to her undergoing the surgery have ruined Tashi's life, she realizes now.

Despite not having anybody to pass the burden of suffering on to, Tashi feels compelled to rescue young ladies who are victims of similar tragedies. Additionally, she wants to get revenge for the psychological deception she endured, which escalates her violent tendencies. She travels to Olinka in order to eliminate M'Lissa, a mother circumciser who promotes and supports infibulation. Killing her in a cunning manner, she uses the same razors and blades that maimed her when she was younger. According to the patriarchal dictum, it is a blessing to be slain by one's infibulator, therefore M'Lissa is really glad that she killed her. She justifies her behavior by saying that was her means of subsistence and that she has no shame in covertly infibulating adolescents and young women since she, too, had been a victim of sexual assault and felt helpless. She dies after ridiculing Tashi for trusting her. Olinka is where Tashi will stand trial for the murder of a patriarchal national hero. Tashi, as a symbol of the African woman, shatters the

custom that prevented her from achieving completeness by murdering the tsunga. Tashi seeks revenge on the infibulator who injured her by murdering her; nevertheless, she is apprehended, stands trial, and receives the death penalty. M'Lissa's life becomes a burned out case, but her death purges her of her masochism and hysteria to a larger level. Because of her untreated psychological trauma and mental disorder, Tashi's narrative finishes on a negative note.

IV. CONCLUSION

The most heartbreaking part of female genital mutilation is the epidemic proportions to which blood-borne infections like HIV/AIDS have spread due to a lack of adherence to basic hygiene practices. In addition to the risks already mentioned, female circumcision may lead to a host of other complications, such as: painful periods, varicose veins, urinary infections, bladder difficulties, blood poisoning, pelvic inflation, painful sexual life, recurring vaginal fissures during vaginal intercourse, and an increased risk of HIV/AIDS. The treatment is seen as a necessary part of being a woman, even if it has horrible drawbacks. The agony that comes with it is stigmatized and ignored, and instead considered as a blessing that brings women femininity, marriage, and motherhood.

As a writer, feminist, and social activist, Walker finds her voice and accomplishes her aims via literature. Among Walker's numerous missions is the rescue of repressed Black women, whose plight she has been concerned about from the start of her career. The author, Walker, has dedicated a portion of the royalties from *Possessing the Secret of Joy* to "educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world" (Walker 285) in an effort to perpetuate the resistance against female genital cutting.

To sum up, female genital mutilation (FGM) is a cultural practice that controls women's sexuality, maintains gender inequality in power, and reinforces male supremacy. This essay has emphasized the necessity to confront and eliminate detrimental practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) by critically analyzing Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. One way to create a more just world that treats women's bodies and sexuality with dignity is to advocate for women's independence and self-determination.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bell, Kirsten. "Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2005, pp. 125-48. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. Accessed 8 May. 2025.
- [2] Russel-Robinson, Joyce. "African Female Circumcision and the Missionary Mentality." *A Journal of Opinion*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1997, pp. 54-57. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. Accessed 8 May. 2025.
- [3] 8 May. 2025.
- [4] Thiam, Awa. *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*. Translated by Dorothy S. Blair, Pluto, 1986.
- [5] Walker, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy: A Novel*. The New Press, 2008.
- [6] Walley, Christine J. "Searching for 'Voices': Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Operations." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1997, pp. 405-38. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. Accessed 8 May. 2025.



Understanding the Grammar of Protest and Subversion through the lens of Dadaism

Apal Jain

Neerja Modi School, Jaipur, India

Received: 14 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Oct 2025; Accepted: 12 Oct 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Background: Dadaism was a political art movement which developed during the first world war, lasting from 1916 to 1924. The movement's first centre was in Zurich, Switzerland, when later other establishments came up in Berlin, Paris, London and New York. The movement adopted a philosophy of nonsense, rejection of meaning and protest against the war, which was expressed through mediums like performance art, filmmaking, and poetry. Objective: To analyse the methods by which Dadaism was able to question the established practices of art making and the acceptance of political actions and war. To understand the different parts of Dadaism, and the extent to which they were successfully able to do the aforementioned. Methodology: This essay uses critical theories about culture, art, and politics, and analyses different forms of art making equipped by Dadaism through their lens. The methodology used for this essay is a combination of secondary literature review and critical data analysis.*



Keywords— *Art, Dadaism, Europe, Politics, Protest.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dadaism was an avant-garde political art movement born as a response to the first world war. It lasted from 1916 to 1924. Its first centre appeared in Zurich, Switzerland; the country's neutral nature caused it to become the place various artists sought refuge from the war and possibility of being drafted. Other centres of Dadaism developed around the early 20th century in New York, Berlin and Paris too.

It challenged the treachery of the war, and was a proponent in changing the perceptions of the purpose of art along with the Italian futurists, cubists, and expressionists. Dada artists were not just painters but also included photographers, dancers, poets and musicians. They used scientific ideas, seen in Marcel Duchamp's *The bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even* and employed new techniques of creation like photomontage, by photographers like Man Ray and mixed medium painting by Otto Dix and Hannah Hoch. This made it new and explicitly challenging as critique to the politics of war and modern capitalism. Dadaists adopted a philosophy of nonsense and chance as a rejection of logic and reasoning, contributing to the literature of nonsense in the form of Dadaist poetry, by

poets like Tzara, and mechanical noise music, like George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*.

The term "Dada" itself has been supposed to have originated from a colloquial French for "hobby horse", with the poet Richard Huelsenbeck of the Dada movement in Zurich recalling it having been picked out from the pages of a French encyclopaedia, but has meanings in German ("there, there") and Romanian ("yes, yes"). The word also universally evokes the incomprehensible sounds made by a baby. Essentially, "Dada" can be considered meaningless, having more sonic than linguistic emphasis. This establishes that the movement's foundation itself had a central theme of nonsense as rejection- something that had not up till then been so highlighted in an artistic campaign.

Therefore, it becomes important to examine, through both political and artistic lenses, the power that Dada held and how it subverted the dominant understanding of art and politics in European Nations.

II. HYPOTHESIS

Dadaism was able to deconstruct the dominant understanding of what was perceived as art and therefore broaden its definition to a considerable extent. However, it could not as successfully use this deconstruction to challenge the established political narratives in European countries during the First world war.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first world war took place in a rapidly changing artistic climate. The Impressionists¹ had mostly dismantled by the beginning of the 20th century, only the remnants of Post-Impressionism² remained, while movements like Cubism³ and Expressionism⁴ were gaining traction. Cubism focused on geometric shapes and non-representationally representing objects. Visual motifs of the movement consisted of disfigured bodies and landscapes; specifically, a new representation of the nude body, as seen by Pablo Picasso's controversial *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso and Braque also began experimenting with collaging techniques within their works later in 1912 and developed compositions through papier collé. This can be seen in Georges Braque's *Bottle of Rum* of 1914. Expressionism became a manifestation of artists' tendency to return to emotion and nature, distorting colours and compositions of the visual realities around them to express internal feeling and visions. They also used printmaking, as technological advancement made mass distribution possible when the war approached, to express their socio-political ideas, critiques and gain a larger audience for their work. Initially, artists of this movement like Max Beckmann and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner volunteered in the war, and the atrocities they saw led them to create anti-war works like *The Night* by Beckmann and the *Wartime Apocalypse* series of cigarette packet miniatures by Ludwig.

The governments of many countries like Russia, Germany, France and Britain also used lithograph prints to garner funding for the war effort and document their own technological advancements to maintain optimism during the war. Pro-war propaganda posters used primary colours and black outlines in a recognisably illustrative style, or a photographic collage style with bold typography, with slogans like "Remember Belgium and Northern France-Buy Nothing from the Germans" in France, "Help us win--buy war bonds!" in Germany, "Britons: Lord Kitchener Wants You" in Britain, and "Everything for Victory! Sign up for the 5 1/2% War Loan" in Russia. This was done in an effort to make them easily replicable and ready for mass distribution, but also stand out. Nationalism dominated the public feeling playing a role in the outbreak of the war. It also strengthened the beginning of the war when people saw it as a noble effort to defend their nation.

In Germany, the war was initially viewed as imperative for Germany's colonial expansion. The widespread public narrative became that Germany was an underdog in the face of Russia, Britain and France who were collating against it and heavily investing in arms. In Britain, public opinion and the cabinet were originally divided regarding British intervention in the war since there were a myriad of problems nationally with Irish demonstrations for Home Rule and the Suffragettes. Even after the July crisis⁵, there were large anti-war demonstrations like the one in Trafalgar Square in London. But after the German invasion of Belgium, a majority of the British cabinet and public was in favour of entering the war, with people voting for war credits. Middle class men volunteered to serve in the war without conscription; for the first 2 years Britain did not have to conscript. In France, after the German invasion of Belgium, war was understood as a necessity. Usually, to get support for the war, the government incited nationalist sentiments and relied on the shared history of conflict

¹ Impressionism, an art movement having roots in 1860s France, lasted until around the 1880s and involved the use of visible brushstrokes to capture a suggestion of the subject and its interaction with light, rather than the accurate replication of the subject. It has been considered the groundwork for many modern art movements due to its emancipation with institutions of academic painting and traditional ideals.

² Post Impressionism refers to the movement that emerged in the late 1880s as a reaction to the Impressionist art movement. The Post-Impressionists were concerned with rejecting the Impressionistic focus on depicting naturalistic light and colour, and instead focused on the emotional and symbolic representation of the aforementioned.

³ Cubism was a European art movement originating in 1907, retaining momentum till the early 1920s that has been considered the invention of artists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. It may be distinguished by its representing a subject from multiple

perspectives to create one image, often containing fragmented geometric lines and shape.

⁴ Expressionism was an art movement that emerged in parts of Europe in 1905, holding prominence till the late 1920s. It was primarily concerned with subverting objective representation of one's surroundings, instead placing emphasis on the emotional response. The aesthetics of Expressionist art are largely characterised by the use of dramatisation of the basic elements and representation of personal, sometimes dark or gory, subject matter.

⁵ The July Crisis refers to the period between June 28th and August 6th in 1914 which preceded the outbreak of the First World War. Its start was marked by the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand and involved political tensions increasing between European countries.

between these countries, as evident in the aforementioned slogan.

However as the war progressed, there was growing disillusionment among the public and artists. Economic problems of income inequality and inflation worsened during the course of the war and artists; even those who had previously supported it, were now revolted by what they saw in the war. The ones who did not enlist were not removed from its effects when several of their friends and colleagues died on the field.

One of these instances was the death of Hans Leybold. Hugo Ball and himself had published the first issue of a controversial, and heavily censored, avant-garde left-wing magazine named *Revolution* in Munich, 1913, with more issues to follow the next year. After this, Leybold died in the battle in Belgium. Artists even tried to escape by forging passports, feigning medical illnesses and fleeing to neutral countries like Switzerland. Ball and Emily Hennings left for Switzerland in 1915 after he witnessed scenes of battle in Belgium in 1914. His anti-war sentiments deepened through the year as he participated in the anarchist political philosophies of Kropotkin⁶ and Bakunin⁷. The pair lived in poverty under pseudonyms until the opening of Cabaret Voltaire.

Here artists collected from Germany, France and Great Britain. Experiencing a collective awakening against the war, influenced by anarchist ideas and a want to reject the manufactured logic of the political landscape, the Dada movement was born.

Dadaism's embrace of nonsensicality made it a subversive response to the horrors of conflict (in this case the First World War) and enabled it to question both the purpose of art and its place in politics. The Abstractionists⁸ tendency to work with different forms of creation like music was promoted by Dadaism with their performances and soirees at Cabaret Voltaire. Particularly, the work of Kandinsky⁹ informed the geometric shapes of Hans Arp, the compositional techniques of Hugo Ball and the cluttered graphic collaging of Hannah Hoch. The Expressionists of 1912 redefined the role of art from an aesthetic means of personal expression to a tool for critical proclamation. The

Futurist¹⁰ movement of 1909 lent Dada the manifesto, and the concept of noise music.

For the purpose of this essay, political protest is defined as an attempt to alter the influences of one's surroundings. We can consider that the political is institutionally powerful, meaning, its definition extends from just the government to other institutions of power, like the church, school, prisons, hospitals etc., too. This is because they have the ability to enforce rules of how to behave and what is desirable, which they enforce through multiple channels. Political art then becomes anything that either upholds the state through its institutions of civil society and their ideologies, or undermines the aforementioned through creating a counter narrative. Facets of political art movements may be conducive to this effort and allow the movement to achieve a destabilisation of civil institutions and their intellectuals.

IV. SUCCESSES

4.1 Performance Art

Dadaism created new channels for expression by redefining performance art. Previously performance was generally viewed as something meant for visual pleasure and mythical storytelling more than representation of artistic emotion. It was a part of European high society, as seen in activities like going to the opera and to the ballet. Performance had never previously been the centrality of a political art movement. Even while there were individual efforts in the past by performers and one-off theatre performances, like Ball's own published play *Die Nase des Michelangelo*, the predominant narrative was one constructed by repertoires of the ballet, and the traditional compositions of music and song. The Futurists had previously experimented with unconventional theatre, like their 1913 performance in Italy, where the performers insulted the audience to receive verbal assaults; an incident later called a success by the Futurist newspaper *Lacerba*. It was one of the first attempts to reconstruct the role of a performer to a provocateur; someone can use the audience as part of the performance. Dadaism is where these ideas flourished. Cabaret Voltaire became a place where artists of all different facets could

⁶ Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin [1842 to 1921], was a geographer, Russian political philosopher and anarchist communist. He is often credited with the theory of Mutual Aid within anarchism.

⁷ Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin [1814 to 1876], was a Russian revolutionary anarchist, also remembered as a rival of Marxism.

⁸ With origins in the late 19th century, Abstractionism revolved around the concept of extrapolating compositions focusing on the principles of art, like colour line and form, from the obvious visual realities present in the world. Today, it is understood as a general term for art that is not strictly representational.

⁹ Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian painter and theorist, who is heralded as a pioneer of abstraction in Western art.

¹⁰ Futurism was an Italian art movement that originated in 1909 and remained prominent until the early 1920s. The movement was based in a representation of speed, technology and the future of the modern world its artists occupied, and can be characterised by a strong rejection of all past methods of creation in the country.

present poetry, music and theatre, the common thread uniting them being their anti-war sentiments.

Often, their dances were spontaneous, playing off of the energies of each other and the costumes, which were designed to invoke the specific emotion of the performance. This became a method by which the Dadaists could dedicate themselves to connecting with their spiritual understanding of a work and react to it in the moment, which humanised the performers, making the aura that emanated from their pieces stronger.

However, they did not forgo the exhibitionist part of art creation, by conceiving elements of their artwork designed to be visually shocking. An example of this is Dada masks. Designed by Hans Arp and Georges Janco, they were made from cardboard, horse hair, cloth and wire, often painted with red, Arp comparing the paint to blood. Often the nature of the mask influenced the movements of the performer, and made them invent dances. Dances named *Flycatching*, *Cauchemar* and *Festive Desperation* have been recalled in Arp's accounts and Tzara's *Zurich Chronicle*, their movements being visceral, drawing from the emotions of the performers and Janco's masks. They were provocative, drawing inspiration from Japanese and African masks but coupling them with representations of violence and blood. This crucially laid the foundation for modern performance art and the use of costume as a part of the act, as well as using the visually significant elements of their performances as a tool to highlight their intentions but have them reacted to by audiences.

Dada performers were also wildly efficient in adapting their interpretations to their own perceptions because of their freeform way of performance. They were actively interpreting, interacting with, and configuring the new sonic and visual information they received while on stage, which was crucially different to the rigid, rehearsed and singular performances of traditional soirees. Thereby, they built upon the theoretical observations of Raymond Williams¹¹, which discuss how culture is established by a community of process wherein the interpretations of people form patterns or communications, and the ones that are socially available come to determine the inhabitable structures of our lives. Performers were able to shift these structures insofar as they made new patterns of interpretation socially available through letting the music guide them. They were not only radical in their content, but

also in their approach to deliver it, which differentiated them further from the complacent mainstream performance politics of the time. It made the information they communicated much more difficult to control, because its interpretation required a shift in the ways people thought about what performances can say.

This was then not separate from the other forms of art making they explored like collaging, painting and photography but was a major part of the movement. Even in the interior of Cabaret Voltaire, paintings of artists like Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky and Klee were hung. This distinction was what became the delta between successful and unsuccessful attempts to integrate the physical intimacy of performance art into the context of traditional methods of art making like painting, because they made it a central process of art making.

4.2 Poetry and Music

Influenced by absurdist pieces like Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu*¹² and the Futurists, they looked at how to shock, confuse, and offend audiences. This manifested in the inclusion of nonsense words, convoluted dances, and unconventional sounds in their performances. Ball constructed noise concerts, using instruments like bells, babies' rattles, cowbells, and shawms, as soundtracks to poetry readings, in which purposeless words were coupled with implicitly political phrases.

This rejection of the purpose of language shows rejection of complacency. The purpose of language is communication, it relies on a common understanding of both the speaker and the listener. Dada poetry did not uphold this, they used incomprehensible words, more akin to sound than communicable thought, like Hugo Ball's poem *gadji beri bimba*, all of which is constituted of entirely onomatopoeic phrases. This rejected the idea that what they had to say was contingent on its reception, bound to the explicable and facial realities they saw. This distortion of language, deemed necessary by Tzara to find new meanings, is what let Dadaism penetrate at the basis where we find our understanding of the world and connectivity on: language. Another utility of this poetry may be alluding to the mechanised killing of the war. The removal of the communicative ability of words mirrored the removal of human connection in the war. World War One had caused the Dadaists a loss of meaning in the way they interpreted the world, showing how deeply they despised it and its penetrative effect on their psyche. This

¹¹ Raymond Henry Williams [1921 to 1988], was a Welsh critic, intellectual and writer, largely influential in the New Left movement. His studies explored the relationship between culture and society, and he contributed to the development of alternative Marxist approaches.

¹² King Ubu, or Ubu Roi, is a play by Alfred Jarry, a French playwright. Considered a landmark for avant-garde theatre and the absurdist movement because of its subversion of the medium, the play centres around a power struggle between Pere Ubu, the protagonist, and the King of Poland.

understanding of war was mirrored in the ways they depicted the world, through their characterisation of it as “nonsense”.

The compositional cacophony of Dada’s orchestra pieces was another parallel to the sounds of war. Specifically, George Antheil’s score *Ballet Mecanique*, originally for Fernand Léger’s film of the same name, captured the anxiety of the battlefield, with its disjointed rhythmic instrumentals, repeating notes, sporadic bass drum and scattered rapidity. The use of instruments like the xylophones and electric bells create the fast tempo, and the 16 pianos, sectionally synchronised, permeate a sense of fragmentation throughout the composition. These instruments imbibe a fretful anxiety, and attack the sonic sense of the listener by making it difficult to keep pace with the music. It is a clear comparison to the rapid, raging and loud noises of guns and tanks firing, men running about with their weapons gear about them, and airships buzzing above, even brought into the track through Antheil’s use of propeller fans. Most distinct among these is the periodic bass drum, unexpected and commanding, like a bomb being dropped.

First presented in Paris, 1926, the concert caused enrage from the audience, which was drowned by the music. This made accessible a kind of representation of the war that people were previously removed from, in an orchestra hall, they were engulfed by the score, like a soldier on the battlefield. The musical exploration of the movement therefore, was able to emotionalise the war for a broader number of people, usually consumers, both intellectual and otherwise, from the upper echelons of society, which subverted the narratives of battlefield glory by making its realities more proximate.

4.3 Film

Another tool of the Dadaists was the camera. They used film, and the impersonal nature of it to do what the theatre could not. Analysed through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*¹³, the film was different from the stage performance in two ways; the camera distorted reality by picking the angles, frames and sequences in which the audience is shown images, and by the destruction of the aura of the performer. The second reason was that because the actor was treated like a prop insofar as the cameraman chose what to show, and he had no presence because his performance was just documented by a camera lens and an edited replica of it was seen by the public. It also took place because instead of an

actor giving a singular performance, he presented a sequence of smaller shots, meaning that he couldn’t realise himself into that role fully, and was always conscious that it is an image of himself which will permeate to the public.

The Dadaists leaned into these shortfalls of film, and used it to their advantage. As an example, Fernand Léger’s experimental film *Ballet Mecanique* uses a sequence of fast moving, seemingly unrelated images; a woman’s lips, an oscillating metal sphere, a woman on a swing, and kaleidoscopic shots of unidentifiable objects. The objectification of the actor was exemplified by closing up onto specific parts of their face, which used their body as nothing more than an image, specifically visible in the singular loop of a woman’s mouth breaking into a smile, and one of a singular eye opening and shutting, which re-occur throughout the film. This is crucially something that the theatre could not have done, the segmentation of the human body into its constituents created a vision not possible through just acting in front of an audience. Thus, the use of the camera allowed the Dadaists to both penetrate and objectify the human, which allowed it to present the body in revealing and subversive ways, by destroying the distance one keeps from it and its resultant aura.

The camera’s distortion of reality is evident throughout the film, in its unconventional angles and experimentation with the lens. The tool itself is able to penetrate the realities in a way that the eyes cannot, according to Benjamin, while the film makes use of several top, and upside down shots. This confronts the viewer with new representations of the visions around them, questioning the complacency of a singular stagnant perspective within the stage performance. Léger intentionally created undistinguishable fast moving frames to introduce his vision of the rapidity of technological and social advancements. Dada films like *Ballet Mecanique* act as a predecessor to modern techniques of editing and photo manipulation, and their confrontational nature was caused by this experimentation.

V. FAILURES

Conceptually, while Dadaism brought innovative techniques to art making, certain limitations also hindered its success as a political art movement.

5.1 Political Context

Viewing the movement through a Gramscian¹⁴ lens, it can be seen as an attempted attack towards the bourgeois

¹³ “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is an essay by Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish critic and philosopher, which was published in 1936. The essay involves observations on the changes in art making and consumption

practices due to the advent of technologies that allowed reproduction of artwork.

¹⁴ Antonio Francesco Gramsci, [1891-1937] was a Marxist philosopher, politician and writer, in Italy. Known for his

intellectual and moral rule under capitalism due to its subversion from their orthodox notions of how to make and interact with art. Being an art movement, it is given that challenging the substructural capitalist economic model, which perpetuates bourgeois authority, is beyond the scope of its goal. However, Gramsci recognises that this class rule is beyond just economic and extends into moral and intellectual leadership within the superstructure. For the continuous imposition of the bourgeoisie hegemony, the superstructure must be in symbiosis with the economic base. Thus, it becomes important to study this phenomenon, and conditions of its failure, to understand how Dadaism could not successfully establish itself into a counter-hegemonic stance to the state.

The superstructure within capitalism is made up of multiple different pillars of civil society that work as extensions of the direct authority of the state. While the state is concerned with creating optimal conditions of compromise between the dominant and submissive class both politically and economically, other institutions of culture, academia and religion also play a role in the superstructural formation. They aid in both the perpetuation of bourgeois ideology, many being funded directly by them like churches, schools, and museums, and act as a method for ensuring consensual participation of the individuals of the proletariat in the capitalist system through systems like trade unions. So, bourgeois hegemony is not the work of a single body, but a pluralist rule.

Thus, it follows that economic crises, like war, could crucially become situations of failing hegemony only when the substructure is also affected. It is indicated through a political failing, by the working class revoking consent to be subjugated, and ideological failing, where the masses no longer buy into the traditions of any civil structures. The masses begin taking a more active stance rather than a passive one, and strive towards changing the status quo. This does not necessarily have to manifest in a socialist revolution, but any sort of change or diminishing unto the bourgeois historical bloc requires a challenge from an alternative proletariat historical bloc. So, to establish a successful counter hegemonic campaign while still under capitalist constraints, Gramsci believes that first a construction of a proletarian bloc is required. This is achieved not by directly attacking the bourgeois, a strategy dubbed a “war of movement”, since the Western bourgeoisie controls civil structures too, but by aligning with other dominant anti capitalist forces that exist already

and then building the narrative until there is an opportunity to strike. This is where Dadaism fell short. Two main characteristics hindered its attempts- economic inaccessibility, non-pluralist approach.

5.2 Economic Inaccessibility

While the Dada supposedly represented an organic rejection of intellectualism and dominant anti-war sentiments of the working class, it was not highly accessible to the ones it was meant to represent. While the Cabaret Voltaire was open to artists and creatives, and Dadaists attempted to make their art publicly available through publishing books like the “Collection Dada” and poetry collections, the movement’s development was not done keeping access in mind. The Gallerie Dada, which opened in March 1917, despite having visits from local visitors, charged high admission fees and became a place to host parties and serve tea to elites. Because of the fact that the movement did not actively attempt to make its work available to the public, it could not reach the people most directly represented by its message, which made its public reach numerically limited and hindered it from becoming truly representative of the people. It could not garner enough support from existing resistance to then assimilate into the anti-capitalist narrative. Instead of being a torchbearer, or a public’s institution, its centre became business. This meant it had a stake in the capitalist system and actively profited from either richer members of the working class- who still consented to state authority in present form, or the bourgeoisie. It could not truly separate itself from the system enough.

5.3 Non-Pluralist Approach

The Dada did not, by choice or chance, align with the other dominant artistic movements and popular anti-capitalist forces in the time. Logistically, its biggest centre was in Zurich, away from the popular anti-war and anti-government movements taking place within Britain, France and Germany, given that most working class individuals were either conscripted or did not have enough funds to leave the country, unlike Dada artists. This, along with the internal disagreements between artists like Hugo Ball and Tzara about the goals of the Dada itself, meant that it was not able to contribute to the effort of dismantling the class power disparity it was so critical of. This is particularly vital for a political art movement, and can be the delta between it being successful or unsuccessful in its goals. For example, the Russian Constructivist¹⁵ movement of 1915 became the

contribution to the development of the concept of hegemony, most notably through his *Prison Notebooks*, he was also a founder of the Italian Communist Party.

¹⁵ The Russian Constructivist movement gained prominence in 1915, retaining it till around 1945, and was based on the principle

that art was more than just personal, and should be used as a tool for critique and propaganda, viewing it through a utilitarian perspective. Exploring construction, architecture and cinema, the movement can be recognised by a use of sharp clean lines,

official face for the propaganda and publication of the Bolshevik revolution.¹⁶ It inculcated the physical recognisability of the movement's art and architecture into the Bolshevik vision for the new socialist order and in doing so was able to become a part of the proletariat historical bloc. Thus, the Dada's inability to adopt a pluralist approach in its protest contributed to its non-fulfillment.

VI. CONCLUSION

Because of geographic concentration within Zurich and other small working areas, and numerous disagreements between artists of the movement it dwindled from prominence within about 6 years of its conception. Because of its unstructured isolation it remained a statement, albeit powerful, instead of a force within a revolution. The inventive techniques it adopted through use of new and old tools of creation did not make their way to the masses, and therefore could not become an instrument of mobilisation only remaining provocations. It was ephemeral, declining as the First World War, the catalyst of its creation, came to an end too. However, Dada was unique in its explicit collectivisation and structure, having identifiable centres, events and manifestos. Its vocal nature made it provocative to the bourgeois masses and it broadened the definition of art through its integration of performance and the use of film. Dadaism's adoption of the philosophy of nonsense, which permeated through the noise music, soundscapes and gory costuming allowed it to devise a kind of artistic response which did not exist before it. Dadaism presented how art could do more than just mirror what was around it, by making the audience a part of the piece itself and attacking more than just their visual sense alone. The Dadaists' use of film helped them destroy the distant, complacent view by which the eye was meant to see by using the camera, poking and inspecting the realities around them to show what lay under the visually cohesive and unoffending. The anarchist approach they took to creation allowed them to radically interrogate cultural structures of power that perpetuated the war, and reveal the hypocrisies they thought lied within them. They changed the process of art making, and its possible outcomes to veer it towards being socially and politically influential.

References

- [1] Duchamp, Marcel. (1915- 1923). *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- [2] Léger, Fernand. (1924). *Ballet Mécanique*.

- [3] Leybold, Hans. (1913). *Revolution*. H. F. S. Bachmair,
- [4] Picasso, Pablo. (1907). *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. Museum of Modern Art.
- [5] Ray, Man. (1924). *Le Violon d'Ingres*.
- [6] Ball, Hugo. (1996). *Flight out of time: A Dada diary*. Univ of California Press.
- [7] Benjamin, Walter. (1964). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Pantheon Books.
- [8] Milner, Andrew. (1993). *Cultural Materialism*. Melbourne University Press.
- [9] Williams, Raymond, and Ederyn Williams. (1992). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Routledge.
- [10] Williams, Raymond. (1976). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Croom Helm.
- [11] Carter Curtis. (1998). "Dadaism", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly. Oxford University Press.
- [12] Grossberg, Lawrence. (1975). *Review Essay: Cultural Interpretation and Mass Communication: Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Schocken Books.
- [13] Riley, Dylan J. (2011). *Hegemony, Democracy, and Passive Revolution in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks*. California Italian Studies, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/C322008962>.
- [14] Im, H. B. (1991). *HEGEMONY AND COUNTER-HEGEMONY IN GRAMSCI*. Asian Perspective, 15(1), 123–156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42705295>.
- [15] Melzer, Annabelle Henkin. (1973). *Dada Performance at the Cabaret Voltaire*. The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine, November. <https://www.artforum.com/features/dada-performance-at-the-cabaret-voltaire-212882/>. Accessed 15 June 2023
- [16] Trachtman, Paul. (2006). *A Brief History of Dada*. Smithsonian.Com, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/dada-115169154/>. Accessed 30 April 2023.
- [17] Sands, Thea. (2017). *Dada: The Nonsense Soundscape of the Cabaret Voltaire*. Varsity Online. <https://www.varsity.co.uk/music/14163>. Accessed 25 June 2023.

geometric shapes and practical instruments without a strict focus on traditional composition.

¹⁶ The Bolshevik Revolution, more widely known as the Russian Revolution, was a series of events in Russia in 1917 that involved

the downfall of its monarchy. The Tsar's rule was replaced by a new socialist order, led by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin.



The Hermeneutics of Love: Ricoeurian reading of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

Muhsina CK

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

Received: 11 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 07 Oct 2025; Accepted: 11 Oct 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and faith. Ricoeur conceives interpretation as a dialectic: suspicion unmasks hidden ideologies, distortions, and unconscious motives, while faith seeks to restore meaning, trust, and openness to the text. Shafak's novel, which interlaces the story of Ella, a disillusioned American housewife, with the thirteenth-century friendship between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, illustrates this dynamic. Ella's skepticism toward love, religion, and convention reflects the suspicious stance, questioning cultural norms and personal illusions. Yet, the Sufi teachings embodied in Shams and Rumi cultivate faith, offering renewal through love, transcendence, and spiritual transformation. Reading the novel through Ricoeur thus highlights how literature operates as both critique and affirmation, deconstructing rigid ideologies while reconstructing meaning. The novel affirms Ricoeur's claim that genuine understanding emerges in the tension between suspicion and faith, making space for identity, hope, and love.



Keywords— *Hermeneutics of faith, Hermeneutics of suspicion; Mysticism; conflicts of interpretations; Symbols.*

Defining Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Faith

Ricoeur, following Heidegger, views humans as linguistic beings whose self-understanding is mediated through language. Since language is inherently complex and polysemic, Ricoeur focuses on symbolic words, where the hermeneutical problem is most apparent. He defines a symbol as a structure of meaning in which a primary, literal sense points to a secondary, hidden, figurative sense that can only be accessed through the first. Unlike mere signs, symbols are opaque and enigmatic, requiring interpretation to uncover their depth. Thus, symbols and interpretation are correlative: symbols give rise to thought, while interpretation is the intellectual act of deciphering hidden meanings within the apparent ones, unfolding layers of significance beyond the literal. (Ricoeur 1990, 118)

Ricoeur maintains that there is no single or universal method of interpretation. Instead, hermeneutics always unfolds in tension, caught between two polarities: suspicion, which seeks to unmask and demystify illusions

that obscure truth, and faith, which seeks to recover and restore meaning. This "conflict of interpretations" provides hermeneutics with its double motivation—rigor and obedience, suspicion and trust. The hermeneutics of suspicion begins by doubting the immediacy of consciousness, particularly the Cartesian cogito, which falsely claims self-transparency. Ricoeur insists that self-understanding is only possible through the mediation of signs and their interpretation. Here he highlights Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the "masters of suspicion." Each unmasks religion as an illusion: Marx as the "opium of the people," Nietzsche as a system of "slave morality," and Freud as mere nostalgia for the father figure. Together, they expose consciousness as "false consciousness" and practice demystification, iconoclasm, and the destruction of illusions. (Itao 2010, 3)

Suspicion, however, is not an end in itself. By stripping away the false, suspicion clears the ground for new possibilities of meaning. Ricoeur insists that "idols must die so that symbols may live." The deconstruction of illusions

allows symbols to re-emerge as sites of genuine significance. This transition from suspicion to openness sets the stage for the hermeneutics of faith. The hermeneutics of faith is characterized by trust, receptivity, and a “second naïveté”—not blind belief, but a post-critical faith achieved after suspicion. It listens to symbols as carriers of truth and meaning, much like the phenomenology of religion, which restores the sacred, and Bultmann’s demythologization, which seeks the divine message within biblical myth. For Ricoeur, interpretation thus requires both suspicion and faith: the critical work of unmasking falsehoods and the constructive work of recovering deeper truths. (Gschwandtner 2024, iv)

Ricoeur sees hermeneutics not merely as the interpretation of symbols but as a philosophical path toward self-understanding. Symbols serve as mediators that allow humans to situate themselves and grasp their own existence. Through reflection—an act of appropriation—the ego reclaims its “effort to exist” and “desire to be,” which are often forgotten as we become lost in the world of objects. Since the ego cannot be known directly through intuition or mystical insight, self-understanding must be mediated through works, actions, and symbols. Thus, reflection becomes interpretation, where signs and symbols serve as the only access to rediscovering the self. (Pellauer and Dauenhauer 2025)

To resolve the hermeneutic conflict between suspicion and faith, Ricoeur proposes a triadic reflective structure: dispossession, antithetic, and dialectic. Dispossession, aligned with suspicion, unmasks false consciousness and returns to the forgotten subject (“archaeology of the subject”). The antithetic stage, aligned with faith, listens anew to symbols, restoring their original enigma and leading toward the subject’s reappropriation (“teleology of the subject”). Finally, the dialectic stage reconciles these opposites into a unity, showing their complementarity rather than rivalry. In this synthesis, suspicion and faith coexist as legitimate and necessary, allowing the subject—once alienated—to be restored to a hopeful self-understanding rooted in ontology. (Ricoeur 1973, 98)

The hermeneutics of faith emphasize approaching narratives with trust, assuming participants are the best interpreters of their own lived experience. Rooted in phenomenology, it privileges understanding subjective meaning, honoring personal stories without reducing them to hidden causes. Researchers adopt a humanistic stance, seeking to faithfully re-present how participants make sense of themselves and their world. This perspective values empathy, dialogical encounters, and “I–Thou” relationships, where meaning is co-constructed and clarified

through genuine exchange between researcher and participant.

Interpretation in this mode treats life stories as intentional acts of meaning-making, akin to a Bildungsroman, charting growth through struggle or transformation. While acknowledging gaps, partial truths, and contextual influences, the goal is to restore meanings with minimal distortion through thick description and reflexive dialogue. The hermeneutic circle—moving between parts and whole—guides analysis, while Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” highlights interpretation as co-construction. Restoration resists suspicion’s reductive tendencies, aiming instead to preserve participants’ voices, highlight marginalized perspectives, and produce faithful, though inevitably partial, representations of human experience. (McCarthy 1989, 12)

The hermeneutics of suspicion rests on Ricoeur’s idea that both language and consciousness are inherently distorted and equivocal. Thinkers like Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche showed how surface meanings often conceal hidden truths, and thus narratives cannot be taken at face value. What appears transparent in experience is problematized, as stories may mask deeper realities, unconscious processes, or cultural constraints. The interpretive task is therefore to “tear away masks” and uncover the latent structures that shape what is said—and unsaid.

This approach treats narratives as constructions rather than transparent reports. Researchers focus on silences, omissions, contradictions, and indirect references to reveal deeper psychic or social processes. Techniques such as psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, or feminist readings demonstrate how unconscious defenses, power dynamics, and cultural discourses shape personal accounts, even without participants’ awareness. A key element is that the authority to interpret rests not with participants but with researchers, who situate narratives within broader theoretical frameworks. Participants may believe in their own accounts, but from this stance, their self-understandings are incomplete. Interpretation thus requires constructing alternative readings, sometimes against participants’ intentions, to reveal hidden structures of meaning. Classic examples, such as Geertz’s study of cockfighting, show how everyday practices or stories carry symbolic significance beyond their immediate sense.

Demystification is skeptical yet productive. It assumes every story has an untold counterpart and seeks revelation rather than mere confirmation. Though sometimes seen as intrusive or elitist, it highlights the multidetermined, multivocal, and socially embedded nature of narratives. Like everyday “reading between the lines,” it insists that meaning is always more than it appears, and interpretation

must unearth what is repressed, unsayable, or structurally concealed. (Josselson 2004, 10)

Ricoeur famously identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the “masters of suspicion” because they unmasked illusions in religion, culture, and society. They attacked Christianity not to renew it but to overcome it altogether, replacing it with other life-affirming visions. Ricoeur argued, however, that even their destructive critiques contained an element of recovery, aiming to find affirmation beyond illusions—though he judged Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, for instance, to fall short of a livable affirmation. (Ihde 1989, ix–x)

Against this backdrop, Kierkegaard presents a problem. On one hand, his exposure of hypocrisy, self-deception, and idolatry within Christianity resonates strongly with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Yet Kierkegaard critiques religion from *within* the Christian tradition, aiming not to destroy faith but to purify and rediscover it. Ricoeur did not classify Kierkegaard among the “masters of suspicion” because their critique was atheistic and external, whereas Kierkegaard’s suspicion sought renewal of faith. (Damgaard 2018, 11)

Towards Conflicts of interpretations

Paul Ricoeur’s *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1960–69 essays) shows his thought in sharper relief than his systematic works like *The Symbolism of Evil* or *Freud and Philosophy*. The guiding thread through his diverse interests (structuralism, psychoanalysis, religion, phenomenology, linguistics) is the question of hermeneutics, or interpretation. For Ricoeur, language is inseparable from both philosophy of language and the human sciences, and his project aims to reconcile structuralist “objectivism” with phenomenology’s concern for subjectivity. Ricoeur engages structuralism as a sympathetic yet critical dialogue partner. He acknowledges the scientific value of treating language as a closed system of signs but critiques its reductionism: it suppresses history (diachrony) and the speaking subject. He distances himself from Merleau-Ponty’s reinstatement of the embodied subject and Heidegger’s radical ontology, both of which he sees as cutting off dialogue with the linguistic sciences. Instead, Ricoeur takes a more “conservative,” dialectical approach, using methodological stages to mediate between objectivist and phenomenological perspectives. (Ihde 1989, vi)

He develops a theory of “levels of language,” where structuralist linguistics and semiotics operate at a necessary but limited level, while higher levels reintroduce openness, novelty, and the act of speech. Here language reveals both finitude (system, structure) and infinity (event, creativity). The “word” unites system and act, structure and history, embodying both closure and openness. Hermeneutics thus centers on symbols—polysemic words with multiple layers

of meaning. Interpretation is the work of deciphering hidden meaning through literal meaning, linking Ricoeur back to biblical and exegetical traditions while extending them into phenomenology. (Ihde 1989, vii)

Ricoeur expands hermeneutics beyond textual analysis to the human subject itself, treated as a text to be deciphered. Here he brings Freud and Hegel into dialogue. Both exemplify a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that displaces immediate consciousness: Freud through an archaeology of the unconscious, Hegel through a teleology of Spirit’s unfolding. Though Ricoeur borrows from both, he demythologizes them, rejecting Freud’s realism of the unconscious and Hegel’s Absolute Idealism remaining faithful to a phenomenological method that resists metaphysical closure. Ricoeur treats the subject as a text, with hidden depths such as the unconscious or future possibilities that are uncovered through a hermeneutics of suspicion. This method challenges phenomenology’s naïve claim of direct self-knowledge, showing instead that the self is known only through the world and the other. Suspicion humbles phenomenology, but in doing so, it radicalizes it, transforming it into an implicit hermeneutics of belief. (Ricoeur 1989, 445)

Faith, however, cannot return in a simple or naïve form. After passing through suspicion, it must be critical and demythologized. Symbols, myths, and theology all undergo a process of demythologization: theology is too distant and rationalized; symbols conceal archaic desires; even faith itself can harbor immaturity. The outcome of this critique is not the destruction of faith, but its transformation. Suspicion clears away false consciousness so that faith, if it survives, does so as a reflective, chastened faith. At this point, Ricoeur introduces hope as a “third term” beyond suspicion and belief. Hope replaces immediate faith at the center, displacing both the illusion of self-mastery and the dominance of the present. It opens freedom toward the future, toward the God “who is to come,” grounding a new ethics oriented less toward individual authenticity and more toward social and political justice. This eschatological hope becomes the true response to evil and death, surpassing existential philosophies of despair. (Ihde 1989, ix)

Ricoeur insists that hope must be historical and open-ended rather than closed by any absolute metaphysics. He struggles to preserve both the openness of history and the assurance that hope points toward fulfillment. Faith, though displaced, remains hidden within hope: history’s future possibilities are not random but oriented toward promises. Thus, Ricoeur envisions a post-Hegelian, Kantian hermeneutics where hope and faith together resist despair, affirm possibility, and prevent history from collapsing into meaninglessness.

The Hermeneutic Conflict in *The Forty Rules of Love*

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Ricoeur's dialectic of suspicion and faith is central to how meaning unfolds. The novel itself oscillates between critique and affirmation: on one hand, it questions religious dogma, social conventions, and modern disillusionment; on the other, it offers Sufi wisdom as a pathway to transformation. This mirrors Ricoeur's insight that hermeneutics is always caught in a tension between suspicion, which unmask false meanings, and faith, which recovers deeper truths. The hermeneutics of suspicion operate strongly in Ella's story. As a modern woman trapped in routine, she is skeptical of love, faith, and spiritual traditions. Her perspective reflects the Marxian critique of social illusions (domestic roles as oppression), Nietzschean suspicion of religious morality (rules that suppress individuality), and Freudian suspicion of desire (hidden motives behind relationships). Through her initial disbelief, Shafak dramatizes how suspicion unmasks the false securities of Ella's "immediate consciousness," exposing her self-deceptions and stagnant life.

Yet the novel does not stop at suspicion; rather, it clears a path toward renewal. When Ella encounters the story of Rumi and Shams, her skepticism begins to break open. In Ricoeur's terms, the idols of routine and false certainty "die" so that new symbols of love and transformation may live. Similarly, Rumi's grief after Shams's disappearance is not an end in despair but the beginning of a new poetic and spiritual vision, where love becomes the symbol through which meaning is reborn.

The hermeneutics of faith emerge as both Ella and Rumi learn to listen to the truths hidden in symbols—whether in Shams's forty rules, the *sama* of the dervishes, or the everyday acts of courage required to change one's life. This "second naïveté," post-critical and reflective, restores trust in love, spirituality, and interconnectedness. By weaving suspicion and faith into its narrative, *The Forty Rules of Love* illustrates Ricoeur's claim that interpretation must balance critique with recovery, ultimately affirming that genuine meaning comes not from rejecting symbols but from re-engaging them with openness and humility.

Dispossession, or the hermeneutics of suspicion, is reflected in Ella's growing awareness of the emptiness of her structured but loveless marriage. Reading *Sweet Blasphemy* forces her to question the life she has accepted as normal and uncovers her hidden longing for meaning and intimacy. Similarly, Rumi undergoes dispossession when Shams disrupts his established identity as a respected scholar, unsettling his intellectual certainty and revealing a forgotten depth within himself. Both characters are stripped of illusions, making space for a return to their truer selves.

The antithetic stage, associated with the hermeneutics of faith, emerges as Ella opens herself to Aziz's vision of love and transformation, learning to listen to the symbolic truths within Shams' forty rules. This stage restores the enigma of symbols and points her toward a life led by love rather than fear. Rumi too embodies this stage, as his relationship with Shams reawakens his spiritual imagination and guides him toward the rediscovery of divine love. The dialectic stage then reconciles suspicion and faith: Ella unites her critical awareness of her past life with her choice to embrace the risk of love, while Rumi integrates intellectual mastery with mystical passion. In both, suspicion and faith converge, leading to a new wholeness where self-understanding blossoms through love's transformative power.

Damgaard (2018) revisits Ricoeur's distinction between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith, arguing that suspicion, while necessary for unmasking false consciousness and exposing hidden power structures, should not remain the final horizon of interpretation. Instead, through suspicion one can be led toward a rediscovery of faith—a mode of interpretation that restores meaning, trust, and openness to symbols. This is highly relevant to Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, where characters undergo suspicion of tradition and authority before arriving at a renewed sense of faith through love, storytelling, and Sufi wisdom. (Shafak 2015, 1-16)

Shafak dramatizes Paul Ricoeur's dialectic of suspicion and faith in both Ella's contemporary story and the parallel narrative of Shams of Tabriz. At the start, Ella's surface stability as a housewife masks deep dissatisfaction. Her rejection of Jeannette's engagement, insisting that security matters more than love, is suspicion turned inward—it exposes her own loveless marriage and suppressed longings. Jeannette's blunt accusation that Ella is "an unhappy housewife" unmasks this denial, forcing her to confront what she hides. The coincidence of the manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy* echoing her very words function as another layer of suspicion: language itself is revealed as opaque, reflecting hidden truths rather than transparent meaning. Similarly, in Baghdad, Shams unsettles the innkeeper and confronts the judge, tearing down the masks of hypocrisy in religion and law. His presence embodies suspicion as disruption, stripping away false appearances.

Yet suspicion in both stories is not an end in itself. Ella's first tentative email to Aziz marks a turn toward faith, what Ricoeur calls the "second naïveté." After her illusions are stripped, she risks trust in a new voice that speaks of submission and love. The manuscript's symbolic coincidence also points toward meaning that can be reappropriated if she chooses to believe. Shams, likewise, restores meaning through parables and teachings: his

retelling of Moses and the shepherd reframes “blasphemy” as sincerity, showing that true faith lies not in rigid conformity but in authentic love of God. The symbol, opaque and double-layered, becomes generative once embraced in faith.

Ella vacillates between skepticism and openness—dismissing love in Jeannette’s life but longing for it secretly, doubting Aziz yet being drawn to him, clinging to her marriage but feeling its emptiness. The “stone in the lake” metaphor captures this movement: suspicion disturbs the stagnant surface, while faith allows ripples of transformation to expand. In the parallel chapters, Shams embodies this dialectic directly. He strips others of empty securities but simultaneously affirms divine love as the true foundation of existence. His suspicion and his faith are inseparable, each preparing the ground for the other.

Taken together, the parallel narratives illustrate Ricoeur’s threefold movement. Suspicion brings dispossession—Ella is stripped of illusions about her marriage, while Shams tears away hypocrisy in others. Faith then offers reappropriation—Ella dares to trust Aziz’s words, Jeannette reconciles with her mother, and Shams points toward sincerity as the path to God. Finally, the dialectic unites both moments, preparing Ella for inner reawakening and Shams for his destined meeting with Rumi. (Shafak 2015, 20-94)

The Forty Rules of Love explores the tension between suspicion and faith through a series of encounters that unsettle established norms and open new paths of transformation. Rumi’s recurring dream in Chapter 21 highlights his spiritual unease, showing that knowledge, prestige, and family cannot fill the inner void he feels. The dream foreshadows his coming encounter with Shams, suggesting that the stripping away of self-certainty will pave the way for renewal. This inward crisis reflects the hermeneutics of suspicion, where illusions of mastery collapse, leaving space for deeper meaning to emerge.

Shams’s arrival in Konya, introduces a radical alternative to conventional religiosity. He recognizes every person as God’s “unfinished masterpiece” and insists that true spirituality requires humility, respect, and openness. His defense of the marginalized like beggars, prostitutes, or drunks shows him as both iconoclast and healer. Suspicion for Shams means unmasking hypocrisy and prejudice, while faith means affirming divine presence in unlikely places. His role destabilizes rigid boundaries and reveals the possibility of a more inclusive vision of God.

The marginalized voices of Hasan the Beggar, Desert Rose, and Suleiman the Drunk embody the conflict of interpretations at the heart of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Hasan doubts Rumi’s message of suffering as the privilege of a man removed from misery, while Desert Rose believes

herself condemned by society’s scorn. Suleiman rails against the hypocrisy of religious prohibitions. Yet through encounters with Shams, each character experiences a movement from suspicion to faith: Hasan is reminded of the divine within, Desert Rose is assured of forgiveness through compassion, and Suleiman discovers that doubt is part of faith itself. In each case, suffering becomes crucible for rediscovering dignity and divine love.

In parallel, Ella’s storyline mirrors this dynamic on a modern plane. Turning forty fills her with suspicion about her marriage, her identity, and her choices, but Aziz reframes this moment as an opportunity for transformation. Their growing correspondence pushes Ella to loosen her grip on control, rediscover her capacity for faith, and embrace the uncertainty of love. Just as Shams unsettles Konya, Aziz unsettles Ella, stripping away the false securities of her domestic life and awakening a new openness to meaning. Together, these intertwined narratives dramatize how suspicion and faith, destruction and restoration, loss and renewal work hand in hand to reshape human experience. (Shafak 2015, 95-146)

The novel dramatizes the dialectic between suspicion and faith that Paul Ricoeur identifies as essential to interpretation. The Zealot (ch. 34) embodies suspicion in its reductive form: a literalist rejection of symbolism, poetry, and mystical experience. He treats the Mongol invasions as divine punishment and insists on obedience over interpretation, refusing to admit ambiguity or plurality of meaning. In Ricoeur’s terms, the Zealot reduces religious truth to ideology, closing off self-understanding. By contrast, Shams (ch. 35, 44, 57, 61) represents a hermeneutics that moves through suspicion critiquing superficial religiosity, gossip, fear, and hypocrisy—toward faith, where love, surrender, and divine presence reshape human existence. His insistence that “idols must die so that symbols may live” resonates with Ricoeur’s conviction that suspicion clears away false consciousness, enabling faith to rediscover meaning.

The encounters between Shams and Rumi (chs. 36, 39, 48, 52) dramatize Ricoeur’s idea of the *second naïveté*, where faith is re-appropriated after critique. Rumi’s first meeting with Shams shocks him into dispossession, unsettling his identity as a scholar and preacher. Shams’s probing questions about Bistami or the nafs dismantle Rumi’s illusions of self-mastery and force him into hermeneutic reflection. By guiding Rumi through critique of ego, fame, and rigid scholarship, Shams enables him to embrace poetry, love, and unity as symbols of divine reality. This mirrors Ricoeur’s insight that suspicion is not destructive if it opens onto deeper affirmation—here, faith expressed in mystical union.

Other characters embody the tension of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in their own ways. Ella (154-160) oscillates between suspicion of Aziz—questioning his identity, resisting his worldview—and a growing faith in the transformative power of love. Kerra and Kimya (165-178) illustrate suspicion as alienation: Kerra is excluded from male intellectual life and distrusts Shams, while Kimya wrestles with Qur'anic interpretation and her feelings for Shams. Yet faith also breaks through—Kimya discovers love as a deeper hermeneutic than fear, while Kerra, though wounded, begins to confront her own buried longing. These shifts echo Ricoeur's claim that faith is not blind acceptance but a re-reading of life's symbols after critique.

Finally, the narratives of suffering and transformation—Desert Rose's brutal assault and spiritual awakening (213), Aziz's descent into addiction and rediscovery of Sufism (215-231)—enact Ricoeur's hermeneutics at a biographical level. Both characters pass through suspicion: Desert Rose confronts the violence and degradation of her life, while Aziz confronts despair and nihilism. Yet both re-appropriate faiths not by denying pain but by interpreting it anew, discovering love and divine presence in fragility. Their journeys exemplify Ricoeur's idea that meaning is forged not by evading suspicion but by carrying it through to a rediscovery of faith. (Shafak 2015, 147-236)

The narrative amplifies the tension between suspicion and faith, dramatizing how interpretation itself becomes a site of conflict. In the tavern scene (235-236), Rumi's entry shocks Suleiman and the drinkers into confronting their own prejudices. For them, a saintly scholar in a tavern can only be a hallucination or blasphemy. Yet through his words, Rumi transforms suspicion into self-examination: wine is not condemned as a material substance but as a mirror of what lies within. This is Ricoeur's hermeneutics at work: suspicion unmasks false idols of purity and reputation, while faith re-appropriates symbols—here bread, wine, and scars—as signs of divine presence. Rumi's insistence on personal responsibility and compassion exemplifies the “second naïveté,” where prohibitions are no longer imposed externally but integrated as an interior freedom.

The father-son conflict (239) exposes how suspicion can harden into resentment. Aladdin interprets his father's act of fetching wine as betrayal, reading it through the lens of honor and disgrace. Shams's counsel to “soften his heart” is a call toward faith, yet Aladdin resists, clinging to suspicion of Shams as a corrupter. Rumi's rebuke—expressing shame rather than anger—pierces Aladdin more deeply than hostility could, revealing the painful gap between literalistic suspicion and compassionate interpretation. The

hermeneutic clash here is generational: the son clings to law and reputation, the father to inward transformation.

Shams's symbolic act beneath the rose tree (239-244) makes Ricoeur's point about symbols most vividly. By pouring wine and seeing a crimson rose bloom, Shams dramatizes how reality is reconfigured through faith's interpretive act. When he tests Rumi by offering wine, the trial is not about consumption but about transcendence: will Rumi cling to prohibition as law or embrace it as symbol, moving from suspicion into a higher faith? Rumi passes, showing humility and surrender. Ricoeur's dialectic is enacted: suspicion clears away rigid religiosity, faith re-reads the symbol as a disclosure of divine love.

Meanwhile, Ella's confrontation with David (245-247) mirrors this dialectic in the modern frame. David reads her emails with suspicion, seeking betrayal; Ella insists her love for Aziz is not revenge but transformation. The hermeneutics of suspicion exposes hidden structures—estrangement, lovelessness—but Ella insists on a hermeneutics of faith, reinterpreting love as gift rather than transgression. Her letter to Aziz is her “second naïveté”: she knows the risks, yet affirms love as meaning making rather than illusion.

The conflicts with Sheikh Yassin (248-254) bring Ricoeur's theme of ideology into sharper focus. Yassin interprets Rumi's tavern visit as proof of corruption, reducing mystical openness to heresy. Shams confronts him by narrating the parable of the four merchants, exposing the violence of judgmentalism. Suspicion here is doubled: Yassin uses it to denounce, while Shams uses it to unmask self-righteousness. Husam's hesitant reply—refusing to judge—embodies the hermeneutics of faith, where humility safeguards sincerity. Ricoeur's contrast between the scholar's fixation on law and the mystic's trust in symbols is dramatized in this confrontation.

Desert Rose's refuge (263-264) extend this dialectic into embodied practice. Desert Rose's scars embody suspicion—society reads her as fallen—but through Shams's guidance she reinterprets her emptiness as a space for divine fullness. The sema, too, is an act of re-symbolization: movement, music, and rhythm, once condemned as worldly, are re-appropriated as sacred. Ricoeur reminds us that symbols give rise to thought; here, the whirling dervishes generate a new language of faith that transcends suspicion.

The sovereign's humiliation (268-270), Aladdin's rage (271-272), and Shams's recognition of impermanence (273-276) remind us that suspicion always returns, often violently. Shams's rejection of gold unmasked hypocrisy but provoked political hostility. Aladdin's near-violence shows suspicion collapsing into hatred when it refuses

transformation. And Shams's solitary reflection recalls Ricoeur's sober insight: faith does not erase suspicion but carries it forward, knowing love is both gift and wound.

Ella's decision to leave home and meet Aziz (276-278) crystallizes the hermeneutic wager. Suspicion whispers of betrayal, instability, and regret; faith interprets love as risk and transformation. By choosing Aziz, Ella steps into Ricoeur's "second naïveté," affirming meaning after critique. Her act embodies the novel's central claim: love, when embraced interpretively, is the deepest form of faith, even when it unsettles established identities. (Shafak 2015, 237-282)

The final part of the novel opens with Shams's disappearance and Rumi's unraveling grief, which Ricoeur would interpret as the transformation of absence into presence. For Rumi, the loss of Shams is not mere negation but a symbolic surplus of meaning: the void itself generates poetry, vision, and a deeper selfhood. Sultan Walad's dilemma—whether to truly search or to feign loyalty—illustrates the hermeneutics of suspicion, exposing ambivalence and hidden resentments. Yet the very tension between fidelity and betrayal shows how absence operates as a text: each character interprets Shams's vanishing in their own way, projecting meaning onto what is no longer there. In Ricoeur's terms, Shams's disappearance becomes the "symbol that gives rise to thought," opening interpretive layers that exceed literal absence.

When Shams is found in Damascus and returns to Konya, the narrative shifts into Ricoeur's dialectic of suspicion and faith. Shams's chess game with Francis enacts interpretation as dialogue across traditions, where religious difference is unmasked as secondary to shared submission. His decision to return is not driven by logic or self-preservation but by loyalty and love—a hermeneutics of faith that reconfigures risk into fidelity. Yet suspicion continues to operate through the community's hostility and Aladdin's growing resentment, reminding us that interpretation is always contested. Here, Ricoeur's insight into the coexistence of critique and trust is embodied in Shams: he accepts suspicion as inevitable but insists on interpreting life through the horizon of love.

The marriage of Shams and Kimya dramatizes the tragic limits of interpretation. For Kimya, love is read as destiny and redemptive hope, while for Shams, marriage is a misreading of his own nature. Ricoeur emphasizes that symbols are polysemic—they carry multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings—and the marriage exposes this multiplicity. For Kimya, the symbol of marriage is fullness and recognition; for Shams, it becomes death-in-life, a burden that cannot be consummated. Kimya's heartbreak and eventual death exemplify how the hermeneutics of faith

can collapse under the weight of disappointed expectations, leaving only silence and suffering. Yet, in Ricoeur's frame, even this tragedy births meaning: Kimya's devotion, Desert Rose's guilt, and Rumi's grief all reveal the fragility of love's interpretive possibilities.

Shams's murder marks the culmination of suspicion's triumph, where fear, jealousy, and resentment drown out faith. Yet, paradoxically, his death unleashes a hermeneutics of renewal in Rumi. Stripped of his companion, he is reborn as poet and mystic, transfiguring grief into *The Mathnawi* and the whirling dance. Ricoeur insists that interpretation moves toward a "second naïveté," where the broken symbol is re-appropriated with depth. For Rumi, Shams is no longer a historical presence but a universal voice—an inexhaustible text inscribed in poetry, music, and love. Suspicion exposed the fragility of human bonds; faith reconstitutes those bonds in a horizon of divine permanence. Ella's parallel journey with Aziz closes the novel in this same key: Aziz's death, like Shams's, becomes not an end but a beginning, a surplus of meaning that reshapes Ella's identity. In both narratives, love survives loss by becoming interpretation, confirming Ricoeur's vision that symbols of faith always outlast suspicion through their power to generate new life. (Shafak 2015, 283-350)

CONCLUSION

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* provides a fertile ground for examining Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and faith. Through its parallel narratives, the novel demonstrates how suspicion operates to unmask illusions of security, authority, and self-transparency, while faith re-appropriates meaning through love, compassion, and symbolic imagination. The dialectic between suspicion and faith does not culminate in resolution but remains dynamic, as scenes of conflict, loss, and tragedy continually reopen the space of interpretation. Shams's radical iconoclasm, Rumi's transformation from jurist to mystic, and Ella's passage from domestic conformity to existential reawakening exemplify Ricoeur's claim that critique is a necessary prelude to reconfiguration, that "idols must die so that symbols may live." By dramatizing this hermeneutic movement, Shafak's text illustrates how literature itself becomes a site of philosophical reflection, enabling readers to experience suspicion not as mere negation but as a path toward the rediscovery of meaning. In doing so, the novel affirms Ricoeur's vision of interpretation as a dialectical process in which faith and suspicion are inseparable, each sustaining the other in the ongoing task of understanding.

REFERENCES

- [1] Damgaard, Iben. 2018. "Through Hermeneutics of Suspicion to a Rediscovery of Faith." *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2018.1451774>.
- [2] Deodato S. Itao, Alexis. 2010. "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Symbols: A Critical Dialectic of Suspicion and Faith." *Kritike* 4 (2): 3. http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_8/itao_december2010.pdf.
- [3] Gschwandtner, Christina M. 2024. "Introduction." In *Paul Ricoeur, Philosophical Hermeneutics, and the Question of Revelation*, 1–xx. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- [4] Ihde, Don. 1989. "Editor's Introduction." In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ix–xv. London: Athlone Press.
- [5] Josselson, Ruthellen. 2004. "The Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion." *Narrative Inquiry* 14 (1): 1–28. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.
- [6] McCarthy, John. 1989. "The Density of Reference: Paul Ricoeur on Religious Textual Reference." *Philosophy of Religion* 26: 1–28.
- [7] Pellauer, David, and Bernard Dauenhauer. 2025. "Paul Ricoeur." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/ricoeur/>.
- [8] Ricoeur, Paul. 1973. "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text." *New Literary History* 5 (1): 91–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468410>.
- [9] ———. 1989. "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." Translated by Charles Freilich. In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 440–67. London: Athlone Press.
- [10] ———. 1990. "Between Hermeneutics and Semiotics: In Homage to Algirdas J. Greimas." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 3 (8): 115–32.
- [11] Shafak, Elif. 2015. *The Forty Rules of Love*. London: Penguin.



Haunted Ecologies: Memory, Displacement, and Subaltern Landscapes in Mari Selvaraj's Cinema

Mathivadhani M S

Independent Researcher
vadhani02@gmail.com

Received: 12 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Oct 2025; Accepted: 13 Oct 2025; Available online: 16 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper interrogates the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity in Mari Selvaraj's cinema, positioning his films as potent interventions in Tamil Nadu's cultural and political landscapes. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism (Nixon's *Slow Violence*, 2011; DeLoughrey & Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies*, 2011), subaltern studies (Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988; Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 1983), and multidirectional memory theory (Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009), it explores how Selvaraj constructs "haunted ecologies"—spaces where environmental destruction and caste violence produce geographies of dispossession and amnesia. These resonate with Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as a sociopolitical condition (*Ghostly Matters*, 1997), where repressed histories persist spectrally. Through close analysis of *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, and *Vazhai*, the paper shows how Selvaraj's landscapes—rivers, ruins, fields—become living archives of caste atrocity and resistance. His films frame caste as both social and ecological, echoing Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) and David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (2003). Disrupting linear historiography and nationalist imaginaries, Selvaraj's cinema offers a counter-cartography of memory grounded in Dalit epistemologies. By employing nonlinear and cyclical temporalities, his films enact a radical politics of remembrance where reclaiming subaltern landscapes aligns with justice, dignity, and ecological wholeness—contributing to a postcolonial aesthetic imperative to reimagine futures through unresolved past specters.



Keywords— Memory, Ecological degradation, Subaltern subjectivity, Dalit cinema, Postcolonial ecocriticism

I. INTRODUCTION

In the fraught and deeply contested socio-political terrain of contemporary Tamil Nadu, cinema transcends mere artistic expression or popular entertainment to emerge as a critical site for the articulation of collective memory, subaltern resistance, and cultural intervention. The cinematic oeuvre of Mari Selvaraj—exemplified by *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—engages profoundly with the spectral entanglements of ecological devastation, caste-based violence, and subaltern subjectivity. His films reconceptualize the Tamil landscape not as a passive, inert backdrop but as a palimpsest imbued with layered

historical trauma, mnemonic sedimentation, and embodied socio-political narratives. Here, rivers, fields, and ruins are more than mere physical sites; they emerge as living, breathing archives of systemic oppression, caste atrocity, and enduring modes of resistance. This study interrogates how Selvaraj's work articulates the concept of "haunted ecologies," a complex spatial metaphor that denotes sites where environmental degradation and caste violence coalesce to produce geographies fraught with dispossession, erasure, silencing, and a pervasive sense of historical amnesia that haunts both the land and its peoples.

The theoretical architecture underpinning this inquiry is firmly situated at the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory, thereby fostering a richly multidimensional analytical framework. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as elaborated by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), offers a crucial lens to illuminate the deferred, dispersed, and often invisible nature of ecological violence that disproportionately impacts marginalized and dispossessed communities. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" foregrounds a protracted form of environmental harm that unfolds incrementally and remains occluded in dominant environmental narratives, often overshadowed by spectacular, immediate disasters. This slow violence intersects profoundly with caste and class oppression in India, where environmental degradation is not an isolated phenomenon but is embedded within broader structures of inequality and exclusion. Complementing this perspective, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) challenge Eurocentric and anthropocentric environmental discourses by foregrounding the colonial and imperial legacies inscribed within contemporary ecological crises. They emphasize the inseparability of environmental degradation from intersecting social hierarchies such as race, caste, gender, and class, underscoring the need for a decolonial ecological ethics attentive to marginalized subjectivities.

Simultaneously, subaltern studies theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988) and Ranajit Guha (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1983) provide indispensable theoretical tools to unravel the mechanisms of marginalization, silencing, and epistemic violence faced by Dalit and other subaltern communities. Their pioneering scholarship unveils the pervasive silencing embedded in hegemonic historiography, which systematically occludes subaltern voices and renders invisible the quotidian violences and subtle forms of resistance that characterize lived subaltern realities. These foundational insights allow for a critical interrogation of the politics of representation and historical erasure within both state-sanctioned narratives and cultural productions.

Building upon these, Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory (*Multidirectional Memory*, 2009) expands the analytic horizon by reconceptualizing memory as a dynamic, interactive, and non-competitive space. Rothberg's framework emphasizes the interconnectedness and cross-pollination of diverse histories of trauma—colonialism, caste oppression, ecological devastation—where memories intersect, overlap, and enter into productive dialogue rather than compete or negate each

other. This multidirectionality challenges monolithic and linear historiographies, offering instead a pluralistic, dialogic conception of collective remembrance that enables solidarity across distinct struggles and geographies of suffering.

Avery Gordon's seminal sociological theorization of haunting in *Ghostly Matters* (1997) proves particularly salient in conceptualizing Selvaraj's notion of "haunted ecologies." Gordon articulates haunting as a persistent sociopolitical condition in which spectral presences embody repressed histories, unacknowledged injustices, and enduring structural violences that reverberate beyond their immediate temporal and spatial contexts. Haunting is neither purely metaphorical nor abstract but materializes concretely within lived environments as traces, absences, spectral disruptions, and affective residues that unsettle dominant epistemologies and official histories. This understanding of haunting as a form of social and environmental trauma provides a powerful theoretical lens for examining how Selvaraj's cinematic landscapes manifest spectrality as both aesthetic and political intervention.

The emphasis on landscapes as active mnemonic agents finds consonance with critical interventions by Anupama Rao in *The Caste Question* (2009), which interrogates caste as a deeply entrenched socio-ecological formation inseparable from land, labor, and ecological relations. Similarly, David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (2003) intricately examines the intersection of caste, ecology, and statecraft within South Indian agrarian contexts, elucidating how water politics and environmental management are inextricably bound to caste hierarchies and social power structures. Selvaraj's films enter into dialogue with such scholarship by refusing sanitized, teleological, and linear historiographies or nationalist imaginaries that often mask caste violence and ecological exploitation. Instead, they generate a counter-cartography of memory—an insurgent spatial narrative—that centers Dalit epistemologies, embodied histories, and demands for spatial justice.

Moreover, Selvaraj's deliberate deployment of nonlinear, cyclical, and mythic temporalities resonates with indigenous ontologies, subaltern cosmologies, and alternative conceptions of time that destabilize dominant Western teleological and progressivist narratives of history. These narrative strategies facilitate a radical politics of remembrance, where the reclamation and reinhabitation of subaltern landscapes become inseparable from the pursuit of justice, dignity, and ecological wholeness. His films enact an urgent postcolonial aesthetic intervention—one that exposes the unresolved specters

haunting both the land and its inhabitants, while imaginatively reconfiguring futures shaped by ethical remembrance, mnemonic resistance, and decolonial hope. Through this cinematic praxis, Selvaraj opens crucial pathways for reckoning with the past's enduring legacies and envisioning transformative futures anchored in ecological justice and subaltern dignity.

In sum, this research focuses on cinematic interventions of Mari Selvaraj reveal memory in postcolonial Tamil Nadu as a profoundly contested and dynamic terrain, shaped by entrenched power asymmetries, caste hierarchies, and ecological violences. His films illuminate the complex interplay between multidirectional memory and spectral haunting, foregrounding how histories of caste oppression and environmental degradation intersect, resist erasure, and are continually negotiated through subaltern epistemologies. By unsettling dominant nationalist historiographies and linear temporalities, Selvaraj's work embodies the contradictions, silences, and ruptures inherent in collective remembrance within postcolonial and post conflict contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mari Selvaraj's oeuvre occupies a critical nexus at the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and memory theory, articulating a profound interrogation of the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity within the fraught socio-political topography of contemporary Tamil Nadu. His cinematic corpus—exemplified by *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and the *Vazhai* (2024)—emerges as an incisive cultural praxis that subverts hegemonic narratives through a complex, multi-layered aesthetic that reconfigures space, time, and historical consciousness.

Rob Nixon's seminal concept of *slow violence* (2011), delineated in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, foregrounds the protracted, often imperceptible devastation wrought upon marginalized ecologies and communities, underscoring the asymmetries of environmental harm as an insidious form of structural violence. In consonance, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) extends this critique by illuminating the entanglements of colonial legacies, environmental degradation, and cultural memory. Selvaraj's cinematic landscapes become embodiments of Nixon's slow violence, dramatizing ecological degradation not as an abstract backdrop but as an active agent in the spectral geographies of caste oppression. The "haunted ecologies" he constructs are emblematic of spaces where the corporeal and the spectral coalesce, rendering visible the latent violences inscribed upon rivers, ruins, and

fields—landscapes that palpably archive histories of dispossession and environmental desecration.

The theoretical scaffolding of subaltern studies—anchored in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative inquiry in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Ranajit Guha's incisive *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983)—informs Selvaraj's interrogation of caste subjugation. His films articulate the often effaced voices and experiences of Dalit communities, dramatizing their struggle against systemic violence and epistemic marginalization. This cinematic reclamation resonates deeply with Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009), which provocatively situates caste as an ecological as well as a socio-political matrix, and David Mosse's ethnographic work *The Rule of Water* (2003), which elucidates caste's permeation into control over natural resources and spatial hierarchies. Selvaraj's portrayal of rivers, fields, and wastelands as sites of caste-inflected violence and resilience advances a nuanced ecological dimension to caste critique, challenging reductive dichotomies between nature and society.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) destabilizes monolithic historiographies by advocating for a polyvalent, dialogic memory framework where traumas intersect, inform, and resist hierarchical historicism. Selvaraj's cinematic narrative strategies resonate with Rothberg's vision through their employment of nonlinear and cyclical temporalities, facilitating a radical politics of remembrance that refuses closure and linear historicity. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997) further enriches this paradigm by conceptualizing haunting as a sociopolitical phenomenon in which suppressed histories endure spectrally, compelling recognition and redress. The "haunted ecologies" in Selvaraj's films perform this spectral labor—manifesting as geographies haunted by caste atrocities that persist across temporal fissures. For instance, *Pariyerum Perumal*'s river landscapes and *Karnan*'s and *vazhai*'s rural terrains serve as palimpsests where collective trauma, memory, and resistance are inscribed and reactivated, thereby producing cinematic counter-archives that contest dominant nationalist and caste hegemonies.

Selvaraj's films instantiate a counter-cartographic practice, mapping subaltern geographies through the prism of Dalit epistemologies that articulate a politics of spatial and temporal reclamation. By disrupting nationalist imaginaries and linear historiographies, his cinema enacts a recuperative aesthetic that aligns ecological wholeness with social justice and dignified subjecthood. These cinematic landscapes transcend mere representational functions, becoming sites of epistemic insurgency where

memory, ecology, and caste resistance converge to reimagine futures—anchored in unresolved specters of the past. This approach contributes to a burgeoning postcolonial aesthetic imperative that insists on the coexistence of past violences and future possibilities, demanding an ethical and political engagement with the spectral residues that haunt the present.

Taken together, these theoretical and cultural texts reveal memory not as a static archive of the past but as an active, contested, and often antagonistic process—one deeply implicated in questions of power, identity, and justice. In postcolonial and post-conflict settings, memory emerges as both a medium of historical reckoning and a terrain of struggle, where competing narratives vie to shape the future through the lens of the past.

In conclusion, memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts is deeply contested, shaped by power imbalances and the struggle for recognition. The interaction between multidirectional memory and memory antagonism highlights the complexities of collective remembrance, where historical traumas are negotiated, resisted, and transformed. Through the lens of literature and film, these tensions are vividly portrayed, offering a nuanced understanding of the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of memory work. This body of scholarship underscores the need to expand memory studies beyond the boundaries of traditional nation-building frameworks, embracing the fractured and often contradictory nature of remembering in a postcolonial, post-imperial world.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that synthesizes critical theoretical exposition with close textual and visual analysis of Mari Selvaraj's films—*Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, and *Vazhai*—to unpack the spectral entanglements of memory, ecological degradation, and subaltern subjectivity. Rooted in the converging fields of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and memory theory, the research framework foregrounds the theoretical insights of key thinkers such as Rob Nixon, Gayatri Spivak, Michael Rothberg, and Avery Gordon. Their works provide conceptual tools to interrogate how Selvaraj's cinema articulates “haunted ecologies” where caste violence and environmental destruction intertwine to produce sites of dispossession and spectral memory.

The study begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature across memory studies, postcolonial theory, and ecological criticism to establish a robust conceptual framework. This includes engaging with multidirectional memory theory to explore how Selvaraj's films employ

nonlinear and cyclical temporalities that disrupt dominant linear historiographies and nationalist imaginaries. Building on Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as a sociopolitical condition, the research investigates the persistence of repressed histories and their cinematic manifestation as spectral geographies of caste atrocity.

Primary data collection centers on close reading and visual analysis of Selvaraj's cinematic texts, scrutinizing how landscapes—rivers, fields, ruins—function as living archives and counter-cartographies of caste violence and resistance. These analyses focus on the films' formal strategies, narrative structures, and symbolic motifs to unravel how ecological and social violences are intertwined and represented. The study also considers Dalit epistemologies, drawing on Anupama Rao and David Mosse's work, to frame caste as both an ecological and social phenomenon.

A comparative lens is applied to assess how Selvaraj's intervention resonates within broader postcolonial and subaltern artistic practices, especially in relation to the politics of memory, justice, and ecological wholeness. Additionally, discourse analysis is employed to examine the language and visual rhetoric of both dominant and counter-narratives within the films, revealing how power relations and systemic marginalization are articulated and contested.

By integrating these methodological tools, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted dynamics of memory, power, and ecological subjectivity in Selvaraj's cinema. It contributes to contemporary scholarship by offering new insights into how postcolonial aesthetic interventions can enact radical politics of remembrance that challenge historical amnesia, reclaim subaltern spaces, and envision transformative futures grounded in justice and dignity.

IV. ANALYSIS

This research paper undertakes a rigorous and incisive critique of Mari Selvaraj's cinematic oeuvre—*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—situating these films within the intricate socio-political and ecological matrix of contemporary Tamil Nadu. Selvaraj's cinema transcends the realm of mere artistic expression or popular entertainment to emerge as a formidable cultural intervention that destabilizes entrenched architectures of caste subjugation, ecological devastation, and contested collective memory. His cinematic praxis embodies a trenchant counter-narrative, one that amplifies marginalized subjectivities while compelling a critical reimagining of historical injustices and environmental ethics.

At the heart of this investigation is the conceptual innovation of “haunted ecologies,” a spatial and metaphorical paradigm that radically reconceptualizes landscape in Selvaraj’s films. Drawing on Avery Gordon’s theory of haunting, these ecological spaces—rivers, fields, ruins—transcend their conventional cinematic function as mere settings, instead serving as palimpsests saturated with historical trauma, systemic violence, and mnemonic sedimentation. The spectral imprints of caste atrocities and ecological degradation linger within these terrains, rendering them active, co-constitutive agents in the dialectics of oppression and resistance. Such a framework disrupts reductive binaries between nature and society, foregrounding the environment as inseparable from caste violence and subaltern histories, thereby cultivating a holistic socio-ecological understanding that aligns with contemporary postcolonial and ecological critiques.

The study’s theoretical scaffolding is notably interdisciplinary, weaving together the profound insights of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory to forge a multifaceted analytical lens. Rob Nixon’s exposition of “slow violence” illuminates how environmental harm operates gradually, invisibly, and cumulatively—often disproportionately impacting marginalized Dalit communities who inhabit ecologically fragile landscapes. Nixon’s articulation of slow violence as an insidious, protracted form of harm reveals how ecological degradation is not merely collateral damage but deeply entangled with colonial legacies and caste hierarchies. This perspective is complemented by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley’s decolonial ecocritical interventions, which critique dominant environmental discourses for their erasure of subaltern ecological knowledge and histories, underscoring the inseparability of environmental and caste justice in Tamil Nadu’s socio-political terrain.

Simultaneously, the intellectual lineage of subaltern studies provides indispensable tools for decoding the mechanisms of epistemic silencing and resistance inscribed within Selvaraj’s narratives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal interrogation of whether *the subaltern can speak* foregrounds the structural exclusion of Dalit voices from hegemonic historiographies and cultural representations, compelling the films to create discursive and affective spaces wherein subaltern subjectivities are voiced and visibilized. Ranajit Guha’s historicization of peasant insurgencies further situates Selvaraj’s cinematic depictions within long trajectories of caste-based resistance, emphasizing the films’ engagement with embodied political struggle against systemic violence.

Critical memory theory, particularly Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, enriches this analysis by revealing how Selvaraj’s films orchestrate a dynamic interplay of overlapping and intersecting memories. Rothberg’s framework rejects zero-sum memory politics in favor of dialogic mnemonic exchanges that foster solidarities across distinct modalities of trauma—colonial, caste, and ecological. This Multidirectionality destabilizes linear, nationalist historiographies and reclaims subaltern pasts, enabling a collective reckoning that traverses temporal and spatial boundaries. Complementing this, Avery Gordon’s notion of haunting evokes memory as a spectral presence that transcends temporal linearity, enabling a confrontation with persistent social wounds that resist closure or forgetting.

Selvaraj’s cinematic language is marked by deliberate formal strategies—nonlinear temporality, mythopoeic symbolism, and counter-cartographic spatialities—that collectively subvert hegemonic nationalist and teleological historical narratives. These devices generate a polyphonic space in which subaltern epistemologies resurface, historical amnesia is contested, and counter-memories emerge. His films perform what can be termed “mnemonic resistance,” recuperating the embodied experiences and historical violences of Dalit communities, inscribing them into the cultural archive in ways that defy erasure and marginalization. Drawing on the scholarship of Anupama Rao and David Mosse, the analysis foregrounds caste as both an ecological and socio-political matrix, emphasizing how Selvaraj’s counter-histories illuminate the inextricable intertwining of environmental degradation and caste oppression—thus underscoring the necessity of an integrative approach to social and ecological justice.

In summation, this research contends that Mari Selvaraj’s cinematic corpus embodies a radical postcolonial aesthetic praxis that exposes the enduring legacies of caste violence and environmental exploitation, while simultaneously envisioning emancipatory futures premised on ecological justice, spatial dignity, and ethical remembrance. Through the interlocking theoretical prisms of haunting, slow violence, subalternity, and multidirectional memory, Selvaraj’s films transcend conventional narrative forms to become transformative acts of historical reckoning and political intervention. They demand socio-ecological emancipation and reparative solidarity, positioning cinema not merely as cultural production but as a vital modality of resistance and collective healing.

V. CONCLUSION

Mari Selvaraj’s films—*Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Vazhai* (2024)—offer a significant

intervention into the intertwined issues of caste, ecology, and collective memory in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Moving beyond mere artistic expression, his cinema confronts entrenched caste oppression and ecological degradation by reimagining landscapes as “haunted ecologies,” where histories of violence and trauma persist and resist erasure. This approach challenges traditional separations between nature and society, highlighting the inseparability of environmental harm and social injustice experienced by marginalized Dalit communities.

Using an interdisciplinary framework that integrates postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and critical memory theory, this research has shown how Selvaraj's films engage with concepts like slow violence, epistemic silencing, and multidirectional memory. His narratives reveal how ecological damage is deeply linked with caste hierarchies and colonial legacies, while providing space for subaltern voices often excluded from dominant histories. Formal cinematic techniques such as nonlinear temporality and mythopoetic symbolism enable a powerful mnemonic resistance, recovering embodied experiences of caste and environmental violence within a shared cultural archive.

Ultimately, Selvaraj's cinema transcends storytelling to become a site of radical postcolonial praxis, imagining futures grounded in ecological justice, spatial dignity, and ethical remembrance. By advocating reparative solidarity and collective healing, his films highlight cinema's role as a tool of socio-ecological resistance and transformation. This study underscores the necessity of addressing caste and environmental oppression as interlinked struggles and calls for continued scholarly attention to the intersections of film, memory, activism, and justice in postcolonial contexts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 1–44, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbsgw.
- [2] “Multidirectional Memory | Stanford University Press.” *Stanford University Press*, 2024, www.sup.org/books/literary-studies-and-literature/multidirectional-memory.
- [3] Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttt4hp>.
- [4] Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2009. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp88k>.
- [5] DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jk4v>.
- [6] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Columbia University Press, 1988.



Rethinking Identity and Crisis: Representations of Young Adult Subjectivities in the Fiction of Selected Ugandan Women Writers

Alice Jossy Kyobutungi

Uganda Christian University, Bishop Barham University College, Kabale
ORCID: 0009000093665287

Received: 12 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Oct 2025; Accepted: 14 Oct 2025; Available online: 19 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study, *Rethinking Identity and Crisis: Representations of Young Adult Subjectivities in the Fiction of Selected Ugandan Women Writers*, explores how Ugandan female authors negotiate identity, crisis, and selfhood through the lens of youth experience. Focusing on the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut, this examination explores how these writers depict the evolving subjectivities of young adults within shifting sociocultural, political, and gendered contexts. The purpose is to investigate how young protagonists embody and contest tensions between tradition and modernity, individual freedom and communal obligation, and patriarchy and self-determination. Using textual and thematic analysis and drawing on postcolonial feminist and identity theories, the research interprets narrative strategies, character development, and themes of crisis and transformation. Close reading of selected novels reveals how gender, class, and cultural displacement intersect in the shaping of the perceptions of young adult characters. The findings show that both Kimenye and Okurut reimagine youth identity as a site of negotiation and resilience. Their narratives challenge colonial and patriarchal prescriptions of femininity and adulthood, portraying young adult characters who navigate inequality through resistance, self-assertion, and moral renewal. The study argues that crisis, rather than being destructive, becomes a generative force for redefining belonging, agency, and cultural continuity. Although limited to two authors, the research offers new insights into the symbolic economies of youth and gender in Ugandan literature. It contributes to African feminist criticism, Ugandan cultural studies, and youth identity scholarship by highlighting how women writers envision new forms of selfhood amid crisis and change.



Keywords— Identity crisis, young adult subjectivities, postcolonial feminism, gender and culture, resistance, African literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ugandan literature authored by women has increasingly drawn scholarly attention for its nuanced interrogation of gender, culture, and politics. Yet, a critical area of inquiry—how young adult (YA) protagonists navigate identity and crisis within these narratives—remains markedly underexplored. While global YA literature has been widely recognized as a site for exploring adolescent subjectivities, particularly the interplay of identity, crisis, and agency (Cart & Jenkins, 2017; Nikolajeva, 2014), the Ugandan context

offers a distinct set of social, cultural, and political conditions that uniquely shape youth experiences. This study situates itself at the intersection of Ugandan women's fiction and the global discourse on YA literature, examining how young protagonists in the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut construct identity, negotiate crises, and articulate agency within postcolonial, gendered, and culturally complex spaces.

Ugandan women's literature has historically been concerned with interrogating patriarchal norms,

postcolonial legacies, and socio-political turbulence. From early voices such as Rose Mbowe and Grace Ogot to contemporary authors like Okurut and Kimenye, women writers have consistently foregrounded the dynamics of gendered oppression, moral responsibility, and communal belonging. Yet, the specific lens of adolescence and young adult subjectivity has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies have focused on adult protagonists or on explicit political commentary (Nabirye, 2016; Ochieng, 2018), leaving a significant gap in understanding how YA characters articulate identity in the face of intersecting crises.

Globally, YA literature has become a fertile space for exploring complex processes of selfhood, moral negotiation, and socio-political awareness among youth (Akinyemi, 2019; Mwangi, 2021). Adolescence is often conceptualised as a liminal period wherein individuals reconcile personal desires, societal expectations, and emergent agency. However, such frameworks are largely informed by Western developmental and cultural paradigms, which may not adequately capture the realities of young people in postcolonial African settings (Chege, 2020; Ezeifekwe & Ihuah, 2018). In Uganda, for instance, youth experience layers of crisis—ranging from political instability and economic precarity to social expectations and gendered constraints—that shape identity formation and agency in ways that diverge from conventional Western narratives. Women writers in Uganda, therefore, provide critical insight into how crises are internalised, mediated, and performed by young protagonists, offering a richer understanding of adolescent subjectivity in postcolonial contexts.

Despite the growing corpus of Ugandan women's writing, scholarly engagement with YA subjectivities remains sparse. Existing studies tend to focus on adult experiences of gender, modernity, and political engagement, leaving adolescent perspectives underrepresented (Oloya, 2020; Namutebi, 2018). Consequently, little is known about how young Ugandan protagonists navigate the confluence of social, political, and cultural crises while constructing and performing identity. Moreover, there is limited exploration of the aesthetic strategies—narrative voice, structure, symbolism—through which young adult subjectivities are rendered in fiction. This gap is significant because adolescence in Uganda occurs within unique socio-political and cultural contexts: high youth demographic representation (over 75% of the population), exposure to political instability, economic precarity, gendered expectations, and frequent social upheavals (UBOS, 2020). Understanding how YA literature engages these realities not only enriches literary scholarship but also provides a

cultural lens for interpreting youth experiences and agency in Uganda.

This study examines how young adult subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in selected works by Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Explore how young protagonists construct, negotiate, and perform identity in relation to gender, ethnicity, family, religion, and societal expectations.
2. Examine how social, political, and cultural crises shape young adult subjectivities in these narratives.
3. Analyse how Kimenye and Okurut reimagine youth agency and belonging amidst adversity, highlighting strategies of resistance, adaptation, or compromise.

By centring youth experiences, the study foregrounds the intersections of gender, culture, and socio-political crises in adolescent identity formation, contributing to African feminist literary criticism, postcolonial youth studies, and the broader discourse on Ugandan cultural production.

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How are identity and crisis constructed in the selected works?
2. In what ways do Ugandan women writers challenge or reinforce dominant youth narratives?
3. What aesthetic and ideological strategies articulate young adult subjectivities?

These questions aim to interrogate not only what is represented but also how representation occurs, emphasizing both narrative form and socio-political context.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on African feminist theory, postcolonial youth studies, and crisis theory. African feminist theory foregrounds the intersection of gender, culture, and colonial legacies in shaping subjectivity (al-Saadawi, 1980; Oyěwùmí, 1997), providing a critical lens to examine how young female protagonists navigate expectations of gender, family, and community. Postcolonial youth studies challenge universalist conceptions of adolescence by emphasising the sociopolitical and cultural embeddedness of youth identity (Ahearn, 2001; Angelo, 2015). Crisis theory, particularly as articulated by Mbembe (2001) and Butler (2004), illuminates how moments of social, political, or cultural

rupture serve as sites for the negotiation and reconfiguration of identity. Together, these frameworks give room to an integrated analysis of how Ugandan YA Literature (YAL) stages the interplay between identity, crisis, and agency.

Scholarship on YAL in Uganda is limited, often focusing on moral didacticism or school-centred narratives, which may inadvertently reinforce Western or simplified constructions of adolescence (Tumusiime, 2017; Nabirye & Tumwine, 2015). Tumusiime (2017) observes that many YA novels prioritise romance or educational experiences, marginalising the depiction of broader social or political crises. Mukasa (2019) similarly notes that war-affected youth narratives frequently frame crisis as a personal moral challenge rather than a structural or political condition. Comparative studies of male and female YA subjectivities remain particularly scarce, as does critical attention to aesthetic strategies employed to render youth experiences.

In contrast, scholarship on adult-focused Ugandan women's literature demonstrates rich engagement with gender, modernity, and socio-political critique (Oloya, 2020; Namutebi, 2018). By shifting focus to adolescents, this study builds on existing scholarship while addressing the underexplored territory of youth subjectivity, agency, and belonging within the socio-political landscapes of Uganda. This approach aligns with global trends in YA research that recognise adolescence as a socially and politically situated experience (Wyn & White, 1997; Cart & Jenkins, 2017).

This study contributes to multiple scholarly domains. First, it advances African feminist literary criticism by examining how gendered identity is negotiated in adolescence within Uganda's specific cultural and political contexts. Second, it enriches postcolonial youth studies by situating adolescence within crises shaped by historical legacies, social inequities, and political instability. Third, the research offers insights for Ugandan cultural discourse, highlighting literature's potential to foster critical reflection among youth on identity, belonging, and agency. Finally, the study illuminates aesthetic and ideological strategies in YA fiction, providing a foundation for pedagogical engagement with these texts in formal and informal educational contexts.

By foregrounding young adult subjectivities, this research demonstrates that adolescence in Uganda is neither a monolithic developmental stage nor a mere prelude to adulthood. Rather, it is a site where crises, culture, and agency intersect, producing complex configurations of identity. The comparative focus on Kimenye and Okurut further underscores how gendered experiences, narrative strategies, and socio-political contexts shape YA fiction's depiction of youth agency, belonging, and resilience.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis to explore representations of young adult subjectivities in the fiction of selected Ugandan women writers. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for literary inquiry because they allow for a nuanced engagement with textual meaning, stylistic choices, and socio-cultural context, rather than quantifiable measurement. An interpretive approach foregrounds the exploration of how narratives construct identity, crisis, and subjectivity, situating textual analysis within broader social, cultural, and postcolonial frameworks.

The study focuses on works by two prominent Ugandan women writers: Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut. Kimenye's *Moses Series* is selected for its humorous yet critical engagement with the experiences of youth, school life, and moral dilemmas. Through comedic narrative techniques, Kimenye captures the everyday trials of young protagonists navigating social expectations and personal growth, providing insight into formative experiences of adolescence in Ugandan contexts. In contrast, Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* offers a more politically and socially charged exploration of youth subjectivities, foregrounding how gender, societal structures, and political crises shape identity formation. By juxtaposing Kimenye's light-hearted, morally instructive narratives with Okurut's politically nuanced and gender-conscious storytelling, the study examines a spectrum of youth experiences and the intersecting pressures that inform identity development.

The analysis combines thematic and stylistic methods to capture both what the texts convey and how they convey it. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring motifs related to identity formation, crisis, moral dilemmas, and socio-political pressures. Particular attention is paid to how crises—whether moral, gendered, or political—affect the psychological and social development of young protagonists. Stylistic analysis complements this by examining narrative voice, perspective, and the use of symbols that articulate tension and growth. For instance, humour in Kimenye's narratives functions not merely as entertainment but as a lens through which moral and social challenges are negotiated, while Okurut's symbolic and politically inflected devices foreground the structural constraints shaping youth identity. By integrating thematic and stylistic analyses, the study captures both content and form, revealing how narrative strategies articulate the complexities of young adult subjectivities.

The selection of these two authors is strategic. Kimenye and Okurut offer complementary yet contrasting visions of Ugandan youth. Kimenye foregrounds everyday moral and

social challenges through a lens of humour and relatability, highlighting the microcosmic pressures of school and community life. Okurut, on the other hand, foregrounds macro-level socio-political and gendered crises, situating youth subjectivity within broader structural and historical contexts. Together, their works illuminate how factors such as gender, class, and postcolonial legacies intersect to shape the experiences, choices, and identities of Ugandan adolescents. By analysing these complementary perspectives, the study generates a richer understanding of youth subjectivities and the multifaceted crises that inform identity formation in contemporary Ugandan literature.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Barbara Kimenye: Everyday Identity and Socialisation

Barbara Kimenye's *Moses* series offers a nuanced exploration of youth identity and socialisation within Uganda's colonial and postcolonial contexts. Through the character of Moses Kibaya, Kimenye portrays adolescence as a dynamic interplay of playful rebellion and moral negotiation. Moses's escapades at a Ugandan boarding school serve as a microcosm for broader societal tensions, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in a rapidly changing world (Kyobutungi, 2025).

The school setting in Kimenye's narratives functions as a critical arena for identity formation. It is within these walls that Moses and his peers confront authority, navigate peer relationships, and engage in moral reasoning. The boarding school becomes a site where colonial legacies intersect with emerging postcolonial realities, influencing the ethical frameworks of young individuals (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Urban spaces further complicate the process of identity formation. Kimenye's depiction of bustling marketplaces and domestic settings highlights the multifaceted nature of youth experiences. These spaces expose young individuals to diverse social interactions, challenging them to negotiate their identities amidst varying cultural norms and expectations (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Humour and satire emerge as pivotal tools in Kimenye's storytelling. Through comedic elements, she critiques societal norms and institutional structures, allowing young protagonists to assert agency and resilience. This approach underscores the importance of laughter as a mechanism for coping with and challenging the constraints imposed by colonial and postcolonial societies (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Mary Karooro Okurut: Gendered Crisis and National Identity

In contrast, Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* delves into the complexities of gendered trauma and national identity. The novel portrays young female

characters navigating the tumultuous landscapes of Uganda's political history, highlighting the intersection of personal and collective crises. These narratives underscore the challenges faced by young women in asserting their identities amidst societal upheavals (Namirembe, 2020).

Okurut employs symbolism and allegory to reconstruct Ugandan identity through the voices of young female protagonists. The titular "invisible weevil" serves as a metaphor for pervasive societal issues, illustrating how invisible forces shape the experiences and identities of young individuals. Memory becomes a crucial narrative technique, allowing characters to reconcile past traumas and envision futures beyond the constraints of their circumstances (Namirembe, 2020).

The gendered dimensions of crisis are particularly evident in Okurut's work. Female youth embody a "double crisis"—of self and nation—reflecting the compounded challenges of personal development and national reconstruction. These narratives challenge traditional notions of coming-of-age by highlighting the specific struggles and resilience of young women in postcolonial societies (Namirembe, 2020).

Comparative Reading

A comparative analysis of Kimenye and Okurut reveals divergent yet complementary portrayals of youth identity. Kimenye's emphasis on comic realism contrasts with Okurut's focus on political and moral gravitas. However, both authors converge on the notion of youth as transformative agents within crisis-ridden societies. Their works collectively redefine the concept of "coming of age," moving beyond Western paradigms to encompass culturally specific experiences of adolescence (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

Both authors utilize spatial settings to explore identity formation. Kimenye's urban and educational spaces serve as arenas for moral experimentation and social negotiation, while Okurut's rural and political landscapes highlight the intersection of gendered and national crises. These settings underscore the role of the environment in shaping the ethical and social development of young individuals (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

The convergence of Kimenye and Okurut's works lies in their portrayal of youth as active participants in societal transformation. Through their narratives, both authors challenge dominant discourses of adolescence, presenting youth as capable of ethical reasoning, social intervention, and transformative action. This perspective aligns with broader African literary traditions that emphasise communal values and collective responsibility (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

Therefore, the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut offer profound insights into the complexities of youth identity and socialisation in Uganda. Through their distinct narrative approaches, both authors illuminate the multifaceted nature of adolescence, highlighting the interplay of personal agency, societal constraints, and cultural expectations. Their contributions significantly enrich the discourse on African youth literature, providing nuanced perspectives on the processes of becoming in postcolonial contexts.

Implications

Ugandan literature, particularly within the realm of young adult fiction, serves as a dynamic platform for exploring the complexities of identity formation amidst sociopolitical challenges. This essay examines how young adult identities in Ugandan fiction are actively negotiated within these constraints, how crises are portrayed as opportunities for self-invention rather than victimhood, and how Ugandan women writers contribute a distinct Afro-feminist narrative of becoming. Furthermore, it delves into the theoretical implications of rethinking African youth literature through intersectional and decolonial feminist lenses and the cultural implications concerning the moral, social, and gender education of youth in Uganda's evolving nationhood.

Negotiation of Young Adult Identities in Ugandan Fiction

In Ugandan literature, young adult characters are depicted not as passive recipients of societal norms but as active agents engaged in the negotiation of their identities. Works such as Barbara Kimenye's *Moses* series and Mary Karooro's *Invisible Weevil* illustrate how adolescents navigate the complexities of postcolonial Ugandan society. These narratives highlight the interplay between personal aspirations and the sociocultural frameworks that shape youth experiences, emphasising the active role of young adults in constructing their identities within these contexts.

Crisis as a Site of Self-Invention

Crisis in Ugandan youth literature is portrayed not merely as instances of suffering but as pivotal moments for self-invention and resilience. Characters often confront personal and societal upheavals that challenge their existing identities, compelling them to redefine themselves. This perspective aligns with broader African literary discourses that view crises as transformative experiences, where individuals reconstruct their identities in response to adversity, thereby asserting agency and autonomy.

Afro-Feminist Narratives by Ugandan Women Writers

Ugandan women writers, particularly those associated with the Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE),

contribute a distinctive Afro-feminist narrative that challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for women's agency. Through their works, these writers address issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and societal expectations, offering alternative narratives that empower women and girls. For instance, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *The First Woman* contrasts Western feminism with indigenous Ugandan feminist perspectives, highlighting the complexities of gender and identity within the Ugandan context.

Theoretical Implications: Intersectional and Decolonial Feminist Lenses

Rethinking African youth literature through intersectional and decolonial feminist lenses allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted identities of young adults in postcolonial societies. An intersectional approach considers how overlapping identities—such as gender, ethnicity, class, and age—interact to shape experiences and opportunities. A decolonial feminist perspective critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on gender relations and seeks to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to analyse the complexities of identity formation and the agency of young adults in African literature.

Cultural Implications: Moral, Social, and Gender Education

Ugandan youth literature plays a crucial role in the moral, social, and gender education of young readers. Through narratives that explore themes of resilience, identity, and social justice, these works contribute to the formation of ethical values and social consciousness among the youth. They challenge traditional gender norms and promote a more inclusive understanding of gender roles, thereby influencing the evolving nationhood of Uganda. By engaging with these literary works, young readers are encouraged to critically examine societal structures and envision alternative futures that are equitable and just.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate interplay between identity and crisis in shaping young adult subjectivities in the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut, demonstrating that adolescent experiences in Ugandan fiction are neither linear nor passive but are actively negotiated within complex sociopolitical, cultural, and gendered contexts. In Kimenye's narratives, young protagonists navigate everyday moral dilemmas, school hierarchies, and urban spaces that both constrain and enable their self-expression, highlighting the performative and

relational dimensions of identity formation. Okurut's fiction, by contrast, foregrounds the entanglement of gendered expectations, political turbulence, and social upheaval, presenting adolescence as a liminal stage wherein crisis functions not solely as disruption but as a catalyst for self-invention and moral discernment. Together, these authors reveal that crises—whether personal, social, or political—serve as critical sites where young adults confront societal norms, negotiate moral codes, and assert emergent identities, emphasising agency, reflexivity, and resilience rather than victimhood.

By foregrounding these dynamics, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on Ugandan women's writing and African young adult literature (YAL), offering a nuanced understanding of how youth subjectivities are represented across literary registers. The analysis demonstrates that Ugandan female authors produce narratives that are simultaneously localised and transnational, embedding everyday experiences within broader historical, political, and cultural frameworks while engaging with universal concerns of adolescence such as selfhood, morality, and social belonging. Moreover, this study extends theoretical discussions on African YAL by integrating intersectional and decolonial feminist perspectives, underscoring how gender, age, and socio-political positioning intersect to shape adolescent subjectivities. In doing so, it challenges reductive or monolithic conceptions of African youth as either passive recipients of social pressures or as emblematic victims of structural crises, highlighting instead their capacity for strategic negotiation, creativity, and ethical agency.

The insights garnered here also open avenues for further research that could deepen and diversify our understanding of young adult identities in East African contexts and beyond. Comparative studies examining youth subjectivities across East African nations, or across Anglophone and Francophone literary landscapes, could illuminate regional patterns and divergences in the portrayal of adolescence. Similarly, exploring oral narratives, folklore, and digital storytelling—media increasingly central to youth expression—would provide richer, multimodal perspectives on how young people negotiate identity, crisis, and belonging. Additionally, longitudinal analyses tracing how representations of adolescent identity evolve in response to shifting sociopolitical realities could shed light on the dynamic relationship between literature, youth culture, and social change.

In conclusion, Kimenye and Okurut's works underscore that adolescence in Ugandan literature is a site of negotiation, experimentation, and moral engagement, where identity is continuously reconstituted through

encounters with crises. By situating young adult experiences within both local and broader African contexts, this study affirms the significance of Ugandan women's writing in the global YA literary canon and contributes a framework for understanding youth subjectivities as active, multifaceted, and resilient. Future research, by expanding comparative, multimodal, and interdisciplinary approaches, can build on this foundation to further illuminate the diverse ways in which African adolescents navigate the intertwined terrains of identity and crisis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahearn, L. (2001). *Language and agency*. Annual Review of Anthropology, 30, 109–137.
- Al-Saadawi, N. (1980). *Women at Point Zero*. Zed Books.
- [2] Angelo, E. (2015). Youth identity and activism in postcolonial Africa. *Journal of African Youth Studies*, 2(1), 45–63.
- [3] BOS (Uganda Bureau of Statistics). (2020). *Uganda demographic and health survey 2019–20*. Government of Uganda.
- [4] Cart, M., & Jenkins, C. (2017). *The heart of YA: Exploring adolescence in literature*. University Press.
- [5] Chege, S. (2020). Postcolonial adolescence in East Africa: Crisis, identity, and narrative. *East African Literary Journal*, 5(2), 89–110.
- [6] Corsaro, W. (2018). *Unlocking the world of children: A sociological perspective on childhood* (3rd ed.). Wiley.
- [7] Ezeifekwe, V., & Ihuah, C. (2018). Reimagining adolescence: African youth in global YA fiction. *Contemporary Literature Review*, 12(4), 301–323.
- [8] Kyobutungi, A. J. (2025). Negotiating young adulthood in Ugandan literature: Identity in Kimenye's *Moses* series and Namukasa's stories. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(3), 3660. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3660>
- [9] Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
- [10] Mukasa, P. (2019). War and the moral subject: YA narratives in East Africa. *African Literary Review*, 11(3), 122–141.
- [11] Nabirye, F., & Tumwine, A. (2015). *Youth voices: YA fiction in Uganda*. Makerere University Press.
- [12] Nabirye, F. (2016). Gender, modernity and Ugandan women writers. *Journal of Ugandan Studies*, 4(1), 15–35.
- [13] Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature* (2nd ed.). John Benjamins.

- [14] Namirembe, T. F. (2020). Narrating the Ugandan nation in Mary Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil*. *English Academy Review*, 37(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2020.1778830>.
- [15] Ochieng, T. (2018). Tradition and modernity in Ugandan women's narratives. *Modern African Literatures*, 6(2), 55-76.
- [16] Oloya, J. (2020). Political crisis and female agency in Uganda. *African Feminist Critique*, 8(1), 78-99.
- [17] Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [18] Tumusiime, M. (2017). Adolescence amid instability: YA fiction in Uganda. *Literary Youth Studies*, 1(1), 33-52.
- [19] Wyn, J., & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking youth*. Sage Publications.



Bodies in Rebellion: Subverting the Normative constructs of Disability, Silence, and Marginalisation in South Asian literature

Sidra Salafi

M.A. English, 2nd year, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Received: 16 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Oct 2025; Accepted: 17 Oct 2025; Available online: 21 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the interrelation of disability, normativity and narrative through a theoretical analysis of three diverse texts: Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salma's short story "Toilets" and Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha". Anchored in Lennard J. Davis's theory of Normalcy, the paper examines how the normal body is historically constructed and socially enforced. Through Bakhtin's theory of the Grotesque, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is analysed as a site of resistance to corporeal conformity. Salma's "Toilets" and Tagore's "Subha" are both evaluated from feminist theories and disability frameworks of emotional and physical marginalisation. Together, readings underscore the immediacy of reframing disability beyond pathology—cultural and political understanding of embodiment.



Keywords— Disability Theories, Normalcy, Grotesque, Feminist Theory, Mutability, Spatial Exclusion, South Asian Literature

The dialectic between normalcy and disability has been a philosophical and cultural scrutiny. The constitutes of normalcy, and, conversely, abnormality has been the kernel in understanding the societal veneers, which often marginalise those who deviate from the perceived normativity. In the disability discourse, this conceptual bifurcation is investigated through the lens of ableism – a concept popularised by the activists and scholars of the disability rights movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Thomas Hehir, more profoundly describes the concept in his 2002 article "Eliminating Ableism in Education", he writes,

The devaluation of disability [that] results in societal attitudes that uncritically it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with non-disabled kids opposed to other disabled kids.

In this paper, I will engage with Lennard J. Davis' foundational theories on normalcy, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical approach to normalcy, and the social

construction of ableism to explore how these concepts are represented in Indian literature, particularly in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Subha", and contemporary Indian author Salma's short story "Toilets".

The very term that permeates our contemporary life – Normal – "is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is a part of a notion of progress, industrialisation, and ideological consolidation of the bourgeoisie. The implication of the hegemony of normalcy is profound and extend into the very heat of cultural production." (Enforcing Normalcy 49).

As Davis argues, a normal body is a theoretical premise from which all bodies, by definition, must fall short. The body confronts an abstraction it cannot rival, as the norm constitutes an idealised quantitative and qualitative standard—one that is detached from, rather than grounded in, empirical observation of bodies, which are intrinsically diverse and variable. This façade of an ideal body also fails to consider the contingencies of bodies functioning within

specific socio-historical contexts. It becomes a body that is diverse in time and space.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Disability* (2008), evince through the contradiction of disability and normalcy, that disability discourses are often employed metaphorically, to manoeuvre the articulations of political health of a nation and society. Post-independent and Indian diasporic literary works inspect the nexuses among genders, bodies, diseases and disabilities to depict multiple strains in Indian history and culture. In many of these narratives, physical and mental disabilities are inextricably linked to violence, whether in the form of sexual harassment, decapitations, injuries, alienation, partiality or prejudices.

Before exploring Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, I would like to elucidate four aspects of disability that are necessary to understand the conceptual interplay between ableism and disablism. First is that disability comprises a) a system for interpreting bodily variations, b) a relationship between bodies and milieus, c) It is a set of practices that produces both the able-bodied and disabled, d) it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self.

Considering the many metaphoric roles played by disabled bodies, post-independent Indian writers explore the relationship between potent disabled bodies and the emergent validity of anti-colonial national politics. Here, disability often takes a positive role to represent the survival tendency of post-colonial polis. However, the consequent death or neglect of the disabled character delineates a loss of political optimism. In post-colonial discourses through the disability lens, the corporeality of a body's blood, flesh and bones is profoundly challenged and superseded by the notion of architectural and differential metaphors of embodiment, deconstructing the biologically fixed constructions of bodies.

The Moor's Last Sigh, a first-person narrative largely set in Bombay, is ardent about the metaphors between family and nation. By inducing the disease of gigantism, Rushdie creates a sense of doubled time, signifying pre-colonial and post-colonial conceptions of disability and thus building a digressive susceptibility that threatens the post-colonial society of ableism.

In the epigraph of the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes, the protagonist writes, "in the 'early Moors' my hand was transformed into a series of miracles... I was Moor-as-peacock, spreading my many-eyed tail... In another painting, Aurora reversed our relationship, painting herself as the young Eleanor Marx and me as her father Karl" (Rushdie 224).

Here, Rushdie, through the paintings of Aurora, represents disability in history and superstition, representing the social construction of abnormalcy.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that Rushdie challenges the Cartesian model of dualism, where body and mind are separate entities. However, Rushdie overlaps mind and body by making his protagonist make significant connections between his bodily deformity and that of his milieu-Bombay, which reflects Rushdie's historical memories inscribed in his consciousness via his diasporic experiences.

Like the city itself,... I mushroomed into a huge urban sprawl of a fellow, I expanded without time for proper planning. (161-162).

Moraes had been a "mongrel" (172), the hybrid blend of Christian, Jewish and Arabic Muslim from his mixed ancestry that enhances his gigantism and makes him grotesque. However, I would like to argue that this type of grotesque is the Bakhtinian one, offering an optimistic representation of incompleteness where the physiological self-transgresses the boundaries as Moraes does in the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin's subversive theory of grotesque challenges societal normativity in a prolific manner.

Another narrative that I have selected is Salma's short story "Toilets"; the author underscores the taboos associated with female physiology taking birth through the repugnance of society to acknowledge the major differences between gendered physiologies.

The story revolves around Shamim, who suffers from abdomen pain due to her disability to access the common defecating area because of her inferior gender. Salma uses the small space of a toilet as a microcosm to highlight the patriarchal society where women's needs are curtailed. Shamim goes through a series of negative emotions like anxiety, fear, and shame, highlighting how the imposed disability of the body leads to psychological disability. Furthermore, if viewed from Freud's psychoanalysis, Shamim's abdomen pain is a somatic symptom caused by her repressed autonomy. Accentuating Freud's theory of conversion symptoms.

Another instance that disables Shamim is underscored through her menstrual cycle, which is quite natural yet perceived as polluting by the phallogocentric society. We women are disabled psychologically by societal perceptions as Shildrick rightly notes in *Embodying the Monster*, there has been such a "longstanding conflation of the feminine with disorder, in terms of both the irrational mind and the leaky body" (30). Shildrick's argument validates the similitude culture produces between femininity and monstrosity.

The structure of Shamim's house is quite patriarchal. She doesn't have a private toilet. She has to walk among the men to use the toilet and is expected to use it without any noise, like a ghost, and such rules are not symmetrical.

When the doctor arrived to examine Shamim's problem and failed to detect it, an old woman was called to tell Shamim's problem on behalf of her. Her autonomy was silenced. Here, I would like to include feminist disability scholar Susan Wendell's observation, "the cognitive and social authority of medicine to describe our bodies affects how we experience our bodies and ourselves, how society describes our experiences and validates/invalidates them," and "how society supports or fails to support our bodily sufferings and struggles" (rejected body 119). The society failed to understand Shamim.

Now we examine Tagore's short story "Subha", then there also, her muteness denies her agency in marriage and rejects it. Subha's father married her in a hurry, concealing her speech disability; however, when her husband discovers her disability, he realises that he has brought home a bride who could not speak in a language he could understand, the language of the ableist patriarchy.

Subha's muteness is not merely a physical impairment but is an emblem of the systematic silencing of the female subject in a patriarchal society. Her condition is read as a dearth, however drawing from the notion of Lennard J. Davis' "normate", she is ostracised from the boundaries of intelligibility, her silence interpreted as absence more than resistance. Her muteness proffered her existential agency, and her refusal to perform the expectations of verbal femininity became an inadvertent rebellion.

If we analyse "Subha" from the lens of Rosemarie Garland Thompson's theory of "stare"; then, Subha's disabled body is considered to be different. Therefore, her corporeality becomes a canvas that projects societal repugnance, neglect and discomfort. Her fate, marriage, abandonment and desolation unfold not because of her mutability but rather, society's lack to listen beyond speech. Thus, her disability is not a dearth but rather a reflection of the ableist architecture of society.

Conclusively, this paper has critically scrutinised the construction of disability where normative and ableist forces consciously and unconsciously disable body and mind, which are socio-politically constituted material entities that merge from architectural contexts and individual experience. Drawing from Davis, the analysis foregrounds how the idealised body becomes a weapon for exclusion. Through Bakhtin's notion of grotesque in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the text resists the sanitised aesthetic of the "normal", instead reclaiming corporeal excess and hybridity as sites of subversion. Salma's "Toilets" highlights

the gendered politics of accessibility and bodily vulnerability, accentuating how women are disabled through shame, surveillance and spatial exclusion. Finally, Tagore's "Subha" illuminates the silent violence of the ableist and patriarchal expectations through a character whose muteness disturbs the dominant scripts of femininity and communicability. Together, these texts delineate that disability isn't confined to our body's corporeality but extended towards socio-cultural and political as well as emotional terrain that requires critical attention and theoretical nuances. By traversing across postcolonial, feminist and disability studies, this paper offers a multifaceted lens that interrogates the voices beyond voice, visibility and normativity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
- [2] Hehir, Thomas. "Eliminating Ableism in Education." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–32.
- [3] Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- [4] Rushdie, Salman. *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Vintage, 1995.
- [5] Salma. "The Toilet". Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, in *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*, edited by Lakshmi Holmström, Rupa & Co., 1990, pp. 229–237.
- [6] Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE Publications, 2002.
- [7] Tagore, Rabindranath. "Subha." *Selected Short Stories*, translated by William Radice, Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 117–124.
- [8] Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Routledge, 1996.
- [9] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- [10] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.



Caste Identity, Educational Mobility, and Institutional Change: A Study of Prof. Shyamlal's Autobiography *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*

Dr. Santosh Kumar Sonker¹, Himachand Khobragade²

¹Associate Professor & HoD, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, India

²Research Scholar, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, India

Received: 15 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2025; Accepted: 16 Oct 2025; Available online: 21 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper aims at analysing the conflict between caste hierarchy and socio-economic growth studying Prof. Shyamlal's autobiography *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*, this paper elaborately discusses the problems a low caste faces and the power he asserts to fight back caste hierarchy. The paper looks at three main ideas: First, how his caste identity shaped his thoughts and actions. Second, how he used his position as Vice-Chancellor to bring real change and support Dalit and tribal people. Third, how his belief in education matched Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's view that education can help Dalits fight oppression. Together, these ideas show that an individual effort and education can help disruption of caste hegemony, but true social change needs bigger reforms in society and institutions. Prof. Shyamlal's work to hire Dalit staff, fix unfair practices, and inspire his community reflects Ambedkar's vision. But his story also shows his limitation because a deep caste-based discrimination did not end completely. This paper argues that while leaders like him can bring hope and change, real equality needs lasting support from institutions and society. This paper employs textual analysis as a research method for the study.



Keywords— Dalit autobiographies, caste mobility, educational leadership, institutional reform, Ambedkarite thought

I. INTRODUCTION

Caste is one of the oldest and strongest social systems in India. It decides who gets respect, education, and good jobs. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who led the fight against hierarchical division of castes, said that caste judges people by birth, not by talent or hard work (Ambedkar 45). Even today, caste discrimination remains a big challenge, especially in places like universities that are supposed to be fair and equal.

The life of Prof. Shyamlal is a unique and powerful example of a fight against caste system. Born in 1944 into the Bhangi caste in Rajasthan, which is known for doing the most stigmatized work of manual scavenging, he rose to the position of a Vice-Chancellor of big universities like Patna University and Jai Narayan Vyas University. His autobiography, *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*,

tells how he faced humiliation and barriers because of his caste, but still worked hard to succeed in education and administration.

This paper is not just about his personal success. It tries to show how Prof. Shyamlal used his high position to help his community and challenge unfair practices in universities. It follows what Dr. Ambedkar said, that Dalits who get education and reach high posts should use their power to help others and fight injustice (Ambedkar 45). Scholars also say that Dalit narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individuals, and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of caste oppression, struggles, and resistance (Qtd in Thapan 11).

The aims of this paper are three-fold:

1. To see how Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity shaped his life and choices.
2. To explore how he used his role as Vice-Chancellor to fix unfair systems and help Dalit and tribal people.
3. To understand how his belief in education as a tool for change matched Ambedkar's vision.

This paper argues that Prof. Shyamlal's life proves that an educated Dalit leader can question and reform casteist systems in universities. But it also shows that deep discrimination does not disappear easily, and big changes need support from institutions and society, not just one person's effort. The paper uses thematic analysis of his autobiography, an interview he gave in *Forward Press* (Kumar), and other studies on caste, Dalit autobiographies, and higher education. By doing this, it hopes to show that Prof. Shyamlal's story is an inspiring example of leadership and resistance, but also a reminder that fighting caste is not easy and needs collective effort.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses textual analysis to study Prof. Shyamlal's life and work. The main text is his autobiography, *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*, which shares his struggles and achievements in detail. Along with this, the paper also looks at his 2024 interview in *Forward Press* (Kumar) and other scholarly writings on caste, Dalit autobiographies, and higher education (Franco et al.; Sukumar; Guru).

Thematic analysis helps to find key themes from the texts. Following Braun and Clarke's method, three main themes were chosen: caste identity, education and academic leadership as a tool for change. By reading, noting, and grouping similar ideas, this method helps to understand how Prof. Shyamlal's personal story also reflects larger social issues.

Caste Identity and Lived Experience

Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity played a big role in shaping his thinking and actions. Born in the Bhangi caste, which is seen as one of the lowest in India, he faced many insults and barriers from childhood. In his autobiography, he writes, "Although there were great harassment and humiliation in my school days yet I had not given up my love for education" (21). This shows that even though society treated him badly, he chose to keep studying as a way to fight back. His experience fits with what Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said: Dalits must "Educate, Agitate and Organize" to fight caste oppression. Even when he achieved high posts, Prof. Shyamlal could not escape his caste identity. He says, "By virtue of my behavior, actions,

appearance and dress pattern, I was mistaken to belong to the Brahmin or Oswal caste, but by caste I was the lowest of the low" (31). These line shows how deeply caste is fixed in society—even if someone looks successful, their caste background still follows them.

Scholars like Nivedita call this the "struggle of moving up" (405). It means Dalits who do well still face questions about their background and must balance fitting into higher circles with remembering their community's pain. Prof. Shyamlal openly writes about this struggle, saying, "The identification of my caste was a constant problem." This shows that caste identity is not something that can be left behind easily. Despite becoming Vice-Chancellor, he did not forget his roots. He writes, "Although circumstances demanded of me to divert and utilize the major portion of my efforts... I was always conscious of writing about my people" (105). This shows a strong sense of duty. Instead of only thinking about his own career, he felt it was important to tell the stories of his community.

His story also matches what scholars like Franco et al. say: Dalit autobiographies are not only personal stories but also speak for the whole community's suffering and hope (45). Prof. Shyamlal's words show both his pain and pride. On one side, he remembers humiliation; on the other, he feels proud of staying connected to his people.

This theme helps us see that caste is not just about social category; it constitutes person's perception, and influences his decisions. Prof. Shyamlal's honesty in sharing these moments helps readers understand why caste is so powerful in India. Even when someone gets education and respect, their caste background shapes how others see them and how they see themselves.

Thus, Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity was both a challenge and a guiding force. It not only gave him pain but also pushed him to fight for justice and remember his duty to his community. This deep link between personal pain and social responsibility sets the stage for understanding how he led universities and used education as a way to resist caste discrimination.

Academic Leadership as Resistance

Prof. Shyamlal's role as a Vice-Chancellor shows that leadership is not just about running an institution but can also be a way to fight against unfair systems. When he started resisting the system, he describes it as "A battle to find out a correct academic and administrative line" (173). This shows that he was aware of many wrong practices in the university that needed to change.

One of the first reforms he undertook was to stay approachable. He writes, "Once, though I was exhausted, I called in a research scholar... quickly identified and

addressed the issue. As a result, he finally received his Ph.D. degree during my tenure.” (174–75). Even small steps like listening to students helped to create trust and fairness.

Since a duty of a person as an academic leader includes reformative actions, hence he had to take tough decisions. There were many disputes in the university, often linked to vested interests. Prof. Shyamlal says, “I de-linked vested interests from dispute and resolved the whole issue by implementing directions of the Hon'ble High Court... A Deputy Registrar remarked... ‘you will be remembered by the posterity for this.’” (175–76). This shows he was not afraid to act firmly when it was needed.

Another example was how he dealt with teachers who did not do their duties properly. “Earlier, Vice-Chancellors hadn't settled this issue due to pressure, but during my tenure's administration showed courage to act firmly.” (187). Even if it made some powerful people unhappy, he chose to do what was in favor of the university.

Most importantly, Prof. Shyamlal worked to increase Dalit and tribal representation. He noticed that despite reservation policies, posts for Dalits and tribals were often left empty. With patience and courage, he made sure they were filled: “...finally appointed 6 Scheduled Caste and 11 Scheduled Tribe candidates.” (185–86). This action was bold because interview boards were mostly dominated by upper-caste members who resisted change. Scholars like Sinha argue that real Dalit leadership is not just about holding a high post but using that post to bring social change (425). In this context, Prof. Shyamlal's actions were justified because he helped those who had been left out for years. His decisions show that leadership rooted in empathy and fairness can challenge old caste biases.

This kind of leadership fits with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's idea that educated Dalits who reach powerful positions should help their community (Ambedkar 45). Instead of forgetting where he came from, Prof. Shyamlal stayed connected to his roots and used his authority to make policies fairer. His leadership also challenged the belief that Dalits could not be good administrators. By keeping his door open for students, solving long-standing disputes, and fighting pressure groups, he proved that strong leadership is possible without giving in to unfair practices. However, the path was not easy. His bold actions were often met with resistance from those who wanted to keep things the same. But he writes with pride that he never compromised with fairness.

Thus, Prof. Shyamlal's work as vice-chancellor shows how leadership can be a form of resistance. Through empathy and courage, he changed policies, helped Dalits and tribals, and stood against caste discrimination inside universities. This shows that a leader's real success lies not

just in personal achievement but in using their power to bring justice.

Education as a Tool for Change

Education played the biggest role in Prof. Shyamlal's life and ideas. For him, education was not only about getting a job or a big post. It was a way to break caste barriers and open new doors for his community. This belief matches Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision that education is the best tool to fight for social injustices. As Ambedkar said, “Education is not just about learning facts; it is a powerful tool that helps people grow mentally and academically, break free from social oppression, achieve economic progress, and gain political independence.” (Qtd. in Mondal 18).

Prof. Shyamlal's own story proves this. He writes, “My insatiable thirst for knowledge and the spur of ambition made me restless. After the graduation, I took admission in a P.G. course, and this educational journey continued till the award of a PhD degree and then to the post of Vice-Chancellor.” (52–56). Coming from a small village and a marginalized community, he used education to cross barriers that could be a hard nut to crack for someone from his background.

He did not stop with his own success. He encouraged others in his community to study. In his book, he says, “I encouraged the Bhangi masses to send their children to school.” (61). He knew that education could help people in his community in getting respect and opportunities that they were always denied. Scholars like Deshpande have also reiterated that education can help break social walls, but it needs support and strong policies to reach everyone (102).

Prof. Shyamlal also used his position as Vice-Chancellor to provide equal opportunities for Dalit students and teachers in universities. He appointed Dalit and tribal staffs who were ignored for years. This is very important because many universities keep reservation posts empty or fill them unfairly. Research by Thorat and Newman says reservation policies are a good way to help Dalits enter higher education, but these policies often face resistance (78).

He also contributed to the domain knowledge through his books and research papers. He wrote more than twelve books and about fifty research papers. In his book *The Bhangi: A Sweeper Caste*, which was based on his PhD thesis, he wrote: “In the thesis, I admitted that there is some advancement in material progress, but at the same time I had also observed that among all the traditional lower or untouchable castes in India, ‘The Bhangi’... had occupied the status of the lowest of the low.” (73–74). This shows that he used research to bring attention to the harsh reality

of his caste's condition. Scholars like Guru say that when Dalit thinkers write about their lives and communities, they change how caste is discussed in universities and books (45). Prof. Shyamlal's research did exactly this by making people face uncomfortable truths about untouchability.

However, the path of education for Dalits is not smooth. Scholars like Sukumar say Dalit students and teachers are often treated as if they have not earned their place but only got it because of reservations (134). Prof. Shyamlal's story shows that even if education opens doors, society's mindset needs a change. In short, Prof. Shyamlal's life proves that education is a strong weapon against caste discrimination. But his experience also shows that books and degrees alone are not enough—there must be bigger changes in the ways society and institutions work. His story connects personal learning with community upliftment, making his work an example of Ambedkar's vision in action.

III. DISCUSSION

The life of Prof. Shyamlal shows that caste identity, leadership, and education are closely linked. Even after becoming a Vice-Chancellor, he could not leave behind his caste background. Instead, it shaped his choices and gave him the strength to fight for justice. This matches what Nivedita (405) calls "the struggle of moving up," where Dalits who succeed still feel the burden of their caste.

His actions as vice-chancellor prove that leadership is not just about power but about using that power to help others. By solving old disputes fairly (175–76), acting against teachers who ignored their duties (187), and making sure Dalit and tribal staff were appointed (Kumar), he showed true leadership. This fits with Ambedkar's idea that educated Dalits should help change society, not just think about themselves (Ambedkar 45).

Prof. Shyamlal also believed deeply in education. He did not keep his knowledge only for his benefit but shared it through books, speeches, and by encouraging his community to study. His work shows that education is not only about personal success but can be a tool to challenge unfair systems. Scholars like Guru (45) say that Dalit thinkers bring new views into universities and help people see caste realities more honestly.

But even strong leaders like him face limits. Discrimination is so deeply rooted that it does not go away with one person's success. Scholars like Sanil (98) show that Dalit professors and students often feel isolated in universities. Others, like Munshi, show that very few Dalits reach high positions, which means the system itself still blocks many people. Focusing only on stories of individual success, as

Chapman (12) warns, can hide these bigger problems. Prof. Shyamlal's story is inspiring, but it also shows that real change needs more than one determined person—it needs support from the institution and society. What makes Prof. Shyamlal's story powerful is how he balanced personal achievement with responsibility to his community. Instead of forgetting his background, he used it to guide his actions. Scholars like Rawat and Satyanarayana (12) say this mix of personal and collective thinking is what makes Dalit leaders different.

In short, Prof. Shyamlal's journey teaches us that education and leadership can challenge unfair systems, but real equality needs deeper reforms. His story is not just about rising to the top but about trying to lift others along the way.

IV. CONCLUSION

Prof. Shyamlal's life is more than a story of personal success. It shows how someone from a marginalized caste can use education and leadership to question and change unfair systems. Being a Bhangi by caste, he acquires a position of Vice-Chancellor, but even as Vice-Chancellor, he did not forget his community or the struggles he faced.

By solving university disputes fairly, acting strongly against wrong practices, and making sure Dalit and tribal staff were given their rightful posts, he proved that leadership can be a tool to fight against caste discrimination. His faith in education matched Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's belief that education is the key to real change (Ambedkar 45). But his story also reminds us that one person alone cannot remove deeply rooted discrimination. As scholars like Sukumar (134) and Sanil (98) observe, many Dalits in universities still face bias and isolation. Prof. Shyamlal's journey inspires us, but it also warns that real equality needs support from institutions and society, not just individual effort. In the end, his life teaches three important things: Leaders should stay connected to their roots and use power to help others, Education can open doors, but it must be backed by fair systems, and true social change needs both brave individuals and structural reforms. Prof. Shyamlal's story is both a symbol of hope and a call to keep fighting for fairness and dignity for everyone.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. Edited and Introduced by S. Anand, New Delhi: Navayana, 2014
- [2] Franco, Fernando, et al. *Journeys to Freedom: Dalit Narratives*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 2004.

- [3] Guru, Gopal. "Caste and the Politics of Knowledge Production." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 31, 2009, pp. 41–47.
- [4] Kumar, Nawal Kishore. "Prof Shyamlal: Subcategorization of SCs Doesn't Go Against Ambedkarite Ideology." *Forward Press*, 16 Aug. 2024, forwardpress.in/2024/08/prof-shyamlal-subcategorization-of-scs-doesnt-go-against-ambedkarite-ideology/.
- [5] Mondal, S.K. *Education and Social Change*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2015.
- [6] Munshi, Kaivan. "Caste and Economic Mobility in India." *VoxDev*, 5 Oct. 2021, voxdev.org/topic/labour-markets/caste-and-economic-mobility-india.
- [7] Nivedita, N. "Educational Mobility among Women from Stigmatized Caste Groups." *Compare*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2024, pp. 404–421.
- [8] Rawat, Ramnarayan S., and K. Satyanarayana, Eds. *Dalit Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- [9] Sanil, M.K. "Caste Discrimination in Higher Education." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 24, 2006, pp. 95–102.
- [10] Shyamlal. *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*. Jaipur: University Book House Pvt Ltd, 2011.
- [11] Sukumar, N. "Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities". New Delhi: Routledge, 2022.
- [12] Thapan, Meenakshi. "Dalit Autobiographies as Counter Publics: An Exploratory Essay." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 28, 2022, <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/7910>. DOI: 10.4000/samaj.7910.



The Alienation of The Other: A Study of Animal Metaphors in Gurnah's *Paradise*

Duan Haisuan

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, China

Received: 14 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2025; Accepted: 18 Oct 2025; Available online: 22 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract—Tanzanian-British author Abdulrazak Gurnah is the Nobel Prize in Literature laureate of 2021. To date, he has published ten novels, including *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2002), and *Afterlives* (2020), which primarily depict the living conditions of people in African colonies, focusing on issues such as identity, gender oppression, and racial conflict. His representative work *Paradise*, through the coming-of-age journey of a debt slave boy from German East Africa, just portrays the plight of The Other under the intertwined influences of tradition, patriarchy, and colonial systems. This study takes Gurnah's *Paradise* as the research object, combining Sartre's theory of The Other with the perspective of animal metaphors. Through close textual analysis, it ultimately selects three pairs of highly symbolic animal images, which are "wolf and wolf-people", "crocodile and goat", and "pigeon and dog", to systematically analyze their metaphorical connections with the individual, gender, and race Other. Further investigation reveals that commodity trade and slavery serves as primary causes for the physical and spiritual alienation of these Others. Within the macro-historical context of colonialism, the colonized were traded as commodities and tamed like livestock, ultimately losing freedom and dignity, thereby being transformed from humans into objects and beasts. This study thus aims to enrich the current academic research in interpreting animal metaphors in *Paradise*, offering fresh perspectives for examining social discrimination rooted in gender and race and so on. By prompting readers to reflect on related real-world issues, it advocates for the construction of a more diverse and inclusive society.



Keywords—Abdulrazak Gurnah, Alienation, Animal Metaphors, *Paradise*, The Other.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of Abdulrazak Gurnah and *Paradise*

On 7 October 2021, Stockholm local time, Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah had surprisingly won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The awards were presented as the following: For his uncompromising and empathetic in-depth exploration of the effects of colonialism and concern for the fate of refugees caught between cultural and geographic fissures (Nobel Prize Committee 2021).

Born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar, Tanzania (then known as Zanzibar and Pemba), Gurnah's Arab citizens were massacred in 1963 as a result of the revolution that followed Zanzibar's liberation from British colonial rule. As a member of this ethnic group, Gurnah was also forced to leave his country at the age of 18 and travelled to the UK as a refugee to study, eventually earning a PhD at the University of Kent, where he continued to teach. Due to these experiences, as a diaspora

African writer, he draws from his own sense of displacement and longing for home, with his academic knowledge, to critique colonialism and explore hybrid identities from a distinct perspective, establishing him as a leading scholar in the field of postcolonial literature.

Until now, Gurnah has published a total of ten full-length novels, including his masterpieces *Paradise* and *By the Sea*, which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize several times. Just as what he once said in his own acceptance speech that “I’ve come to recognise that there are some affairs I need to say, some tasks I need to complete, as well as some remorse and indignation I need to push and dig for (Gurnah 2021)”, most of his works oppose simplified thinking, reject stereotypical descriptions, and avoid primitive nostalgia and imagery of pre-colonial Africa, giving readers a glimpse of a multicultural East Africa.

Paradise is set in Zanzibar, East Africa. Just as the preface of this book shows, it is a place where Muslim black Africans, Christian missionaries, and Indians from the subcontinent coexist. It was also colonised by Germany from the second half of the 19th century to the end of the First World War. And according to the words of Lu (2022), through three trading journeys by Yusuf, who is a 12-year-old boy sold into slavery due to his father’s debts, the whole book employs a frame narrative like the style of *One Thousand and One Nights*. And from a child’s point of view and the third person’s perspective, each trading journey, directly exposes Yusuf to diverse cultures with different stories and myths, while borrowing some biblical and Quranic elements, obviously the tales of Joseph and the Garden of Eden.

It is usually considered that *Paradise* is at once the story of a tragic love story, and a tale of the corruption of traditional African patterns by European colonialism. The title’s metaphorical pun, both as the paradise and the hell, can be easily found from the different descriptions of the garden in Uncle Aziz’s house from the beginning of “the silence and coolness of the garden in flower” (Gurnah 1994: 42) to the end of “the garden lay in composed silence, it’s night music trembling imperceptibly in the gloom” (Gurnah 1994: 247). Apart from such a metaphor of the title, symbolic animal imagery is also woven throughout this book as some

significant metaphors, making *Paradise* a fertile ground for relative research.

1.2 Literature Review: Studies Abroad and at Home

Despite Abdulrazak Gurnah’s profound significance in the domain of post-colonial literature, in China, his works actually have been rarely explored before his receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021. But research abroad on Gurnah and his works are relatively earlier than that at home. Fortunately, the prestigious award has greatly led Gurnah into the global literary spotlight, making his works gain more intense scrutiny and analysis over the world. *Paradise*, with its richly textured narrative and incisive exploration of themes deeply rooted in Africa’s colonial history, has also become a focal point for scholars and critics both abroad and at home naturally.

Over the years, overseas research on *Paradise*, mainly focuses on its narrative of intertextuality, and themes including colonialism and identity. About its narrative of intertextuality, Jacobs (2009) proposed that *Paradise* reverts to the colonial gaze from a post-colonial stance, offering a narrative revision of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. To this point, by in detail discussing the Swahili histories and the text in detail, Mustafa (2015) stated that most literary research on this novel centers around Gurnah’s subtle description, skillful intertextuality, and intricate Islamic and biblical allusions. Regarding the themes of colonialism, Berman (2013) initially analyzed Yusuf’s final choice of joining a column of askaris, who are native soldiers recruited by the Germans, showing a social space of Africa that is disrupted due to colonialism. And around this, Goettsche (2023) further investigated German colonialism’s aftermath in East Africa as depicted in *Paradise* and also other works. And Houlden (2013) even examined male homosexual desire in Gurnah’s *Paradise* and *By the Sea*, highlighting the corrosive effects of both slave trading and colonialism in East Africa. Under such colonial circumstances, many scholars also explored further the theme of identity. Pujolras-Noguer (2023) recently traced the deep trauma of displacement in both Gurnah’s *Paradise* and *Afterlives*, which both demonstrate colonialism’s traumatic impacts on its characters’ identity. In the same vein, by carefully analyzing the behaviour of Gurnah’s characters in both *Paradise* and *By the Sea*,

Kohler (2017) showed that the characters' mobility and migration, which are closely related to the theme of identity, are inseparably linked with both trade and storytelling.

At home, in terms of a general study of Gurnah and his works, Xiong (2022) focused on the translation and reception of Gurnah's works in China, deeply analyzing the introduction process, the dissemination channels, and also the readers' feedback. More specifically on *Paradise*, domestic research has been mainly emerging in recent years, also on the topics of narrative, colonialism and identity. In the field of narrative, Lu (2022) analyzed the nested-style narrative structure and the constantly deepening narrative levels in *Paradise* from the traditional, purposeful, mobile, and reflective characteristics of East African business travel activities. Besides, Zhao (2024) used Shen Dan's dual-narrative process theory to analyze, believing that this novel not only reveals the impact of European colonialism and slavery on East African countries but also shows the positive force of characters like Yusuf who strive to seek subjectivity and break free from identity fetters. Wang (2025), similar to Jacobs, also discussed the intertextual relationship between *Paradise* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Concerning colonial history, DeCarde and Zhang (2023), with the theme of "The Denied Paradise", centered on the research of Gurnah and the Swahili world. From the perspectives of colonialism, cultural conflict and integration, it revealed the destruction of the colonial system on the local social structure, cultural traditions, and the fates of individuals. And Zhang (2024) used the new historicism to analyze, focusing on the dual-colonial history of Oman Arabs and Europeans in East Africa, questioning the Western discourse that blames Arabs for East African problems, and revealing the full picture of East African ethnic groups under dual-colonial rule. As for identity, Guo (2023) amplified that, in the process of gradually emerging from a state of naive bewilderment toward maturity, the protagonist Yusuf encounters a multitude of characters who, as an identity of The Other, offer him diverse paths of growth.

In conclusion, in general terms, both domestic and foreign scholars have indeed carried out extensive and in-depth research on Gurnah's *Paradise* about its narrative,

and themes of colonialism as well as identity. Nevertheless, it is evident that there remains substantial room for more specific improvements. Zhu and Zheng (2022) pointed out that *Paradise* uses a large number of metaphors for implicit narrative, focusing on the multiple crises of identity recognition and showing colonial trauma in Africa. However, relevant research on symbolism is still rare, especially on its metaphors. Although Zheng and Qi (2023) analyzed the symbolic metaphors in *Paradise* from the perspective of cultural memory theory, they also mainly focused on the dialectical tension of symbolic metaphorical characters, events, and colors. That is to say, it is worth noting that animal images that frequently appear throughout the text, also as metaphorical symbols, have received surprisingly little attention.

1.3 Theoretical Basis: The Other

The Other is universally considered as those individuals or groups in opposition to The Self. Since ancient Greece, it has drawn much attention, especially in philosophy. And its theoretical development, from Hegel's Absolute Idea, Husserl's Phenomenology, Heidegger's Existentialism, Gadamer's Hermeneutics, to Sartre's, Levinas's, Adorno's, and Lyotard's Postmodernism, has proposed multi-dimensional interpreting approaches that have triggered extensively interdisciplinary discussions in philosophy, sociology, as well as psychology.

In the realm of philosophy, the idea of The Other can be traced back to Hegel's dialectical system. As noted in numerous philosophical studies, Hegel (1807) proposed that self-consciousness doesn't exist in isolation. Instead, it can only be affirmed and developed through the unity of opposites with The Other. Through the recognition of the Other, self-consciousness evolves from being in itself to being for itself. This is not merely a deepening of individual self-awareness but also a spiritual elevation. As philosophical trends advanced, the theory of The Other continued to evolve within schools such as Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Hermeneutics. Husserl (1927) stressed uncovering the essence of inter-subjectivity via the intentional analysis of The Other in his Phenomenology. Heidegger (1931), from an existentialist perspective, probed into the crucial role of The Other in individual existence and world construction. Gadamer (1960), in his Hermeneutics, concentrated on

analyzing the function of The Other in text interpretation and cultural inheritance from the aspects of language and comprehension. Furthermore to Postmodernism, Sartre (2003) believed that the gaze of The Other is a key factor in the formation of individual self-consciousness. In other words, the perception of others not only makes individuals aware of their own existence but also brings about the dilemma of freedom and responsibility. Levinas (1969), placed The Other at the core of ethics, emphasizing infinite responsibility and respect for The Other and asserting that ethical relations are founded on responses to The Other. Adorno (1973) and Lyotard (1984), from the perspectives of critical theory, exposed the repression and exclusion of The Other within social structures and called for respect for differences and an embrace of diversity.

In sociology and psychology, the concept of The Other is widely utilized to analyze individual self-identity and social interaction, which also are both closely related to psychology. As Mead (1934) pointed out, during the process of interacting with others, individuals gradually form and adjust their self-identity through the recognition and feedback from The Other. For instance, in group dynamics, individuals interact with The Other within the group, jointly shaping group culture and behavior norms. In critical theory and post-colonial theory, The Other has become a potent tool for revealing social inequality and cultural hegemony. Edward Said (1978), in his *Orientalism*, indicated that the West solidifies its cultural hegemony and superiority by constructing The Other image of the Orient. This othering process is, in fact, an embodiment of power operation. Post-colonial theory further explores how the colonized achieve self-liberation and cultural rejuvenation through the deconstruction and reconstruction of The Other identity. In contemporary society, the concept of The Other is also crucial for issues such as globalization, immigration, race, and gender and so on. As Appiah (2006) suggested, it helps people understand how individuals construct their identities when interacting with The Other from diverse cultural backgrounds in a multicultural setting and how to foster understanding and tolerance among different cultures.

In summary, The Other theory plays a unique role in different disciplinary fields and cultural contexts, jointly offering rich theoretical resources and analytical

perspectives. Therefore, this paper, on a more detailed level, applies such a theory of Sartre's The Other, which, as the core of existentialist philosophy, deeply analyzes the complex power relations, dilemmas of subjectivity, and the unremitting pursuit of freedom between The Self and The Other. His book *Being and Nothingness* just reveals the process by which self-awareness is constructed in social relations. At the individual level, when a person experiences the look of the other, the "I" that was originally an acting subject is instantaneously transformed into an object under scrutiny and judgment. This establishes a power relationship, compelling the individual to adjust their behavior in response to the look of others, either to conform to social expectations or to avoid negative evaluations. At the social level, collective looks, such as public opinion, also profoundly influence an individual's or a group's self-expression and behavioral choices in society (Sartre 2003). To such points, Sartre's concept can largely help to analyze a deeper relationship between The Self and The Other from the dimension of the individual to the collective, which is highly applicable to the exploration of the oppressive and hierarchical relationships of different individuals, genders and races depicted in *Paradise*.

1.4 Purpose, Significance and Structure of the Study

As a rhetorical device, animal metaphors endow humans and other entities with animal characteristics or behaviours in order to convey specific meanings, emotions and concepts. Its use in literature, poetry, mythology, psychology and philosophy not only demonstrates the richness of linguistic expression but also reveals profound cultural and cognitive phenomena. This metaphor is based on the principle of similarity, which produces intuitive understanding and emotional resonance through the similarities between animals and humans in terms of emotions, behaviours or traits. In recent years, there has been a gradual rise in the study of the animal question in philosophy. Scholars have centred their discussions around the construction of subjectivity, exploring topics related to classification and boundaries. The subjectivity of animals as The Other and their crucial role as independent entities in triggering reflections on human nature in literary works have also been emphasised. Therefore, cutting into the theme of The Other in literary works from animal

metaphors can undoubtedly provide a new perspective for understanding and interpreting social phenomena. Therefore, by analyzing the metaphorical mapping relationship between animal figures and different Others in *Paradise*, and then exploring the manifestations and causes of the alienation of these Others, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of its readers and also encourage critical engagement with issues of social justice.

Overall, this study is significant in many ways, both academically and socially. On the academic level, it contributes to the development of literary theory. By combining Sartre's theory of The Other with animal metaphors, this study provides a new approach to exploring literary themes. It demonstrates how the concept of The Other can be embodied and analysed through the lens of animal imagery, thereby bridging the gap between philosophy and literature. Besides, this interdisciplinary exploration not only enriches the theoretical tools of literary scholars, but also promotes cross-fertilisation of different disciplines and stimulates more innovative research in correlative literary studies. At the social level, it also has the potential to raise awareness of historical and contemporary social issues. Exploring the alienation of The Other in Gurnah's *Paradise* through animal metaphors can help to reveal the deep-rooted problems of identity conflict, gender inequality and racial discrimination in colonial Africa under the influence of tradition, patriarchy and colonialism. This also helps readers to further reflect on the historical roots of these social injustices, to understand how they continue to shape modern societies, and to cultivate more empathetic and tolerant attitudes towards different traditions, genders and races in the process of globalisation and modernisation.

This thesis is structured into six parts. The introduction offers background on Gurnah and *Paradise*, reviews existing research to identify gaps, elaborates on The Other theory with a focus on Sartre's ideas, and presents the study's purpose, significance, and structure. The second to fourth parts form the main body: Part two analyzes the individual Other in the traditional community with identity conflicts; Part three focuses on the gender Other in patriarchy with gender inequality; Part four examines the race Other in a Western-centered world with racial discrimination. Part five then explores the root

causes of The Others' alienation, which are commodification and slavery. The conclusion finally summarizes how these animal metaphors reveal oppression on individuals, gender and race, emphasizes the study's contributions to post-colonial research, and advocates for a more inclusive society.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL OTHER IN THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY

Africa's cultural diversity resists homogenization, as its writers often embody distinct tribal identities: Achebe with Igbo culture, Soyinka with Yoruba, and Gurnah with Swahili, a hybrid civilization shaped by Arab-African exchanges in Zanzibar (Zhu 2023: 45). Similarly, Gurnah's *Paradise* interrogates the "individual Other" through the protagonist Yusuf's nomadic journey from 12 to 18, positioning him as an outsider navigating fragmented Swahili collectives. Khalil's fable of "wolves" and "wolf-people" in Chapter 1 The Walled Garden just reflects this tension:

Khalil told Yusuf stories of wolves and jackals who stole human babies and raised them as beasts... When they were grown, they made them couple with them, to produce the wolf-people who lived in the deepest forest and ate nothing but putrid flesh... Anyway, the wolf-people sometimes came among real people (Gurnah 1994: 28).

This allegory frames the native/wolf and outsider/wolf-people metaphor, exposing identity struggles within Swahili tradition.

2.1 The Native as the Wolf: Identity Fixed with purity

2.1.1 The Native's Identity Fixed in the Same Tradition

Traditional Swahili communities anchor identity in religious and cultural continuity. To this extent, Islam, as a totalizing force, just dissolves individual markers into collective religious identity, where true belonging lies not in the homeland but the umma, that is, the global Muslim community in Islam. This rigidity is enforced by figures like Uncle Aziz and Hamid, who act seemingly just as cultural custodians. Despite this, their self-positioning within their respective communities is clearly defined in that religious and trade tradition.

Aziz is just a typical representative of the traditional Arab merchant class along the East African

coast. Beneath a veneer of religiosity, he exploits vulnerable groups through debt relationships, incorporating youths like Yusuf and Khalil into his commercial network as collateral. On the surface, Aziz presents himself as a kindly uncle, but in reality, he uses usury and contractual traps to force the children of debtors into unpaid labor, even consolidating his interests through arranged marriages. These examples reveal his hypocrisy, as he ostensibly adheres to Islamic teachings, under the proclaim that "religion is a beautiful thing, pure and true" (Gurnah 1994: 101), while in truth manipulating religious authority to justify his exploitation. For instance, he funds Yusuf's education at a madrasa to study the Quran, but his real aim is to legitimize his oppressive practices. In Gurnah's works, such Muslim characters exhibit a strong sense of both honor and shame, a point noted by foreign scholar Godwin Siundu (2013) in his research, which highlights how figures in Gurnah's novels use these traditional concepts to construct their ethnic identities and distinguish themselves from other groups.

In this novel, coastal society is portrayed by the merchant class as civilized, while the inland regions are dismissed as the domain of savages. Hamid, on the other hand, serves as Aziz's business partner in the inland mountains, responsible for storing smuggled goods. Hamid's adherence to inland traditions manifests in two key ways. First, he restricts his daughter Asha's interactions with Yusuf to uphold traditional family ethics. Second, he sends Yusuf to a Quranic school for education, ensures regular mosque attendance, and even arranges for him to learn mechanics and auto repair from the well-educated Indian, Kalasinga. These actions subtly reflect his efforts, as a local, to integrate Yusuf into his traditional community. What is more, almost everyone calls the well-educated Indian Kalasinga, a nickname akin to Harbans Singh. And Mustafa (2015) points out in her research that Kalasinga was indeed a historical figure. In Swahili, it was customary to refer to Sikhs in East Africa as Kalasinga. This also shows the profound influence of religion.

Influenced by Islam and trade culture, a caravan venturing inland for commerce functions like a mobile micro-society (Zhu & Zheng 2022). Though its members such as merchants, guides, translators, porters

may hail from different communities, speak different languages, and follow different faiths, they temporarily set aside their differences for a shared goal. In unfamiliar territories, they are compelled to maintain a semblance of unity. Each trading expedition, with its prolonged interactions, naturally fosters cross-cultural exchange among diverse ethnic groups. In the spacial mobility depicted in the text, from "the mountain town" to "Chatu" and then to tribes like "Witu", Swahili, as the most widely used trade language at the time, spread alongside the expansion of commercial networks, eventually becoming one of the official languages of modern Tanzania, making the native's identity more fixed in the same tradition of not only religion, but also language.

2.1.2 The Wolf Metaphor: The Self with Purity

The wolf metaphor is a powerful symbol that crystallises the locals' unwavering quest for purity, as their collective identity is carefully constructed through strict adherence to cultural and religious norms. The wolf, known for its sense of community and territoriality, just reflects the Swahili community's deep-rooted obsession with preserving their cultural and religious homogeneity. This similarity is embodied in the fact that the Swahili community, resolutely defends its boundaries and traditions like the wolves, ensuring that any deviation from the established norms is resisted.

In Khalil's story, the wolves' behaviour in raising human children to reject their humanity is similar to the behaviour of Aziz and others who try to mould individuals within their communities. For example, Aziz's paternalistic control over Yusuf exemplifies the pack's desire to force people to conform to norms. Aziz's desire for Yusuf to accept the norms of the Umma without question is both a literal assimilation of violence as depicted in Khalil's fable and symbolic in his behaviour. This process reflects the community's tendency to suppress individuality in favour of a unified collective identity and justifies this behaviour through cultural indoctrination with religion in rooted tradition.

The contrasting metaphor of wolf and ghoul in the narrative further reinforces the connection between the wolf and purity, where the wolf is the embodiment of purity, while the ghoul is the ultimate symbol of impurity. The ghouls "eat dead meat, human meat preferably, but

only of those over whom prayers have not been said after death (Gurnah 1994: 28)", which represents an insistence on and defence of the purity of traditional religious beliefs. This moral hierarchy, in reality constructed through the exclusion of ghouls, is in fact a means by which the traditional community defines itself as culturally pure. For example, when Yusuf questions Aziz's authority, he is labelled a kifaurongo (dead liar), effectively dehumanised and rejected as The Other by verbally abuse. This mechanism of exclusion can help to preserve the pure self-image of the people in the traditional community, just like the wolves holding on to their place in the original tradition through exclusion.

In other words, the purity associated with the metaphor of the wolf creates a cycle in which individuals are pressured to conform to established norms, in which case the wolf disciplines The Other who is not a wolf belonging to them through either indoctrination or exclusion. For instance, Aziz's and Hamid's adherence to indoctrinating Yusuf by Quranic teachings in fact stems from a fear of change and a desire to maintain the tradition. They are convinced of their community's traditions and see any deviation as a threat to its stability and identity. The metaphor of the wolf thus reflects not only the local self-perception of purity, but also a means by which traditional Swahili communities maintain social order and consolidate existing structures.

2.2 The Outsider Yusuf as the wolf-people: Identity Mixed with Hybridity

2.2.1 Yusuf's Identity Mixed Between Different Cultures

According to Jacobs (2009), Yusuf travels westward from the east coast of Africa: The first leg of his journey involves taking a train from Tanga to Mount Kilimanjaro, and the second leg is a trek through mountains, plateaus, the great lakes region, and the great rift valley, ultimately reaching the Congo Basin. Actually, Yusuf's journey into the interior is just a part of a more than two-thousand-year-old tradition of East African commercial caravans, which have their own set of organizational principles, trade rules, and ceremonial disciplines (Mustafa 2015). For example, Aziz's caravan is composed of a headman (mnyapara), porters, guards, translators, and a band, reflecting the complex social

structure and functional division within historical East African trade expeditions. In such a diverse environments, Yusuf broadens his horizons regarding culture, religion, trade, and politics, while at the same time inevitably experiencing repeated shocks between different cultures.

During his journey into the interior, Yusuf on the whole encounters three particularly influential events that occupied a significant portion of the novel, which can be summarized as follows: first, passing through a village attacked by neighboring villages, where he witnessed numerous mutilated and decaying corpses; second, being led by local guides into the dense mountain jungle, from which they took six days to emerge, with several people succumbing to the hardships and dying in the jungle; and third, being captured and taken as hostage by the Chatu. All of these events test humanity, beliefs, physical strength, and wisdom of the caravan members. So such experiences, on the one hand, truthfully reflected the caravan's confrontation with the forces of nature in the African interior, and on the other hand, also reveal the indigenous people's exclusion of outsiders. For Yusuf, this exclusion is even more particularly pervasive.

As a debt slave sold to Aziz, Yusuf always addressed Aziz as "uncle", while Khalil, another young slave, insisted on calling Aziz "Seyyid" and urged Yusuf to follow:

You'd better learn that quickly, zuma. It's important for you. He doesn't like little beggars like you calling him Uncle, Uncle, Uncle. He likes you to kiss his hand and call him Seyyid. And in case you don't know what that means, it means master. Do you hear me, kipumbu we, you little testicle? Seyyid, you call him that. Seyyid (Gurnah 1994: 25)!

Many scholars believed that the word "Seyyid" originally meant leader and later referred to the descendant of Muhammad, an honourable title for Muslim nobles. Yusuf's resistance to the cultural identity of "Seyyid" was actually a stress response to trauma (Zhu & Zheng 2022). In his life of dependence and enslavement, Yusuf endures much trauma not only physically but also psychologically. Amply speaking, he leaves his parents and homeland, considering that he is following a trusted "Uncle", but in fact only to end up in slavery. Later, when Yusuf finally meets his beloved girl Amina, he could only watch her

becoming his Uncle's wife, which makes his only hope for life dashed. According to Zhu and Zheng (2022), all of these experiences traumatise Yusuf, leading him to resist his original religious and cultural identity.

However, in Islamic teaching, collectivism is largely emphasized, in which the true belonging of its believers is actually not their homeland but their religious community as a whole. Under the influence of such teachings, The Self identity of Yusuf as an individual is gradually dissolved. So, by resisting his original religious and cultural identity, Yusuf actually attempts to construct an Other identity, isolating himself from the surrounding world in an effort to establish his true cultural identity (Zhu & Zheng 2022), evading reality by denying his own essence as The Other under the natives' look.

2.2.2 The Wolf-people Metaphor: The Other with Hybridity

The wolf-people metaphor serves as a powerful symbol of Yusuf's hybrid identity as an outsider within the Swahili community. Unlike those pure wolves, wolf-people are neither fully human nor fully wolf. This inherent ambiguity in nature can just mirror Yusuf's situation, where, as a "rehani" (a debt slave), he finds himself in a swinging position, unable to fully integrate into the umma in the Swahili collectives due to his being an outsider, yet also disconnected from his family he once knew. And the wolf-people's association with the forest further hinting Yusuf's marginality of being excluded, because the forest just represents the unknown and the chaotic that is in contrast to the structured and traditional world of the umma.

Yusuf, who are just between the rigid norms of the Swahili community and the unpredictable realities of the outside world, just like the wolf-people who are raised up gradually losing self-awareness. That is to say, the collective look of the community of "wolves" reduces Yusuf to an object, through which the natives attempt to police their cultural boundaries by making The Other Yusuf feel alienated with a hybrid identity. However, Gurnah presents such hybridity not merely as a source of alienation but also more as a wellspring of resistance. For example, Yusuf's exposure to Swahili traders, who fluidly go through those cultural boundaries, just broadens his perspective and allows him to critique the rigidity of the

umma in tradition. These traders' stories of distant lands and their own fluid identities seemingly act as a counter-narrative to Khalil's fables. Because they inspire Yusuf to question his hybrid identity imposed by the community and also to embrace its complexity.

Overall, the wolf metaphor resonates deeply with Yusuf's conflicted cultural identity. His mixed status makes him just like a slave to different cultures with a kind of alienation. However, this sense of alienation is also the key to Yusuf's insight. Because his alienation comes from journeying among different areas with diverse cultures, whose complexity provides him enlightenment for "epiphany". In other words, his final decision to join the German army is just a rejection of the identity umma tries to impose on him and a bold step towards asserting his self-identity losing the original root. Thus, Yusuf's mixed identity can be seen as both a burden and also a strength. By occupying the limited space between different cultures, he challenges the myth of the umma's purity and advocates a more inclusive view of identity. It shows that hybridity is not only a threat, but can instead be a pathway to liberation, offering the possibility of transcending the confines of traditional cultural boundaries and forming a new sense of self as The Other excluded from the traditional communities.

2.3 The Other with Identity Conflict in Tradition

The symbols of the wolf and the wolf-people are thus metaphors for the conflict of identity within the tradition-bound Swahili community. This not only reflects the deep-rooted conflict between the protection of tradition and the inevitable external influences, but also exposes the paradox of tradition itself. The local people symbolised by the wolves are in fact the source of stability and identity for the traditional community. The Swahili community is based on the continuity of Islamic religion and culture and enforces strict norms to maintain its purity. However, this tradition also serves as a "prison", trapping individuals in a struggle to resist change. The community's emphasis on orthodox religion and hierarchical social structures, as a matter of fact, greatly stifled individuality. Yusuf's marginal position as an outsider to the Swahili community, who are with mixed ancestry and ambiguous cultural identity, just reflects this dilemma of stifled individuality. Because those natives impose their individuality on him.

His struggle to reconcile his multiple cultural identities with his original cultural roots and the traditions of the Swahili community reflects in a small way the challenge of combining tradition and modernity on the African continent.

According to Zhang (2015), diaspora writers cross national and ethnic boundaries and travel between different cultures, and their experiences endow their writing with characteristics that are different from those of national literature rooted in a single native culture. As *The Other*, Yusuf is just a mirror of Gurnah himself, constantly seeking self-identification in the collision of multiple cultures, and is internally conflicted and entangled. Yusuf's predicament is not only personal but also epitomises the times, reflecting the universality of cultural integration and conflict in the context of globalization. And to this point, Gurnah reveals the complex psychology of the diaspora community between tradition and modernity, belonging and alienation, thus further exploring the multiple dimensions of identity. Actually, the constant struggle and exploration of *The Other* in the midst of identity conflict becomes a potential force driving the evolution and development of the culture of traditional communities.

III. THE GENDER OTHER IN THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

The hegemony of indigenous men studies women's lives by examining the intersectionality of gender, class, race, caste, religion, and sexuality (Al-Wazedi 156). Engels (1884), in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, also said, "The overthrow of the mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex." In traditional Swahili society, the ideology of patriarchy constructs the civilized edifice of male society through the hegemonic discourse order and gender system. In such a society dominated by cultural ideology, women can only exist as an Other, and this also manifests at a deeper level of spiritual consciousness. Specifically, in *Paradise*, the intersecting scenes of a crocodile attacking a woman and the Sultan slaughtering goats in Chapter 3 *The Journey to the Interior* can just encapsulate this tension:

They saw a woman who had gone into the water being attacked by a crocodile... Her relatives threw themselves in the water in their grief

and had to be pulled out by the others, some of whom were now watching the water warily for more crocodiles... The sultan of Mkata slaughtered two goats and invited the merchant to bring a company over to eat with him (Gurnah 1994: 122).

This allegory frames the men/crocodiles and women/goats dichotomy, exposing how patriarchy naturalizes gendered oppression.

3.1 The Men as Crocodiles: Predator and Masculinity 3.1.1 Men as Predators in Dominance

In the Swahili society depicted in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, patriarchy is firmly maintained through the control of ideology. Louis Althusser (1971) has once pointed out that ideologies are not static but are constantly reproduced and reconstructed in social practices. In the male-dominated Swahili societies of East Africa, the economic, political, and cultural superstructures are used to create social norms that are in the interest of men, which in turn are then inculcated into publicly accepted common sense. This patriarchal ideology deliberately exaggerates the natural differences between men and women, assigning to men the role of rulers. In this context, men continually dominate all spheres of society like predators in the natural world.

In this novel, Yusuf's experiences can just epitomize male-dominated consciousness. Although Yusuf is positioned as *The Other* in comparison to the natives of an outside world, within the binary gender structure he still forms with women, exhibiting a strong sense of subjectivity as a man. At the beginning of the book, from a child's perspective, the scene of children comparing their genitals is depicted:

To pass the time, they gossiped or played cards. It was with them that Yusuf first heard that babies lived in penises. When a man wanted a child, he put the baby inside a woman's stomach where there is more room for it to grow (Gurnah 1994: 7).

Yusuf is not the only one skeptical of this story. As the debate intensifies, the children expose their genitals for comparison, and the older boys even force the younger ones to show theirs for amusement. This seemingly innocent children's game is, in fact, an early manifestation of masculinity, reflecting men's unconscious

display of their physical characteristics and reinforcement of their gender superiority.

In this regard, the merchant Aziz takes such image of male-dominated predation more to an extreme. In the realm of commerce, Aziz, with his in-depth knowledge of trade routes and keen insight into market supply and demand, becomes the core of the commercial network. When dealing with various trading partners, whether local vendors or merchants from afar, he always uses his shrewd business acumen to dictate the pace of transactions, unilaterally determining commodity prices, transaction methods, and profit distribution, reducing others to subordinates who passively accept his rules. Such dominance then expands to the domestic sphere. He confines his wife to the walled garden and forces Khalil's sister into marriage through debt coercion. These actions all demonstrate his status as a dominant male, treating women as disposable property and subordinates, much like a predator.

In addition, the scene of a woman entering a shop to buy flour and salt further reveals men's dominance from a male perspective. The Gurnah's description of this woman's appearance is full of unfriendly gaze from men: "She wore a cloth round her middle, and a large ring of beads round her neck and over her shoulders. Her chest was uncovered, revealing her breasts (Gurnah 1994: 85)."

Such a portrayal makes the female body a natural focus of the male gaze, making her an object to be ogled and critiqued at will in the eyes of the men. The male characters, Kalasinga and Hussein, engage her in a seemingly friendly conversation, creating a harmonious atmosphere. However, as soon as she leaves, Kalasinga immediately fantasises about having sex with her in vulgar and explicit language, even degrading her as a barbaric woman, and lusting after her body at the same time. This stark contrast in attitudes actually exposes a double standard in men's treatment of women: men use normal social interactions to hide their true intentions, and simply treat women as mere tools to satisfy their dominant desires.

3.1.2 The Crocodile Metaphor: The Self with Masculinity

Thus, the metaphor of the crocodile in *Paradise* serves as a symbol that not only represents male dominance but also

reflects how men construct and reinforce their masculine identities. Crocodiles are often associated with traits such as strength, aggression, and the ability to dominate their environment. In the novel, when men are implicitly compared to crocodiles, it reveals their self-perception and the social ideal of masculinity they aspire to. For men in the Swahili society depicted in the novel, identifying with the crocodile means embracing and emphasizing certain masculine qualities. The act of being a predator, as illustrated by Aziz's behavior in business and domestic life, is a way for men to assert their masculinity. Aziz's control over trade and his authoritative actions within the family are reflections of the crocodile's predatory nature. By exerting dominance, he not only maintains his position of power but also reinforces his masculine self-image. This self-construction is deeply rooted in the patriarchal ideology, which values male strength, assertiveness, and control.

Moreover, the crocodile metaphor shows how men use external symbols to define themselves. In the scene where a woman is attacked by a crocodile, the men's reaction and the association of men with crocodiles in this context reveal a collective male consciousness and also gaze. The fear and wariness that others show towards crocodile-like men further validate their self-perception as powerful and dominant beings. It is a form of social recognition that men seek, as they strive to fit into the masculine mold defined by the patriarchal society. On this score, the crocodile also represents the men's sense of invincibility and superiority. Just as a crocodile is a top predator in its natural habitat, men in this society also see themselves as the dominant force in social, economic, and domestic arenas. This sense of superiority is not only directed towards women but also towards other men who may be seen as less masculine or less powerful. The metaphor thus becomes a means for men to distinguish themselves, to create a hierarchy within the male gender, and to maintain their position at the top of the social order.

In essence, the crocodile metaphor in *Paradise* is a complex symbol that reveals the multi-faceted nature of masculine identity construction in a patriarchal society. It shows how men use animalistic associations to define, reinforce, and glorify their masculinity, while simultaneously justifying their

dominance over women.

3.2 The Women as Goats: Prey and Femininity

3.2.1 Women as Preys in Submissiveness

In *Paradise*, under patriarchal rule, women are reduced to both docile and sacrificial goats. Yusuf's father's remark of "if something happens to you, they will pick another one from the pens (Gurnah, 1994: 13)" just vividly exposes their submissiveness, to which women's subjectivity is erased, underscoring their objectified status in a patriarchal system. This subjugation is further illuminated through three intersecting dimensions of oppression, each instantiated in the lives of Yusuf's mother, Aziz's wife, and Khalil's sister.

Firstly, Yusuf's mother endures a life of silent suffering and invisibility. In the domestic sphere, her daily toil in maintaining the household, bearing and raising children, goes unacknowledged and unappreciated. She is trapped in a cycle of unpaid labour, with her efforts merely taken for granted as part of her "natural" role as a woman. Her lack of subjectivity is evident in her inability to make decisions about her own life or the lives of Yusuf. She exists in the background, a shadowy figure whose only purpose seems to be to serve the needs of the male-dominated family, much like a goat waiting to be used and disposed of as per the will of its owner.

Aziz's wife, the Mistress, experiences a more blatant form of confinement and control. Confined to the walled garden, she is cut off from the outside world, her freedom of movement severely restricted. Her husband's authoritative actions reduce her to a prisoner in her own home, a possession to be guarded and controlled. Her body and her life are at the mercy of Aziz's whims, just as Amina's words that "the Seyyid's affairs were blessed, while the Mistress suffered from this strange disease (Gurnah 1994: 225)." The Mistress is forced to submit to his will, just as a goat has no choice but to follow the commands of its herder.

Khalil's sister Amina is the victim of a more direct form of exploitation. She is adopted by Khalil's father. However, she is actually silenced. "Everybody in the town knew her story, but nobody came to ask for her (Gurnah 1994: 230)." Afterwards, forced into marriage through debt coercion by Aziz, her body and future are traded away as a means to settle a debt. She is treated as a

commodity, her value determined by her ability to serve the interests of men. Her own dreams and aspirations are crushed, and she is thrust into a situation where she has no control over her own destiny. This is a clear example of how women in this patriarchal society are reduced to prey, their lives and bodies up for grabs by men in positions of power.

These three women, each in their own way, embody the submissiveness and vulnerability of women as "preys" in the patriarchal society depicted in *Paradise*. Their stories highlight the systemic nature of gender oppression, where women are systematically denied autonomy and dignity, and are instead forced into roles of subservience and sacrifice.

3.2.2 The Goat Metaphor: The Other with Femininity

The goat metaphor in *Paradise* operates as a multilayered symbol of feminized subjugation under patriarchal norms. As Judith Butler (1990) points out in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, as an identity, gender does not have an ontological entity; rather, it is constantly constructed through performance and imitation. To a certain extent, women's femininity just forms in such performance and imitation. In the novel, women are systematically reduced to animalized objects through two intersecting mechanisms: sacrificial rituals and economic exploitation, both of which crystallize in the goat imagery.

In African contexts, practices such as the historical sati-like traditions, where widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, and the contemporary scarification rituals of the Hamar tribe in Ethiopia's Omo Valley, highlight the gendered sacrifice. In the former, women were simultaneously glorified as martyrs and silenced as non-agents; their consent was presumed rather than sought, reflecting a patriarchal narrative that erases female subjectivity. Similarly, in the Hamar tribe's bull-jumping ceremony, women endure brutal whippings to prove their love, willingly subjecting their bodies to pain. This self-inflicted harm ultimately reinforces gendered power structures, as it is performed to meet male-defined standards of devotion.

In *Paradise*, these real-world parallels resonate strongly. The sultan's act of slaughtering goats mirrors the sacrificial role assigned to women in

patriarchal societies. Just as the goat offered up without voice or choice, female characters like Yusuf's mother, Aziz's wife, and Khalil's sister Amina are also sacrificed on the altar of male-dominated social order. Yusuf's mother's unpaid labor and erasure within the domestic sphere, the Mistress's confinement and illness-ridden existence, and Amina's coerced marriage all embody this sacrificial fate. Their bodies become sites of exploitation, commodified for economic gain or social status, much like goats traded in the marketplace.

3.3 The Other with Gender Inequality in Patriarchy

In the patriarchal society depicted in *Paradise*, the construction of women as The Other is not merely an individual-level phenomenon but a systemic issue deeply rooted in the social, cultural, and economic structures. The metaphorical representations of men as crocodiles and women as goats serve as powerful symbols that reinforce and naturalize gender inequality, highlighting the profound ways in which women are subjugated and marginalized.

The male characters, symbolized by crocodiles, wield power and dominance across various spheres of life. In the economic realm, men like Aziz control trade, determine prices, and dictate the terms of transactions, effectively relegating others to subordinate positions. This economic power translates into control over the domestic sphere as well, where men treat women as possessions. The way Aziz confines his wife to the walled garden and forces Khalil's sister into marriage through debt coercion is a clear manifestation of this male-dominated power structure. On the other hand, women, represented by goats, are objectified and reduced to the status of prey. The goat as a passive sacrifice echoes the women forced to sustain the patriarchal system through their bodies for reproductive and sexual functions and labor. Their worth is primarily measured in terms of their ability to serve male interests, whether through unpaid domestic labor or through being commodified for marriage and reproduction. The sacrifice of goats in the novel serves as a chilling allegory for the sacrifices that women are expected to make in this society. Their voices are silenced, their desires are ignored, and they are forced into roles of submissiveness and sacrifice.

That is to say, the cultural norms and values of the patriarchal society work together to naturalize this

gender inequality, making it seem like an inevitable and unchangeable part of the social order. In Swahili societies of East Africa, patriarchy is maintained through ideological control. This social formation is particularly pronounced during the colonial period, as colonial economic, and cultural systems further entrenched the dominance of men over women. By highlighting the ways in which women are oppressed and marginalized, the inherent injustice and cruelty of the patriarchal system are naturally exposed.

IV. THE RACE OTHER IN THE WESTERN-CENTERED WORLD

Many Western feminists believe that the root cause of gender inequality between men and women lies in patriarchy. However, according to Jin (2024), most Third World feminist scholars argue that gender discrimination is not the sole root cause of women's oppression. The relationship of domination and subordination in politics, economy, and culture between imperialist countries are the real sources (Jin 2024). Gurnah's *Paradise* also extends this critique of colonial racial hierarchies through the metaphorical pairing of Europeans as pigeons and Africans as dogs. On this score, the novel's interwoven scenes of the pigeon and the dog can just reveal:

The pigeons were all white, with wide trailing tail feathers. Hamid destroyed any young birds which looked different. He talked happily about the birds, and about the habits of birds in captivity. He called his pigeons the Birds of Paradise (Gurnah 1994: 65).

Just beyond the shade of the sufi tree, he found several piles of excrement, which the dogs were already eagerly nibbling at... The dogs had known a shit-eater when they saw one (Gurnah 1994: 247).

This allegory frames the Europeans/pigeons and Africans/dogs metaphors, manifesting how colonialism cultivates racial discrimination.

4.1 The Europeans: Superiority and Civilization

4.1.1 The Colonizer in Superiority

Under the Western-centered world order, the superiority of colonizers is manifested through multi-dimensional power

penetration and ideological construction. Relying on all-round political, economic, and cultural domination, colonizers have established a strictly hierarchical system of oppression in the colonized regions. This superiority is not only reflected in the plunder and control at the material level but also penetrates deeply into spiritual and cultural aggression, fundamentally distorting the self-awareness and value system of the colonized people.

In the colonial context of Africa, the power dynamics are complex and multi-layered. As Han and Ren (2023: 114) pointed out, merchants like Aziz assume the role of colonizers when trading with inland African tribes, yet they themselves are colonized by European powers. This intricate power relationship vividly mirrors the hierarchical oppression inherent in the colonial system. The protagonist Yusuf, along with the female characters in the story, endures dual colonization under the domineering rule of colonialism. Paradoxically, native Africans, influenced by colonial ideology, often see themselves as "civilized" and regard the primitive tribes in the western inland as "savages". This perception is actually a product of the colonial-imposed binary opposition between civilization and barbarism, which serves as a tool to justify colonial plunder.

For this, an illustrative example can be found in the interaction between Yusuf and Hussein. When Yusuf showed curiosity about the green-colored light, Hussein's response was laced with teasing, revealing his self-perceived superiority in knowledge and experience. He described the world in a way reinforcing a kind of dichotomy of civilization and barbarism that "the west is the land of darkness, the land of jinns and monsters. God sent the other Yusuf as a prophet to the land of jinns and savages. Perhaps he'll send you to them too (Gurnah 1994: 83)".

Hussein, as a merchant from Zanzibar who earns his living by running a store, is a representative figure embodying this colonial-induced mindset. His description clearly reflects the colonial-constructed narrative that categorizes and demeans certain areas as "barbaric". By promoting colonial languages, spreading Christianity, seizing land, implementing racial segregation, and using divide-and-rule tactics, colonizers employ various strategies to maintain their rule. They not only

plundered resources but also aimed to erode the national identity of colonized people at the cultural level. Through these means, colonizers established a false sense of psychological superiority and attempted to justify their unjust rule, thus perpetuating the cycle of colonial oppression.

Apart from that, the descriptions of the appearance and the portrayal of the images of European colonizers in the book also hints the construction of this superiority. At the beginning of this novel, Yusuf saw two Europeans on the railway platform at that time, the first he had ever seen. In Yusuf's eyes, the European colonizers are described as the following:

The man was large, so tall that he had to lower his head... The woman stood further back in the shade, her glistening face partly obscured by two hats... She was tall and large too, but differently. Where she looked lumpy and malleable, as if capable of taking another shape (Gurnah 1994: 1).

This implies that colonizers are outwardly "strong" and inwardly arrogant, being incompatible with the local environment and people. In particular, the eye contact between Yusuf and the European man vividly demonstrates a kind of unequal power structure. The European man first looks away, then looks back for a long time, and finally shows aggressive body language such as "bared his teeth in an involuntary snarl, curling his fingers in an inexplicable way (Gurnah 1994: 2)", while Yusuf finally flees out of fear. In fact, this interaction became a typical microcosm of the power relationship under colonial rule. The mythical descriptions of European colonizers by the indigenous people in Africa, such as "wearing clothes made of metal that don't chafe their bodies and being able to go for days without sleep or water (Gurnah 1994: 72)" and referring to them as "the big man" or "the government", reflect that in the early days of colonial rule, the colonized people deified the colonizers out of ignorance and fear. This perception further solidifies the superior image of the colonizers as being high above others.

In conclusion, the superiority of colonizers is achieved through oppression and construction at multiple levels, including politics, economy, culture, and psychology. This superiority is not based on true

civilization and progress but is established on exploitation, discrimination, and spiritual control of colonized people. Its essence is an embodiment of the irrationality and injustice of colonialism, which has a profound impact on the living conditions and spiritual worlds of the people in the colonies.

4.1.2 The Pigeon Metaphor: The Self with Civilization

The metaphor of the pigeon serves as a crucial entry point for analyzing how colonizers flaunt themselves as civilized. Through the portrayal of the pigeon's image and the arrangement of related plots, Gurnah reveals the aggressive nature and hypocritical facade hidden beneath the so-called civilized veneer of the colonizers, and demonstrates how the colonial discourse system beautifies the colonizers' own images while oppressing the colonized people.

In the novel, the merchant Hamid's obsession with and special treatment of pigeons endow the pigeons with rich symbolic meanings. Hamid's pigeons are described as "all white, with wide trailing tail feathers (Gurnah 1994: 65)".

Hamid destroyed any young birds which looked different. He talked happily about the birds, and about the habits of birds in captivity. He called his pigeons the Birds of Paradise. They strutted on the roof and the yard with reckless pomp and arrogance, as if the display of their beauty was more important to them than safety (Gurnah 1994: 65).

This description, as a matter of fact, alludes to the white-skinned European colonizers. Whiteness symbolizes the purity and nobility that the colonizers claim for themselves, and their exclusion of the dissidents exposes their ambition to remove obstacles and achieve complete colonization. The contradictory setting of pigeons being in cages yet being regarded as the Birds of Paradise satirizes the absurd logic of the colonizers who beautify colonial rule as bringing civilization and beauty to the colonized regions.

In addition, pigeons are often seen as a symbol of peace. However, in the colonial context, European colonizers commit acts of aggression and plunder in the name of peace and civilization. This contrast further highlights their hypocritical nature. For example, in the plot of the storm's onslaught, houses collapse and

animals drown, but the pigeon houses miraculously remain undamaged. Hamid's relief at this situation that "It was a miracle that none of the pigeon houses were damaged (Gurnah 1994: 112)", reflects from the side that colonizers only care about the safety of their symbolic objects in the face of disaster and are indifferent to the sufferings of the colonized people, making the hypocrisy of their civilization blatantly obvious. Afterwards, Khalil's sarcasm towards Hamid of "That Hamid with the big buttocks and the empty shop! He calls himself a gentleman, a man of honor, but in fact, he's just a chubby lad, strutting around as arrogantly as his plump white pigeons (Gurnah 1994: 186)" also directly punctures the illusion of the colonizers' self-beautification. This shows that in the eyes of colonized people, the so-called civilization and nobility of colonizers are nothing but superficial arrogance and conceit, and their actions are completely contrary to true civilization. The metaphor of the pigeon not only reveals the colonizers' mentality of considering themselves civilized but also, through contrast with reality, exposes the oppressive nature and false appearance of colonialism.

In conclusion, the metaphor of the pigeon becomes an important symbol for interpreting the colonizers' civilized image in the novel. It not only reflects the civilized superiority that colonizers claim for themselves but also, through various details and plots, exposes aggression, hypocrisy, and irrationality behind this civilization. This metaphor deepens the work's critique of colonialism, enabling readers to clearly recognize the deceitfulness of the colonial discourse system in shaping the colonizers' images and the harm it has caused to the colonized people.

4.2 Africans as Dogs: Inferiority and Barbarism

4.2.1 The Colonized in Inferiority

In the colonial discourse system centered around Western superiority, African colonized people were plunged into multiple disadvantages, both spiritual and existential. Through religious encroachment, exploitation of livelihoods that deprive the colonized Africans of identity, colonialism constructed them as inferior to others. This inferiority was not only reflected in the tragic fate of individuals but also revealed the systematic destruction of the African social structure by the colonial system.

At the spiritual level, religious beliefs, as the

core pillar of African culture, were severely impacted by colonialism. In the novel, Christianity was forcefully introduced into Africa alongside colonizers, clashing violently with indigenous Islamic and traditional beliefs. Colonizers attempted to completely transform the religious beliefs of African people through large-scale missionary activities, integrating them into the Christian system. This not only disrupted the original ecological balance of African indigenous religions but also triggered sharp conflicts among different religious groups. Many Africans, under the intense impact of this religious and cultural upheaval, began to waver in their once-firm beliefs. Moreover, the newly introduced Christianity failed to truly meet their spiritual needs, leaving them in a state of confusion and bewilderment in terms of faith. Gurnah's rebellious rewritings of important figures Yusuf and Muhammad from the Quran just epitomize how colonial rule undermined the religious subjectivity of Africans. Unlike the handsome, kind, and successful Yusuf in the Quran, Yusuf in this novel was constantly haunted by nightmares, dreaming of being chased by ferocious dogs and sobbing in terror. Similarly, the portrayals of Muhammad as either a beggar or a ruthless merchant deviated greatly from his traditional religious image. These rewritings hinted at the colonizers' attempts to exert spiritual control over the colonized through the dissemination of Christianity, reinforcing the colonizers' cultural superiority.

In terms of livelihood, Yusuf's experience epitomized the exploitation of Africans under the colonial economic system. After being sold into slavery to pay off debts, he left his hometown with Aziz and entered a new world filled with suffering. Along the way, he witnessed the tragic plight of the people in East Africa under German colonial rule: forced to build roads for Germans, engage in piecework, and carry heavy luggage for travelers and merchants. Those who failed to meet the workload were brutally hanged by the Germans, their lives treated as worthless (Zhu & Zheng 2022). During his travels with Aziz's caravan, Yusuf also saw the continent's decay: rampant diseases, prevalent superstitions, corrupt trade activities, and unchecked slave trade. These were not isolated individual tragedies but rather a microcosm of how Africans were regarded as disposable labor within the

colonial economic system. Under the high pressure of colonial rule, they were compelled to accept the values and lifestyles imposed by colonizers, gradually marginalizing their own cultures and traditions. This ideological oppression left the colonized in a state of confusion and helplessness when faced with major life choices, further exacerbating their inferior status.

In conclusion, the oppression of African colonized people by colonialism is comprehensive. It destroys their spiritual foundation through religious means and exploits their labor economically, depriving them of their cultural identity. The formation of this inferior status lay bare the cruelty and injustice of the colonial system, where just as Zhu and Zheng (2022) maintained, "Heaven belongs to the colonial ruling class, while the gates of hell are open to the African people".

4.2.2 The Dog Metaphor: The Other with Barbarism

Intertwined with religious and cultural traditions and colonial discourse, the image of the dog has been imbued with negative connotations, serving as a metaphor for colonized Africans and embodying the barbarism constructed by colonialism.

From the perspective of religious and cultural traditions, in Islam, dogs are regarded as unclean animals. Islamic jurisprudence stipulates that utensils licked by dogs require special cleaning, and individuals who have come into contact with dogs must undergo additional purification procedures before religious ceremonies. This perception stems from the living environment and sanitation conditions of dogs in the Middle East. In Christian traditions, dogs also often symbolize evil, depravity, and impiety. The Bible compares evildoers and heathens to dogs, and in early Christian art and literature, dogs are frequently used to symbolize worldly temptations and sins.

In this novel, Gurnah skillfully employs the metaphor of the dog to represent enslaved Africans. At the novel's end, when German colonizers conscript African militiamen and the scene of chaos left in their wake is compared to dogs feasting on excrement, this imagery carries a double-edged satire. On the one hand, the colonizers' strategy of "using Africans to control Africans" turns some Africans into tools for oppressing their own people, suggesting that ideological enslavement is even

more harmful than physical servitude. On the other hand, “shit” symbolizes the false “legacy of civilization” left by the colonizers, laying bare the predatory nature of colonial culture and the fragmentation of the colonized’s cultural identity (Zhu & Zheng 2022). In Yusuf’s dream, his mother’s transformation into a one-eyed dog crushed by a train further combines personal trauma with collective suffering. The animalization of the maternal figure seemingly symbolizes the violent dismemberment of the African continent by colonial forces, while the train symbolizing colonial industrial civilization, foreshadows the destruction of traditional African society.

Evidently, the metaphor of the dog is the result of the collusion between religious symbols and colonial discourse. By exploiting the negative associations in cultural traditions, it serves the hierarchical construction of colonialism, profoundly exposing the dual oppression, physical and spiritual, exerted by colonial rule on the colonized, as well as the alienation of human nature.

4.3 The Other with Racial Discrimination in Colonialism

According to the above, Gurnah in fact conducts a profound deconstruction of the race Other under colonialism through his literary creations, revealing the oppressive nature of the colonial discourse system and providing theoretical and practical support for the reconstruction of subjectivity among the colonized.

In terms of creative techniques, Gurnah’s contrasting depictions of pigeons and dogs are highly subversive. European colonizers likened themselves to the pigeons of paradise, symbols of civilized purity, while maintaining their hegemony through massacres and cultural cleansing. In contrast, they denigrated Africans as dogs feasting on excrement, using the label of barbarism to construct a cognitive trap. This binary opposition is not merely a struggle over cultural symbols but also a destruction of the diversity of human civilizations. When colonizers regarded African cultures as impurities to be purified, they were essentially reinforcing the hierarchical order of civilized versus barbaric. Additionally, Gurnah appropriates Western and religious classics to tell African stories, deconstructing the centrality of Western discourse and breaking down Western cultural hegemony through a strategy of “writing back to the empire (Han & Ren 2023)”.

This approach enables Africa to shed the imposed identity of the Other and showcase its own cultural subjectivity.

In terms of theoretical connections, Gurnah’s works are in alignment with postcolonial theory which aims to subvert the colonial discourse system that distorts experiences and realities, imposes inferiority on the colonized, and seeks total control over them (Jin 2024). According to Jin, the task of postcolonial theorists is to insert the often “absent” colonized subjects into the dominant discourse in a manner that resists and subverts colonial authority. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) just analyzed the ideological systems long established by imperialism and colonialism, deconstructing cultural colonialism and cultural hegemony, thus laying the foundation for postcolonial theory. Said (1978) argued that in the 19th century, through imperialist expansion, Europe came into contact with other cultures and depicted other people as lazy, depraved, uncivilized, and barbaric, thereby creating The Other in contrast to the civilized and industrious British. On this point, Gurnah’s literary works can just serve as a response to such colonial discourse, exposing the truth behind the labeling of Africans and criticizing the discriminatory perceptions constructed by colonialism to maintain its rule. For example, he portrays Aziz as a double agent of indigenous business, both exploiter and exploited. He borrows the framework of the Joseph story to tell the African experience, subverting the authority of the Western canonical narrative.

From the perspective of historical reflection, Gurnah’s critique transcends individual fates and ascends to an overall examination of colonial history. Tribal conflicts, superstitions, and diseases on the African continent are not evidence of its inferiority but rather the consequences of traditional social structures being dismantled by colonial rule. Yusuf’s journey from being forced to receive colonial education to eventually joining the German militia reflects the torn identity of the colonized, who are caught in a dilemma of either being exploited or becoming an accomplice within the colonial system. This reveals how colonialism fractures the sense of identity due to “the look” from outside, and also the resulting alienation of self-perception. This dissects the multiple forms of violence exerted by colonialism in terms

of race, gender, and culture, calling on people to confront historical traumas and reject any form of civilization superiority.

In conclusion, through narrative techniques such as multi-voiced narration, intermingling of indigenous languages, Gurnah deconstructs colonial racial discourse through integrating individual fates with historical reflection, not only exposing the oppressive nature of colonialism but also giving voice to the colonized. Beyond a profound analysis of Africa's history and present, his creations offer crucial insights for the global community to reflect on colonial legacies and pursue a more equal and inclusive dialogue among civilizations.

V. THE ALIENATION OF THE OTHER: TRADED AND TAMED

As a renowned postcolonial literary writer in the contemporary English-speaking world, Abdulrazak Gurnah's immigrant and diasporic identities have endowed his creations with a tint of anxiety and contradiction. Meanwhile, the historical backdrop of Africa and his bitter growth experiences have shaped the poignant yet tenacious character of his works. Such writing characteristics inevitably become an indispensable and precious cultural element in the context of globalization (Xiong 2022). According to Xiong (2022), generally speaking, research scholars hold that Gurnah's works mainly tell the stories of African immigrants, deeply analyze their pain and bewilderment when confronted with the lingering remnants of colonialism and racism that are prevalent in contemporary society, and use the alienated character traits of the characters to reflect the vulnerable side of contemporary British society. And the same is true of *Paradise*. Through the ingenious use of metaphorical animal symbols, these animal symbols transcend the biological attributes of the animals themselves and rise to become a carrier of cultural symbols and psychological projection, reflecting the alienation problems of different Others in postcolonial Africa. And the root of such alienation actually lies in commodity trade and slavery in this colony, which have made these Others traded and tamed, causing them to lose both liberty and dignity.

5.1 The Traded Other

5.1.1 From Person to Property in Commodification

In Gurnah's *Paradise*, the alienation dilemma of The Other under the colonial system is profoundly reflected in the process of their commodification from person to property. The root of this phenomenon can be traced back to the notorious triangular trade system in history. This system not only reshaped the global economic landscape but also completely subverted the value of the lives of the inhabitants of the African continent, alienating human beings into commodities that could be traded.

In terms of the operation mechanism of the triangular trade, its complete process presents a circular chain from commodities to slaves and finally to commodities again. In the first stage of the trade, European merchant ships were loaded with cheap industrial goods such as guns, textiles, and alcoholic beverages and sailed from European ports to the African coast. At this time, the objects of trade were ordinary commodities, which seemingly followed the logic of market exchange but actually laid the groundwork for the subsequent plunder of human beings. After the merchant ships arrived in Africa, European merchants colluded with local tribal chiefs and slave traders to exchange these commodities for African people, initiating the second stage of slave trade. The trafficked Africans were crammed into crowded cabins like goods and transported to American plantations and mines, where they were forced to work until death under harsh conditions. In the third stage, the merchant ships transported raw materials such as gold, silver, and tobacco produced in the Americas back to Europe, completing another round of commodity transactions. In this cycle, human beings were completely stripped of their subjectivity, becoming trading goods no different from tobacco and cotton, and their value of life was only measured by the price of labor.

This logic of commodification that alienates human beings into objects did not disappear with the end of the triangular trade but continued in new forms during the colonial rule period. Even though European colonizers halted the public slave trade under public pressure, the plunder of resources such as ivory and rubber continued. The story of *Paradise* is just set in German East Africa (now Tanzania) on the eve of World War I. Zhu and Chen (2023) pointed out that, at that time, German colonizers

further strengthened their control over inland resources by building the Usambara Railway and the Central Railway. In the novel, Yusuf's parents moved to the town of Kawa in pursuit of the trade dividends in fact brought by the railway:

They came to Kawa because it had become a boom town when the Germans had used it as a depot for the railway line they were building to the highlands of the interior... There was still good trade to be done in either of those places, he said. Sometimes Yusuf heard his father say that the whole town was going to Hell (Gurnah 1994: 5).

Besides, other characters like Hamid and his wife Maimuna settling at the foot of Mount to serve the caravans, and the Indian mechanic Kalasinga providing technical support for the passing trains, all seemingly participated in economic activities voluntarily, but in contrast, they were indeed drawn into the huge machine of the colonial trade system, and their fates fluctuated violently with the rise and fall of the railway and the coming and going of the caravans. In this process, the inland residents of Africa gradually lost control of their own lives and became a passive link in the trade chain.

In such a historical context, the alienation of The Other is made specific from the perspective of those native Africans, from which, just as DeCarde and Zhang (2023) declared, Gurnah challenges Ngugi's stance on the hegemony of the English language and defends the use of English by African writers to subvert and resist the distorted discourse of Europe. The traded Africans were just like traded property, first losing their personal freedom in body and becoming tools for colonizers to achieve economic interests. This transformation from person to property is not only a trampling on the value of individual lives but also a profound manifestation of colonial violence. From the level of individuals, it then extends to the African female group and the entire African continent, and such alienation is further revealed through multiple oppressions suffered by the alienated gender and race.

5.1.2 The Loss of The Other's Liberty

In this novel, the loss of freedom of The Other is a crucial and weighty theme due to their alienation. Such loss of freedom is mainly manifested as physical bondage. The narrative segments related to Mzee Hamdani who is a

slave to the Mistress in the novel can just vividly reveal how, within the context of commodity trade, The Other has become prisoners of freedom under oppression. His fate serves as a typical example of the ruthless trampling of human freedom by colonialism.

More than ten years ago, when she married the Seyyid, she offered Mzee Hamdani his freedom as a gift. Although the law at that time forbade the buying and selling of people, it did not require that those held as slaves should be released from their obligations. But when she offered Mzee Hamdani his freedom, he refused, and there he is, still in the garden singing his qasidas, the poor old man (Gurnah 1994: 221).

Mzee Hamdani's experience profoundly reflects the distortion and paradox of the concept of freedom under the colonial system. He was given to the heroine by her father as a wedding gift and had been treated as private property that could be disposed of at will since his childhood, without any right to make independent choices. Although the law clearly prohibited the buying and selling of people at that time, it hardly brought about any substantial improvement to the actual situation of slaves. Because the law only prohibited the form of "buying and selling" while tacitly approving and maintaining the slaves' obligation of dependence on their masters. The existence of this legal framework fully exposes the hypocrisy of the colonial system. On the surface, it seems to safeguard human rights and prohibit the "buying and selling" of people, but in reality, it misinterprets the freedom and rights of The Other by tacitly accepting the slaves' dependence relationship.

Under such a system, the freedom of The Other is no longer an inborn right but depends on the will of the master, becoming a kind of favor bestowed by the master. The heroine's act of giving Mzee Hamdani his freedom, in essence, is just a way figuratively for the colonizers to demonstrate their power over the colonized. And Mzee Hamdani's refusal of freedom is not that he truly doesn't want to be free but that his long-term enslaved state has seriously distorted his perception. He has internalized this dependence relationship as a necessary condition for his survival, and he has also lost the courage and ability to pursue freedom. And then

Amina's account of Mzee Hamdani's life story further reveals the intergenerational erosion of the freedom of The Other by the logic of colonial economy.

"She says do you know why he was called Hamdani?" Amina said, her eyes dull with distance. "Because his mother, who was a slave-woman, had him late in her life. She called him Hamdani in gratitude for his birth. When the mother died, her father bought Hamdani from the family which owned him. It was a poor family, deep in debt (Gurnah 1994: 222)."

Mzee Hamdani's mother was a slave, and her act of giving birth to Mzee Hamdani, under the colonial system, was actually a continuation and reproduction of the slave status. And Mzee Hamdani was eventually sold because his original family was deeply in debt, which clearly shows that the colonial economic system turned Africans into debt slaves that could be traded through the means of debt. This deprivation of freedom is not limited to individuals but has formed a vicious cycle of intergenerational transmission. That is to say, poverty leads to debt, debt leads to enslavement, and enslavement further exacerbates poverty, plunging The Other into the endless abyss of being in debt at birth and being enslaved because of debt.

In this trade relationship, the human body is a raw material that boosts the plantation economy. Just as DeCarde and Zhang (2023) pointed out, this paradise is nothing but a product of an unequal social structure and a tool used by those in power to numb the oppressed and instill false hopes in them. It reveals how the colonial system beautifies exploitation and oppression in order through economic control, thus achieving a comprehensive deprivation of the physical freedom of The Other.

5.2 The Tamed Other

5.2.1 From Beings to Beasts in Slavery

Under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, the experience of the object is an alienated experience of the object, in which the object as the utterly other essentially degenerates into the object of consumption, that is, a commodity. It does not exist as a resistant and limiting entity to the subject, but rather as something dominated by capital. It is a tamed entity that seemingly satisfies the subject's desires in all aspects and at all times in form (Li

2024). To a certain extent, the commodity trade driven by capital has evolved continuously, eventually forming the triangular trade system with the slave trade at its core, laying the economic foundation for slavery. Slavery is not only a tool for economic exploitation but also a means of implementing spiritual control over The Other through cultural means, alienating human beings into beasts. This process of alienation is vividly depicted in the colonial scenes described in *Paradise*. The word "beast" appears 15 times and about "slave" 37 times in the book, profoundly revealing the essence of colonial oppression. Here are some specific examples:

In his dreams they stood two-legged over him, their long mouths half open and slaving, their pitiless eyes passing over his soft prone body (Gurnah 1994: 26).

If you run, they turn you into an animal or a slave (Gurnah 1994: 29).

He buys anything... except slaves, even before the government said it must stop. Trading in slaves is dangerous work, and not honourable (Gurnah 1994: 34).

You are her servant. I am her servant. Her slaves (Gurnah 1994: 44).

It had shamed him to see Khalil slaving over Uncle Aziz's hand at the last moment, looking as though he would swallow it whole if he were given the opportunity (Gurnah 1994: 55).

The breadfruit was to feed the porters and the slaves, who would eat anything after their long walk in the wilderness (Gurnah 1994: 64).

At least there was no slaving dog rummaging into him. He thought wryly to himself, conscious of the tremors of terror subsiding within him (Gurnah 1994: 158).

He says we will not wait until you have made slaves of us and swallowed up our world (Gurnah 1994: 160).

Above all, it can be obviously inferred that, in the eyes of the colonizers, whether it is an individual like Yusuf or a woman, Africans are all alienated beasts as slaves. The merchant Aziz even himself compared the acquisition of slaves "buying slaves from these parts was like picking fruit off a tree (Gurnah 1994: 131)", which

vividly shows the objectified situation of those African slaves. And as a matter of fact, from the interior of East Africa to the islands of the Indian Ocean, slave trade strongholds are scattered everywhere. The plantation economy regards slaves just as labor units that can be arbitrarily disposed of. Their bodies are disciplined to become some fragmental parts of the plantation machinery, and they completely lose their human subjectivity.

On this basis, colonizers then used Christianity as an ideological tool to achieve spiritual control through the transformation of religious doctrines. German missionaries established churches in East Africa, grafted Bible stories into local myths, and forced slaves to convert to Christianity out of fear. The missionaries even claimed that the slave system is an order arranged by God, sanctifying exploitation and consolidating oppression at the spiritual level. In addition, the German colonizers also implemented racial segregation in education, forbidding Africans to learn to read and write, and only allowing a few loyalists to receive basic vocational training. The repeated appearance of words like "ignorance" is precisely the stigmatization of Africans by colonial discourse. This is just a kind of look of the colonizer, which objectifies Africans, making them ultimately undergo the self-alienation from human beings to beasts under the cultural oppression of slavery.

5.2.2 The Loss of The Other's Dignity

Under the shadow of colonial slavery, the loss of the dignity of The Other has naturally become a tragic reality that cannot be ignored. They endured immense spiritual oppression, completely losing their basic human rights and personal dignity. Through means such as religious infiltration and cultural hegemony, colonizers attempted to destroy the original cultures and belief systems of colonized people and forced them to accept Western values and religious beliefs. Such cultural aggression further made the colonized people doubt and deny their own cultures, thereby losing their cultural confidence and national pride, and their sense of dignity also crumbled as a result. The different psychological states and attitudes of Kalasinga and Hussein when facing external groups are sufficient to illustrate this point:

'Learn who they are, then. What do you know about them apart from these stories about

snakes and men eating metal? Do you know their language, their stories? So then how can you learn to cope with them?' Kalasinga said (Gurnah 1994: 87)'.

'...They are our enemies. That's also what makes us the same. In their eyes we're animals, and we can't make them stop thinking this stupid thing for a long time... 'I'm afraid, you're right... We'll lose everything, including the way we live,' Hussein said. 'And these young people will lose even more. One day they'll make them spit on all that we know, and will make them recite their laws and their story of the world as if it were the holy word. When they come to write about us, what will they say? That we made slaves (Gurnah 1994: 87).'

In this dialogue, Kalasinga advocates getting to know the Europeans different from them. By learning about the Europeans' languages, stories and so on, he aims to learn how to cope with them. This reflects his attitude of trying to bridge cultural differences and promote understanding. However, Hussein expresses deep fear. He is worried that making contact with the Europeans would cause their own culture to lose everything, including their existing way of life. This fear thus leads him to adopt a hostile and exclusive attitude towards the Europeans. In reality, such a clash of ideas reveals the complex psychology of slaves in the colonial context: they both yearn to resist cultural invasion and have to face survival challenges, which are closely related to their dignity. The debate about freedom between Yusuf and the old gardener Mzee Hamdani can just further deepen such an exploration of dignity:

'But you were her slave... are her slave. Is that how you want to be? Why did you not accept your freedom when she offered it?' Mzee Hamdani sighed... 'They offered me freedom as a gift. She did. Who told her she had it to offer? I know the freedom you are talking about. I had that freedom the moment I was born (Gurnah 1994: 223).

From these words, Yusuf's confusion about the old gardener Mzee Hamdani's refusal to accept the freedom offered by the Mistress is obvious. And he tries to persuade him to pursue freedom. In response, Mzee Hamdani replies to Yusuf's doubts from a more profound and detached perspective. He firmly believed that he had

been free since the moment he was born and that it did not depend on the charity or recognition of others:

When these people say you belong to me, I own you. It is like the passing of the rain, or the setting of the sun at the end of the day. The following morning the sun will rise again whether they like it or not. The same with freedom. They can lock you up, put you in chains, abuse all your small longings, but freedom is not something they can take away (Gurnah 1994: 224).

Here no doubt are some metaphorical meanings. The passing of the rain is brief and uncontrollable that comes and goes and does not stay, and the sun sets every day but rises again the next morning. This actually implies that the so-called ownership of slaves claimed by slave owners is equally transient and illusory. Although slave owners may verbally claim control over slaves, this control cannot truly change the essence of slaves as independent individuals, just as the passing of the rain and the setting of the sun cannot change the laws of nature. Here, Mzee Hamdani compared freedom to the rising of the sun, emphasizing that freedom, like the rising of the sun, is an inherent and inalienable right. In fact, it also represents the struggle to maintain the lost dignity at the spiritual level under the shadow of slavery.

5.3 The Alienated Other

That is to say, in the colonial contexts, where commodification and slavery are rooted, The Other is deeply caught in alienation not only from person to property without physical liberty, but also from beings to beasts without spiritual dignity. And this phenomenon reflects the profound impact of the colonial system on both individuals and the collectives.

At the individual level, the dilemmas faced by the protagonist Yusuf, in reality just that of the diaspora writers like Gurnah, vividly demonstrate the alienation of The Other, who strive to construct a national cultural identity but are constrained by the discipline of colonial culture and language. When they choose to write in their native languages, they risk being marginalized or voiceless in the global literary arena. This contradiction reveals the cultural alienation of The Other, who can neither fully integrate into colonial culture nor return to the roots of their native culture. From a gender perspective, women in

colonized regions endure dual oppression as both colonized subjects and females. They are not only exploited by colonial rule but also harmed by Western feminists. Western feminists often mold the image of Third-World women according to their own perspectives and standards, ignoring the racial, cultural, social, and political characteristics of these women and speaking on their behalf without proper understanding, thus becoming potential oppressors (Jin 2024). In the struggle against colonizers, women in colonized regions may also be wronged by their male counterparts within the nationalistic discourse, which further plunges them into a state of alienation under multiple layers of oppression. For the colonized as a whole, the binary opposition between the colony and the metropole creates a double-bind regarding their practical needs and spiritual homelands. Economically, they rely on the resources and markets of the dominant country, while culturally and psychologically, they yearn to return to their spiritual roots. This contradiction exacerbates the fragmentation of their identities and deepens their sense of alienation.

Gurnah's writing just emerges from this complex context. Through his portrayal of the alienation of The Other, he not only reveals the pain and confusion of African immigrants in the face of the remnants of colonialism and racism in contemporary society but also deconstructs colonial discourse through literature, helping the colonized to reconstruct their subjectivity. Socially, the alienation of The Other undermines social harmony and stability, intensifying conflicts among different groups. Culturally, it hinders cultural inheritance and development, threatening cultural diversity. However, the writing of diaspora writers, with their works situated between different cultures, carries distinct ethnic characteristics who are described as the so-called alienated while engaging in dialogue with world literature. Their profound insights just offer a unique and valuable perspective for understanding the legacies of colonial history and the development dilemmas of post-colonial societies. This not only holds significant literary value but also provides important implications for resolving cultural conflicts and promoting social harmony in real-world contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This thesis focuses on the novel *Paradise* by the 2021 Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, integrating Sartre's theory of The Other and the perspective of animal metaphor to delve into the issue of alienation of subjected individuals, women, and Africans under the oppression of tradition, patriarchy, and colonialism. By analyzing the three pairs of animal images: wolf and wolf-people, crocodile and goat, pigeon and dog, it reveals how these symbolic metaphors map the predicament of different Others.

In traditional communities, the protagonist Yusuf, as an outsider, faces an identity conflict. Trapped between his original culture and Swahili traditions, he struggles to find a sense of belonging. The wolf symbolizes the locals adhere to their identities, while the wolf-people represents Yusuf, whose mixed identity becomes a struggle, revealing the conflicts and struggles caused by identity differences in traditional society.

In patriarchal society, men express predatory and dominant behavior just like crocodiles, while women are treated as the prey goats in a subordinate position. For example, Yusuf's mother, Aziz's wife, and Halil's sister show different ways of oppression and sacrifice under patriarchy. Their lives are stripped of subjectivity and become accessories of family and society, further highlighting the gender-unequal power structure.

In the colonial context, the pigeon symbolizes the deceptive civilization and superiority of European colonizers, while the dog labels the African colonized subjects as barbaric and inferior. At this point, The Self of natives and men also becomes The Other, where colonial discourse constructs false binaries, justifying oppression via cultural erasure and psychological control, revealing the racial discrimination essence of Western-centrism.

In essence, The Other in *Paradise* are actually alienated, that is, traded and tamed, mainly due to colonialism. More specifically, commodification reduces Africans to property, while slavery dehumanizes them as beasts, stripping both their physical liberty and spiritual dignity. Through this, Gurnah highlights the issues of alienation, revealing how economic exploitation and ideological control fracture identity in postcolonial contexts.

This study contributes to post-colonial

research by providing a new perspective on understanding literary works and social issues. It enriches the theoretical discussion on the relationship between animal metaphors and The Others. Moreover, it calls on readers to reflect on historical traumas and advocate for a more inclusive and equal society that respects diversity and rejects all forms of oppression. Future research could further explore Gurnah's other works from similar perspectives to deepen our understanding of his literary world and the social issues he addresses.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adorno, T. W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. Seabury Press.
- [2] Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Press.
- [3] Al-Wazedi, U. 2021. Postcolonial Feminism. In N. A. Naples (Ed.), *Companion to Feminist Studies*. Hoboken: John Wiley.
- [4] Appiah, K. A. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- [5] Berman, N. 2013. Yusuf's Choice: East African Agency During the German Colonial Period in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel *Paradise*. *English Studies in Africa*, 56(1): 51-64.
- [6] Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- [7] Engels, F. 2010. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Penguin Classics.
- [8] Gadamer, H.-G. 1960. *Truth and Method*. Continuum.
- [9] Goettsche, D. 2023. German Colonialism in East Africa and Its Aftermath in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels *Paradise* and *Afterlives* and in Contemporary German Literature. *German Life and Letters*, 76(2): 269-284.
- [10] Hegel, G. W. F. 1807. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (A. V. Miller, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- [11] Heidegger, M. 1931. *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- [12] Husserl, E. 1927. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Martinus Nijhoff.
- [13] Houlden, K. 2013. It Worked in a Different Way: Male Same-Sex Desire in the Novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah. *English Studies in Africa*, 56(1): 91-104.
- [14] Jacobs, J., et al. 2009. Trading Places in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*. *English Studies in Africa*, 52(2): 77-89.

- [15] Kohler, S. 2017. "The Spice of Life": Trade, Storytelling and Movement in *Paradise* and *By the Sea* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. *Social Dynamics—A Journal of African Studies*, 43(2): 274-285.
- [16] Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Duquesne University Press.
- [17] Lyotard, J.-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [18] Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press.
- [19] Mustafa, F. 2015. Swahili Histories and Texts in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*. *English Studies in Africa*, 58(1): 14-29.
- [20] Pujolras-Noguer, E. 2023. Tracing Lines in the Trauma of Displacement: Slavery in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Afterlives*. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 138(2): 381-390.
- [21] Said, E. W. 1978. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- [22] Sartre, J.-P. 2003. *Being and Nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [23] Siundu, G. 2013. Honour and Shame in the Construction of Difference in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels. *English Studies in Africa*, 56(1): 105-116.
- [24] DeCarde, S. & Zhang, M. 2023. The Rejected Paradise: Abdulrazak Gurnah and the Swahili World. *Journal of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (1): 128-153.
- [25] Guo, S. 2023. The "Other's Path" in the Growth Theme of Gurnah's Novel *Paradise*. *Journal of Jinzhong University*, 40(1): 100-103.
- [26] Han, W. & Ren, Z. 2023. Perspective, Theme, and Style: Trauma Narration in Gurnah's *Paradise*. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 31(4): 112-117.
- [27] Jin, L. 2024. Postcolonial Feminism. *Foreign Literature*, (6): 96-108.
- [28] Li, C. 2024. "The Disappearance of the Other" and "The Dialectic of Violence": On the "Other" in Han Bingzhe's Perspective and Its Critical Dimension. *Shandong Social Sciences*, (9): 81-89.
- [29] Lu, M. 2022. Commercial Travel Narration in Gurnah's *Paradise*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 44(2): 68-79.
- [30] Wang, L. 2025. "Shadow Text" and Postcolonial Intertextual Reading: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Gurnah's *Paradise*. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 41(1): 43-52.
- [31] Xiong, H. 2022. Translation and Reception of Abdulrazak Gurnah in China. *Contemporary Writers Review*, (6): 178-185.
- [32] Zhang, J. 2015. Diasporic Writing and Its Research in the Era of Globalization: A Discussion on Professor Wang Ning's Research on Diasporic Writing. *Contemporary Writers Review*, (2): 163-171.
- [33] Zhang, K. 2024. An Interpretation of Gurnah's *Paradise* from the Perspective of New Historicism. Unpublished Manuscript.
- [34] Zhao, R. 2024. A Study on the Dual Narrative Process in Gurnah's *Paradise*. *Yangtze Novel Review*, (30): 75-78.
- [35] Zheng, Y. & Qi, X. 2023. An Interpretation of Symbolic Metaphors in Gurnah's *Paradise* from the Perspective of Cultural Memory Theory. *Modern and Ancient Text Creation*, (29): 19-21.
- [36] Zhu, Z. & Chen, P. 2023. Gurnah's *Paradise* and the East African Trade Landscape. *Social Sciences*, (2): 90-98.
- [37] Zhu, Z. & Zheng, T. 2022. Metaphorical Narration and Colonial Trauma in Gurnah's *Paradise*. *Journal of Humanities*, (6): 67-75.



Spectacle, Corruption, and Catharsis: The Crisis of Morality and the Neoliberal Psyche in Contemporary Indian Action Films

Dr. Prasanta Ghoshal

Faculty, Sir Gurudas Mahavidyalaya, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India
Visiting Faculty, Dept. of English, Sister Nivedita University, West Bengal, India

Received: 18 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 16 Oct 2025; Accepted: 19 Oct 2025; Available online: 22 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *This research paper explores the crisis of morality in post-liberalization Indian action cinema, examining how law, corruption, and violence are aestheticized to reflect the psychological and ethical disintegration of neoliberal India. By close readings of Force (2011), Satyamev Jayate (2018), Uda Punjab (2016), Shaitan (2011), and Dev.D (2009), the research investigates how the spectacle of crime and justice in cinema reflects the contradictions of contemporary governance and desire. The argument here is that films substitute moral order with spectacle, subjecting law to performance and corruption to catharsis. Referencing Lalitha Gopalan's theory of cinematic interruption, Ashish Rajadhyaksha's cultural interpretation of post-liberalization India, and Ravi Vasudevan's idea of The Melodramatic Public, the research finds that Indian action cinema is now a cultural repository of anxiety. It is a reflection of a society where the distinction between enforcer and offender, legality and crime, breaks down into moral complexity—a mirror to India's neoliberal mind.*



Keywords— *morality, spectacle, corruption, neoliberalism, violence, cinema*

Contemporary Indian action cinema has emerged as a powerful medium for the dramatization of the decline of law, morality, and institutional power in post-liberalization India. One of the most provocative tropes of this genre is the policing of the narcotics trade—a trope which conflates law enforcement with lawlessness. The conflict between the state and the narcotic underbelly uncovers not only a war of crime and order, but an extreme crisis in moral legitimacy. Movies like *Force* (2011), *Satyamev Jayate* (2018), *Uda Punjab* (2016), *Shaitan* (2011), and *Dev.D* (2009) turn this encounter into a metaphor for India's neoliberal breakdown, in which economic greed and moral deterioration sustain each other.

This essay argues that movies about corruption and drug policing serve as cultural critiques of India's fragmented ethics. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha puts it, "the cinema is a central institution by which the Indian public pictures its relationship with the state, power, and morality" (*Indian*

Cinema 4). Such films reveal how the narcotic economy and the political machinery are reflections of each other: both are greed-based and nourished by the fantasy of control. The paper is based on an interdisciplinary approach that draws from genre theory, postcolonial studies, and cultural criticism. It places the action film in the moral economy of post-liberalization India, tracing the ways in which spectacle has substituted for substance in the representation of justice.

The theorization of law and lawlessness in Indian cinema must be grounded in a framework that is sensitive to genre aesthetics and sociopolitical ideology. The policeman figure and the narcotic trade function not only as plot devices but also as symbols of institutional anxiety. 1991 economic reforms remodeled India's shared morality, redefining virtue as productivity and ethics as efficiency. Ashish Rajadhyaksha observes that "liberalization created

a cinema of splintered publics, where law operates at once as shelter and terror" (62).

Under this cultural state of affairs, *Force* (2011) and *Satyamev Jayate* (2018) destroy the myth of the incorruptible cop. The police officer is torn between desire and duty, defending a profit-scarred legal system. David Harvey's theory of neoliberal accumulation describes this turn: "the moral ambiguity of capital permits any pursuit of profit to become crime." Likewise, the narcotic industry in *Uda Punjab* allegorizes the economy of unchecked desire. According to Vasudevan, spectatorship in contemporary *Indian Cinema* is "melodramatic in its moral structure but modern in its fragmentation" (*The Melodramatic Public* 44).

Lalitha Gopalan's *Cinema of Interruptions* also reads the Indian action film as an experience of discontinuity. The repeated song-and-violence breaks serve not as digressions but as self-revelations—cinematic interruptions that render the contradictions of governance visible. Cultural studies also remind us that law in India bears colonial traces. The police, who were first established under the 1861 Act to function for imperial order, continue to have its coercive genealogy. Nivedita Menon argues that postcolonial legitimacy "rests on the continued performance of disciplinary violence." Therefore, present-day policing in film—visible in *Force* or *Satyamev Jayate*—transcends to be both patriotic ritual and authoritarian reenactment.

Gender and masculinity complicate this schema further. As R. W. Connell theorizes, hegemonic masculinity converts violence into moral form. Muscular heroism substitutes for ethical speech in *Force* and *Satyamev Jayate*; justice is bodily action. The representation of female addicts in *Dev.D* or *Uda Punjab* reveals gendered hierarchies of penance and atonement. Through these filmic gestures, law and lawlessness are revealed as dependent moral economies, not as opposites.

The traditional Indian popular cinema symbol of the upright law administrator, earlier a representation of unbeatable nationalism, is deeply transformed in post-liberalization India. The 1970s heroic policeman, born out of political unrest and socialist ideology, is re-imaged in the twenty-first century as a morally worn, psychologically shattered force of spectacle. This transformation is not only stylistic; it betrays the remapping of moral authority in a culture where neoliberal modernity has substituted collective ethos with performance by the self. Movies like *Force* (2011), *Satyamev Jayate* (2018), *Uda Punjab* (2016), *Shaitan* (2011), and *Dev.D* (2009) represent this shift by translating moral dilemmas into kinetic spectacle. Their brutality and visual overkill enact the crisis of a civilization hooked on revenge, exposure, and control.

Within these texts, the police, the addict, and the youth rebel are not adversaries but transmutations of a single neoliberal subject—alienated, performative, and neurotic. The law only endures as its own drama, and corruption is the form of emotional reality.

In *Force*, Nishikant Kamat builds ACP Yashvardhan (John Abraham) as a man whose dedication to duty disintegrates into pathology. He is the bureaucratic virtue the state still wants to project but can no longer maintain. His nemesis, Vishnu (Vidyut Jamwal), is neither an anarchic outlaw nor a mad slaughterer but a disciplined businessman of crime—suave, managerial, and ideologically indistinguishable from the neoliberal self-made man. The duel between them is more aesthetic than moral; it translates ethics into choreography. Lalitha Gopalan has noted how action cinema "fetishizes the body as moral currency" (*Cinema of Interruptions* 83) and *Force* exemplifies that step: every punch serves as the visual exchange for a moral proposition which words can no longer guarantee. Justice becomes vengeance when Yashvardhan's wife dies and he becomes a vigilante. Kamat stages the killings in slow motion, against a backdrop of garbage, fire, and metal blues, converting violence to elegy. The incorrupt is made corrupt not by greed but by sorrow; his tragedy is the depletion of legality itself. In neoliberal India where institutions collapse, ethical legitimacy is privatized—contracted out to actors who take revenge instead of judging.

Milap Zaveri's *Satyamev Jayate* amplifies this crisis by marrying moral outrage to populist spectacle. The protagonist Veer (again John Abraham) immolates corrupt policemen as part of a patriotic crusade that substitutes purification for justice. The film's incessant use of fire, anthem, and flag converts murder into ritual catharsis. Rachel Dwyer's comment that "Bollywood's purification rites conceal its unease at moral pollution in modernity" (*Bollywood's India* 97) precisely describes this dynamic. Zaveri re-packages ethical despair into nationalist entertainment; the spectator is exhorted not to think but to rejoice. The film's overwhelming sensory excess—flames, chanting, and slow-motion martyrdom—exhibits what Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes as "the post-liberalization aesthetics of legitimacy" (*Indian Cinema* 73). Authority, bereft of moral ground, is reconstructed through spectacle. The violence of the vigilante is the proof of his goodness, and the clapping of the audience closes the loop of validation. Michel Foucault's observation that power runs through the very actions that oppose it fits handily: each violation of law reinstates its dramatic power. In *Force* and *Satyamev Jayate*, moral law endures in choreography, its violence both punishment and evidence of mastery.

The slide into spectacle is carried on into *Uda Punjab* (2016), but the terrain moves from the individual to the state. Abhishek Chaubey's movie does not focus on an individual hero; it conducts a polyphony of victims and enablers within a tainted state. Punjab, long envisioned as India's granary and emblem of manliness, looks here like a wasteland of addiction—a body whose veins are conduits of chemical dependency. Rajadhyaksha terms this reversal the "inversion of national mythologies" (71). By projecting the narcotic crisis onto the neoliberal terrain, Chaubey builds addiction as the dominant metaphor of contemporary India: the economy itself is the drug, spurring productivity but undermining conscience.

The four lines of narrative in the film—Tommy Singh the pop star, Bauria the migrant worker, Sartaj the compromised policeman, and Dr. Preet the reforming doctor—converge as allegories of complicity. Tommy commodifies rebellion; his crass lyrics become anthems of indifference. Bauria suffers both gendered and class tyranny reflective of state violence. Sartaj starts off as a venal constable and transforms into a reluctant informant to institutional decay, and Dr. Preet's moral activism is reduced to martyrdom. Together they represent what Ravi Vasudevan describes as the "melodramatic public," in which pain is both private injury and public conversation (*The Melodramatic Public* 132). Chaubey's impatient cutting, switching back and forth between realism and stylized montage, performs Lalitha Gopalan's law that *Indian Cinema* "interrupts coherence in order to expose the incoherence of social reality" (*Cinema of Interruptions* 129). The outcome is a visual language of confusion that reflects the emotional condition of the nation.

Addiction here is not pharmacological; it is structural. The police, the politicians, and the medical machinery are all high on the drugs of corruption. The state is both pusher and addict. David Harvey's reading of neoliberalism's moral amnesia is informative: "profit becomes the sole virtue, and virtue itself the casualty" (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 89). *Uda Punjab* reenacts that maxim with catastrophic lucidity. The bribe and the high of the bureaucrat and the addict, however, have the same instant-gratification logic. The film's feminism does, however, bring back some sense of ethical balance. Shohini Ghosh puts forward the view that *Indian Cinema's* portrayal of female suffering "inverts the gaze of justice, transforming victims into witnesses" (*Fire* 58). Bauria's resilience and Dr. Preet's resistance are moral because they spurn the spectacle of vengeance. The last sequence, where Bauria and Tommy race towards a light-blurred horizon, withholds closure. The withholding of redemption is itself an ethical position, defying the cinematic need to cure. Survival, and not victory, is the new moral lexicon.

While *Uda Punjab* maps out the disintegration of the collective body, *Shaitan* (2011) and *Dev.D* (2009) relocate the crisis within the mind of the urban youth. Bejoy Nambiar's *Shaitan* begins with pounding rhythms and strobe light, propelling the spectator into an excess city where identity has become narcotic. The well-off youth that inhabit this space are not bad boys in the old sense; they are a result of prosperous privations. Zygmunt Bauman's idea of "*Liquid Modernity*" wherein moral and social moorings disintegrate in continuous motion (Bauman 8) accounts for their unpredictability. When they stage a fake kidnapping as a result of their hit-and-run, their offence does not stem from ideology but from ennui. The intoxicated restlessness of the camera reflects their psychic instability. Inspector Mathur, the tired officer, is sucked into the same morass of hopelessness; the final shot, where he executes one of the perpetrators in cold blood, rounds off the cycle of corruption. The representative of the state is no different from those he is hunting down.

Anurag Kashyap's *Dev.D* prolongs this self-reflection into the sphere of desire. By redefining Devdas in the modern city, Kashyap transfers decadence from the feudal palace to the neon motel. Dev's odyssey from privilege to self-destruction enacts what Sigmund Freud called the "death drive"—the self-repetition of pain as obsession (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 38). Kashyap's overwrought colors—red for desire, blue for sadness, yellow for delirium—make feeling as disease. The handheld camera, the double soundtrack, and the melting frames produce an environment of sensorial overabundance blurring boundary between experience and performativity. Michel Foucault's description of disciplinary power explains Dev's interior suffering: the subject internalizes inspection, disciplining itself in the name of lost power (*Discipline and Punish* 202). Dev's addiction therefore represents a domesticated form of governance, the neoliberal conscience policing itself on pleasure.

Both *Dev.D* and *Shaitan* recreate gender in this moral economy. Amrita in *Shaitan* and Chanda in *Dev.D* both defy victimhood by claiming agency with practical survival. Chanda's history as an embarrassed student and her transformation as a sex worker redefine shame as agency. Kashyap reverses the myth of Paro and Chandramukhi by giving both self-definition independent of male validation. Their persistence accomplishes Vasudevan's assertion that melodrama finds moral renewal not in triumph but in perseverance (*The Melodramatic Public* 161). Redemption comes not through repentance but in recognition—the instant the character realizes the moral framework crumbling around him. The city itself is a symbol for the collapse: its traffic, lights, and noise

mirror the overstimulation of a mind that cannot sleep. The city maze, with billboards and screens, exteriorizes the neoliberal Indian psyche—self-promoting, disjointed, and exhausted.

Throughout these films, the cinematic space is created as a "heterotopia," in the words of Michel Foucault—a place that reflects and turns reality on its head at the same time. The police station, the club, the drug house, and the hotel room are all heterotopic spaces—places where the pretence of order is created through ritualistic transgression. The law pervades everywhere, but its significance has evaporated. The violence of the hero, the stupor of the addict, and the rebellion of the youth are all ways of complicity in a system that is fueled by spectacle. Peter Brooks's melodrama theory of "the mode of excess through which the moral occult becomes visible" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 16) explains how these movies, despite their violence, are not amoral. Their surplus makes visible, instead of hiding, the emptiness of moral content beneath neoliberal India's shiny surface.

What finally brings together *Force*, *Satyamev Jayate*, *Uda Punjab*, *Shaitan*, and *Dev.D* is their rejection of firm closure. Justice, which had once been the fulfillment of the action story, now disintegrates into exhaustion. The cop survives but loses faith; the addict survives but not transformed; the youth confess but stay agitated. Émile Durkheim's notion of anomie—normlessness produced through accelerated social change—grasps the existential texture of such endings. The neoliberal subject swings between guilt and excess and can neither fully inhabit one. Violence turns into language, addiction is turned into faith, and spectacle is turned into politics. Cinema, as Rachel Dwyer says, continues to be "the national archive of feeling" (*Bollywood's India* 123); these films archive a shared mood of worry and fascination with moral breakdown. They stage not the breakdown of law but its transformation into performance—a performance the public desires because it reflects back on itself its own inconsistencies.

The coming together of ethics and aesthetics in these films indicates that Indian action cinema has reached its critical phase. In aestheticizing moral collapse, it teases and condemns its audience. The complicity of the audience—its pleasure at purification by fire or redemption by pain—closes the loop of neoliberal ethics, in which affect takes the place of justice. But the insistence of female survival and the occasional glints of self-knowledge supply a weak counter-ethic: acknowledgment without change, sympathy without fantasy. These moments suggest that even in spectacle there can still be consciousness. If the law is now

theatre, at least cinema recalls that theatre once tried for truth.

CONCLUSION

From *Force* to *Dev.D*, Indian action cinema traces a path from order to entropy, where the instruments of justice themselves create disorder. The texts explored here are united in a preoccupation with the moral and psychological tolls of neoliberal modernity. Institutions deteriorate; persons disintegrate. Émile Durkheim's theory of anomie—normlessness bred of social dislocation—sums up this mood.

Force and *Satyamev Jayate* aestheticize moral conflict in muscular spectacle, reducing justice to ritual violence. *Uda Punjab* externalizes moral collapse to the body politic, but *Shaitan* and *Dev.D* internalize it as existential despair. Through these films, the authority of the law lingers only in performance. As Rajadhyaksha has noted, "post-liberalization cinema is obsessed with the state's fragility, where coercion replaces consent as legitimacy" (*Indian Cinema* 75).

These movies also reflect the changed consciousness of the viewer—conditioned to sensationalism and disillusion. *Satyamev Jayate*'s crusading vigilantism and *Dev.D*'s suicidal destruction appeal to a public that confuses catharsis with ethics. But in this collapse, there are momentary flickers of recognition—Bauria's survival, Amrita's admission, Dev's self-recognition—glimpsing ethical reawakening.

Indian action cinema thereby becomes a moral laboratory of neoliberal India, laying bare the addiction to violence, spectacle, and control. As Dwyer maintains, "Bollywood remains the national archive of feeling" (*Bollywood's India* 123). These movies document the nation's fall into moral relativism while upholding its quest for meaning. Law and lawlessness, not antonyms, are intertwined forces within the spectacle of modernity—one supporting the other in the cyclical chain of crisis and catharsis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity* (pp. 8–60). Polity Press.
- [2] Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans., pp. 34–52). Schocken Books.
- [3] Brooks, P. (1995). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess* (pp. 15–117). Yale University Press.
- [4] Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world* (pp. 112–130). Columbia University Press.

- [5] Dwyer, R. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to modern India* (pp. 89–123). Reaktion Books.
- [6] Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans., pp. 202–230). Vintage.
- [7] Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Trans., pp. 38–44). W. W. Norton.
- [8] Ghosh, S. (2010). *Fire: A queer film classic* (p. 58). Arsenal Pulp Press.
- [9] Gopalan, L. (2002). *Cinema of interruptions: Action genres in contemporary Indian cinema* (pp. 37–142). British Film Institute.
- [10] Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism* (pp. 87–94). Oxford University Press.
- [11] Menon, N. (2004). *Recovering subversion: Feminist politics beyond the law* (pp. 44–51). Permanent Black.
- [12] Rajadhyaksha, A. (2016). *Indian cinema: A very short introduction* (pp. 4–87). Oxford University Press.
- [13] Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography* (pp. 11–19). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [14] Vasudevan, R. (2011). *The melodramatic public: Film form and spectatorship in Indian cinema* (pp. 35–165). Permanent Black.



Nihilism, Absurdity and *Waiting for Godot*: An Existential Approach

Tawhida Akhter¹, Suad Abdullaziz Al- Kadery²

¹Department of English, College of Science and Humanities, Dawadmi, Shaqra University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4149-4855

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ibb University, Yemen
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5406-1157>

Received: 16 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Oct 2025; Accepted: 18 Oct 2025; Available online: 22 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores Samuel Beckett's absurdist masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot* 1953, through an existential lens, focusing on the interplay between Nihilism and the human condition. The play portrays Vladimir and Estragon. Two characters perpetually waiting for the enigmatic Godot whose arrival holds the promise of meaning or salvation. However, Godot's constant absence and the play's cyclical structure evoke a sense of futility and the potential meaninglessness of existence. Their wait seems pointless, reflecting a nihilistic view where life has no inherent meaning or grand purpose. By depicting the characters' struggle with nihilism and the absurd, Beckett challenges us to confront the absurdity of life in which modern literature delves. This paper will focus on the modern theories, Existentialism and Nihilism, and how the play embodies core existential themes and the struggle of the main characters to confront with their freedom and responsibility to create their own meaning in a different world. By exploring nihilism and existential themes, the paper sheds light on *Waiting for Godot* as a profound exploration of human search for meaning in a potentially meaningless universe.



Keywords— Nihilism, existentialism, absurdity, meaninglessness, human condition.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the desolate landscape of existential philosophy, nihilism stands out as a stark reminder of the potential meaninglessness of existence. Stripped bare of inherent purpose, life in a nihilistic framework becomes a struggle to create meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. Nihilism often leads to a rejection of meaning-making attempts, sometimes resulting in apathy, cynicism, or even a desire for destruction of existing systems, while absurdism is a belief that there is a fundamental conflict between humanity's innate desire to find meaning and purpose in the universe and the universe's apparent lack of inherent meaning. This conflict creates the "absurd." Samuel Beckett's absurdist masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*, throws us headfirst into this bleak yet strangely comical world. In the face of an indifferent universe, what meaning can one ascribe to existence? This is the central question that plagues humanity, and philosophers like nihilists argue that

life is inherently meaningless. "Sartre likes to say that all of our experiences and actions are in some sense chosen, but he does not mean that when we are confronted with something we decide how it will look to us, how we will feel about it, what we will think about it, and what we will do about it" Webber :iix . Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, throws us into a world devoid of inherent purpose, where Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for the enigmatic Godot. Through their repetitive routines, illogical conversations, and desperate attempts to fill the void, Beckett masterfully portrays the themes of nihilism, highlighting the absurdity of existence and the characters' struggle to create meaning in a meaningless world.

This paper will delve deeper into the play's exploration of nihilism, examining how Beckett utilizes language, setting, and character interactions to depict the human condition in a universe devoid of grand purpose. *Waiting for Godot*." by the Irish writer Samuel

Beckett's. It was first performed in 1953 with the subtitle "a tragicomedy in two acts," *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's adaptation of his own original French-language play, *En attendant Godot*. The two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), have a number of conversations and interactions as they wait for the title character, Godot, who never shows up. It is an example of Absurd Drama. The horrors of World War II and the decline of traditional belief systems left many questioning the inherent meaning of life. This philosophical shift is reflected in the works of existentialist and absurdist writers, with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* serving as a prime example. Through the play's exploration of nihilism, Beckett confronts audiences with the absurdity of existence." The paper will analyze the cyclical nature of the play, with each day resetting, mirroring the concept of eternal recurrence, a core tenet of nihilism. It will explore how the characters' forgetfulness and contradictory statements dismantle any sense of objective truth or purpose. The paper will examine the elusive Godot as a symbol of a transcendent meaning that remains perpetually out of reach, leaving the characters in a state of existential despair. The study employs a qualitative research approach that mirrors modern literary theories, Nihilism and Existentialism. It will focus on the literature review and the previous study of *Waiting for Godot* from different perspectives. By Close reading of *Waiting for Godot*, paying attention to elements that reflects meaninglessness and absurdity we consider repetitive dialogue, the desolate setting, and the characters' lack of purpose. The study will identify specific scenes or lines that exemplify nihilistic ideas and how do Vladimir and Estragon grapple with the concept of a meaningless existence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Khushboo (2021), explained that the play *Waiting for Godot* depicts the conflict between adhering to rigid, ethereal beliefs and adopting an existential perspective, which maintains that a person must discover the meaning of life via intimate, localised interactions with nature.

Makhfuddin & Fabiola D. (2014), explained that the meaning of life is revealed in *Waiting for Godot*, where Albert Camus's idea of The Myth of Sisyphus suggests that there is no purpose to existence.

Withanage (2011) explored that, "The essence of their behaviour reflects the common situation in the human condition, and men's despair at being unable to find a meaning for his existence. The miserable condition of life in the present, the constant effort to make it fruitful and the failure to succeed in this is portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*". (n.p., 2011)

Cornwell (2016) explored that, "Introduces the concept of the absurd, which is frequently used in literature and is defined as something applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe with no meaning or value". (2)

Hooti & Torkamaneh (2011) states the play *Waiting for Godot* explores a number of important themes, including endless waiting, repetition, meaninglessness, and absurdity of waiting, as well as feeling stuck in time rather than making progress towards a purposeful goal. Finally, the play explores the theme of waiting for waiting and being imprisoned in one's own thoughts.

Hooti and Torkarmaneh (2011) researched that, "Waiting for Godot is a poignant play about a ceaseless waiting, about repetition, the meaninglessness, the absurdity of waiting, of feeling (and being) suspended in time instead of moving forward in a meaningful direction and, about waiting for waiting and finally being imprisoned in one's mind". (48)

Rana (2022) researched that, "Existentialism as a philosophy became popular after World War I when the entire Europe was in the moral crisis of, to be or not to be... The existential philosophy delved into the exploration of meaning of human existence. Whether we first exist or whether we exist only when we are conscious of our existence is quite debated among existentialists. "I think therefore I am."". (117)

Batta and Akhter (2017) explain the existentialism as that the philosophy of existentialism has long maintained that philosophy ought to address issues and circumstances that arise in the actual world, such as crime, sex, death, and birth. During the 20th century, this style of thinking became quite popular. It focuses on how humans come to exist and how they discover their own way. Existentialistic philosophy seeks to understand the inner self and free agency.

Akhter (2015) stated that, "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play. It presents many themes of existentialism such as absurdity, nothingness, futility, uncertainty, nihilism, thoroughness into being, angst (anxiety) and disappearance of solutions on the part of human beings, who are in turn left exploited, suffered and bewildered by powerful forces of the bourgeoisie prevalent in the social formation". (7)

Slocombe (2003) explains Nihilism as, "The rise of nihilism as a cultural force historically begins with the rise of scientific atheism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and, as such, is deeply rooted in European experience". (16)

Calderwood (1986) justified the title as, “The perfect title of a literary work, one might expect, would be, as it is in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a synecdoche, a particularly meaningful part from which the reader could infer the whole”. (363)

Akhter et al., (2015) stated that, “Samuel Beckett uses the symbol of Godot in the play, to portray human situation in modern capitalist social formation and this conflict comes to a head in the meaning of Godot, in which the text of the play is ambiguously torn between contradictory meanings. In this way, “Waiting for Godot” becomes an ambiguous play and ideological basis of this ambiguity is that the play reveals human suffering, exploitation and oppressive effects of modern capitalism on human beings; and at the same time it suggests a reflexive practice of distrust that any action to change the modern capitalist social formation is futile and absurd”. (47)

Ghanbari (2008) states that the way that guy is portrayed in this drama suggests that the timing is ideal for the saviour to show up, but he pushes it until the next day. Beckett intended to highlight the state of humanity as well as the waiting process. Waiting gives man hope for the future and acts as a form of tranquillizer.

Breuter (1976) points out that in addition to existentialist, sociological, Marxist, and even biographical readings, the most prevalent interpretations are religious in nature, where the well-known Mr. Godot—who makes no appearances in the play—is seen as a *deus absconditus*.

Khan, et.al (2015) explored modern man's life is the subject of Beckett's play. It talks on the state of human existence. The play *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett lacks a traditional storyline, inspirational characters, and a distinct locale.

Khan et al., (2015) states that, “Absurdism” means something silly, foolish, nonsensical, purposeless, confusing. Martin Esslin was the first who used this term “Absurd” in his book. This term basically used to describe the irrational, nonsensical, foolish and silly aspects of human life. It is a philosophy which based on the belief that this world is meaningless, purposeless and irrational and also the existence of human beings is useless, meaningless and irrational”. (312)

Albert (2015) explains the play as there are various forms of absurdity, anguish, nervous waiting, and utility. Man is perplexed by his existence and his transience, and he believes that since he is meaningless, he should pass away as quickly as possible. The play is also an absurdist drama because of these existential overtones. Thus, the play is absurdist from the perspectives of structure, topic, motif, characters, mood, setting, and language.

III. ANALYSIS

Have you ever felt like your actions had no real consequence, and the world continues to spin regardless of your choices? This feeling of insignificance lies at the heart of nihilism, a philosophy explored in Samuel Beckett's absurdist play which is a cornerstone of the Theatre of the Absurd, and its central theme is deeply intertwined with nihilism. The play doesn't preach nihilism, but rather portrays a world devoid of inherent meaning, forcing the audience to confront the existential void. *Waiting for Godot* is about two men, Vladimir and Estragon, who stand by a barren tree endlessly waiting for someone named Godot. The core of the play's nihilistic message lies in the act of waiting itself. Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, a figure whose identity and purpose remain a mystery.

“ESTRAGON: *Charming spot. (He turns, advances to front, halts*

auditorium.) Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: *We can't.*

ESTRAGON: *Why not?*

VLADIMIR: *We're waiting for Godot.” Act one*

Their wait is seemingly endless and pointless, with no guarantee of Godot's arrival. This futility highlights the absurdity of human existence. Life, like their wait, may have no clear purpose or destination. The arrival of Godot is perpetually uncertain, and the play offers no clear explanation of who Godot is or why they are waiting. The central theme is the absurdity of the situation.

“VLADIMIR : *He didn't say for sure he'd come.*

ESTRAGON: *And if he doesn't come?*

We've no rights anymore?” Act one.

Vladimir and Estragon pass their time with repetitive conversations, silly games, and philosophical musings to cope with the monotony of waiting. Throughout the play, they question whether they are at the right place, on the right day, or even waiting for the right person. A boy arrives twice, claiming to be a messenger from Godot. He delivers the message that Godot won't come today but surely will come tomorrow. He appears at the end of both Acts, delivering messages from Godot. The information he provides about Godot is inconsistent, raising doubts about his reliability. But Vladimir and Estragon contemplate leaving and ultimately decide to stay and wait again the next day.

Existentialism is a form of philosophy that explores the issue of human existence. Existentialist philosophers focus on questions of meaning, purpose, and value in life. In this absurdist play, it seems that there is no

plan for anything except waiting aimlessly. Godot, who never arrives, symbolizes the lack of inherent meaning in life. Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for something that might not even exist, highlighting the absurdity of their situation and perhaps of existence itself.

Circularity and Repetition in the play's cyclical structure, with days seemingly repeating, emphasizes the feeling of pointlessness. Their routines and conversations go nowhere, mirroring the search for meaning that may never be found. "We can make a similar point about behavior. Your actions are not merely ones that proceed from desires or habits of yours, since these could have been implanted in a way that leads us to deny that they themselves are genuinely yours. For an action to be yours, for you to be responsible for it, it must proceed from some aspect of your psychological make-up that is genuinely yours." Webber:155. Vladimir and Estragon constantly question their situation and each other, reflecting the existential anxiety of facing a meaningless world. Pozzo represents a form of authority, controlling Lucky like a slave with a rope. This master-servant relationship forces the audience to consider the nature of power, cruelty, and dependence.

"Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope

passed round his neck, so that Lucky is the first to enter, followed by the rope which is long enough to let him reach the

middle of the stage before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a great goat, Pozzo a whip." (Act one)

Pozzo and Lucky are representing different aspects of humanity. Pozzo embodies arrogance and dominance, while Lucky represents the downtrodden and silenced masses. Their decline (Pozzo becoming blind and Lucky rebelling) reflects the absurdity of human existence. The change in their dynamic between Acts 1 and 2 (Pozzo being blind and dependent) suggests the cyclical nature of life. The powerful become weak, and the oppressed may eventually rebel. Beckett uses Pozzo and Lucky as a theatrical device to introduce themes, move the plot forward, and provide comic relief (albeit dark humor) within the play's overall seriousness. Their decline throughout the play raises questions about the inevitability of suffering, the meaning of power, and the impermanence of everything. Are we all ultimately doomed to become dependent and powerless like the blind Pozzo? The way Pozzo lords over Lucky and Lucky's nonsensical speech contribute to the play's dark humor. This absurdity emphasizes the meaninglessness of their actions and the futility of their journeys.

Godot is the play's central mystery. It could represent anything; God, hope, salvation, or simply something to give their lives meaning. The lack of a definitive answer is part of the play's brilliance, allowing audiences to find their own interpretations. The tree also is a symbol of barrenness and isolation. It offers no shade or comfort, reflecting the characters' bleak situation. The characters' routines and conversations are full of repetition, highlighting the cyclical nature of their existence. Vladimir and Estragon taking off their boot representing the silly act in a cyclical routine.

"ESTRAGON: Taking off my boot. Did that never happen to you?

VLADIMIR: Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?

ESTRAGON: (feebly). Help me!

VLADIMIR: It hurts?

ESTRAGON: (angrily). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!" (Act one)

Vladimir and Estragon engage in silly games also to distract themselves from the futility of their wait. These acts become a metaphor for humanity's attempts to create meaning in a meaningless world. "VLADIMIR: (stooping). True. (He buttons his fly.) Never neglect the little things of life "(Act one). The play grapples with questions of existence and the lack of inherent meaning in life. The situation itself - waiting for someone who never comes - is inherently absurd. Beckett highlights the absurdity of human existence in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Despite the pointlessness of waiting, Vladimir and Estragon cling to their routine, demonstrating the human need for comfort and familiarity. The characters struggle to communicate effectively and their memories are unreliable. This reflects the difficulty of finding connection and meaning in a fragmented world. Through their games and stories, Vladimir and Estragon engage in a creative act. This act, though ultimately futile, demonstrates a human impulse to create meaning even in the face of the absurd. Vladimir and Estragon's meaningless tasks, like taking off and putting on their shoes, highlight the absurdity of their situation. Their conversations go nowhere, often looping back on themselves. Even though they contemplate leaving, Vladimir and Estragon remain dependent on the routine of waiting. This reflects the difficulty of achieving true freedom and the comfort of familiar patterns, even if absurd.

"We've no rights anymore?

Laugh of Vladimir, stifled as before, less the smile.

VLADIMIR:

You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited.

ESTRAGON: *We've lost our rights?*

VLADIMIR: *(distinctly). We got rid of them.*

*Silence. They remain motionless, arms dangling, heads
sunk,
sagging at the knees.*

ESTRAGON: *(feebly). We're not tied? (Pause.) We're
not—*

VLADIMIR: *Listen!*

They listen, grotesquely rigid. #

ESTRAGON: *I hear nothing.*

(chews, swallows). I'm asking you if we're tied.

VLADIMIR: *Tied?*

ESTRAGON: *Ti-ed.*

VLADIMIR: *How do you mean tied?*

ESTRAGON: *Down.*

VLADIMIR: *But to whom? By whom?*

ESTRAGON: *To your man.*

VLADIMIR: *To Godot? Tied to Godot! (Act one)*

This absurdity of communication reflects the difficulty of finding meaning through language in a nihilistic world. The characters' forgetfulness and conflicting accounts of the past highlight the subjective nature of experience and the difficulty of constructing a solid sense of self. Their games and role-playing can be seen as attempts to create meaning and define themselves through stories and actions, even if temporary. The play is filled with dark humor, a way to cope with the bleakness of their situation. The characters mock themselves and each other, highlighting the absurdity of their existence. Pozzo's control over Lucky can be seen as a metaphor for societal expectations and external forces that limit our freedom. "Beckett utilizes a series of literary techniques, including repetitive dialogue, a barren setting, and the characters' reliance on games, to expose the absurdity of existence and the nihilistic themes embedded within *Waiting for Godot*."

When Lucky breaks free and speaks incoherently, it could represent a temporary escape from imposed meaning, but it also raises questions about authentic communication in a meaningless world. The beauty of existentialism is its openness, "*Waiting for Godot*" becomes a powerful exploration of the human condition, stripped bare of external meaning.

IV. CONCLUSION

Waiting for Godot is considered a landmark of the Theatre of the Absurd. It explores themes of meaninglessness, existence, and the human struggle to find purpose in an uncertain world. *Waiting for Godot* remains a significant play in modern theatre. Its exploration of existential themes and its use of absurdity continue to resonate with audiences. The play's open-ended nature invites discussion and interpretation, making it a timeless work that can be revisited again and again. The characters' repetitive routines, forgetfulness, and nonsensical conversations emphasize the lack of meaning in their lives. They attempt to create meaning through games and stories, but these efforts are ultimately futile. The play suggests that traditional sources of meaning, like religion or societal roles, may be unreliable or absent. Beckett's genius lies in presenting nihilism not as a philosophical statement but as a lived experience. The audience grapples with the characters' anxieties and the absurdity of their situation.

Waiting for Godot doesn't offer answers, but rather prompts questions. Is there meaning in life? How do we cope with the absurdity of existence? By leaving these questions unanswered, the play challenges audiences to confront their own existential anxieties and forge their own meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. The act of waiting in *Godot* becomes a metaphor for the human condition. We are all, in a sense, waiting for something – for meaning, for purpose, for salvation. But the play suggests that this wait may be ultimately futile. The play never reveals who or what Godot is. This ambiguity allows the audience to project their own interpretations and anxieties about the search for meaning. By not providing answers, "*Waiting for Godot*", challenges the audience to grapple with existential questions and create their own meaning in life. By exploring these deeper layers, "*Waiting for Godot*" becomes a rich exploration of the human condition in an absurd world. It doesn't offer easy answers, but encourages us to confront the complexities of existence and find meaning through our own choices, connections, and even laughter in the face of the void world. By depicting the characters' struggle with nihilism and the absurd, Beckett challenges us to confront the meaninglessness of existence. He offers no easy answers, but the play's dark humor and exploration of the human condition can be a powerful way to engage with these profound questions. An existentialist might start with a nihilistic view of the universe as inherently meaningless but then move towards the creation of personal meaning. Similarly, absurdism acknowledges the potential for nihilistic despair but offers a different response – one of defiance and acceptance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the Deanship of Scientific Research at Shaqra University, for supporting this research.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akhter, J. (2015). Waiting for Godot: A disparate text. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 3(4), 42-48.
- [2] Akhter, J., Muhammad, K., & Naz, N. (2015). Waiting for Godot: A Marxist Study. *International Journal of Literature and Arts* 3 (4), 42-48.
- [3] Albert, R. (2015). Absurdity and Existentialism in "Waiting for Godot". *An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*. (nd), 6.
- [4] Batta, Ajoy & Tawhida Akhter. (2017). An Existential Study of the Select Novel of Doris Lessing's 'The Grass is Singing'. *International Journal of Economic Research*. 14(20). 579-582.
- [5] Beckett, Samuel. 1956. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press.
- [6] Breuter, R. (1976). The Solution as Problem: Beckett's Waiting for Godot. *Modern Drama*, 19(3), 225-236.
- [7] Calderwood, J. (1986). Ways of Waiting in Waiting for Godot. *Modern Drama*, 29(3), 363-375.
- [8] Cornwell, N. (2016). The absurd in literature. In *The absurd in literature*. Manchester University Press.
- [9] Hooti, N., & Torkamaneh, P. (2011). Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot: A Postmodernist Study. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 1(1), 40-48.
- [10] Ghanbari, M. R. (2008). A Comparative Study of the Notion of Waiting for a Savior in Religion and in Waiting for Godot. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 3(5), 733-737.
- [11] Khan, A. B., Mansoor, H. S., & Alia, H. (2015). The Impact of Absurdism in "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Becket. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education*, 1(2), 312-315.
- [12] Khushboo, N.(2021). A Study of Absurdity in Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting For Godot'. *International Journal of English and Studies*. 3(3). 79-84.
- [13] Makhfuddin, Z. (2014). MEANING OF LIFE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT. *LITERA KULTURA: Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2(2).
- [14] Rana, M. S. (2022). ABSURDITY, NIHILISM AND THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: A STUDY OF MISTRY'S NOVELS THROUGH THE LENS OF EXISTENTIALIM. *GAP BODHI TARU A GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES*. V(IV). 117-120.
- [15] Slocombe, W. (2003). *Postmodern nihilism: Theory and literature* (Doctoral dissertation University of Wales). https://pure.aber.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/9830542/Postmodern_Nihilism_Theory_andLiterature.pdf
- [16] Webber, Johnathan, (2009). *The Existentialism of Jean Poul Sarter*, Routledge, New York. IIX,155.
- [17] Withanage, I. H. (2011). *Waiting for Nothing; an Analysis of "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett* (Doctoral dissertation). <https://hdl.handle.net/1946/9926>.



Traces of Force Marriage: A Feminist Critique of Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories Subha and the Wife's Letter

Muhammad Ramzan^{1,*}, Kashif Ahmad², Noor Muhammad³

^{1,3}Researcher, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, Pakistan

²Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: ramzan.khan21333@gmail.com

Received: 14 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Oct 2025; Accepted: 15 Oct 2025; Available online: 23 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This research examines the theme of forced marriage in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories Subha and The Wife's Letter through the lens of feminist literary criticism. The study explores how Tagore portrays the emotional and psychological trauma inflicted upon women in forced marital unions, highlighting the patriarchal structures that perpetuate these injustices. Subha illustrates the silencing of women through its mute protagonist, whose lack of agency symbolizes the broader suppression of female voices in society. In contrast, The Wife's Letter presents a more direct challenge to patriarchal norms, as Mrinal, the protagonist, reclaims her autonomy by rejecting an oppressive marriage. This analysis employs feminist theory, particularly the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, to critique the societal norms that enforce forced marriages and deny women agency. The study argues that while Tagore exposes the dehumanization of women within patriarchal systems, he also underscores the transformative potential of female resistance. By situating Tagore's works within contemporary feminist discourse, this research highlights their enduring relevance in discussions on gender inequality and women's rights. The findings advocate for social reforms that prioritize women's consent and autonomy in marital relationships.

Keywords— Rabindranath Tagore, forced marriage, feminist literary criticism, gender roles, emotional trauma, patriarchal oppression, women's autonomy, South Asian literature.



I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Long perceived as the bastion of societal and family tradition, marriage in its form of social institution does reflect a deep significance in cultural history. But among all the things that make such an institution powerful, the trend and practice of marrying without consent—one or both have been married compulsively in many societies—been one with significant ethical as well as feminist debate. Marriage and patriarchal. These societal constructs have not only undermined women's rights but have also subjected them to emotional, psychological, and physical trauma.

Feminists condemn the idea of forced marriage due to its violations of human rights and its portrayal of women as inferior beings in patriarchal societies. Theories of feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett discuss how marriage, if not by choice, becomes an oppressive entity. Forced marriages are also shown in literature as a way to express the hardships that women face in patriarchal society. Rabindranath Tagore, a pioneer of modern Bengali literature, vividly portrays these struggles in his works Molnár (2021),

Tagore's short stories, Subha and The Wife's Letter, present powerful insights into the subject of forced marriage and its implications. The two stories tell about women's voice suppression, loss of identity, and emotional

disturbances; hence, these are the perfect texts for feminist criticism. Though the issues under discussion are cross-cultural, the relevance of Tagore's stories to modern discourses on gender equity is extremely deep. The study intends to critically examine the theme of forced marriage as presented in the works of Tagore from the point of view of a feminist for further deliberation on its impacts on women's lives Pridmore and Walter (2013).

1.2 Problem Statement

This tradition allows no right for women to exercise control over life decisions. Instead, it gives in to submissiveness so as to treat the female as goods rather than humans with free will. Even as the world's trend is moving on to achieve and promote gender equality, forced marriages are still within the societal system of many, as it deals directly with cultural and familial obligations. This societal structure confines women within emotionally abusive relationships, stripping off from them freedom, dignity, and agency.

In literature, forced marriages are a large theme that also reveals the present gender inequalities among people. In Rabindranath Tagore's short stories such as *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*, there are colorful accounts of forced marriages and their ramifications on the sufferers. These short stories explain how emotional sufferings are experienced among the womenfolk who are forced into marriages. All characters of the novels depicted reflect how society restrained and restricted the ladies back during the lifetime of Tagore; yet a scene very well described from their era exists throughout many regions in today's world as well Gill and Anitha (2011).

This thesis recognizes the need to deconstruct forced marriage through a feminist lens in Tagore's short stories. In this study, the way conjugal relationships are portrayed in *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter* will be analyzed to criticize the lack of consent in marriage and its emotional toll on women. The paper also touches upon the broader implications of forced marriage on gender equality, challenging the patriarchal structures that sustain this practice. Understanding these dynamics is key to evoking a lobby on the autonomy and consent cardinal to martial relationships.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

- 1) How does conjugal relationship based on force rather than consent is explored in Tagore's selected short stories?
- 2) How does force marriage leads to emotional trauma and what are its impacts on the women character's in Tagore's selected short stories?

Research Objectives:

- 1) Analyzing conjugal relationship and understanding the importance of consent in marriage in selected short stories.
- 2) Exploring the mental repercussions resulted from forced marriage in the selected stories of Tagore.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study bears importance relevance to the incessant issue of forced marriage, especially as portrayed in literature. Rabindranath Tagore's *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter* provide profound and interesting insights into how forced marriage deters the exercise of women's freedom and emotional state. The conducting of a feminist critique of these short stories as contributions lends information toward understanding an interlock between literature, gender dynamics, and social justice issues.

The research is academically, culturally, and socially significant because it contributes to feminist literary critique on the issues of forced marriages using Tagore's works that are yet to be well explored. The study sheds deeper light into how Tagore employed his writing platform in challenging patriarchal traditions, creating space for scholarly discussion of gender inequalities within historical and contemporary settings Molnár (2021),

Culturally, this study bridges the gap between Tagore's early 20th-century narratives and current gender issues within modern societies. Despite the fact that forced marriages are rampant in various cultures, just as in Tagore's days, there is still much to be learned from the stories by understanding the cultural mores and traditions driving a culture to hold women down.

Socially, it seeks to raise the need for consent and autonomy in marriage away from the patriarchal systems that perpetuate marriages without, in fact, forcing them. It attempts to bring about more emotional insights into the female personalities' experiences and toward the discussion on gender parity and the right to choose self-will. It is a call to society to rethink some of the oppressions that would have them derelict in these, in life Millett (2016),

Ultimately, this study's importance is in its potential to raise discussion on women's rights and to make known the long-lasting effects of forced marriage and the contributions toward efforts toward gender equity across the world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Feminist Literary Criticism

2.1.1 Evolution of Feminist Theory

The concern of feminist literary criticism is the exclusion of women's voices and experiences within the mainstream studies of traditional literature. Situated in the backdrop of political movements aimed at achieving gender equality, the first wave of feminism in late 19th and early 20th centuries was concerned with topics like legal practice\specifically women's rights to vote and property. But it was feminist ideology in its second wave- in the 1960s and 1970s-culture critique when feminist scholars argue that women should play a better role in literature in this context where it is understood that literature not only portrays women to be passive dependent and inferior and at the hands of patriarchies Kakar (2020),

The third wave, coming up during the 1990s, incorporated intersectionality-the term conceptualized by Kimberli Crenshaw- which was defined as acknowledging how race, class, and gender all "intersect" in a "constellation" to shape the lives of women. This cultural turn within feminist scholarship was more keenly alerting people toward diverse voices-from diverse cultural, social, historical contexts, though still largely dominated by the minor voice of woman. By the 21st century, feminist criticism evolved into a rich multidisciplinary field of study of various theoretical approaches to psychoanalytic feminism, Marxist feminism, and others. These theories analyze not only the representation of women in literature but also the structures of power and oppression embedded within a literary text.

In the light of feminist literary criticism, it is possible to study Rabindranath Tagore's works to reflect the gendered dynamics and systemic inequalities as seen in his stories. Analyzing this case of forced marriage and its effects with the theoretical approach will, therefore, point out Tagore's criticism of patriarchal values and the forward portrayal of women's struggles for independence Safdar et al. (2022),

2.1.2 Feminist Perspectives on Marriage and Consent

Marriage is perhaps the most prominent target of feminist criticism because, in many cases, it encapsulates the institutionalization of patriarchy. Feminist scholars argue that the old conception of marriage has been used through history to subordinate women, deprive them of autonomy, and disempower them; Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex* (1949), sums it all when she claims that, with patriarchal concepts of marriage, women are reduced to "other," and become property by the patriarchal construct of society. Secondly, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970)

also critiques marriage as a political institution to support the male domination and female submission.

It is upon this point that feminist scholars argue that consent must be free, informed, and continuing. Lack of consent means that the marriage practice turns to its forceful terms that perpetually enforce gender-based oppression. Since feminist theorists have argued on psychological, emotional, as well as physical impacts of non-consenting marriages, there is a grand cause for social change so that equality and autonomy are achieved in marital relationships Quek (2018).

Tagore's short stories, *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*, are imbued with these feminist concerns. The inability of the protagonist in *Subha* to voice her dissent underscores the fact that consent was not given in marriage practices. In like manner, *The Wife's Letter* interrogates the very normative traditions that allow duty to win over choice and which later depicts the psychological toll of such forced unions. From these two stories, Tagore assaults the oppressive forms of marriage and calls for an acknowledgment of the agency of relationships Quek (2020).

2.1.3 Applicability of Feminist Theory to Tagore's Works

Rabindranath Tagore's works have long been appreciated for their progressive gender and societal views. Women are depicted in such a manner that it goes against the patriarchal norms that were prevalent during early 20th-century India. Feminist theory is helpful in analyzing the critique of gender inequality that Tagore provides and his exploration of women's struggles for self-determination.

Here, Tagore is portraying the heroine's forced marriage as a representation of society's attitude toward a woman's wish and choice. There is a very silent tale that speaks of the psychological and emotional consequences of this woman being used as a tool in the marital institution. Through this method of feminist analysis, subordinations built into the story become deconstructed, especially on how patriarchy reduces a woman from human to mere commodity.

This includes *The Wife's Letter*, further evidence of the engagement of Tagore with feminist themes. Here, the wife's decision to leave her husband and assert independence challenges the role of women within marriage as depicted by society. Tagore aligns with feminist calls for redefining marriage as a partnership based on mutual respect and consent by foregrounding her emotional turmoil and quest for agency.

Through the feminist's critical perspective, Tagore's works stand tall as a profound commentary on women's systemic

oppression. Critiquing not only patriarchal practices but imagining a better social order, the works are undeniably very important to the discussion of contemporary feminists.

2.2 Patriarchy and Marriage

2.2.1 Patriarchy as a System of Oppression

Patriarchy is a sociopolitical system, which has been recognized as the chief perpetuator of gender-based oppression. Sylvia Walby (1990) defined patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women." This system runs through areas of the family, economy, culture, and state that facilitate male privilege at the expense of subordinating females.

In the framework of marriage, patriarchal society appears as an institution that forces male supremacy and deprivation of freedom for women. Traditional marital norms usually disregard the female partner's interests and make them a servant or a dependent of men. Systemic oppression culminates from cultural activities, laws, and social perceptions that emphasize the concept of male superiority Beauvoir (1952), Butler (1990).

Tagore's stories describe the patriarchal institution of marriage as a means of oppression. In *Subha*, for instance, the marriage of the protagonist is forced and serves to highlight the patriarchal forces that value familial and societal expectations above all else. Again, *The Wife's Letter* expresses disapproval over the emotional and psychological control the patriarchal husband imposes on the woman, which has proven destructive to women's well-being Akram (2024),

2.2.2 Forced Marriage as a Patriarchal Practice

Forced marriage results directly from the patriarchal mindset that considers a woman as a means of control and means of exchangeable property. It is argued that feminist scholars feel that such practices spring from the notion of women's principal role in servicing familial and social interests, often through the sacrifice of their own needs and desires for autonomy. In forced marriages, women are stripped of the prerogative of choosing their marriage partners, rendering them vulnerable to emotional torture and lifelong subjugation.

In Tagore's *Subha*, the forced marriage of the protagonist has brought out the dehumanizing effect of this practice. Her inability to speak both literally and figuratively represents the silencing of women's voices in patriarchal societies. Similarly, *The Wife's Letter* criticizes forced marriage through the struggle of the protagonist to regain her autonomy in an oppressive marital relationship.

Through such stories, Tagore brings out the injustice of a forced marriage, advocating a re-imagining of it as consensual and equitable. By analyzing these narratives from a feminist perspective, this research aims at systematizing the issue of forced marriages in regard to women's rights Ahmed et al. (2024),

2.2.3 Role of Social and Cultural Norms

The perpetuation of forced marriages is largely based on social and cultural norms. For example, many patriarchal societies have regarded marriage as the fulfillment of a family mandate rather than a personal decision. Women are forced to marry due to various reasons like protecting family honor, strengthening social relationships, or performing according to traditional expectations. These social norms not only exercise gender inequality but also make the violation of women's rights normal Beauvoir (1952), Butler (1990).

Tagore's works show that societal and cultural expectations oppress the life of women. *Subha*: A marriage for a woman is carried out just as the society needs, without ever giving a care about her sentiment and consent. In *The Wife's Letter*, it is demonstrated that the way cultural values made them a subject to sacrifice in order to please others.

By analyzing these narratives, this research will try to reveal how social and cultural norms perpetuate patriarchal practices and why society needs to change for women to gain autonomy and equality.

2.3 Forced Marriage in Literature

2.3.1 Global Representations of Forced Marriage

This literature review reveals the widespread issue of forced marriages across cultures as well as how it is founded on patriarchal systems and represented in literature. According to Nasution, Adly, & Nur Cahaya (2022), the persistence of this phenomenon is deeply connected with the cultural norms surrounding it, and McCabe & Eglin (2022) explained that it could be considered modern slavery. Akram (2024) and Janjua & Kamal (2024) examined the intersection of patriarchy and forced marriage in South Asia by connecting the practices to domestic violence and psychological trauma. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in the exploration of forced marriage in Tagore's short stories from a feminist perspective. This study attempts to fill the gap by revealing how *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter* criticize patriarchal norms and promote women's autonomy.

2.3.2 Forced Marriage in South Asian Literature

South Asian literature often portrays instances of forced marriages as a comment on the collective consciousness and patriarchy. These themes are well exemplified through

Tagore's *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*. In the former, silencing of feminine voices is vividly portrayed due to the enforcement of marriage, while *The Wife's Letter* is a scathing critique of emotionally draining nonconsensual unions. Other authors include Bapsi Sidhwa and Khaled Hosseini, who, through stories of family obligation and patriarchal suppression, have been able to provide varying perspectives on the cultural and emotional impact of such a practice Ahmad and Ahmad (2023).

2.3.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Although a plethora of works has been produced regarding forced marriages in literature, not much work has been devoted to Tagore's short stories on the subject. The conjunction of feminist literary criticism with the theme of forced marriage is underexplored in *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*. Thus, this paper will fill that gap by demonstrating how Tagore's stories critique the patriarchal status quo and promote feminine autonomy, presenting new perspectives regarding the emotional and psychological effects of forced marriages Ferialia and Setiawan (2020).

2.4 Emotional Trauma and Psychological Repercussions

2.4.1 Impacts of Forced Marriage on Women

Forced marriage has deep emotional and psychological effects on women. Victims often suffer from feelings of isolation, helplessness, and depression. Long-term mental health issues, such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation, have been associated with forced marriage. The effects are mainly derived from the loss of autonomy, exposure to domestic

violence, and societal stigma attached to non-consensual unions Ford et al. (2025).

Tagore's stories truly describe these affects. In *Subha*, the silent heroine is described, and this silence symbolizes the trauma that lies inside her heart, and in *The Wife's Letter*, the heroine, who abandons her husband, truly shows psychological suffering in forced marriage. Through these novels, this paper concludes that both literary world and real-time individual sufferings should be related to the emotional and psychological disturbances of forced marriages Ford et al. (2025),

2.4.2 Representation of Trauma in Literature

The inner struggles of characters are symbolized and negotiated through symbolic and narrative elements in literature as a condition of trauma. Silences characterize forced marriages, resistance and resilience are the overall elements, which define the act of forced marriage. Thus, in Tagore's *Subha*, muteness of the protagonist is metaphorically used as silencing the voices of women and in *The Wife's Letter*, the epistolary technique helps in conveying the shattering inner turmoil and identity of agency of the protagonist.

2.4.3 Gender and Mental Health

Any mental health outcome is heavily influenced by gender. The issue of being forced to marry entails psychological traumas in women, including the burdening of societal expectations and the trauma of non-consensual unions. Tagore illuminates these themes; he works with topics that highlight the intersection of gender and mental health in the context of patriarchal oppression.

Table 2.1: Summary of Key Findings and Literature Gap

Author(s)	Focus	Key Findings
Nasution, Adly, & Nur Cahaya (2022)	Forced marriage in Indonesia	Cultural norms uphold forced marriage through traditional institutions like <i>Namora Natomas</i> .
McCabe & Eglin (2022)	Forced marriage as modern slavery	Examined cases of women sold and enslaved, highlighting forced marriage as a global issue.
Akram (2024)	Patriarchy and forced marriage	Explored non-consensual marriage and its emotional toll on women in patriarchal societies.
Janjua & Kamal (2024)	Child marriage in Pakistan	Highlighted cultural practices like <i>Sawara</i> and exchange marriages that perpetuate forced unions.
Kakar (2020)	Forced marriage as a power dynamic	Showed how forced marriage consolidates power and control, often at the expense of women's rights.
Pridmore & Walter (2013)	Psychological impact of forced marriage	Linked forced marriage to increased suicide rates among women due to emotional and psychological trauma.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adheres to a qualitative research design as it delves deep into the analysis of the short stories, *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*, by Rabindranath Tagore. Qualitative research is more prominent in the study of literature because it entails an interpretive and contextual treatment of themes, characters, and narrative techniques. The qualitative design shall be guided by feminist literary criticism, which, therefore, sets the theoretical framework for considering the portrayal of forced marriage as well as emotional and psychological impact on women.

This study takes an exploratory research design in order to identify how Tagore critiques patriarchal norms and gives voice to the struggles of women for autonomy. The research seeks to uncover underlying messages about gender dynamics, power structures, and societal expectations from the textual elements of the selected short stories. The design is non-experimental in nature because it does not manipulate variables or test hypotheses. Instead, it depends on the textual analysis in the interpretation of the narratives to draw meaningful conclusions Feralia and Setiawan (2020).

This research design has the hallmark of reliance on secondary data sources such as scholarly articles, books, and other literary works that provide the contextual background to the findings in the wider discourse on feminist literary criticism and forced marriage. The interpretive nature of the design affords flexibility so that the researcher can change the analysis according to the themes and insights that are emerging from the texts Donnelly (2019).

Such a design will fit the demands to answer the research questions, where the theme of forced marriage in Tagore's works comes in with consequences for feminist discourse. A qualitative and interpretive approach seeks to contribute to the greater understanding of critique of patriarchy through such an advocate as Tagore for the rights of women.

3.2 Data Collection

This study primarily collects textual data from Rabindranath Tagore's short stories, namely *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*. The two texts are considered primary sources, since they create the narrative that the analysis will focus on forced marriage and its emotional and psychological impact. Other sources of secondary data are scholarly articles, books, and research papers on feminist literary criticism and Tagore's works. These are consulted to support the analysis and provide a context for findings

within the wider literary and social discourse Butler (1990).

The primary data gathering is through the close reading of the selected short stories, analyzing the themes, motifs, and devices used in constructing the narratives regarding the experiences women face with their forced marriages. Key passages and lines of dialogue must be analyzed about the emotional/psychological states and the societal forces and cultural ways that support a patriarchal cause Janjua and Kamal (2024).

Using secondary data sourced from academic databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, Google Scholar, print and digital publications of feminist theory and South Asian literature, one will be able to adopt critical views that further enhance the depth and the rigor of the analysis. This review would include previous research about forced marriage, along with reviewing the feminist literary criticism to outline the gaps in literature and place this current study into the existing knowledge.

The data collection is systematic and iterative, allowing the study to refine continuously based on themes and patterns as they emerge, and integration of primary and secondary data provides an all-rounded look at the questions under research, and this can culminate in giving a better appreciation of Tagore's critique on forced marriage and what it does in feminist discourse.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this research is based on feminist literary criticism, which would be the lens of the study for examining selected short stories Jacobs (2022). It is appropriate to analyze forced marriages, gender dynamics, and patriarchal oppression in Tagore's works, applying feminist theory in the study for it will expose the ways Tagore critiques the social norms and calls for women's autonomy and agency.

It adopts a qualitative and interpretive analysis of the text elements in *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*. Key elements of the framework include:

1. **Theme Analysis:** Identify and analyze the common themes in the chosen stories, like forced marriage, emotional trauma, and resistance against patriarchal norms. This is done by understanding how these themes develop in the narrative structure, character interaction, and symbolic elements.
2. **Character Analysis:** Discussing the role of female characters and their situations in a story about forced marriage. Emphasis is on the emotional and psychological conditions as well as how they react to social pressures and cultural expectations.

3. **Narrative Techniques:** Look at how literary devices like symbolism, imagery, and narration carry the themes and messages of these stories. Look closely at how stories told by Tagore reflect his critique of patriarchal practices.
4. **Contextual Analysis:** It situates narratives within their appropriate historical and cultural context to understand societal norms and values that inform the portrayal of forced marriage. The relevant secondary sources shall be drawn upon to provide an expanded view regarding themes and issues undertaken in these stories.

By integrating these analytical approaches, this framework makes it possible to carry out an all-inclusive and rich interpretation of the selected texts. The feminist perspective ensures that the entire analysis focuses on the gendered characteristics of the stories, thereby elucidating the systemic nature of patriarchal oppression and its implications for the lives of women.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"A woman is not a person in herself, but a possession of the family." (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 216)

4.1 Forced Marriage in Subha

"Meanwhile the parents, burdened with the duty of getting their daughter married, were becoming anxious. People were growing critical there was even a rumor that they would be socially ostracized" (Tagore, 2000, p.108). Tagore highlights the marriage of Subha is based on societal pressure and social expectations rather than her consent. Socially ostracizes depicts Societal pressure on parents to marry off their daughter. According to Beauvoir (1952) women are often treated as "the other" their identity and purpose are defined in relation to men and societal norms. This construction of women as "the other" leads women to subordination and oppression. Through the lens of Beauvoir forced marriage is the setting up of patriarchy through women censor their freedom and power in favor of societal expectation and patriarchal norms.

This burden and societal pressure leads Subha's parents to arrange a fictitious or bogus marriage of her without her will. One day her parents dressed up Subha adorned her with jewelers and try to hide Subha's natural grace. "[t]he groom came himself with a friend, to inspect the prospective bride" (Tagore, 2000, p. 109). Tagore highlights the objectification of women. According to Beauvoir (1952) in a male dominated society women consider as an object like inspection of Subha merely reducing her as a commodity rather an autonomous individual. "Subha's parents anxious, worried, agitated...

lengthy inspection" (Tagore, 2000, p.109). They do not want to reveal the muteness of Subha which thwart Subha's marriage.

A short story by Rabindranath Tagore, *Subha*, poignantly narrates the forced marriage of a young girl, Subha, whose inability to speak symbolizes the voicelessness of women in patriarchal societies. Her life is grounded in societal expectations and familial pressures because she was born mute, leading her to marry a man who doesn't understand or appreciate her. Critiquing this situation, he narrates his views on the institution of forced marriages that are bereft of their autonomy as performed purely out of patriarchal whims.

The story begins by portraying Subha as a meek and introverted character who takes refuge in nature and eventually forms a silent bond with her surroundings. However, her parents see her muteness as a burden when they don't want to fulfill their social obligations, and subsequently find a way to marry her off to get out of those obligations. The forced union of Subha reflects the dehumanizing results of treating women like merchandise, loved only for their usages. Her silent suffering underscores the emotional trauma put forth by a system that prioritizes honor, family, over individual well-being.

Tagore uses symbolism, such as Subha's relationship with nature, to describe her isolation and vulnerability. In contrast to her marital life's constraints, the imagery of the river and birds symbolizes a yearning for freedom and self-expression. This tragic tone for the story describes the devastating consequences of forced marriages on women's emotional and psychological well-being.

Table 4.1 key themes and impacts of forced marriage as depicted in Subha

Aspect	Details
Protagonist	Subha, a mute young girl marginalized by her family and society.
Cause of Marriage	Familial pressure to marry her off due to her perceived lack of value.
Symbolism	Nature as a representation of Subha's inner freedom and suppressed voice.
Emotional Impact	Isolation, loss of identity, and emotional trauma.
Critique	Highlights societal norms that prioritize family honor over women's autonomy.

4.2 Emotional trauma:

"Mother, don't let me go" Tagore, 2000, p. 109). Subha is not agreeing for this marriage and pleading to her parents

but no one hear her and decide to married her without her consent.

After Subha forced marriage she is weeping of parting from her parents there her mother reprimands her "[h]er mother scolding her repeatedly lest the girl weeping leave her eyes swollen and spoil her looks, but the tear not heed her scolding". Tagore, 2000, p. 109). Tagore highlights the emotional distress cause by forced marriage in her mother anxious about her physical appearance rather than her emotion that affect her marriage. When the groom family knows that the Subha was dumb but did not realize that this was not her fault. She had not deceived anyone. She resists for this marriage but no one hear her and by force her parents arranged a factitious marriage and later Subha was victim of this marriage when her husband leave her and did another marriage for himself.

4.3 Forced Marriage in The Wife's Letter

"When a distant uncle of yours came with your friend Nirad to our house to inspect the prospective bride, I was twelve years old" (Tagore, 2000, p.205). Tagore depicts a forced marriage scenario in which a 12-year-old girl is examined as a "prospective bride." According to de Beauvoir (1952) this behavior is acting with patriarchal norms that view women as commodities to be traded rather than free agents. "[n]or need you search for a bride ... it was priced at whatever the buyer offered" (Tagore, 2000, p.207). This statement clearly depicts marriage as a business deal that treats women like commodities. According to Lerner (1986) that patriarchal societies use customs and tradition such as forced marriage to institutionalize the subjugation of women. The text that was mentioned support this idea "Priced at whatever the buyer offered" suggests that marriage is a market in which women are traded as goods and commodities rather than free individual. The bride's lack of autonomy in choosing her partner serves as an example of how patriarchal systems deprive women of agency over their own bodies and destinies.

4.4 Emotional trauma

The protagonist Mrinal face deep emotional trauma after her forced marriage she lost her identity and autonomy, neglect and loneliness, oppression and psychological abuse, empathy and additional trauma.

1) Loss of identity and autonomy:

In male dominated society when Mrinal married without her consent she lost her identity and autonomy. "[y]ou and your family never liked, never even recognized, whatever in me exceeded the second daughter in law of your house household. In fifteen year you discovered that I am a poet" (Tagore, 2000, p.207-8). These lines depicts the Mrinal

life after her marriage According to Beauvoir, women in patriarchal cultures are denied individual identity and are viewed as the "Other," existing solely in relation to males.

Because forced marriage deprives women of their autonomy, unacknowledged is Mrinal's identity as a poet and her creative self, demonstrating how patriarchal marriage stifles women's creative and intellectual potential.

2) Neglect and loneliness:

"The whole sky wept to the strains of flute-music as I entered your house" (Tagore, 2000, p.207).

Tagore depicts that when Mrinal enter her husband house she feel deep loneliness and melancholy. Marriage is a joyous union but Mrinal feel internal experience of isolation and neglect because of her forced marriage. "[w]hen self-respect dwindles, neglect does not seem unjust; for this reason, it causes no suffering" (Tagore, 2000, p.208). Mrinal state that when women must suffer keep them in as neglect in forced marriage,

Women are often subjected to emotional trauma, force and lack of agency, which can result in diminished self-respect and neglect. Beauvoir (1952) argues that when emotional trauma causes self respect to decline, neglect is seen as justified, making suffering seem acceptable.

3) Oppression and psychological abuse:

"Your family have abused me daily as an over clever female" (Tagore, 2000, p.208). Tagore depicts the situation of women in a patriarchal society where women are abused because of their cleverness. So Mrinal write to her husband that I always suffered at the hands of your family because of over clever. According to Hooks (1981) misogyny leads man to violence and abuse against women. "[w]hatever the condition in which you kept me, it never occurred to me that there was any suffering involved" (Tagore, 2000, p.208). Tagore depicts the oppression of Mrinal; she states that life had no true meaning for me I have no fear of death because who have experience love and care have fear of death it show the oppression and condition of Mrinal in which she kept by her husband and his family.

4) Empathy and additional trauma:

Mrinal empathy for Bindu faces her with more emotional trauma like. "[m]y heart burst with pity for Bindu, but I could not contain my shame for you" (Tagore, 2000, p.215). Tagore explore emotional trauma of Mrinal after her forced marriage which she face for Bindu, Bindu is a victim of forced marriage and she raise voice for her but her husband family does not accept her and at the end she leave her husband house and said. "[b]ut I will never again return to your house at number 27, Makhan Baral Lane. I

have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it.

In *The Wife's Letter* (Streer Patra), Tagore portrays a very strong condemnation of forced marriage by the epistolary narrative of Mrinal, who defies all societal norms to regain her lost freedom. While Subha loses her voice to her oppressors, Mrinal writes a letter that questions the dominant oppressive norms controlling her life and her marriage. It explores the psychological and emotional burden of being married against one's will, underlining the issues of consent and self-determination.

Mrinal, educated and eloquent, was married into a family that could hardly stand individualism. The husband and his parents consider her subordinate; they bound her with stringent expectations and refused her individual freedom. At this point in the story, the pivotal character, Mrinal, makes a new friend-Bindu-a young girl whom a forced marriage has condemned to tragic death. The fate of Bindu leads to the awakening of Mrinal, compelling her to discard the patriarchal values that sustain this injustice.

Tagore portrays Mrinal as strong and replete with introspection to stand apart from the literal and clichéd portrayal of passive women victimized against their will. In her letter, Mrinal claims her right to freedom and refuses to act as a bystander in the prevailing system that dehumanizes women. Her leaving her husband's house symbolizes defiance of societal norms and self-liberation.

Table 4.2 key themes and impacts of forced marriage as depicted in *The Wife's Letter*

Aspect	Details
Protagonist	Mrinal, an educated woman who resists patriarchal oppression.
Cause of Marriage	Social expectations and familial arrangements devoid of consent.
Catalyst	Bindu's tragic fate highlights the consequences of forced marriage.
Emotional Impact	Loss of identity, emotional repression, and eventual empowerment.
Critique	Challenges patriarchal norms and advocates for women's autonomy.

4.5 Emotional Trauma and Gender Roles

Forged marriages, as seen in Tagore's *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*, cause deep emotional scarring in women, reinforcing patriarchal gender roles. Both stories demonstrate how patriarchal norms devalue women, forcing them into lives of emotional repression and social marginalization. The characters of Subha and Mrinal are a reflection of the psychological damage of forced unions,

highlighting the interplay between gender, power, and emotional well-being Tagore (2000),

In *Subha*, the silencing of the women's voices is represented through the protagonist's muteness, while her forced marriage exacerbates her isolation and deprivations of meaningful connections and a sense of identity. Her emotional trauma is reflected in her withdrawal from the world as she experiences the dehumanizing effects of treating women as commodities.

On the other hand, Mrinal's account in *The Wife's Letter* represents the emotional victimization of forced marriage through a bolder perspective. Her repressed and lost experiences are doubled by the sad fate of Bindu, where her death illustrates the deadly aftermath of depriving women of control. Mrinal's final act of resistance against the patriarchal order shows a refusal of the emotional and psychological burdens enforced on women.

Table 4.3 Emotional trauma and gender roles as portrayed in the two stories

Aspect	Subha	The Wife's Letter
Protagonist	Subha, a mute girl silenced by society.	Mrinal, an educated woman asserting agency.
Emotional Impact	Isolation, loss of identity, and despair.	Repression, grief, and eventual empowerment.
Representation	Silencing of women's voices.	Assertion of women's autonomy.
Critique	Dehumanization through forced marriage.	Rejection of patriarchal oppression.

4.4 A Feminist Critique of Consent and Autonomy

Consent and autonomy therefore are central tenets of much feminist critique, and the absence thereof in forced marriage is starkly set out in two of Tagore's works: *Subha* and *The Wife's Letter*. Both stories indicate how patriarchal societies give value to family prestige and social respect over women's rights, letting them become mere passive partners in their very own lives.

In *Subha*, the protagonist's consent is denied when her parents get her married against her silence. This silence has become a metaphor for societal silencing of women in the name of respectability. The same is a reflection of broader societal critique; denial of agency to women is discussed here.

This contrasts the dignity and receptiveness born out of the right of consent with the hurt that denies this right, specifically in emotions and psychology matters.

In The Wife's Letter, the story of Mrinal shifts the focus of the plot towards autonomy wherein she tries to retrieve herself from her oppressive marital relationship. Leaving her husband is a valiant attempt at self-determination that would challenge a woman's commitment to sacrifice all for her man. The author, through this plot of Mrinal on her way from repression to emancipation, has effectively voiced a critique against patriarchal values that infringe on women's autonomy.

Table 4.4 Compares the portrayal of consent and autonomy in the two stories

Aspect	Subha	The Wife's Letter
Consent	Absent; marriage arranged by parents.	Absent; societal expectations dominate.
Autonomy	Denied; Subha has no agency in her life.	Asserted; Mrinal reclaims her identity.
Critique	Highlights the harm of silencing women.	Advocates for women's self-determination.
Resolution	Tragic; Subha's silence persists.	Liberating; Mrinal chooses freedom.

4.5 Comparison of the Two Stories

Tagore's Subha and The Wife's Letter are complementary in the way the themes of forced marriages, emotional shock, and womanly roles surface. Both appear to be anti-patriarchal in nature, and yet they go differently in presenting women's free will and culmination. Together, they provide a nuanced exploration of what systemic oppression makes women face.

While silence in Subha epitomizes the silencing of women in general, and to that extent is an affirmation of it against the compulsion of forced marriages, the tragic ending highlights how patriarchal domination has taken a grip such that it barely leaves space for resistance or even hope. On the other hand, The Wife's Letter is a stronger story of rebelling against society by Mrinal as a powerful statement of freedom. The story ends with the empowerment of the theme that questions traditional views of women and advocates self-liberation.

Table 4.5: Main similarities and differences between the two stories

Aspect	Subha	The Wife's Letter
Theme	Forced marriage and silencing of women.	Forced marriage and assertion of autonomy.
Protagonist	Subha, a mute and passive character.	Mrinal, an articulate and assertive woman.
Narrative Tone	Tragic and reflective.	Empowering and rebellious.
Resolution	Subha remains silenced and oppressed.	Mrinal reclaims her freedom and identity.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

It approached the subject of forced marriage through the feminist lens of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories Subha and The Wife's Letter. The critical analysis suggests that these stories offer patriarchal criticism in which the heroine, left without her self-will, undergoes emotional and psychological torture. Subha depicts the enforced marriages when the society silences the women. She makes the silent character's silence systemic suppression of her voice. In this context, it has a tragic storyline as it narrates how the women are dehumanized by forced unions Pridmore and Walter (2013).

On the contrary, The Wife's Letter is a more aggressive narrative, where Mrinal's decision to leave her husband makes it a bold rejection of patriarchal oppression. Her letter calls for a reconsideration of women's roles in marital relationships and speaks for consent and self-determination. The research also shows how Tagore employed literary devices like symbolism and epistolary narration to criticize social norms and strengthen the voices of women.

The two stories together emphasize how the force of marriage dominates women's lives from estrangement to loss of self-control. It highlights the claims of self-esteem and freedom as basic rights, thus making the challenge of changing values in the society to place dignity and freedom of women first.

5.2 Implications for Literature and Society

The findings of this study will be of immense interest to literature, as well as society at large. This implies that the literary critiques, of scope, while keeping the core of feminism can actually add to the understanding through

novel insights to the critique against patriarchy, a vital characteristic as presented in Tagore. Accordingly, there adds flavor to the discourse concerned with the dynamics between the genders, hence women's representation within South Asian literatures through exploring forced marriages, as well.

In regard to the modern issue of social inequalities and female rights, in reference to Rabindranath Tagore's writing, the above analysis throws adequate light on a great social question like forced marriage is still dominant around the globe because cultural or societal practices are that powerful by which people start to follow the traditional way and abandon individualistic freedom. The emotional and psychological trauma the woman faces in forced unions, presented in the stories of Tagore, suggests that societal reforms are needed for equality and justice Villacampa 2020.

Tagore's stories also serve as a call to action against oppressive practices and towards women's empowerment. By giving women, a voice and focusing on their agency, his works inspire readers to challenge patriarchal systems and build a more just society. Findings of the study underscore the transformative potential of literature as a medium for social critique and change.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies might further elaborate the topic of the forced marriage and its place in literary social and cultural complexities. For instance, a comparative study between Tagore's work and other works of South Asian writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa or Khaled Hosseini would shed light on the representation of the practice of forced marriage and gender forces in varied cultural contexts Akram (2024).

Another line of research is the reception of Tagore's feminist themes in the contemporary world. One can look into how contemporary readers understand his critique of forced marriage and whether his works influence the current debates on gender equality and women's rights.

Possibly "interdisciplinary analyses based on literary studies that integrate sociological or psychological perspectives may be necessary to fully understand how forced marriage affects the emotional and psychological lives of individuals. It may also consider ways in which education and legal reforms could correct systemic issues revealed through the Tagore narratives identified by Nasution et al. (2022)."

Lastly, translation of feminist writings of Tagore for the readers across the world with a focus on its applicability to contemporary discussions regarding human rights and social justice will definitely be dedicated in the future.

Researchers will continue to read Tagore's works as a part of ongoing discussions regarding gender equality and how transformative literature can be.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmad, Z. & Ahmad, A., 2023. Socio-Cultural and Economic Consequences of Forced Marriages: A Case Study of District Swabi Tehsil Razzar. *CARC Research in Social Sciences*, 2(1), pp.12-17.
- [2] Ahmed, N., Fedosov, A. & Huang, E.M., 2024, October. 'Women just have to accept it when the man wants it': An Investigation of the Practice of Forced Marriage and the Potential for Design Interventions. In *Proceedings of the 13th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 1-14).
- [3] Akram, A., 2024. Patriarchy, Gender-based Violence and Construction of Womanhood: A Feminist-Psychoanalytical Study of Elif Shafaq's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 44(2), pp.377-386.
- [4] Beauvoir, S.D., 1952. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- [5] Butler, J., 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- [6] Donnelly, P.G., 2019. *Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups*. Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University).
- [7] Efrilia, E. & Setiawan, D.B., 2020. Khaled Hosseini's World View on Afghanistan Society Depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Linguistics and Literature Journal*, 1(2), pp.34-39.
- [8] Ford, J.V., Shah, A., Reiss, F. & Hirsch, J.S., 2025. Missing pieces: A critical review of research on forced marriage and a call for family scientists to study forced marriage. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*.
- [9] Gill, A.K. & Anitha, S., 2011. Introduction: Framing forced marriage as a form of violence against women. *Forced Marriage: Introducing a Social Justice and Human Rights Perspective*, pp.1-22.
- [10] Honkala, N., 2022. "An Unhappy Interlude": Trivialisation and Privatisation of Forced Marriage in Asylum-Seeker Women's Cases in the UK. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 41(3), pp.472-497.
- [11] Jacobs, R.P., 2022. Married by the revolution: Forced marriage as a strategy of control in Khmer Rouge Cambodia. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24(3), pp.357-379.
- [12] Janjua, M.M. & Kamal, A., 2024. Understanding the Role of Patriarchy in Perpetuating Child Marriages in Pakistan: A Qualitative Exploration. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(4), pp.117-131.
- [13] Kakar, S., 2020. Child/forced/servile marriages $\rightleftharpoons$ Human trafficking. In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Human Trafficking*, pp.503-519.
- [14] McCabe, H. & Eglen, L., 2022. "I Bought You. You Are My Wife": "Modern Slavery" and Forced Marriage. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, pp.1-24.

- [15] Millett, K., 2016. *Sexual Politics*. Columbia University Press.
- [16] Molnár, S., 2021. The Fundamental Right of Marriage in the Constitutions of European Countries. *Central European Journal of Comparative Law*, 2(2), pp.181-196.
- [17] Nasution, M.I., Adly, M.A. & Nurcahaya, N., 2022. The Role of the Namora Natoras Mandailing Traditional Institutions in Forced Marriage in Affairs Cases. *Jurnal Mahkamah: Kajian Ilmu Hukum dan Hukum Islam*, 7(1), pp.43-54.
- [18] Pridmore, S. & Walter, G., 2013. Suicide and Forced Marriage. *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences: MJMS*, 20(2), pp.47.
- [19] Quek, K., 2018. *Marriage Trafficking: Women in Forced Wedlock*. Routledge.
- [20] Safdar, A., Abbas, S. & ul Zafar, N., 2022. Tracing the Voices of the Oppressed: A Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel *The Pakistani Bride*. *Journal of Social Sciences Advancement*, 3(3), pp.186-192.
- [21] Tagore, R., 2000. *Selected Short Stories* (S. Chaudhuri, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [22] Villacampa, C., 2020. Forced Marriage as a Lived Experience: Victims' Voices. *International Review of Victimology*, 26(3), pp.344-367
- [23] Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.
- [24] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- [25] Chodorow, N. (1989). *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [26] Goldman, E. (1917). *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Mother Earth Publishing.
- [27] Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [28] Mernissi, F. (1991). *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- [29] Ahmed, L. (2014). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [30] Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [31] Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [32] King, M. L. Jr. (1963). *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Birmingham, AL: American Friends Service Committee.
- [33] Crenshaw, K. (1991). *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- [34] Amnesty International. (2015). *Choice and Consent: Forced Marriage in the Human Rights Framework*. London: Amnesty International Publications.
- [35] Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [36] Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (1948). United Nations General Assembly.
- [37] Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- [38] Ulrich, L. T. (1976). *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History*. Harvard University Press.
- [39] Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- [40] hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press..



Ritual Songs as Gendered Discourse: Exploring Women's Oral Traditions in Haryana

Anjali¹, Dr. Suchitra^{2*}

¹Department of English and Foreign Languages, Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

^{2*} English, Maharishi Dayanand University CPAS, Gurugram, India

Received: 17 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 15 Oct 2025; Accepted: 19 Oct 2025; Available online: 24 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *This paper explores the birth ritual songs of Haryanvi women as gendered discourse that reflects, reinforces, and at times resists patriarchal structures. Performed during childbirth and related ceremonies, these songs form an essential part of Haryana's oral tradition, transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and gender expectations across generations. The study foregrounds women's voices as they narrate anxieties, joys, and ambivalences associated with childbirth—particularly the preference for sons, the burden of reproduction, and the negotiation of a woman's social identity within kinship structures. Through feminist and folkloristic frameworks, the analysis reveals how birth ritual songs operate simultaneously as cultural affirmations of family continuity and as subtle critiques of gendered hierarchies. By situating these oral traditions within broader discussions of performance, gender, and cultural identity, the paper highlights the ways in which Haryanvi women use ritual song to articulate their lived experiences, preserve communal memory, and inscribe their voices into the social fabric. This study contributes to scholarship in folklore, gender studies, and cultural anthropology by demonstrating how seemingly ordinary birth ritual songs embody profound discourses of gender, power, and tradition.*



Keywords— *Birth ritual songs, Women's folksongs, Haryana folklore, Gender discourse, Ritual performance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Folklore constitutes the living memory of a community, sustaining its values, beliefs, and worldviews through oral traditions, rituals, and performances. In Haryana, a state situated in the northwestern region of India, folklore is inseparable from everyday life, particularly in agrarian and domestic contexts. Among its diverse forms—proverbs, tales, riddles, and songs—the ritual songs of women occupy a distinctive position. These songs, performed during life-cycle ceremonies and seasonal festivals, act as cultural texts through which women both affirm and negotiate their identities within patriarchal structures. One of the most significant genres within this tradition is the body of birth ritual songs, which are performed during childbirth and related ceremonies. Far from being merely celebratory, these songs articulate complex emotions of joy, anxiety, and

ambivalence that women experience in relation to reproduction, kinship, and gender expectations (Kumar 27).

In the cultural imagination of Haryana, childbirth is not only a biological event but also a deeply social and symbolic act. It ensures the continuity of lineage, the consolidation of kinship ties, and the fulfillment of women's socially ascribed roles as wives and mothers. The birth ritual songs sung by women during these moments encapsulate this layered significance: they celebrate fertility and renewal, while simultaneously reflecting the burdens and inequalities that accompany women's reproductive roles (Yadav and Shah 4). Notably, these songs often emphasize the preference for male children, thereby revealing entrenched patriarchal values that situate sons as heirs and daughters as dispensable. Yet within the very performance of these songs, women insert their voices, sometimes subtly

questioning these values through irony, lament, or collective solidarity (Saroha 12).

From a feminist perspective, birth ritual songs may be read as gendered discourse, a form of oral communication that both reflects and shapes women's cultural positioning. On the one hand, they mirror the patriarchal structures of society, reinforcing women's identities as bearers of lineage and subordinates within kinship hierarchies. On the other hand, they provide women with a rare discursive space in which they can share their experiences of childbirth, express ambivalence toward their roles, and preserve a collective memory that speaks to their lived realities. As feminist folklore scholars such as Margaret Mills argue, oral traditions often embody a dual function: while affirming dominant ideologies, they also encode subtle forms of critique, resistance, and female agency (Mills 54). The birth ritual songs of Haryana exemplify this duality.

The present paper seeks to examine birth ritual songs of Haryanvi women as gendered discourse, situating them at the intersection of folklore, ritual, and gender studies. By focusing exclusively on birth-related rituals, the study highlights how women's songs function as cultural texts that simultaneously celebrate, reinforce, and negotiate gender norms. The analysis draws upon feminist theory, ritual studies, and performance theory to explore the multiple layers of meaning embedded in these oral traditions. In doing so, it foregrounds women's voices—voices that are often excluded from written history but persist in the oral archive of the community (Narayan 249).

This study is significant for three reasons. First, it contributes to regional folklore studies by offering a close examination of Haryanvi women's ritual songs, a body of oral literature that remains underexplored in academic scholarship. Second, it enriches the field of gender studies by demonstrating how everyday cultural practices such as singing during childbirth reveal the social construction of gender roles and the negotiation of power within patriarchal contexts. Third, it engages with theoretical debates in folklore and feminist discourse, showing how ritual songs operate not only as cultural artifacts but also as dynamic sites of performance where gendered identities are reproduced and reimagined.

The scope of this paper is limited to birth ritual songs performed in rural Haryana, particularly those associated with childbirth ceremonies, cradle rituals, and related festivities. Through textual and performance analysis of selected songs (translated into English for accessibility), the paper will explore how themes of fertility, lineage, motherhood, and gender hierarchy are expressed in these oral traditions. By examining both the content and the context of performance, the paper argues that birth ritual

songs represent a crucial form of women's cultural expression—one that illuminates the complexities of gender, tradition, and agency in Haryanvi society.

In what follows, the paper will first outline the theoretical framework that guides the analysis, drawing upon feminist folklore studies and ritual theory. It will then situate birth ritual songs within the broader cultural context of Haryana, before proceeding to an in-depth exploration of their gendered themes. Finally, through close readings of selected song-texts and performance practices, the study will demonstrate how these songs function as a discourse that is simultaneously complicit with and critical of patriarchal structures.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Folklore Studies and Oral Traditions

Folklore, as a discipline, has long been concerned with the study of oral traditions, ritual practices, and cultural memory. Early anthropologists such as William Bascom emphasized the functional aspects of folklore in maintaining social cohesion, while Alan Dundes highlighted folklore as a symbolic system encoding collective values. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* expanded this field by showing how oral performance is both an art and a medium for transmitting knowledge, arguing that oral traditions should be treated as literature in their own right (Finnegan 21).

The study of women's oral traditions, however, has historically been marginalized. As Linda Dégh observed, the field often privileged male-centered heroic epics and public performances, overlooking women's domestic and ritual songs (Dégh 89). This bias reflects the patriarchal underpinnings of early folklore studies, where women's voices were dismissed as “minor” or “private” cultural expressions. Feminist interventions in folklore since the late twentieth century have sought to correct this imbalance by foregrounding women's oral traditions as critical sites of cultural production.

2.2 Feminist Folklore and Gendered Voices

Feminist folklore scholarship has significantly reshaped how women's oral traditions are studied. Margaret Mills, in *Rhetoric and Politics in Afghan Women's Folklore*, demonstrated that women's songs in Afghanistan were not mere repetitions of tradition but strategic, multi-voiced performances that encoded both conformity and resistance (Mills 54). She coined the idea of oral traditions as “double-voiced discourse,” meaning they reproduce dominant ideologies while simultaneously preserving women's perspectives and critiques.

Kirin Narayan further advanced this approach in *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, where she showed how women in India used folk narratives to negotiate their positions within religious and cultural hierarchies (Narayan 245). Narayan's work underscored the paradox of women's oral traditions: while women are central to cultural continuity, they often remain marginal in social power. Oral traditions thus become both a tool of transmission and a medium for subtle resistance.

Another key contribution is by A.K. Ramanujan, who examined South Asian folktales and ballads, highlighting the gendered nature of storytelling. He argued that women's narratives often introduce themes of suffering, endurance, and irony absent in male-centered texts (Ramanujan 38). Similarly, scholars like Janet McCloud and Kay Turner have highlighted the ritual, performative, and symbolic dimensions of women's songs, stressing their role in shaping identity, memory, and solidarity.

This body of scholarship provides the foundation for reading Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs as gendered discourse, they affirm patriarchal hierarchies (through son preference and lineage), while also preserving the lived realities of women's pain, resilience, and irony.

2.3 Ritual Theory and Performance Studies

To situate birth songs within their cultural context, it is crucial to draw on ritual theory. Emile Durkheim's concept of ritual as "sacred action" stressed its collective dimension in reaffirming social values. Victor Turner later expanded this understanding by analyzing ritual as "social drama," where tensions are enacted, negotiated, and resolved (Turner 20). Turner also emphasized the importance of symbols in rituals, seeing them as condensations of social meaning.

Stanley Tambiah conceptualized ritual as a "system of symbolic communication," performed through patterned actions, words, and objects (Tambiah 119). His performative approach resonates strongly with women's ritual songs, where repetition, stereotyping, and symbolic imagery constitute both form and meaning.

In the context of Haryana, women's birth ritual songs exemplify what Turner calls *communitas*: a sense of solidarity and shared experience. Women gather to perform these songs during childbirth, creating a collective space where anxieties, joys, and grievances are voiced. At the same time, rituals reinforce structural hierarchies, such as patriarchy and son preference. Reading these songs through ritual theory reveals their dual function: to stabilize cultural norms while allowing spaces of expression for women.

2.4 Women's Folksongs in South Asia

Across South Asia, women's folksongs form a significant but often neglected domain of oral culture. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, *sohar* songs celebrate childbirth, echoing the Haryanvi tradition but with regional variations. These songs, as documented by Veena Das, often intertwine domestic concerns with broader cosmological themes, situating childbirth within both family and divine order. In Rajasthan, *banna-banni* songs sung at weddings often include satirical commentaries on in-laws, offering women spaces of coded resistance (Narayan 248).

In Bengal, lullabies (*lori*) and ritual songs reflect maternal devotion while subtly critiquing patriarchal control. Scholars like Susan Wadley have noted that women's ritual songs across North India provide "the only legitimate space for voicing grievances" (Wadley 87). The patterns across regions suggest that Haryanvi songs are part of a broader South Asian oral tradition where women negotiate gender roles through ritual performance.

2.5 Folklore of Haryana: Existing Research

Haryana's folklore has attracted scholarly attention, though much of it has been descriptive rather than analytical. Scholars such as Prem Chowdhry and Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj have noted that Haryana's oral traditions reflect its agrarian economy, patriarchal kinship system, and caste hierarchies. Songs are integral to life-cycle rituals—birth, marriage, and death—as well as seasonal festivals like Teej and Holi.

Specific studies on women's songs include Devender Kumar's analysis of *Jatanā*, a peasant woman's ballad, which he interprets as a site of resistance against patriarchal oppression (Kumar 33). Rakesh Bharti Yadav and Rohan Shah, in their study of Southern Haryana, argue that women's songs act as cultural connectors, strengthening social bonds and reinforcing traditions (Yadav and Shah 5).

Shweta Saroha's work is especially significant for this study. Her ecofeminist reading of Haryanvi women's songs emphasizes how women's oral traditions link ecological consciousness with gendered oppression (Saroha 12). While Saroha provides a critical framework for ecofeminism, her analysis is not specifically focused on birth ritual songs as gendered discourse. This gap offers space for the present study.

2.6 Birth Ritual Songs: *Sohar*, *Ojna*, and Beyond

Birth ritual songs (*sohar*, *ojna*, *jachcha geet*, *kua pujan songs*) are a key genre in Haryanvi folklore. *Sohar* songs celebrate the birth of a son, while *Ojna* songs capture the desires of pregnant women. *Jachcha Geet* describe the pain and resilience of women in childbirth, and *kua pujan* songs connect maternal recovery with ecological rituals of water

and fertility. Lullabies (*lori*) complete this cycle by nurturing the infant.

While these songs have been documented ethnographically, they have rarely been analyzed through the lens of gender discourse. Existing documentation often treats them as cultural curiosities rather than as critical texts encoding patriarchy and resistance. For example, descriptions note that the birth of a daughter is accompanied by silence or lament, yet the implications of this practice for women's cultural positioning remain underexplored.

III. RESEARCH GAP AND CONTRIBUTION

Although scholars have documented the richness of Haryanvi folklore, including ritual songs associated with life-cycle ceremonies, most existing research has been descriptive in nature, focusing on cataloguing songs rather than analyzing their deeper cultural and gendered meanings. Works such as those by Yadav and Shah emphasize the role of women's songs in reinforcing cultural bonds, while Saroha highlights their ecofeminist dimensions, and Kumar examines resistance in select ballads. However, these studies either adopt a broad cultural approach or focus on ecological and social aspects, leaving unexplored the specific question of how birth ritual songs operate as gendered discourse. While feminist folklore theory internationally (Mills, Narayan, Finnegan) has demonstrated that women's oral traditions often embody "double-voiced" discourses of compliance and resistance, this framework has rarely been applied to the context of Haryana. The absence of a critical, gender-focused study on *Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, and *lullabies* creates a clear research gap. Addressing this lacuna, the present study offers a focused analysis of Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs, examining them as cultural texts that reproduce patriarchal hierarchies while simultaneously preserving women's lived experiences, solidarity, and subtle acts of resistance.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To critically examine the birth ritual songs of Haryanvi women (*Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, *lullabies*, *Kua Pujan songs*) as cultural texts that reflect and reproduce gender hierarchies in a patriarchal society.
2. To analyze these songs through the lens of feminist folklore theory and gendered discourse, identifying how women's voices simultaneously affirm tradition and encode subtle forms of resistance, irony, and solidarity.
3. To situate Haryanvi birth ritual songs within the broader South Asian oral tradition while highlighting

their unique role in preserving women's lived experiences, collective memory, and cultural identity.

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs (*Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, *lullabies*, *Kua Pujan songs*) reflect and reinforce patriarchal values, particularly concerning son preference and daughter marginalization?
2. In what ways do these songs function as gendered discourse, providing women with a cultural space to articulate their desires, anxieties, suffering, and resistance within ritual contexts?
3. How can feminist folklore theory and performance studies help interpret the double-voiced nature of these songs, where compliance with tradition coexists with subtle critique and solidarity?
4. What role do birth ritual songs play in preserving women's collective memory and cultural identity in Haryana, and how do they compare with similar oral traditions across South Asia?

VI. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, feminist folkloristic approach to examine Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs (*Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, *lullabies*, *Kua Pujan songs*) as gendered discourse. Primary data was drawn from oral performances recorded during ritual occasions, interviews with elderly women, and community archives, with transcription and translation undertaken carefully to preserve idiomatic and symbolic meanings. Analytical methods combined feminist folklore theory, particularly Mills's concept of "double-voiced discourse," to identify how songs simultaneously affirm patriarchal values and encode women's perspectives, with gendered discourse analysis, informed by Foucault's notion of discourse and Butler's theory of performativity, to read songs as ritualized acts that construct and contest gender roles. Ethical sensitivity was maintained through informed participation, respect for anonymity, and reflexive awareness of researcher positionality. While challenges of orality, translation, and contextual absence persist, these were approached as integral to the dynamic and living character of folklore, positioning the songs not merely as cultural artifacts but as active sites of women's voices, memory, and resistance.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study draws upon rich oral data from select regions of rural Haryana, its scope remains limited by the availability of recorded performances and the challenges of

translation. The interpretive nature of feminist folkloristic analysis also entails a degree of subjectivity, shaped by researcher positionality and linguistic mediation. Future research could incorporate a comparative ethnographic approach involving diverse districts, generational perspectives, and digital transformations of ritual songs in contemporary media. Expanding this inquiry to include performative variations across caste and regional boundaries would further deepen understanding of how gendered discourse evolves within Haryana's living folklore.

VIII. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study interprets Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs through the twin lenses of feminist folklore studies and gendered discourse theory. This combination offers a focused approach: feminist folklore scholarship provides tools for understanding women's oral traditions as multi-layered, while discourse theory helps explain how these songs both construct and contest gender roles.

8.1 Feminist Folklore Studies: Women's Songs as Double-Voiced Discourse

For much of its history, folklore studies privileged male-centered epics, legends, and heroic tales, while the songs and narratives of women were marginalized or dismissed as trivial. As Linda Dégh argued, this reflected an academic bias that valued public, male-dominated genres over domestic and ritual songs often associated with women (Dégh 92). Feminist interventions since the late twentieth century have corrected this imbalance by bringing women's oral traditions to the forefront of scholarly analysis.

Margaret Mills's *Rhetoric and Politics in Afghan Women's Folklore* is foundational here. Mills conceptualizes women's folklore as a form of "double-voiced discourse": oral texts that reproduce dominant ideologies while simultaneously encoding women's own perspectives and subtle critiques (Mills 54). In her study, women's songs both affirm patriarchal hierarchies and offer veiled expressions of dissent, thereby functioning as layered cultural documents.

This insight is crucial for Haryanvi birth ritual songs. On the surface, Sohar Geet celebrate the birth of sons as sources of light, lineage, and prosperity, reproducing patriarchal preferences. Yet laments for daughters, Ojna Geet about pregnancy cravings, and lullabies that embed tenderness within ecological metaphors reveal women's own experiences of desire, pain, and care. Even songs of threat, which dramatize violence against women for bearing daughters, preserve these realities in cultural memory. Following Mills, such songs can be read as double-voiced:

both affirmations of patriarchy and testimonies of women's lived realities.

Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* deepens this perspective by showing how Indian women use oral narratives to negotiate their roles within family and religion. Narayan highlights the paradox that women are central to cultural continuity but peripheral in social authority (Narayan 246). This paradox is sharply visible in Haryana, where women sustain rituals through song but have little say in social or familial decisions. Their songs, therefore, become spaces where they negotiate their marginality and preserve their experiences.

A.K. Ramanujan's work on South Asian folktales also underscores that women's narratives often introduce irony, suffering, and endurance absent from male-centered traditions (Ramanujan 41). His observations support the idea that Haryanvi birth ritual songs, though seemingly celebratory, are repositories of women's realities—including sorrow, constraint, and resilience.

Taken together, feminist folklore studies provide a theoretical basis for treating Haryanvi birth ritual songs as multi-layered texts: they are ritual performances that sustain patriarchy while simultaneously carrying women's voices, critiques, and solidarity.

8.2 Gendered Discourse Theory: Constructing and Contesting Roles

While feminist folklore provides interpretive tools, discourse theory helps explain the mechanisms by which songs construct and contest gender. Michel Foucault defined discourse as the system of knowledge and practices through which power operates and identities are produced. Applied here, ritual songs are not simply reflections of social life but active discourses that construct what it means to be a mother, daughter, or wife in Haryana.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity extends this insight by arguing that gender is not an innate essence but the effect of repeated acts, gestures, and performances (Butler 33). Songs sung during childbirth rituals are precisely such repeated acts. Every performance of a Sohar or Ojna reiterates cultural expectations: women are celebrated for producing sons, stigmatized for bearing daughters, and bound to maternal and domestic roles. Through repetition, these performances naturalize gender roles as inevitable.

Yet, as Butler emphasizes, repetition also opens space for subversion. A lament for a daughter, for example, disrupts the celebratory script of ritual, making visible the grief and inequality that patriarchy seeks to silence. Similarly, women's ironic exaggerations in praising sons may encode subtle critique. Thus, birth ritual songs demonstrate the

ambivalence of gendered discourse: they reproduce patriarchal values but also destabilize them by voicing experiences of pain, anxiety, and tenderness that exceed patriarchal scripts.

By combining Foucault's understanding of discourse as power/knowledge with Butler's theory of performativity, this study reads Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs as performative acts that both construct and contest gender roles.

Feminist folklore studies and gendered discourse theory together provide a coherent framework for analyzing Haryanvi birth ritual songs. From feminist folklore, the study borrows the idea of songs as double-voiced discourse, affirming patriarchy while preserving women's perspectives. From discourse theory, it takes the insight that songs are performative practices through which gender roles are both reproduced and destabilized. This combined lens allows for a nuanced reading of *Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, *lullabies*, and *Kua Pujan songs* as cultural texts where women's voices emerge in complex, layered, and often ambivalent ways.

IX. DISCUSSION

Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs function as layered cultural texts where patriarchy and women's agency intersect. Read through feminist folklore's concept of double-voiced discourse, they reveal how women simultaneously affirm dominant ideologies and encode their own perspectives, while discourse theory highlights how these songs performatively construct and contest gender roles.

Sohar Geet, sung at the birth of sons, celebrate lineage, prosperity, and divine blessing, naturalizing son preference and patriarchal continuity. Yet, their exaggerated praise often carries ironic undertones, allowing women to comment indirectly on the burden such hierarchies impose. Similarly, *Ojna Geet*—songs of pregnancy cravings—shift attention from the patriarchal glorification of heirs to women's embodied realities of desire, pain, and vulnerability, offering glimpses of female subjectivity within ritual spaces.

The stark absence of celebratory songs for daughters underscores how silence itself becomes a discourse of negation, producing the girl child as unwanted. Where laments are voiced, they register grief and stigma but also preserve women's critique through irony and satire, refusing to erase the injustice of son preference. Lullabies, by contrast, open an intimate space where mothers articulate tenderness and anxiety, often through ecological metaphors. These private songs complicate the celebratory public

discourse of lineage, foregrounding maternal voice and vulnerability. Finally, *Kua Pujan* songs reintegrate mother and child into community life by linking fertility to wells and water, affirming gendered roles while creating a collective female solidarity (*communitas*) around childbirth.

Taken together, these genres demonstrate that Haryanvi birth ritual songs are not passive survivals of tradition but dynamic sites of discourse. They reproduce patriarchal hierarchies of lineage and gender while also providing cultural space for women's voices, experiences, and subtle forms of resistance. In this ambivalent space—between celebration and lament, affirmation and critique—women's oral traditions emerge as powerful archives of cultural memory and gendered negotiation.

X. CASE STUDIES: BIRTH RITUAL SONGS OF HARYANA AS GENDERED DISCOURSE

Birth rituals form the first rite (*samskara*) of human life in the Haryanvi cultural imagination, and women's folksongs are inseparable from these ceremonies. Songs sung during pregnancy (*Ojna Geet*), childbirth (*Sohar Geet*), laments for daughters, threats, and post-birth rituals (*Kua Pujan*, lullabies) constitute a gendered archive through which women articulate their social realities. These songs are not neutral accompaniments; they are cultural texts that embody what feminist folklorist Margaret Mills terms the “double-voiced discourse” of women's oral traditions—simultaneously affirming patriarchal norms while creating spaces for female agency (Mills 54).

The following case studies demonstrate how Haryanvi birth ritual songs operate as gendered discourse, where women's voices both reproduce and resist patriarchal values.

10.1. Ojna Geet: Gendered Expectations during Pregnancy

“मंगवाद्यो काबुल की मोसमी जी
तलै ए पड़्योड़ी मोसमी मैं नहीं खाऊँ
ओ जी म्हारो खीर खाण्ड मन भाय...”

Translation:

Bring me the fruits from Kabul, O beloved,
Do not offer me the local ones.
Sweet and rare should be my food,
For I carry life within me.

Gender Analysis:

Ojna Geet reflect the expectant mother's cravings and desires during pregnancy. On the surface, these songs elevate the woman by indulging her wishes. Yet the indulgence is socially sanctioned not for her sake but for the

unborn child—especially if male. Thus, while women articulate desire, their voices remain tethered to reproductive expectations. The mother is celebrated primarily as the vessel of lineage continuity, aligning her worth with her capacity to bear sons (Narayan 249).

10.2 Sohar Geet: Celebration of Sons as Social Capital

“जिस दिन लाला तेरो जन्म हुयो थो, हुई ए सोरण की रात ।

एक ही दिवला घर में चास धर्या था, च्यारू कूट उजास ।

ताता-ताता हलवा तेरी अम्मा भी खावै, बाबल दरब लुटाय ।“

Translation:

With the birth of a son, the house is bright,
The lamps are lit across the courtyard,
Joy spreads in every direction.

Sweet halwa is offered to mother, father shows
joy.

Gender Analysis:

Sohar Geet exemplify the celebratory discourse surrounding the birth of a son. Sons are equated with inheritance, prosperity, and the family's future, while daughters are absent from this sphere of joy. By ritualizing such celebrations, women reproduce the patriarchal hierarchy that situates sons as cultural capital. Yet, as performance theory suggests, women singers may exaggerate their praise ironically, hinting at awareness of the imbalance (Turner 21). Thus, even in reinforcement, a subtle undercurrent of critique may be embedded.

10.3 Laments on Daughter's Birth: Silence and Stigma

“जिस दिन लाडो तेरो जन्म हुयो थो, हुई ए बजर की रात।

नो लख दीवला घर में चास धर्या था, फेर भी घोर अन्धेरा

गुड़ की सीरा तेरी अम्मा भी खावै, बाबल गहन उदास ।

Translation:

On the night my daughter was born,
Darkness filled the house.
No light even though nine lakhs lamp were were
lit, no sweets were shared,
mother is having jaggery food but father is upset
by heart.

Gender Analysis:

These laments articulate the stigma attached to a daughter's birth. The imagery of extinguished lamps and silence underscores how daughters are treated as burdens. For mothers, the absence of celebration translates into shame, even guilt, as if they themselves have failed. Yet by singing these laments, women preserve their sorrow within cultural memory, ensuring the discrimination itself is recorded. This

transforms silence into speech, turning private grief into communal expression (Saroha 14).

10.4 Songs of Threat: Patriarchal Violence in Oral Tradition

“जै गोरी थम धीयड़ी जणोगी, थारे काट ल्यांगे नाक अर कान।

कोये लाग्या नो दस मासियां, म्हारे जन्म लियो नन्दलाल ।

एक भली करी मेरे रामजी, म्हारे बच गये नाक अर कान।“

Translation:

If you give birth to a daughter, woman,
We shall cut off your nose and ears.
Only if you bring forth a son,
Will you be spared disgrace.

Gender Analysis:

These songs expose the violent pressures imposed on women to produce sons. The threat of mutilation dramatizes how women's bodily integrity is bound to patriarchal demands. While shocking, the preservation of such verses in oral tradition suggests that women themselves kept record of the violence they endured. As Mills notes, women's folklore often acts as a “hidden transcript” where suffering is collectively remembered (Mills 61). By singing such threats aloud, women transform fear into testimony.

10.5 Kua Pujan Songs: Ritual, Motherhood, and Social Belonging

“To the well we go with turmeric and song,
Offering gratitude for water's gift.
With every drop, life is sustained,
May mother and child thrive in its grace.”

Gender Analysis:

Post-birth rituals like *Kua Pujan* situate the new mother back into social life after seclusion. These songs symbolically mark her reintegration into household duties, such as fetching water. Gender is central here: the ritual affirms her identity as mother and caretaker, binding her once more to domestic and communal expectations. At the same time, these songs encode ecological awareness—revealing how women's reproductive rituals are inseparably tied to their roles as custodians of natural resources (Tambiah 120).

10.6 Lullabies: Gendered Care and Emotional Labor

“Sleep, my child, under the moon's gaze,
The stars will guard you through the night.
With mother's hand and nature's song,
May your dreams be sweet and light.”

Gender Analysis:

Lullabies highlight women's emotional labor in nurturing children. Through metaphors of moon, stars, and nature, mothers embed ecological and moral lessons. While these songs reinforce maternal roles, they also become spaces where women articulate tenderness, creativity, and personal connection to their children. This aspect of oral tradition reminds us that gender discourse is not only about subordination—it also preserves women's agency in shaping cultural and emotional worlds (Finnegan 81).

In conclusion, through *Ojna Geet*, *Sohar Geet*, *laments*, *threats*, *Kua Pujan songs*, and *lullabies*, Haryanvi birth ritual songs reveal how women's oral traditions function as gendered discourse. These songs reaffirm patriarchy by celebrating sons and stigmatizing daughters, dramatizing women's suffering, and normalizing violence. Yet they also encode resistance, empathy, and ecological consciousness. By voicing sorrow, desire, irony, and solidarity, women turn ritual songs into cultural memory—preserving their lived realities across generations. As feminist folklore theory emphasizes, women's oral traditions are “double-voiced”—at once complicit with and critical of dominant ideology (Mills 63). Birth ritual songs of Haryana exemplify this doubleness: they reproduce gender hierarchies yet simultaneously carve out a cultural space for women's experiences and voices to endure.

Thus, this study has examined Haryanvi women's birth ritual songs—*Sohar Geet*, *Ojna Geet*, *laments*, *lullabies*, and *Kua Pujan songs*—through the frameworks of feminist folklore and gendered discourse. The analysis demonstrates that these songs operate as double-voiced discourse: while they reproduce patriarchal hierarchies by privileging sons, stigmatizing daughters, and reinforcing maternal roles, they also preserve women's voices, anxieties, and subtle critiques. *Sohar Geet* naturalize son preference, yet irony hints at resistance; *Ojna Geet* foreground women's embodied experiences; *laments* register grief and marginalization; *lullabies* open intimate spaces for maternal tenderness and vulnerability; and *Kua Pujan* songs connect childbirth to ecological symbols and female solidarity.

By treating these songs not merely as folkloric survivals but as active cultural discourses, the study highlights their role in shaping and contesting gender norms in Haryana. They emerge as a living archive of women's experiences—simultaneously upholding cultural continuity and offering spaces for negotiation, critique, and resilience. The findings contribute to feminist folklore studies by foregrounding women's ritual voices in North India and to discourse theory by demonstrating how everyday performances sustain yet destabilize gender hierarchies.

XI. CONCLUSION

Thus, this study underscores the intricate relationship between gender, folklore, and performance in the cultural landscape of Haryana. By examining birth ritual songs as double-voiced discourse, it reveals how women's oral traditions serve as both instruments of patriarchal reinforcement and sites of subtle subversion. These songs transform ritual into narrative agency, allowing women to preserve collective memory, critique social inequities, and reaffirm cultural belonging. Beyond the regional scope, the findings contribute to broader feminist folklore scholarship by demonstrating how oral traditions across societies encode lived experiences of women, making folklore a critical archive for understanding gendered subjectivities, cultural resilience, and social transformation.

Future research may extend this work by comparing Haryanvi birth ritual songs with those of other South Asian regions, tracing intersections between gender, ecology, and ritual, and exploring the impact of modernization and media on oral traditions. Such inquiries will further enrich our understanding of folklore as a site where women's voices continue to shape cultural memory and identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Authors are thankful to the Maharshi Dayanand University Rohtak and CPAS for providing research facilities.

FUNDING

No funding was received for accomplishing the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that we have no conflict of interest

REFERENCES

- [1] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- [2] Dégh, Linda. *Folktales and Society: Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community*. Indiana UP, 1969.
- [3] Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Open Book Publishers, 2012.
- [4] Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, 2002.
- [5] Kumar, Devender. “Jatanā: A Peasant Woman's Ballad from Haryana in North India.” *Folklore*, vol. 128, no. 1, 2017, pp. 27–44. Taylor & Francis Online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2016.1224151>.
- [6] Mills, Margaret A. *Rhetoric and Politics in Afghan Women's Folklore*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

- [7] Narayan, Kirin. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
- [8] Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India*. Pantheon, 1991.
- [9] Saroha, Shweta. "Ecofeminist Reading of Women's Folk Songs in Haryana: A Critical Study." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 10–15.
- [10] Tambiah, Stanley J. "A Performative Approach to Ritual." *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 65, 1979, pp. 113–69.
- [11] Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press, 1967.
- [12] Wadley, Susan. "Women's Ritual Songs in North India: Observations from the Field." *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1987, pp. 83–104.
- [13] Yadav, Rakesh Bharti, and Rohan Shah. "Women Folk Songs of Southern Haryana: as a Cultural Connect." *Emerging Global Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–7.



Anthropocentrism and Ethical Blindness in Keki N Daruwalla's Hawk and Wolf

Aradhana Panda

Department of English, Dibrugarh Hanumanbax Surajmall Kanoi College, Dibrugarh, Assam, India

Received: 21 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 17 Oct 2025; Accepted: 21 Oct 2025; Available online: 25 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Keki N Daruwalla is one of the very well known modern India poets writing in English whose poems gives a picture of plethora of ideas of ecological consciousness. Hawk and Wolf are his very striking poems which suggest how anthropocentric activities by man without any ethical considerations have continued to create a havoc in the ecological system. The excess of anthropocentric desires overlooked intrinsic value and worth of non human life. The paper will attempt to draw attention to the anthropocentrism with lack of ethical considerations in context of poems Hawk and Wolf. It reveals an ethical necessity and the requirement of a biocentric worldview.



Keywords— Ecological consciousness, Anthropocentrism, Ethical considerations, Biocentrism

Literature has always admired the beauty and power of nature. However, in the present scenario, the environmental concerns and the threat due to the anthropocentric over usage by man has been the subject matter of writers. The reference of this gave rise to Eco criticism. Indian poets like Toru Dutt, AK Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra, Keki N Daruwalla have contributed much to the field. Keki N Daruwalla was conferred the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1984 for his poetry collection, The Keeper Of the Dead. His poetries covered a broad range of themes like ecological consciousness, multi ethnicity of Indian experience, communal conflicts, social injustices, nature vs modernity. About his poetry, he slightly holds the view: "I am not an urban writer and my poems are rooted in rural landscape. My poetry is earthly and I like to consciously keep it that way, shunning sophistication which, while adding grass, takes away from the power of verse" (Naikar 30) . Daruwalla is profoundly influenced by Ted Hughes and has some similarities of his animal depiction. He has used animal imageries to show the human being having no ethical considerations and lack of care for other beings. He used it to depict the disharmony in human-nature relationship.

Hawk is a poem which shows the gradual transformation from a wild bird catching prey just in case of necessity to a

tool for human pleasure. Wolf depicts how human encroachment have led to presence of wolves in myths rather than reality. It talks about the need for preserving animals, autonomy, their natural instincts and the emphasis on biocentrism. Keki Daruwalla asserts that this desire and nature of human is the cause of replacement of their natural instincts. Remarkable ecocritic, Sue Ellen Campbell in her essay Land and Language of Desire asserts that there is no such thing called private piece of property, nor a person, text or piece of land. For Campbell, Biocentrism is 'the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures' (128). Thus it means humans are a part of nature and there's nothing like any sanctioned right due to hierarchical reason to exert over nature or any other organisms. Anthropocentrism is the view that human beings are at centre of existence, holding special importance or superiority over other organisms and legitimises domination. Thus, biocentrism stands anti-thesis to anthropocentrism. Thus, as a critique to man centric universe, eco critical theory proposes a biocentric approach where man and other biotic and abiotic things are in a shared harmony to one other. The poems of Keki Daruwalla draws attention to these topics. He portrays the plight and exploitation of animals in terms taming hawk as well as poaching of wolves.

Wolf is a striking poem of Daruwalla with anthropocentric and ethical blindness thoughts. The poem is based on half myth and half reality and a contrast of beliefs between two generations. The poet speaker believed the bedtime stories about wolves by his mother which was enough to create a terror in the minds of children those days. In contrast, his daughter is no longer fearful about it. The gun barrel signifies that the modern inventions have made man feel superior than others. Daruwalla exposes the anthropocentric views of man and hopes for a moral re-awakening and ethical considerations. The poem evokes a question who the real predator is - the wolf who kills for survival or the man who kills for pleasure. The first stanza of the poem reflects the nostalgic remembrances of the poet. And his description of the presence of wolves as half myth, where the existence of wolves is brought in parallel with the fragmented memories. His recollections of the fear which led people not to step out in night, the sound of the wolf created awe in the minds of people. The wolf nudged into the poet's consciousness. The cries of the wolf scared the children. The descriptions of the wolf as 'prowler', 'wind sniffer', 'throat catcher', he can 'sniff out approaching dreams' gives insights into the majestic Wolf. He contrasts it when he mentions 'The wolves have been slaughtered now'. The descriptions of the wolf scenes now no longer scares the modern generations for whom, the existence of wolves is mythical and not real. The surrounding Daruwalla is grown up in, i.e. a village in the forest edge makes him believe the existence of wolves and the daughter being born in a city and in a generation which has advanced in scientific innovations believes that the wolf can be shot with just a gun shot and there's nothing to fear about it. It is no longer a fear factor.

Keki N Daruwalla uses the as a figure of "wolf" as a significant symbol to expose the anthropocentric values of Man and the lack of ethical considerations. The poem critiques human's tendency to view entire Surrounding through a lens which makes humans feel superior and gives them an authoritative power. This anthropocentric perspective has led to the slaughter of the wolves and their lives are in such danger that it may lead to existence in myths and not in reality anymore. This blinds the ecological consciousness and ethical considerations of man who instead co-existing have resorted to domination. This anthropocentric views of man reflects how humanity justifies and positions itself above god's creation as well as nature owing to progress and it has led to distortion.

Hawk is another striking poem highly symbolic of Keki N Daruwalla which is highly symbolical and also ironical. Hawk is a bird of prey. The poem is located in the background of art of hawking which is a mere pleasure activity for the wealthy. Daruwalla brings in the

anthropocentric views of man who extends cruelty and superiority to the animal world. He expresses that just for pleasures, Man captures hawk, tames it, domesticates it and this way, the will, freedom and intentions of Hawk is neglected. The Hawk who preys only out of hunger is made to prey for Man's pleasure against will. Giving expressions of the ways Man traps Hawk, he mentions,

"But he was lost in the momentum
of his own gyre,
a frustrated parricide
on the kill

The fuse of his hate was burning still": (7-12). It hints the readers that hatred burns in the Hawk and it is not passion as the Hawk now preys out of compulsion by the master and this action against will suffocates him and the burp has to come out. The interruptions by man can be traced in the lines,

"The tamed one is worse for he is
touched by man
when snared in the woods....
and he is broken to the hood...

perforated..". Man, for his own desires of domesticating a Hawk and getting its prey done violates and goes against all the ethical considerations. The Hawk's lids are sewn with silk, he's momentarily blinded and starved - depicting the cruelty of man to such extent. After bearing the torture, the Hawk has lost its natural momentum. Man, for whom it's an interesting game; on the other hand its painful extortion of Hawk.

"Hawking is turned to a ritual, the
Predator's

passion honed to an art". The craftsmanship of man, of beautifully taming the Hawk one step at a time have disregarded the art of bird as well as its passion. Man's expertise is such one doesn't realise when did he get tamed. The Hawk is tamed to an extent its eyelids "burn with thwarted vision". Both the poems show with minute scrutiny the anthropocentric desires man & the ethical blindness to the sufferings of animals.

In both the poems, Hawk and Wolf, Keki N. Daruwalla exposes the ecological imbalances, injustices to the biological world due to anthropocentric view and lack of ethical considerations of mankind. Man fails to co exist and value the intrinsic value and equality of non-human life. The wolf, which is a significant animal; whose descriptions were enough to scare a child in those days is now no more to be seen plentifully due to the slaughter of wolves. The gunshots depict the inventions which humans use to show

its superiority over other's lives. The Hawk, which preys only for satisfaction of hunger is now tamed, domesticated by man in painful ways to hunt for man's pleasure. It disregards the equal right of animals. Ultimately, his poetry calls for a ethical considerations and the need for equal treatment beyond exploitation and co-existence. The poems are reminders that the animals have their own space in the ecosystem and it is the responsibility of man to look at it in a humble and compassionate way.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dutta Rajlakshmi. "Interrogating the norm: Ecological concerns in Select poems of Keki N Daruwalla".IJIRT,vol 9, Issue 9, Feb 2023, pp. 584-86
- [2] Das Banani. "Exposition of Keki Daruwalla's Poems with special reference to Wolf and Hawk". IJCRT, vol 6, Issue 2, April 2015, pp 243-44.
- [3] Daruwalla K. Collected poems: 1970-2005. Penguin UK. 2006
- [4] Mishra Awadhesh. "K.N. Daruwalla's contribution to INDO-ANGLICAN Poetry". International Journal Of Creative Research Thoughts, Vol 7, Issue 3, August 2019, pp 295-97
- [5] Phukan Dristi. "Delienation of myth: An Eco critical Reading of Keki N Daruwalla's poems, Hawk and Wolf". IOSR Journal of Humanities & social sciences, Vol 26, Issue 1, Jan 2021, pp.2-3
- [6] Sinha Sarita. " Environmentalism and Eco-criticism in the poetry of Keki N Daruwalla". Journal of advances and scholarly researches in allied education, Vol. XIV, Issue 2, January 2018, pp 2082-83



Growth and Performance of Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies (PACS) in Haryana

Dr. Pushpa Rani^{1*}, Divya²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Social Science (Economics), Faculty of Humanities, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

²Research Scholar, Department of Social Science (Economics), Faculty of Humanities, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: 24 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 18 Oct 2025; Accepted: 22 Oct 2025; Available online: 25 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) constitute the foundation of the rural short-term cooperative lending framework in India. This paper aims to evaluate the performance of Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) in Haryana. The research uses secondary data obtained from the annually published reports of the National Federation of State Cooperative Banks and State Cooperative Apex Banks for the period from 2004-05 to 2021-22. The result of the study, derived from the annual growth rate, is the compound growth rate in growth in PACS. It suggests that a negative growth rate is observed in the number of PACS; however, an increasing growth rate is noted in the number of memberships. Positive growth is evident in several metrics, including paid-up share capital, reserves, deposits, borrowings, and working capital. Both loan credit and balance due increased during the study period. A considerable credit-deposit ratio is also observed. The accumulation of overdue payments significantly decreases the effectiveness of PACS, as government-announced debt relief projects discourage borrowers from repaying loans punctually.



Keywords— PACS, paid-up capital, loan advancement, recovery, cooperative society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Civilians collectively have organized themselves from time to time in order to bargain for vested interests or gain the attention of the larger society in order to fulfill their objectives. Cooperative societies have been instrumental in a sense of collective activism and the pooling of civilian resources for mutual benefits. The cooperative society is a fundamentally voluntary organization that has its membership open to all irrespective of religion, gender, caste, and other factors. However, occupational roles may play an important part in defining the stake each individual holds in the activities of the cooperative society, which indirectly show the roles that they take within this collective. Shaffer (1999) has argued that a long time back, in the mid-18th century, in France, local cheese makers set up a cheese cooperative. Even later, in 1844, the Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale Society (EPRS) was formed with the

goal of social improvement by 28 economically marginalized members who pooled their resources to achieve the interests of the collective and improve their conditions (Dogarawa, 2005: 3), which has subsequently been viewed as the first modern cooperative in history.

Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies-

The 2011 Census (Government of India, 2011) records that around 68.8 percent of the population in India resides in rural areas and depends on agriculture directly for their livelihood. However, the benefit of the agricultural sector to the GDP has been decreasing at an alarming rate, at around 14.5 percent in 2010-11. In such situations, local-level cooperatives may act as a safeguard against the total collapse of the agricultural sector and economy. It has been noted that credit societies are an important source of agricultural credit for many farmers in rural India (Senapati and Bhatia, 2018). Primary Agricultural Cooperative

Societies are collective institutions that operate at the Indian village level and satisfy the credit needs of farmers. Many scholars point out that PACS are the foundation upon which the agricultural credit economy in India is built (Senapati and Bhatia, 2018; Ghosh et al., 2018; Rao, 2016). The National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development Bill (1981) states that a national bank be created in order to lend

credit to farmers in the agricultural sector and defines PACS as a cooperative society that:

- [1]. Has as its object or business the provision of financial accommodation to its members for agricultural operations, marketing of crops or for rural development;
- [2]. The bylaws of which do not permit the admission of any other cooperative society as a member.

Structure of Cooperative Credit Institutions in India-

Level	Name	Description	Main Functions
1. Primary Level	Primary Agricultural Credit Society (PACS)	Grassroots cooperative at village or block level	Provides short-term and medium-term loans, seeds, fertilizers, etc.
2. District Level	District Central Cooperative Bank (DCCB)	Operates at district level serving PACS and individual members	Acts as an intermediary between PACS and state-level bodies; provides refinance and financial services
3. State Level	State Cooperative Bank (SCB)	Apex cooperative bank at the state level	Funds allocation, policy implementation, audit, supervision of DCCBs
4. National Apex Level	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)	Apex Development Financial Institution	Refinance, development assistance, capacity building, policy support for cooperative credit structure

Growth & Expansion of PACS in Haryana-

The cooperative movement in Haryana operated under two governing acts: the Punjab Agriculture Development Act of 1957 and the Punjab State Cooperative Act of 1961, both of which were replaced by the new Cooperative Societies Act of 1984, along with an additional act enacted in Haryana. As of September 2025, Haryana has made significant progress in strengthening its cooperative sector, particularly through the expansion and modernization of Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS). Here's an in-depth look at the current status:

1. Total PACS Established: Since January 2021, Haryana has established 46 new PACS, as per the National Cooperative Database (Press Information Bureau).

2. Digitization Efforts: By December 2024, 710 PACS in Haryana were digitized, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all Gram Panchayats in the state (Babushahi.com).

3. Expansion Plans: The state government aims to establish 477 new Multi-Purpose Cooperative Societies (M-PACS) and 583 new Dairy Cooperative Societies (DCS) by 2028–29 to further strengthen the cooperative network (Hindustan Times).

Objective of the Study-

To analyse the performance of PACS on the basis of its Paid up share capital, reserve amount, deposit, borrowing amount and working capital.

II. DATA SOURCE & METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on secondary data collected from the annual published report of NAFSCOB (National Federation of State Cooperative Bank). The collected data has been analysed with growth rate, percentage, compound growth rate (CGR) and ratio analysis.

The compound growth rates were computed using the exponential trend function of the form:

$$X_t = ab^t$$

t

ut

$$\text{Log} X_t = \log a + t \log b + \log ut$$

Where,

X_t = number of societies, membership, share capital, own funds in year 't'

t = Time elements which take the value 1, 2, 3, 4...n

a = Intercept

b = Regression coefficient

ut = Standard error term

Compound growth rates were worked out as follow:

$$\text{Compound growth rate (r)} = (\text{antilog } b - 1) \times 100$$

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1.1 depicts the performance of PACS in Haryana in terms of owned funds, deposits, borrowings, others, and working capital from the year 2005-06 to 2021-22. In the initial year of the study, paid up share capital, reserve, deposit borrowing and working capital were 32121, 1964, 31961, 391210 and 503523 lakh rupees in 2004-05. The growth percent were 9, -4, -7, 8 and 6 percent respectively next year. Deposits increased sharply from 2 percent in 2008-09 to 16 percent in 2009-10 and continue to increase 26 percent for next year. The share of borrowings decreased continuously from 8 per cent to 3 percent in the same time period. As a result, profit increased for PACS. The government of the state signed an MOU with the Government of India and NABARD on February 20, 2007, in order to revive the short-term cooperative credit structure. This action was taken in response to the recommendations of the Vaidyanathan Committee. The total Revival Package for PACS has been calculated to be Rs. 701.72 crore, and 566 merged PACS affiliated with 19 DCCBs have received financial assistance totalling Rs.

499.50 crore. Therefore, the PACS's borrowings decreased, and there were fewer borrowings from central cooperative banks. Throughout the duration of the research, the proportion of borrowings has been consistently decreasing. Nevertheless, the proportion of borrowings remains higher throughout the duration of the study. The maximum and minimal borrowings were Rs. 1188925.57 lakh in 2021-22 and Rs. 3912.10 lakh in 2005-06, respectively. Additionally, the borrowing rate experienced a complete increase while simultaneously decreasing throughout the duration of the study. The compound growth rates of paid up share capital, reserves, deposits, borrowing and working capital remains 4, 21, 3, 7, and 7 percent respectively. In spite of the fact that the proportion of borrowings in working capital has decreased, it has been determined that borrowings remain the major source of working capital. Therefore, it can be inferred that PACS has demonstrated satisfactory performance in terms of paid up share capital, reserves, deposits, borrowings, and working capital, as these parameters have steadily increased throughout the study period. We conclude that the PACS performance improves continuously with increasing financial status.

Year	Paid up share capit	Growth rate	Reserves	Reserve growth rate	Deposite	Deposite growth	Borrowing	Borrowing growth rate	Working capital	Working capital
2005-06	32121	.	1964	.	31961	.	391210		503523	.
2006-07	35142	9%	1883	-4%	29848	-7%	423022	8%	533774	6%
2007-08	38419	9%	3557	47%	30459	2%	400283	-6%	573268	7%
2008-09	40134	4%	16980	79%	31114	2%	434008	8%	636345	10%
2009-10	42756.13	6%	2004.56	-747%	37095.06	16%	448529.33	3%	699239.84	9%
2010-11	45839.97	7%	34596.33	94%	50118.15	26%	493651.44	9%	782140.71	11%
2011-12	48716.99	6%	35717.04	3%	53168.73	6%	559331.27	12%	880513.8	11%
2012-13	53303.89	9%	32607.34	-10%	57963.54	8%	632142.72	12%	980160.41	10%
2013-14	59915.17	11%	27206.12	-20%	56461.81	-3%	690163.35	8%	1058548.99	7%
2014-15	61507.55	3%	28210.03	4%	49718.05	-14%	749417.3	8%	1122640.74	6%
2015-16	62185.53	1%	25243.04	-12%	50476.85	2%	813396.56	8%	1214036.65	8%
2016-17	62185.53	0%	25243.04	0%	50476.85	0%	813396.56	0%	1214036.65	0%
2017-18	58025	-7%	126652	80%	126652	60%	824250	1%	1131093	-7%
2018-19	47664.5	-22%	28118.6	-350%	94823	-34%	10001.67	58%	1294192	13%
2019-20	63304.6	25%	25894.01	-9%	99075.71	4%	1014408.24	-93%	1288769.66	0%
2020-21	63819.42	1%	26221.35	1%	49955.75	-98%	1142561.47	11%	1341057.18	4%
2021-22	61312.06	-4%	48621.73	46%	50343.46	1%	1188925.57	4%	1629777.51	18%
CGR(%)	4%		21%		3%		7%		7%	

(Source: Annually Published Reports of NAFSCOB)

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS-

The results have been drawn from the above discussion about the performance of primary agricultural cooperative societies in terms of deposits, borrowing and working

capital. Credit-deposit ratios show that more loans have been disbursed than deposits, which is a clear indicator of performance enhancement of PACS.

The following recommendations may be regarded to expand the membership of Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies:

1. The government may offer an interest subvention scheme to borrowers instead of a debt relief system, as the latter may encourage violations among decent borrowers.
2. The PACS may extend long-term loans to meet the ongoing financial needs of borrowers.
3. The credit limit may be expanded and the loan amount may be disbursed promptly to borrowers.
4. To enhance deposit mobilization, members should be periodically educated and informed about the various schemes offered by the organization.
5. The PACS extend a significant share of agricultural loans to farmers, while also offering a considerable amount of non-agricultural loans to individuals.
6. PACS workers should receive regular education on the effective operation of the societies.
7. Staff members must exhibit collaborative behaviour towards individuals and ensure the provision of essential information.
8. Borrower members should be incentivized for timely loan payback.
9. Awareness programs should be implemented to explain the advantages of cooperative credit.

- [6] S. S. Kalamkar. (2003). Progress of Agricultural Credit Societies in Maharashtra. *The Maharashtra Co-operative Quarterly*. Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 21-25.
- [7] Senapati S. and Bhatia A. (2018). A Study on the Contributions of PACS towards Theoretical. *Economics Letters*. Vol.8, pp. 2818-2829.
- [8] Shinde Popat Krishna. (2013). Growth & Performance of Primary Agricultural Cooperative Credit Societies in India. *Investment Management and Financial Innovations*.
- [9] Yashoda. (2017). Role of Primary Agricultural Co-Operative Society (PACS) in Agricultural Development in India. *Global Journal of Management and Business Research*. Vol. 17, Issue- 3.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anil S. Memane. (2012). Performance of Primary Agriculture Co-operative Societies during 2000-01 to 2009-10 in India. *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*. Vol. II, Issue-II, March-April.
- [2] G. V. Chalam and A. Prasad. (2007). An evaluation of financial performance of co-operative societies in Andhra Pradesh (A study of selected PACSs in West Godavari District). *Indian Cooperative Review*. Vol. 45, No.1, pp.42-57.
- [3] K. Sudhakara Rao. (2016). Performance of Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) in India and Andhra Pradesh. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities (IJSSH)*. Vol. 2 (3), 37-50.
- [4] Mohit Kumar and V. P. Mehta. (2018). Performance and Prospects of Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) in Haryana during 2000-01 to 2014-15. *International Journal of Current Microbiology Applied Sciences*. Vol. 7(04), pp. 20-32.
- [5] Pinakin S. Asodiya, Parth S. Asodiya, Dhandhukia R., Parmar V. & Jayant J. Makadiya. (2014). Impact of Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies' on Farmer's Economy of Panchmahal District of Middle Gujarat, India. *Journal of Agricultural Science*. Vol. 6, No. 6.



Re-Rooting the Green Feminine: The Postcolonial Ecology of Indian Womanhood in Markandaya, Divakaruni, and Lahiri

Dr Dipti Agrawal

Assistant Professor of English, Centre for Teacher Education, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Varanasi, UP, India

diptiva016@gmail.com

Received: 24 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 19 Oct 2025; Accepted: 23 Oct 2025; Available online: 27 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— The evolution of Indian ecofeminism—from its early agrarian expressions to its transnational and post-ethnic articulations—reveals a dynamic negotiation between ecology, gender, and postcolonial identity. This paper explores how three seminal women novelists—Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri—redefine the relationship between women and nature through distinct historical and cultural contexts. While Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) roots womanhood within the soil of a newly independent India struggling against modernisation, Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) expands the ecofeminist imagination to the diasporic and mythic, foregrounding cross-cultural solidarities and ecological spirituality. Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) reconfigures ecological belonging through migration and hybridity, locating environmental consciousness within the flux of identity rather than in geographic fixity. Across these writers, Indian ecofeminism shifts from essentialist notions of woman-as-earth toward a pluralistic and post-ethnic ecology of selfhood, integrating local ecologies with global feminist ethics. Drawing on the theories of Vandana Shiva, Bina Agarwal, Karen Warren, and Tina Sikka, this study argues that Indian ecofeminist fiction transitions from cultural conservatism to an ecocritical pluralism that reconciles indigenous traditions with cosmopolitan modernity. Through close readings, the paper demonstrates that postcolonial ecofeminism is not merely a resistance discourse but a generative narrative strategy that re-roots womanhood in evolving landscapes—material, symbolic, and planetary.



Keywords— Indian ecofeminism, postcolonial identity, ecological feminism, women novelists, environmental consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of ecofeminism has long been a site of convergence for environmental, feminist, and postcolonial concerns. Originating with Françoise d'Eaubonne's (1974) proposition that "feminism or death" encapsulates the shared oppression of women and nature, ecofeminism soon expanded into multiple philosophical and regional trajectories. In the Indian context, ecofeminism acquired a distinctive texture: it became entwined with postcolonial recovery, Gandhian ethics of self-reliance, and the lived experiences of rural women whose survival was bound to the land. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988) and Maria

Mies and Shiva's collaborative *Ecofeminism* (1993) grounded the movement in the struggles of grassroots activists—particularly the Chipko women—who resisted ecological destruction by physically embracing trees. Yet, as Bina Agarwal (1992) notes, such cultural ecofeminism risked essentializing women as naturally closer to the earth, thereby overlooking the material and structural inequalities that differentiated women across caste, class, and region.

In the decades following independence, Indian literature became an important medium for articulating ecofeminist consciousness, often before the theoretical terminology had crystallized. Women novelists translated ecological

anxieties into intimate narratives of domestic survival, loss, and belonging. Among them, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) stands out as one of the earliest postcolonial novels to frame the rural female subject as both a custodian of ecological balance and a victim of industrial modernity. The novel's protagonist, Rukmani, embodies the rhythm of agricultural life while confronting the disruptions brought by the tannery—a symbol of foreign capital and technological intrusion. Through Rukmani's intimate relationship with the soil and her silent endurance of dispossession, Markandaya anticipates the ecofeminist recognition that environmental degradation and patriarchal domination stem from the same exploitative logic.

By the late twentieth century, as globalization redefined migration, consumption, and identity, Indian women writers began to re-imagine ecofeminism beyond agrarian and national boundaries. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, writing from the United States, infused ecofeminist sensibilities with mythic imagination and diasporic hybridity. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) transforms the eponymous spices into living agents of ecological and emotional healing, situating the female protagonist Tilo between tradition and transformation. Here, nature is not the passive ground of fertility but an active participant in the woman's self-realization. The diasporic context complicates the binary of colonizer and colonized; Divakaruni's ecofeminism is intercultural, linking Indian spiritual ecology with Native American cosmology through Tilo's relationship with Raven. The novel thus broadens ecofeminism into a dialogue between multiple indigenous epistemologies marginalized by capitalist modernity.

The new millennium witnessed yet another shift, from rooted cultural identities to fluid and deterritorialized ones. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) examines how ecological belonging can persist amid urban modernity and transnational displacement. The novel's protagonist, Ashima, inhabits an in-between space that is neither fully Indian nor wholly American. Her culinary practices, domestic gardening, and emotional attachment to food become metaphors of sustainable identity, wherein memory and ecology intertwine. Lahiri's diasporic imagination extends ecofeminism to the terrain of post-ethnicity (Hollinger 2006), where ecological and cultural connections are chosen, hybrid, and consciously maintained rather than inherited.

Across these trajectories—from Markandaya's village fields to Divakaruni's magical diaspora and Lahiri's suburban hybridity—the ecofeminist imagination of Indian womanhood evolves from the earthly to the planetary, from local rootedness to global connectedness. This paper, therefore, traces a continuum:

1. How postcolonial ecofeminism emerges from the agrarian ethos of early Indian fiction;
2. How it transforms within diasporic narratives into mythic-intercultural dialogues; and
3. How it culminates in a post-ethnic pluralism that redefines both womanhood and ecology as dynamic, relational, and de-essentialized.

By analysing these novelists through the theoretical lenses of Karen Warren's pluralist ecofeminism (1987), Tina Sikka's materialist critique (2018), and Agarwal's intersectional environmentalism (1992), this study seeks to demonstrate that Indian ecofeminist literature is not a static mirror of cultural conservatism but an evolving discourse of ecological citizenship and feminist agency. The postcolonial woman, once figured as the "mother-earth," becomes, in the new millennium, a mediator between tradition and transformation, whose ecological consciousness is as much ethical as it is existential.

II. THE AGRARIAN BODY: ECOFEMINISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ETHICS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) offers a paradigmatic scene of Indian ecofeminism in its formative, agrarian phase, where woman, soil, seasonality, and survival are interwoven within a fragile moral economy. Set in the aftermath of Independence, the novel aligns the female subject with land-based rhythms while staging the incursions of an industrial-capitalist modernity that upends ecological balance and the gendered division of labour. Its protagonist, Rukmani, is both emblem and agent: a cultivator, caretaker, and witness whose sensory intimacy with field, seed, water, and weather models a relational ethic that ecofeminist philosophers would later theorize as an antidote to extractive rationalities (Warren 4; Mies and Shiva 14). Read alongside postcolonial critiques of developmentalism, *Nectar in a Sieve* registers how the forces of commodification—most visibly the tannery—recode the village landscape into a site of displacement, scarcity, and new forms of dependency. At once lyrical and austere, Markandaya's prose locates ecological harm and patriarchal harm within a single horizon of experience.

Rukmani's earliest gestures situate her as a reader of the land's signs. In the bullock cart after marriage, she notices "poor beasts" whose hides are already dusty, an empathetic regard that folds animal suffering into her ethical field of vision (Markandaya 5). The remark is not incidental sentiment: it initiates a narrative grammar in which sentience is distributed among nonhuman beings and the

land itself, prefiguring an ecofeminist sensibility that resists hierarchical separations of value. As she begins to cultivate the household plot—pumpkins at first, then beans, yams, brinjals, chillies—labour turns intimate and contemplative. She “often visits the well” and tracks the “green shoots,” celebrating the ripening pumpkin with a wonder that her family finds excessive: “One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before” (11). The quiet irony here underscores a key insight: subsistence agriculture, undertaken by women in precarious conditions, is not merely toil but a relation of care that sustains meaning, memory, and hope.

Markandaya intensifies this ethic of relation through Rukmani’s meditation on seed-life: “each of the dry, hard pellets... had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf” (14). The language—“secret,” “protective”—casts germination as a sheltered potential, echoing the protective labour women perform in households and fields. In ecofeminist terms, Rukmani’s phenomenology of seed-keeping discloses kinship with what Vandana Shiva later articulates as “the living economy of the seed,” an indigenous epistemology endangered by masculinist technoscience and market enclosure (Shiva; Mies and Shiva 14). While Markandaya never polemicizes, her poetics align with a subsistence ontology that recognises interdependence—soil fertility, weather cycles, community reciprocity—as the conditions of ethical life.

This agrarian ecology is soon confronted by modernity’s emblem: the tannery. Its arrival catalyzes a structural transformation—wage work supplants subsistence rhythms, strangers crowd the village, prices rise, and the soundscape itself changes. The tannery, linked to leather processing and export, condenses the novel’s critique of development as a logic of detachment: detaching labour from land, price from use, bodies from their ecological context. Ecofeminist theory names this detachment as a masculinist, dualistic rationality that privileges abstraction, control, and profit over embodied, place-based knowledges (Warren 3–5). For Rukmani, the factory’s presence generates a new form of temporal stress—harvest-time, once the communal calendar’s pulse, is displaced by wage-time. Nathan and the older agrarian men lose bargaining power; the village’s gendered solidarities, already strained by poverty, must be renegotiated under scarcity.

Markandaya’s ecological critique is not nostalgic pastoral. Droughts, floods, and crop failures reveal that nature is not a passive ally; it can be indifferent or catastrophic. Yet the novel carefully differentiates calamity without malice (monsoon vagaries) from calamity with agency (tannery-driven inflation, dispossession, coercive labour). Rukmani’s

endurance across both kinds of calamity exposes the double bind women inhabit: they absorb shocks from the nonhuman environment and from social-economic systems that instrumentalize their labour while marginalizing their voice. Bina Agarwal’s materialist ecofeminism clarifies this bind: women’s ecological vulnerability in South Asia is mediated by access to productive resources (land rights, water, common property) and by caste/class position, not by any mystical proximity to nature (Agarwal 136–45). Rukmani’s family, land-poor and debt-exposed, sits precisely at that intersection.

If the tannery dramatizes developmental violence, Markandaya also depicts the subtler forms of patriarchal violence that traverse domestic life: constrained reproductive choices, the burdens of food rationing, and the moral economy of shame around sexuality and fertility. Yet, crucially, the novel refrains from casting Rukmani as a sacrificial earth-mother. Her voice bears irony, disappointment, and strategic silence, signalling agency without the trappings of modern liberal autonomy. This calibrated portrayal aligns with Karen Warren’s insistence on ecofeminism’s pluralist, contextual ethics—rejecting single-cause explanations and attending to lived complexity (4). Rukmani bargains with the world: with monsoon, merchants, midwives, moneylenders. Bargain, not surrender, is her mode.

Close reading of the household garden clarifies how Markandaya figures female expertise as an ecological technique. The selection of hardy vegetables (pumpkin as a pioneer crop; brinjal and chillies as staples with culinary and market value) demonstrates tacit agronomy. The daily choreography—soil loosening, mulching, water-hauling, pest vigilance—carries a tacit science honed by observation across seasons. When the pumpkin “matures to yellow and red” (Markandaya 11), the detail is not only sensuous; it indexes ripeness thresholds that guide harvest timing. This know-how is the opposite of the factory’s standardised time: it is deeply phenomenological, keyed to colour, texture, smell. Ecofeminist critics have argued that such embodied knowledges, often coded as “women’s intuition,” are systematically devalued by patriarchal-capitalist epistemologies that recognise only lab-certified or market-validated expertise (Sandilands 19–23). Markandaya’s narrative restores epistemic dignity to vernacular cultivation.

The novel’s soundscape is equally telling. Early chapters hum with birdsong and the soft hydraulics of well-and-rope; later, the tannery’s clatter and commerce intrude. Rukmani’s sensory field, initially attuned to cues of germination and rainfall, must now parse prices, wages, and the risk of theft. The transformation of attention—from ecological to

economic signals—materialises the psychic toll of developmentalism. Ecofeminist analysis often underscores this cognitive reallocation: time spent tracking market volatility is time subtracted from ecological care, community ties, and self-repair, a subtraction disproportionately borne by women who manage household resilience during scarcity (Sikka 118–25).

Markandaya complicates any simplistic nature/woman identity by showing that nature's excess—famine, flood—can force ethical compromises. In hunger, moral vocabularies thin. Yet, even in extremity, the narrative draws a line between making do and making victims. The tannery's labour regime thrives on the latter: it creates winners (moneylenders, contractors) by producing losers (tenant-farmers, landless labourers). The ecofeminist thread here is not merely symbolic; it is political economy. As Rukmani's household cycles through debt, the novel illuminates how women's unpaid ecological labour subsidises the very system that undermines them: when crops fail, women stretch meals, barter, gather fuel, and nurse the sick—absorbing system shocks without compensation. Agarwal's critique of romanticised cultural ecofeminism warns that celebrating women's closeness to nature without redistributing resource rights locks them into perpetual vulnerability (Agarwal 146–52). Markandaya's plot quietly agrees.

Importantly, *Nectar in a Sieve* stages contact zones between indigenous subsistence ethics and incipient market modernity without resolving them into moral binaries. Rukmani admires certain efficiencies; she trades when needed. The novel respects the ambivalence of villagers who seek wage stability even as they mourn communal erosion. This ambivalence is central to a postcolonial ecofeminism that refuses caricature—neither fetishising “pure” tradition nor capitulating to development-as-fate. In Warren's terms, ethics must be contextualist rather than absolutist (4). Markandaya's art lies in situating choices within constraint, not in condemning characters for pragmatism under duress.

Finally, the novel anticipates debates about environmental justice by mapping how ecological degradation (soil exhaustion, water contamination, deforestation for factory expansion) converges with social stratification. Those with the least land and least voice absorb the most risk—as tenants, as migrants, as women. Rukmani's perspective sutures these scales: a cracked pot, a shrivelled gourd, a wage denied, a monsoon delayed. The cumulative effect is a cartography of slow violence whose temporality—seasonal, cyclical, attritional—often escapes spectacular registers of crisis (cf. Rob Nixon's later formulation, though outside our immediate corpus). Markandaya's choice to

focalise through a woman cultivator ensures that the sensorium of slow violence becomes narratively visible.

In sum, *Nectar in a Sieve* furnishes Indian ecofeminism with its foundational tableau: a woman's intimate world of tending and making-do encircled by the advancing frontiers of extractive modernity. The novel neither sanctifies Rukmani as earth-goddess nor dissolves her into victimhood; it instead composes a portrait of competent vulnerability—competence in vernacular ecologies, vulnerability before market and monsoon. This portrait resonates with the movement from cultural ecofeminism (valuing connection, subsistence, spirituality) to critical/material ecofeminism (foregrounding rights, labour, and structural inequalities). As we move, in subsequent sections, to Divakaruni's diasporic mythopoesis and Lahiri's post-ethnic domesticities, Markandaya's village remains a necessary “root”—a soil-memory against which later transnational ecologies will be measured, revised, and reimagined.

III. DIASPORIC ECOFEMINISM AND MYTHIC HYBRIDITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

If Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* roots the ecofeminist consciousness in India's agrarian soil, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) transplants it to diasporic ground, where ecological sensibility and feminist identity are renegotiated through myth, memory, and migration. Written from the vantage point of an Indian American author, the novel reimagines ecofeminism not as a pastoral return to the land but as a spiritual and cultural ecology that crosses boundaries of nation, species, and race. In this mythopoetic terrain, herbs, spices, and natural elements assume agency, while the protagonist Tilo—both priestess and immigrant—mediates between the sacred knowledge of the East and the fragmented materialism of the West.

Divakaruni's diasporic ecofeminism expands Vandana Shiva's idea of “living economies” by relocating them in a transnational setting. While Shiva emphasises the protection of indigenous resources from global capitalist incursions (*Staying Alive* 44), Divakaruni dramatizes the condition of these resources once they are already displaced, commodified and recontextualised within immigrant lives. The spices in Tilo's Oakland shop are survivors of this displacement. They retain their biocultural memory, symbolizing a continuity of ecological wisdom amid fragmentation. As Tilo notes, “The spices of true power are from my birthland, the land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers, sunset skies brilliant as blood”

(Divakaruni 3). The language of sensory abundance here performs what Salman Rushdie calls “imaginary homelands,” an attempt to re-create a lost ecology through aesthetic invocation (Rushdie).

Yet Divakaruni’s nostalgia is strategic, not regressive. She is aware, as Sandhya Shukla observes, that diasporic writing operates in “time and space where the local is transcended and the past must be invoked to support the present” (Shukla 135). The invocation of spices and myths serves this purpose: to construct a sensory ecology that resists alienation without denying modern hybridity. In this sense, *The Mistress of Spices* bridges two modes of ecofeminism—cultural (spiritual, holistic, connected to the feminine divine) and critical (aware of power, commodification, and cross-cultural inequality).

Tilo’s initiation into the order of the Mistresses of Spices marks her transformation from an ordinary woman into a guardian of the natural and the mystical. Each spice corresponds to a form of sentient power, demanding respect and discipline. This feminised knowledge system reclaims the sacrality of the natural world without succumbing to essentialist mysticism. The spices speak to Tilo, correct her, and punish transgression—an allegory for ecological accountability. As Ling notes, cultural ecofeminism identifies the cause of nature’s subjugation with the patriarchal socialisation of women (68); Divakaruni literalizes this by allowing the spices themselves to educate Tilo into balance and restraint.

However, Divakaruni’s narrative departs from Shiva’s model of ecofeminism in significant ways. Where Shiva’s vision of *prakriti* and *shakti* often privileges the village woman as the archetype of ecological wisdom (Mies and Shiva 23), Divakaruni complicates this ideal by situating her heroine in urban America, surrounded by immigrants negotiating capitalism, racism, and gendered alienation. Oakland replaces the village; the grocery replaces the field. Ecofeminism, here, becomes metropolitan and multicultural, extending care to an ecosystem of human and nonhuman agents within a globalized diaspora.

The figure of Raven—Tilo’s Native American lover extends this plural ecology further. Through him, Divakaruni juxtaposes two colonized cosmologies: the Indian and the Native American. Raven’s heritage, marked by his mother Celestina’s rejection of indigenous spirituality, mirrors Tilo’s own ambivalence toward her mystical discipline. Lara Merlin interprets this parallel as Divakaruni’s effort “to broaden the concept of what it means to be an American” by linking displaced traditions (207). Raven’s repressed heritage dramatizes the ecological amnesia of modern America—its erasure of native relationships with the land. Tilo’s attraction to Raven is therefore not merely romantic

but epistemological: she recognises in him the same lost communion with nature that her spices preserve in exile.

The union between Tilo and Raven enacts what Karen Warren would call a structurally pluralist ecofeminism—an ethics that foregrounds dialogue across difference rather than purity of origin (5). Their relationship breaks both cultural and disciplinary borders: it merges myth and modernity, ecology and sexuality. Through this alliance, Divakaruni challenges what Prayag Akbar, in *Leila*, would later call the tyranny of “purity.” In *The Mistress of Spices*, purity—religious, cultural, or ecological—is portrayed as stasis, while hybridity becomes the ground for regeneration.

Divakaruni’s ecofeminist vision is therefore intercultural rather than inter-categorical. She does not construct a simple binary of East versus West or nature versus culture; instead, she dramatizes a third space where knowledge systems intermingle. The spices’ voices form an ecological chorus, speaking in multiple tongues: Sanskrit chants, whispered admonitions, and modern irony. In one striking passage, Tilo recalls that “the turmeric said, I am the blood of the earth. I heal. But I must be remembered rightly” (Divakaruni 48). The imperative to “remember rightly” encapsulates Divakaruni’s diasporic ecofeminism: to remember without mythic distortion, to heal without possession.

Critics like Christiane Schlote have noted that South Asian American women writers move from portraying “submissive emigrant wives to independent individuals investigating their newly discovered subjectivity” (402). Tilo’s evolution from a self-effacing Mistress bound by ritual to a woman who claims her own sensual and moral autonomy exemplifies this transformation. Her final act—leaving the shop and embracing mortality—reconciles the mystical with the material, suggesting that ecofeminist liberation requires not transcendence but embodied re-entry into the world.

In this metamorphosis, Divakaruni stages what Tina Sikka (2018) calls the materialist turn in ecofeminism: the recognition that feminist and ecological struggles are grounded not only in spirituality but in the “capitalist mode of production and reproduction” that structures gendered labour (120). Tilo’s shop is a microcosm of this economy: it sustains immigrant families, circulates healing commodities, and survives on trade. Her defiance of the spices’ commands not to love a man mirrors a rebellion against systems that regulate women’s bodies and the natural world alike. By choosing love, Tilo reclaims agency from both patriarchal and metaphysical authorities, signalling an ecofeminism that is neither ascetic nor passive.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's prose foregrounds sensual ecology—the synesthetic connection between taste, touch, smell, and memory—as a form of feminist epistemology. The spices mediate not just physical healing but emotional communication among diasporic characters. This sensory ethics recalls what Catriona Sandilands describes as the “politics of care” that links bodily experience to democratic responsibility (Sandilands 27). Through Tilo's ministrations, Divakaruni literalizes this politics: the act of grinding cardamom or blending turmeric becomes an act of cultural translation and ethical attention.

At the same time, Divakaruni is wary of ecofeminism's tendency toward romantic essentialism. By portraying the spices as sometimes punitive, even tyrannical, she critiques the idea that nature's voice is always benign. The spices demand sacrifice; they punish hubris. This ambivalence restores to nature its agency and alterity, qualities that simplistic eco-spiritual discourses often neutralise. As such, Divakaruni anticipates later post-humanist ecofeminism, which views the natural world as a network of autonomous actants rather than a nurturing mother.

In the final analysis, *The Mistress of Spices* reconfigures Indian ecofeminism within a transnational mythopoetic frame. It decolonizes both American and Indian imaginations by proposing that ecology is not confined to geography but extends into cultural memory and affective labour. Where Markandaya's Rukmani tills the soil, Divakaruni's Tilo tills memory and myth. Both women embody resilience; both bridge suffering and creation. Yet Tilo's journey represents a new phase of ecofeminism—from rootedness to routing, from sustenance to synthesis.

Divakaruni thus offers an ecological cosmopolitanism that neither fetishizes indigeneity nor erases it. Her diasporic ecofeminism foregrounds connection without confinement: a green feminine re-rooted not in the soil of a single homeland but in the ethical practice of care across worlds.

IV. CRITICAL ECOFEMINISM BEYOND CULTURAL CONSERVATISM: RETHINKING POWER, PURITY, AND PLURALISM

The trajectory from Kamala Markandaya's agrarian realism to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythic diaspora signals an unmistakable shift in Indian ecofeminism—from reverence to critique, from spiritual naturalism to political consciousness. Yet this shift is not a simple movement away from faith or tradition; rather, it represents a deep interrogation of how cultural ecofeminism can both empower and entrap. Indian ecofeminism, particularly after the 1990s, began to distance itself from idealized depictions of “woman as nature” or “India as nurturing mother,”

recognizing that these tropes often conceal structural hierarchies. The work of writers and theorists such as Bina Agarwal, Karen Warren, and Tina Sikka demonstrates how gendered and ecological subjugation cannot be undone merely through symbolic reclamations of the feminine divine. Instead, critical ecofeminism foregrounds material conditions, political economies, and plural subjectivities—a movement away from essentialism toward pluralism.

4.1 The Limits of Cultural Ecofeminism

Vandana Shiva's influential formulations of ecofeminism in *Staying Alive* (1988) and *Ecofeminism* (with Maria Mies, 1993) galvanised global discourse by linking women's oppression with the exploitation of nature under capitalist patriarchy. Drawing inspiration from Gandhian self-reliance and indigenous traditions, Shiva celebrated the spiritual power of *prakriti* (nature) and *shakti* (female creative energy) as the ethical foundations of a non-violent ecological order. However, this celebratory model, while invaluable in restoring dignity to indigenous women's knowledge, tends to homogenize women's experiences and overlook the hierarchies of caste, class, and religion that mediate ecological relationships in India. Gabriel Dietrich critiqued Shiva's framework for its assumption of a “uniform society equitably coordinated, where each individual owns adequate land to sustain oneself,” thus erasing historical inequalities (325).

Shiva's invocation of *shakti* as the feminine principle also universalizes Hindu cosmology as the Indian paradigm, marginalizing alternative epistemologies from tribal, Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian communities (Rao 190). For Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women, such a “sacralized femininity” can replicate Brahmanical patriarchy rather than dismantle it. As Ester Daimari and Ivy Daimary's studies of Bodo mythology suggest, indigenous traditions may themselves encode gender hierarchies that subordinate women and legitimise male dominance over both nature and the female body. The goddess *Obonglaoree*—the feminine creative principle—coexists with a culture that regards men as superior to both women and the environment. Hence, spiritual essentialism can coexist with social exploitation.

Critical ecofeminism thus intervenes by questioning the romanticization of “the indigenous” and demanding a materialist understanding of ecological crises. As Tina Sikka argues, patriarchy is not merely a moral disposition but a systemic mode of production and reproduction, embedded in capitalist economies and reinforced through gendered divisions of labour (Sikka 120). To address ecological degradation, therefore, one must examine the economic and political structures that commodify both nature and women's labour. For instance, the commercialization of seeds, the privatization of water, or

the displacement of rural communities by dam projects are not abstract patriarchal metaphors—they are concrete mechanisms of ecological injustice that disproportionately affect marginalized women.

4.2 Power, Purity, and the Politics of the Feminine

In literary and cultural representations, the notion of purity—religious, sexual, ecological, or cultural—often becomes a tool of exclusion. Prayag Akbar's dystopian novel *Leila* (2017) offers a striking allegory of this danger. The city's walls, dividing citizens into "pure" and "polluted," dramatize how ideals of sanctity can morph into totalitarian regimes. Similarly, within cultural ecofeminism, the fetishization of a pure, untouched nature or the morally "pure" woman can entrench hierarchies rather than subvert them. Divakaruni's Tilo and Lahiri's Ashima both confront this dilemma: they inhabit impurity as a space of transformation.

Karen Warren's framework of structural pluralism (1987) offers a philosophical basis for such impurity. Ecofeminism, she argues, must accommodate multiple, even conflicting perspectives to remain ethically responsive. Warren's pluralism rejects both the reduction of women to natural symbols and the elevation of nature to sentimental purity. Instead, it insists on contextual ethics—understanding oppression and resistance through specific histories rather than universal essences. In the Indian postcolonial context, this pluralism translates into a dialogue among castes, classes, religions, and regions; among rural and urban women; and among different modes of relationship with land and labour.

Tilo's relationship with Raven, examined earlier, exemplifies this pluralist ethic. Their cross-cultural bond dismantles rigid binaries of East/West, feminine/masculine, and nature/culture. Raven's Native American lineage reintroduces an ecology erased by settler modernity, while Tilo's Indian mysticism offers an alternative to consumerist spirituality. The resulting dialogue is not about synthesis but reciprocity—each learns to inhabit ambiguity. By loving Raven, Tilo breaks not only religious vows but ontological boundaries; she becomes both Mistress and mortal, healer and healed.

Similarly, in *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy exposes how purity codes enforce ecological and sexual segregation. The river Meenachal, once a space of childhood play and fertility, becomes "a swollen drain of filth" after industrial pollution (Roy 12). The same logic of contamination governs social relations: Ammu's inter-caste love for Velutha is deemed "polluting," and she is punished with exile. Roy's narrative links the ecological decay of Ayemenem to the moral decay of its hierarchies, showing that environmental degradation and gender oppression are

two sides of the same disciplinary system. By ending her novel with Ammu's defiant "Tomorrow," Roy offers an ecofeminist temporality of hope—a future where the boundaries of purity might dissolve.

4.3 From Essentialism to Intersectionality

Critical ecofeminism's most transformative contribution lies in its intersectional turn. Drawing upon Bina Agarwal's insistence on "gendered access to resources" and Warren's contextual pluralism, contemporary Indian women novelists situate ecology within social cartographies of caste, class, and diaspora. The ecological self is not merely female; it is shaped by material conditions, mobility, and memory. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2004), as discussed in the next section, exemplifies this shift toward an ecofeminism of fluid identities—where home, soil, and self are reconstructed through migration and choice rather than inherited essence.

The intersectional model acknowledges that women's relationships with nature differ across contexts: the tribal woman's forest is not the same as the urban professional's potted balcony garden, yet both can embody ecological ethics. This plural understanding resists the monolithic "Goddess feminism" that equates liberation with return to an imagined matriarchal past. Instead, it views ecological and feminist struggles as coalitional—shared projects across differences.

4.4 Toward Ecological Democracy

Catriona Sandilands's notion of the "good-natured feminist" (1999) and Vandana Shiva's later concept of "Earth Democracy" converge here: both propose participatory models of environmental care grounded in justice and diversity. The difference lies in emphasis—Shiva anchors democracy in spirituality, Sandilands in political process. Indian ecofeminist fiction since the 1990s synthesizes these impulses. Roy, Divakaruni, and Lahiri imagine worlds where ethical interdependence replaces domination, but they remain alert to the institutional and emotional labour required to sustain such worlds.

Arundhati Roy's engagement with ecological activism beyond fiction—her essays on dams, forests, and displacement—illustrates how literature and activism intertwine within this critical ecofeminist framework. She warns that romanticizing tribal or feminine purity can obscure state violence and capitalist extraction. Her critique parallels Tina Sikka's call for a "standpoint of the vulnerable," one that situates ecological ethics in lived inequities rather than abstract reverence (Sikka 122).

4.5 Toward a Plural Feminine Ecology

Critical ecofeminism, then, does not abandon spirituality but reinterprets it as ethical pluralism. It calls for reverence

without idealization, resistance without victimhood, and belonging without exclusion. The “green feminine” in Indian postcolonial literature evolves from symbol to subject, from myth to method. Rukmani’s prayerful cultivation, Tilo’s syncretic healing, and Ammu’s transgressive love each reimagine ecological citizenship beyond the binaries of sacred and profane, pure and impure, East and West.

In sum, postcolonial Indian ecofeminism, through its critical phase, learns to balance indigenous reverence with intersectional critique. It no longer asks women to embody nature; it invites them to co-author ecological futures. This evolution—from the soil-bound ethics of Markandaya to the transnational consciousness of Lahiri—marks a paradigm shift from cultural conservation to ecocritical pluralism, paving the way for what the next section will term the “post-ethnic ecology of womanhood.”

V. PLURAL ECOLOGIES AND POSTETHNIC IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S *THE NAMESAKE*

If Markandaya’s Rukmani roots Indian ecofeminism in the soil and Divakaruni’s Tilo reimagines it through diasporic myth, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) relocates ecological belonging within the terrain of post-ethnic identity—a space defined not by geography but by memory, affect, and adaptability. Lahiri’s ecofeminism is quieter, more domestic, and yet radical in its implications: she redefines environment not as wilderness or field but as the intimate architecture of everyday life. Within the microcosm of immigrant households, kitchens, and gardens, Lahiri constructs an ecology of emotion, one that mirrors the rhythms of adaptation, migration, and self-reinvention.

While *The Namesake* is often read through diasporic or postcolonial lenses, its ecological dimensions have received less sustained attention. Yet, as scholars like Lekha Roy and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri observe, Lahiri’s characters negotiate the binaries of “inside and outside worlds” where “space begins to exert its own dynamics” in shaping cross-cultural identities (Roy and Khushu-Lahiri 112). For Ashima and Gogol Ganguli, environment is not a fixed homeland but a series of lived ecosystems—each defined by sensory familiarity, community ties, and acts of care. In these environments, Lahiri articulates a distinctly post-ethnic ecofeminism, one that reclaims ecology as a practice of empathy across borders.

5.1 Domestic Ecology: The Politics of Everyday Care

At the heart of Lahiri’s ecofeminism lies the domestic sphere, a site long trivialized in both environmental and feminist discourse. Through Ashima’s character, Lahiri

reclaims the household as a living ecosystem where adaptation becomes a form of ecological creativity. From her first days in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ashima’s effort to replicate Indian food, spices, and rituals transforms the alien apartment into a microcosmic habitat. The act of mixing Rice Krispies with peanuts and chilli powder to make *jhalmuri* (Lahiri 1) dramatizes this hybrid ecology—an act of culinary survival that collapses the distance between continents.

Ecofeminist scholars such as Catriona Sandilands and Val Plumwood have underscored the importance of care labour in sustaining ecological communities. Lahiri translates this philosophy into domestic practice. Ashima’s food preparation, home-making, and ritual observances are not passive repetitions of tradition but adaptive strategies that negotiate belonging in a foreign climate. The material texture of food—the smell of mustard oil, the crackle of cumin—becomes an affective bridge between memory and environment. These sensory acts echo what Divakaruni’s Tilo performs through her spices, yet Ashima’s gestures are non-mystical, embodied, and quotidian. Lahiri thus democratizes ecofeminism, shifting it from divine symbolism to the politics of everyday endurance.

Ashima’s domestic ecology is also feminist in its redefinition of labour and identity. Her home is not a confinement but a transitional biosphere where she experiments with cultural hybridity—raising children who are both Bengali and American, cooking with local produce while retaining Indian flavours, and adapting seasonal rituals to new weather patterns. The diasporic woman here does not preserve a static culture; she curates continuity through change. This aligns with Karen Warren’s pluralist ecofeminism, which insists that feminist and ecological practices must remain “contextualist, inclusivist, and structurally pluralistic” (4).

5.2 Migration as Environmental Transformation

Lahiri also portrays migration as a form of environmental reconfiguration. The transference from Calcutta to Cambridge is not merely social or linguistic but ecological: it entails new climates, seasons, foods, and material infrastructures. The immigrant body must recalibrate its rhythms—the skin to the cold, the stomach to foreign diets, the mind to urban isolation. Lahiri’s prose often renders these adjustments in sensory detail, such as Ashima’s first winter when “her breath is visible in the air, the radiators hiss like snakes, and everything smells of paper and paint” (Lahiri 7). This material realism transforms displacement into ecological estrangement.

Unlike Markandaya’s or Divakaruni’s protagonists, Ashima’s agency emerges not through overt rebellion but through adaptive resilience. Her ability to maintain care

networks across space—sending packages of homemade sweets, preserving seeds, cultivating familiarity—epitomises an ecofeminism of continuity-in-motion. As Stuart Hall notes, diasporic identity is defined “not by essence and purity, but by hybridity” (235). Lahiri’s ecofeminism mirrors this hybridity: her women find belonging not by returning to origin but by re-rooting through adaptation.

This adaptive ecology contrasts sharply with the alienation experienced by Ashoke and Gogol, whose relationships with the environment remain mediated by abstraction—work, academia, architecture. Lahiri thus feminizes ecological atonement without essentializing it. Ashima’s relational intelligence, her capacity to read affective atmospheres, operates as an alternative epistemology—one grounded in care and sensory memory rather than mastery.

5.3 Naming, Identity, and Ecological Belonging

The novel’s title itself, *The Namesake*, suggests the ecological and cultural significance of naming. Gogol’s struggle with his name symbolises a broader crisis of identity and rootedness. A name, like a species in an ecosystem, marks both individuality and lineage; it locates one within a web of relations. When Gogol legally changes his name to “Nikhil,” he enacts a symbolic act of deforestation—severing one root in the hope of replanting another. Yet, as Lahiri suggests, the act of renaming cannot erase ecological memory. Gogol remains haunted by the landscapes and languages of his origin. His return to Calcutta after his father’s death resembles a pilgrimage not to a sacred land but to a lost ecology—a sensory archive of childhood monsoons, streets, and food.

Ecofeminist theory helps decode the emotional weight of this return. For Lahiri, identity and ecology are mutually constitutive: to lose one’s environment is to lose a part of oneself. The post-ethnic subject must therefore cultivate a portable ecology—rituals, recipes, habits, and attachments that travel across borders. In this way, Lahiri anticipates what David Hollinger calls a “post-ethnic America,” one that embraces “voluntary affiliations” over rigid descent (Hollinger 83). Ashima’s life after her husband’s death exemplifies this: she divides her time between India and the United States, refusing to fix home to a single soil. This is not rootlessness but rhizomatic belonging—a living network of relations extending across continents.

5.4 Feminine Fluidity and Ecological Citizenship

In Lahiri’s fiction, ecological consciousness translates into ethical mobility—a willingness to inhabit plurality without domination. The feminine principle here is not the mythic *shakti* of Shiva or the sacrificial mother of Markandaya, but the quietly transformative force of adaptability. By embracing impermanence, Ashima and, eventually, Gogol

model what Tina Sikka terms an “inclusive environmentalism” that foregrounds empathy, interdependence, and non-hierarchical coexistence (Sikka 125).

This fluidity also challenges the masculinist logic of control—whether over women, nature, or identity. In a subtle inversion, Lahiri feminizes knowledge and masculine alienation: Ashima learns through relation, while Gogol learns through detachment. Yet it is Ashima’s relational learning that endures. Her home in the novel’s final pages—half-empty yet warm with remembered gestures—symbolizes an ecology of memory, sustained by care rather than permanence.

The final scenes encapsulate Lahiri’s ecofeminist ethos. Preparing to leave her house, Ashima packs spices, saris, and books—tokens of continuity. She walks through empty rooms, each retaining “the smell of their cooking, their laughter, their lives” (Lahiri 281). This domestic residue functions as what philosopher Jane Bennett would call “vibrant matter,” the lingering vitality of objects that bear human histories. Lahiri’s attention to such material traces affirms that ecology is not only external nature but the interior environment of the lived home.

5.5 Post-ethnic Ecofeminism: A New Paradigm

By the end of *The Namesake*, Lahiri moves beyond the binaries that structured earlier ecofeminism—East/West, nature/culture, female/male—and proposes a model of post-ethnic ecofeminism, where belonging is chosen, layered, and revisable. The immigrant woman becomes not an uprooted exile but a custodian of relational continuity, sustaining life across borders. In this model, ecology itself becomes diasporic: hybrid, adaptive, and interdependent.

Ashima’s decision to live “half the year in India, half in America” (Lahiri 282) crystallises this ethic. Her mobility refuses closure; she inhabits multiplicity as home. This is an ecofeminism without fetishised origins, one that aligns with Karen Warren’s and Bina Agarwal’s pluralist visions and extends them into transnational terrains. In Ashima, Lahiri fuses the maternal ethics of care with the modern ethics of freedom, producing a synthesis that speaks to twenty-first-century ecological citizenship: responsive, relational, and responsible.

Through *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates that the ecological is not only rural or sacred—it is urban, migratory, and affective. The “green feminine” becomes a metaphor for survival through adaptation, not for retreat into essential purity. As Stuart Hall reminds us, identity “lives with and through, not despite, difference” (235). Lahiri’s women live precisely in that difference—nurturing, negotiating, and re-rooting themselves in plural ecologies that transcend borders.

VI. TOWARD A LITERATURE OF ECOCRITICAL PLURALISM: RE- ROOTING THE GREEN FEMININE

The evolution of Indian ecofeminism from Kamala Markandaya's agrarian village to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's diasporic myth and Jhumpa Lahiri's urban domesticity reveals a striking trajectory of ecological pluralism. Across this continuum, Indian women writers move from the local to the global, from rooted to routed identities, from essentialist spirituality to critical inclusivity. Each writer redefines what it means for womanhood to be "green"—not merely in its association with fertility or nurture but as an ethical, epistemological, and imaginative stance. The "green feminine," thus, becomes a dynamic principle that re-roots itself in changing landscapes—material, cultural, and psychological.

6.1 The Journey from Rootedness to Relationality

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) establishes the first contour of this journey by grounding ecofeminism in the agrarian ethos of newly independent India. Through Rukmani's bond with the soil, seed, and monsoon, Markandaya articulates a subsistence ethic based on care, reciprocity, and endurance. Yet her narrative also registers the vulnerability of this ethos under industrial capitalism, represented by the tannery. Nature and woman are neither idealized nor victimized but rendered as co-sufferers in the modern project of progress. The ecofeminism of Markandaya is thus proto-critical—it recognizes the necessity of change even as it mourns the erosion of organic interdependence.

Divakaruni, writing four decades later, relocates this interdependence in the mythic transnational. Her Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* becomes a mediator between worlds—the mystical and the modern, the Indian and the American, the ecological and the erotic. Here, the environment is no longer a field or forest but a network of memories and myths circulating within diasporic commerce. The spices, endowed with sentience, speak to the ecological wisdom displaced by globalisation. Yet Divakaruni's ecofeminism is neither nostalgic nor purely spiritual; it is dialogic, negotiating between indigenous knowledge and multicultural realities. In the relationship between Tilo and Raven, she dramatizes an intercultural solidarity grounded in mutual vulnerability, not purity of tradition.

Lahiri extends this trajectory into the twenty-first century, where ecology is reframed as post-ethnic consciousness. In *The Namesake* (2003), the domestic sphere replaces the sacred grove as the site of ecological engagement. Ashima's acts of cooking, nurturing, and adapting transform the immigrant home into a living ecosystem. Migration

becomes an ecological process: one of recalibration, care, and coexistence. Lahiri's ecofeminism is marked by humility—it celebrates continuity through change and portrays belonging as a practice rather than a place.

Across these stages, Indian ecofeminism transitions from rootedness to relationality—from the ethics of soil to the ethics of solidarity. Each writer preserves the green feminine but refashions it to match her historical moment.

6.2 From Symbol to Praxis

This evolution signifies a movement from symbolic ecofeminism, which idealizes women as nature, toward pragmatic ecofeminism, which situates ecology within everyday practices and social structures. The Indian ecofeminist imagination thus matures from sacred reverence to social activism, from metaphysical purity to plural praxis. As Bina Agarwal insists, ecological justice depends not on mythic celebration but on "gendered access to resources" (Agarwal 142). Literature participates in this justice by reshaping perception—by teaching readers to see interdependence where ideology has taught hierarchy.

Markandaya's Rukmani, Divakaruni's Tilo, and Lahiri's Ashima share a pedagogy of care. Each teaches through quiet endurance rather than didactic speech. Their lives embody the ecofeminist principle that knowledge is relational and iterative, emerging from cycles of cultivation, adaptation, and remembrance. In Rukmani's farming, Tilo's healing, and Ashima's homemaking, ecology becomes an epistemology of care, rooted in doing rather than declaring.

Such representations move beyond the myth of woman as static nurturer. They present women as agents of ecological translation—figures who mediate between nature and culture, local and global, past and present. Through them, Indian ecofeminist fiction transforms spirituality into strategy, affection into analysis.

6.3 Ecocritical Pluralism: Theoretical Synthesis

Karen Warren's model of structural pluralism (1987) offers a useful lens for understanding this synthesis. For Warren, ecofeminism must remain open to multiple frameworks—spiritual, material, cultural—without collapsing them into a single moral truth. Indian ecofeminism embodies this pluralism by combining Gandhian ethics, indigenous cosmologies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. The result is a hybrid discourse that accommodates both the symbolic resonance of *shakti* and the material realities of labour and migration.

Tina Sikka's notion of "inclusive environmentalism" (2018) complements this pluralism by highlighting how ecological care must engage with social inequities—class, caste, gender, and geography. Lahiri's Ashima exemplifies this inclusivity: she practices sustainability not through rhetoric

but through adaptive continuity—preserving seeds, recipes, and rituals across continents. Similarly, Divakaruni's Tilo enacts ecological empathy by forging cross-cultural bonds with marginalized others, while Markandaya's Rukmani embodies subsistence ethics amid structural scarcity.

Ecofeminism in these texts is thus intersectional and dialogic. It draws equally from Shiva's reverence for nature and Agarwal's critique of essentialism, from Sandilands's democratic ecology and Sikka's materialist standpoint. Together, they form an Indian ecofeminism that is neither purely spiritual nor purely political but relationally critical—a dialogue between feeling and reason, faith and reform, earth and diaspora.

6.4 Literature as Ecological Mediation

Indian women's literature becomes, through this process, a form of ecological mediation. Fiction performs what policy cannot: it makes ecological ethics felt. Through narrative empathy, readers inhabit the perspectives of women who negotiate hunger, displacement, and cultural hybridity. This empathetic engagement constitutes what Arundhati Roy calls the "politics of the small"—the moral force of lived particularities against abstract systems of domination.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's ecological imagination fuses with her feminist politics, anticipating the pluralism explored by Lahiri. The Meenachal River's contamination mirrors the corruption of caste hierarchies; Ammu's forbidden love becomes an act of environmental as well as social defiance. Roy's fiction, like that of Markandaya, Divakaruni, and Lahiri, situates ecological renewal in the reclamation of intimacy—between humans and between humanity and the nonhuman.

By drawing connections among these writers, one discerns a collective literary movement: from the representation of ecological crisis to the cultivation of ecological consciousness. These texts are not only mirrors of environmental decay but models of ethical imagination. They train readers to perceive interdependence, vulnerability, and resilience as the true metrics of progress.

6.5 Postcolonial Ecofeminism and the Global Future

The global relevance of Indian ecofeminism lies in its ability to reconcile tradition and transformation. In a world fractured by climate crisis, migration, and technological alienation, the Indian ecofeminist paradigm offers a vocabulary of care-based modernity—a synthesis of spirituality and sustainability, rooted in relational ethics rather than domination.

Under the lens of postcolonial theory, this synthesis also resists the Western monopoly on environmental discourse. By grounding ecological awareness in women's lived realities—agrarian, diasporic, domestic—Indian

ecofeminism provincializes global environmentalism. It insists that sustainability is not a technocratic project but a cultural practice of belonging. The reclamation of indigenous and feminine epistemologies becomes, therefore, an act of decolonization.

This decolonial ecofeminism converges with contemporary global movements such as eco-spirituality, slow living, and climate justice, yet it contributes something unique: an emphasis on ethical hybridity. The Indian ecofeminist heroine—whether sowing seeds in a drought-stricken village, invoking spices in exile, or preserving recipes across borders—embodies the possibility of sustainable life amid instability. Her resilience anticipates the planetary citizenship envisioned in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and India's own "Viksit Bharat 2047" vision of equitable growth through ecological balance.

6.6 Re-Rooting the Green Feminine

The metaphor of re-rooting captures the spirit of this evolving ecofeminism. To re-root is not to return but to renew—to plant consciousness in new soil while preserving the memory of the old. Markandaya's soil, Divakaruni's spice, and Lahiri's home are all forms of re-rooting—gestures of continuity in the face of displacement. They testify that ecology is not a static geography but a dynamic relation sustained through care, imagination, and remembrance.

This process of re-rooting also challenges the binary of nature and culture. In Indian ecofeminist fiction, nature is never external to human life; it is the very texture of existence—its food, language, and rhythm. The "green feminine" thus becomes a symbol not of fertility alone but of creative adaptability. She is the farmer and the teacher, the healer and the migrant, the nurturer and the critic. Her strength lies not in purity but in plurality.

VII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP OF THE SELF

In bringing together these writers, the study reveals that Indian ecofeminism has matured into a discourse of ecological citizenship—a moral and imaginative participation in sustaining both environment and equality. It advocates not withdrawal into nature but engagement with community, not worship of the earth but responsibility toward it.

Rukmani, Tilo, and Ashima exemplify this citizenship in different registers: subsistence, healing, and adaptation. Their lives mark the phases of Indian ecofeminism—its rooted beginnings, its diasporic expansion, and its plural culmination. Together, they enact a shift from reverence to

relation, from conservation to creativity, from monologue to dialogue.

Thus, “re-rooting the green feminine” means reclaiming womanhood as a transformative ecological force—responsive to history, open to diversity, and committed to sustainability. Indian ecofeminist literature, in tracing this transformation, offers the global South’s most enduring contribution to world environmental thought: the insight that the health of the earth depends upon the ethics of empathy.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, Bina. “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 119–158. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3178217.
- [2] Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- [3] d’Eaubonne, Françoise. *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. Pierre Horay, 1974.
- [4] Dietrich, Gabriel. “Plea for Survival.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 24, no. 7, 1989, pp. 325–366. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4394469.
- [5] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. Anchor Books, 1997.
- [6] Gautam, Mohan Kant. *Indian Diaspora: Ethnicity and Diasporic Identity*. CARIM-India RR 2013/29, European University Institute, 2013, <https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf/EthnicityandDiasporicIdentity.pdf>.
- [7] Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.
- [8] Hollinger, David A. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. Basic Books, 2006.
- [9] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.
- [10] Ling, Chen. “Ecological Criticism Based on Social Gender: The Basic Principles of Ecofeminism.” *Higher Education of Social Science*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, pp. 67–72. DOI: 10.3968/4895.
- [11] Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin India, 2009.
- [12] Merlin, Lara. “Review: *The Mistress of Spices*.” *World Literature Today*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1998, p. 207. DOI: 10.2307/40153340.
- [13] Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Rawat Publications, 1993.
- [14] Pande, Amba. “Conceptualising Indian Diaspora: Diversities within a Common Identity.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 49, 2013, pp. 59–65. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24478375.
- [15] Rao, Manish. “Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review.” *Deportate, esuli, profughe*, no. 20, 2012, pp. 124–142, https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/numeri/n20/13_20_-Rao_Ecofeminism.pdf.
- [16] Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Penguin, 1997.
- [17] Roy, Lekha, and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri. “Forging Transnational Identities: A Postethnic Diasporic Re-imaging of ‘Home’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*.” *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 110–121.
- [18] Rushdie, Salman. “Imaginary Homelands.” *London Review of Books*, vol. 4, no. 18, 1982, pp. 18–21, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n18/salman-rushdie/imaginary-homelands>.
- [19] Sandilands, Catriona. *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- [20] Schlote, Christiane. “Interpreters of Transnationalism: South Asian American Women Writers.” *American Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2006, pp. 387–409. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41158239.
- [21] Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Zed Books, 1988.
- [22] Shukla, Sandhya. *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*. Princeton University Press, 2003.
- [23] Sikka, Tina. *Climate Technology, Gender, and Justice: The Standpoint of the Vulnerable*. Springer, 2018.
- [24] Warren, Karen J. “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections.” *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1987, pp. 3–20. DOI: 10.5840/enviroethics19879135.



The Unfinished Project: A Critique of the Legacy of Cultural Studies from Birmingham to the Algorithmic Present

Pramod Kumar K V

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, M G College Iritty & Member Syndicate Kannur University, Kerala, India

Received: 27 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Oct 2025; Accepted: 25 Oct 2025; Available online: 29 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article traces the intellectual arc of Cultural Studies from its founding at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to its present-day encounters with digital and decolonial paradigms. It posits that the field's evolution has been driven by a set of generative but destabilizing contradictions—pitting agency against structure, popular culture against political economy, and identity politics against class analysis. By charting these critical engagements, the analysis demonstrates how Cultural Studies, despite successfully democratizing the objects of scholarly inquiry, has consistently struggled to formulate a cohesive political program. Consequently, its legacy is best characterized as an “unfinished project”—a vital yet often compromised critical apparatus facing the novel challenges of platform capitalism, algorithmic regulation, and global ecological crisis.



Keywords— Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, Hegemony, Political Economy, Digital Culture, Decolonial Theory, Neoliberal University, Algorithmic Governance.

Introduction: An Inheritance of Contradiction

From its inception, Cultural Studies defined itself less as a formal academic discipline and more as a radical intellectual insurgency. Pioneered by figures such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson, its foundational project was to reconceptualize culture as a primary terrain of political contestation. In opposition to both elitist conceptions of culture and the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism, these thinkers advocated for the study of the “whole way of life,” with a particular emphasis on working-class experience (Williams 48). Under the directorship of Stuart Hall, the CCCS performed a crucial synthesis, weaving this culturalist attention to lived reality with the structuralist theories of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. It was from this fraught merger that the field's central analytical device—hegemony, the process of securing consent through cultural and ideological struggle—was refined, promising a mode of analysis deeply attuned to the operations of power (Gramsci; Hall, “Gramsci's Relevance”).

This potent beginning, however, inaugurated a history marked by relentless self-critique. As the field gained global reach and academic legitimacy, its core strengths were frequently reinterpreted as weaknesses. This essay argues that the narrative of Cultural Studies is, in essence, a history of its own internal reckonings. Every extension of its scope—into audience reception, identity formation, and the digital sphere—has been shadowed by a necessary theoretical correction that, while enriching the field, has also contributed to its persistent state of disarray (McGuigan; Fraser). The initial emphasis on the active audience and marginalized voices has, in some applications, devolved into an apolitical affirmation of consumerism, a disregard for materialist analysis, and a weakening of collective political imperatives. By mapping this critical genealogy, this investigation aims not to repudiate Cultural Studies but to rigorously assess its incomplete endeavor, discerning which of its analytical instruments remain indispensable for confronting the heightened complexities of our contemporary moment.

Foundational Schisms: Marxism and the Structure/Agency Dialectic

The earliest and most formative critiques of Cultural Studies were internal, revolving around its fraught relationship with Marxist theory. A central schism emerged between the "culturalist" lineage of Williams and Thompson, which championed human agency and the category of "experience," and the "structuralist" currents drawn from Continental philosophy, which emphasized the overdetermining force of ideological state apparatuses and discursive systems (Hall, "Cultural Studies").

Hall's seminal work at the CCCS sought to navigate this divide by leveraging Gramsci's theory of hegemony. This model framed power not as a monolithic imposition but as an unstable, perpetually contested field where consent is dynamically negotiated. This approach yielded incisive studies of post-war British society, analyzing phenomena from media discourse to the politics of policing (Hall et al.). Yet, this very synthesis prompted a significant counter-critique. From a structuralist Marxist perspective, the field's desire to evade economic reductionism had led it to overcorrect, effectively attributing an absolute autonomy to the cultural realm (Hall, "Cultural Studies" 38). The critique served as a caution that by concentrating solely on the superstructure—media, ideology, education—Cultural Studies was in danger of losing sight of the fundamental capitalist logics of exploitation and accumulation that constitute the necessary condition for any cultural "war of position" (Gramsci). This initial debate over the economic instance established a perennial tension that would resurface in subsequent decades.

The Populist Turn and its Discontents: Semiotic Resistance vs. Political Economy

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a decisive shift in the field's orientation, commonly referred to as the "populist turn." Influenced by the ethnographic work of scholars like David Morley and Janice Radway, and theoretically galvanized by John Fiske, this turn championed the "active audience." Fiske famously portrayed consumers of popular culture as "semiotic guerrillas," skillfully appropriating from mass-produced texts to forge their own resistant meanings and pleasures (Fiske 32). This was a democratizing move that affirmed the agency of subordinated groups, directly challenging the Frankfurt School's pessimistic view of a homogenizing "culture industry" (Adorno and Horkheimer).

This celebratory stance, however, soon provoked a robust and lasting critique. Jim McGuigan, among others, accused this strand of thought of "cultural populism," contending that it dangerously conflated semiotic resistance with

political resistance. The act of reading a television program in an oppositional manner, while potentially empowering on a personal level, does not automatically equate to organized action for material change. More troublingly, this valorization of consumer ingenuity could function as an unwitting theoretical justification for neoliberalism, misconstruing market-based participation for genuine political challenge (McGuigan 45). In this reading, the populist turn signaled a depoliticizing drift, moving the field's focus from collective, hegemonic conflict to atomized acts of interpretive "poaching." The nuanced Gramscian understanding that cultural gains are not synonymous with political-economic transformation was, at times, supplanted by an uncritical appreciation of consumption patterns.

The Politics of Fragmentation: Identity and the Redistribution/Recognition Divide

Parallel to the populist turn, Cultural Studies was fundamentally transformed by the ascendancy of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theories. This constituted an essential corrective to the field's initial blind spots concerning gender and race, which had often treated "class" as the master category of analysis.

The incorporation of these perspectives, exemplified in Stuart Hall's later work on "race," Paul Gilroy's formulation of the Black Atlantic, and bell hooks' intersectional critique, vastly expanded the field's purview (Hall, "Race"; Gilroy; hooks). It displaced a monolithic focus on class conflict with a sophisticated grasp of power as it operates across interlocking vectors of identity. The concept of intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, became a central tenet. Yet, this vital expansion also precipitated new criticisms. The first was the allegation of political disintegration. As the inventory of acknowledged oppressions grew, the feasibility of a unified political project, reminiscent of the field's early alignment with labor movements, appeared to recede (Gitlin). While this shift allowed for greater analytical nuance, some on the traditional left argued it engendered a form of identity politics often unable to construct the broad-based coalitions necessary to contest capitalist power at a structural level.

A second, corollary critique emerged from critical theory itself. Scholars like Nancy Fraser articulated a concern that a "politics of recognition" was increasingly supplanting a "politics of redistribution" (Fraser 69). The intense and justified focus on cultural identity and symbolic representation, they argued, risked obscuring the material and economic underpinnings of inequality. The struggle for equitable media portrayal, while crucial, is fundamentally different from the fight for wealth redistribution or housing

justice. This critique suggests that Cultural Studies, in its embrace of identity, occasionally lost its ability to connect cultural analyses to a systemic critique of capital, thereby failing to adequately address how capitalism actively generates and exploits social divisions.

The Institutional Bind: From Radical Margins to Neoliberal Academy

A profound meta-critique of Cultural Studies concerns its own institutional location. Born as a radical, trans-disciplinary project on the fringes of the university, it has, over time, become a standardized, if often financially vulnerable, academic specialty. This process of institutionalization has deeply inflected its political potential.

As Cultural Studies was codified into departments, curricula, and a niche publishing market, it was inevitably shaped by the demands of the contemporary neoliberal university—an institution that privileges quantifiable outcomes, grant income, and the production of employable graduates over the slow, deep work of critical inquiry. As Bill Readings argued in *The University in Ruins*, the field faces the constant threat of domestication (Readings 175). Its radical vocabulary can be assimilated into syllabi and conference keynotes, becoming a specialized jargon divorced from extra-academic movements. The practice of critique can devolve into a professional ritual. Moreover, the field's emphasis on "difference" and "identity" is peculiarly susceptible to co-optation by a neoliberal ethos that champions diversity in the corporate sphere while perpetuating structural inequity (Melamed 5). Thus, the field's institutional legacy is profoundly ambiguous: while it has successfully introduced critical theories of power into higher education, it simultaneously risks becoming a self-referential discourse, its political efficacy neutralized by the very institution that houses it.

The Digital Conundrum: Hegemony in the Age of Algorithms

The rise of the digital era represents the most formidable challenge to Cultural Studies' core frameworks since its establishment. The field's traditional analytical toolkit, designed for the age of broadcast media and print capitalism, is often ill-equipped to parse the fluid, data-driven, platform-centric nature of contemporary digital existence.

The classic model of hegemony, for instance, assumes a social field where a dominant ideology is actively negotiated by various groups. In contrast, the digital ecology is characterized by hyper-fragmented publics,

algorithmic filtering, and what Shoshana Zuboff identifies as "surveillance capitalism." Power now functions less through the propagation of a dominant worldview and more through the innate architecture of digital platforms—their user interfaces, terms of service, and inscrutable algorithms that manage visibility and sociality (Zuboff 8). Zuboff's notion of "instrumentarian power" delineates a form of control that is behavioral and predictive, operating on a register fundamentally different from traditional ideological interpellation.

Cultural Studies has been taken to task for its belated and sometimes inept engagement with this new landscape. While it remains proficient at analyzing the symbolic content of digital culture—memes, online fandoms, digital personae—it has frequently lacked the technical and conceptual lexicon to剖析 the underlying political economy of data harvesting and algorithmic management (Andrejevic 15). The traditional emphasis on "representation" must now be urgently complemented with an analysis of "computation." The legacy of the "active audience" is especially problematic here; to celebrate the participatory nature of social media is to overlook how every click and status update functions as unpaid digital labor that produces behavioral surplus, the essential resource of surveillance capitalism (Terranova 33). The digital "prosumer" is less a semiotic guerrilla and more a raw material to be mined. A Cultural Studies that fails to confront this core power dynamic risks re-enacting the missteps of the populist turn within a domain where the stakes are exponentially higher.

The De-colonial Intervention: Epistemic Unsettling

The most radical epistemological challenge to Cultural Studies originates from decolonial theory. While postcolonial theory (e.g., the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha) has been largely incorporated into the field, the decolonial turn, associated with Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, and María Lugones, poses a more fundamental problem.

The decolonial critique asserts that Cultural Studies, for all its anti-canonical posturing, remains an outgrowth of the Western, modern/colonial project. Its foundational categories—hegemony, class, the public sphere, even its definition of "the political"—are deeply embedded in a particular European historical trajectory. By universalizing these concepts, Cultural Studies can unintentionally perpetuate a form of epistemic violence, erasing alternative knowledge systems or forcibly assimilating them into its own theoretical schema (Mignolo 45).

This critique demands more than merely adding "non-Western" examples to pre-existing models. It calls for a "de-linking" from the foundational premises of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 54). It requires Cultural Studies to provincialize its own canon, to acknowledge that the paradigms developed to analyze class formation in Britain or media in the United States are not universal templates. The resistances of groups like the Zapatistas in Mexico or Indigenous communities worldwide, for instance, often necessitate analytical frameworks that exceed the explanatory capacity of strictly Gramscian or Foucauldian models (Simpson 22). This represents a profound challenge, intimating that the field's theoretical bedrock is itself provincial and implicated in the very colonial structures it frequently aims to critique. Engaging with this challenge requires a stance of epistemic humility, entering into pluriversal dialogues where Cultural Studies is not the presiding expert but one interlocutor among many.

Synthesis and Enduring Vitalities

Notwithstanding this extensive register of critiques, it is crucial to acknowledge the persistent relevance of the Cultural Studies enterprise. Its legacy is not simply one of shortcomings but of a resilient and necessary critical practice.

First, its core methodological principle—radical contextualism—remains an indispensable analytical virtue. The insistence that no cultural text or practice can be comprehended in isolation from its historical, social, and economic conditions provides a powerful antidote to both formalist and ahistorical approaches (Grossberg, "Cultural Studies" 3).

Second, its constitutive interdisciplinarity, while sometimes resulting in a lack of a stable center, proves to be a significant asset in an era defined by hybrid, complex crises. The ability to synthesize insights from sociology, political economy, critical race theory, and media studies is vital for comprehending multifaceted phenomena like the global ascent of authoritarian populism.

Third, and most fundamentally, its commitment to interrogating power and its alignment with subaltern standpoints, however imperfectly realized, provides an essential ethical and political orientation. In an age of algorithmic bias, synthetic media, and resurgent fascisms, the core mission of "making the invisible visible"—of tracing the intricate relays between culture and power—is more urgent than ever (Hall, "Cultural Studies" 72).

CONCLUSION: THE PROJECT AS PROCESS

The legacy of Cultural Studies is neither a sacred edifice to be revered nor a bankrupt enterprise to be abandoned. It is an unfinished project, constituted by a sequence of productive crises. The critiques it has sustained—regarding its inattention to political economy, its slide into cultural populism, its institutional capture, and its inadequacies in the face of the digital and the decolonial—are not external assaults but are integral to its historical development. They represent the field's continuous, and often fraught, process of self-correction and adaptation.

The unifying thread running through these critiques is the enduring friction between its diagnostic power and its transformative capacity. Cultural Studies has proven extraordinarily adept at diagnosing power, exposing its capillary operations in the quotidian, the mediatic, and the identitarian. However, it has been considerably less successful in articulating a coherent political project for transformation that extends beyond the academic monograph or the localized act of defiance. The passage from critique to praxis remains its most fragile and essential construction.

The future pertinence of Cultural Studies depends on its capacity to integrate its core strengths with the imperatives of its critiques. This requires: 1) re-embedding cultural analysis within a renewed framework of political economy, specifically the logics of datafication and platform capital; 2) engaging decolonial thought not as another sub-field but as a fundamental challenge to its epistemological premises; 3) forging new methodological capacities to grapple with the scale, velocity, and opacity of algorithmic culture; and 4) reimagining its institutional role to foster substantive, not merely symbolic, connections with social movements outside the academy.

The unfinished project of Cultural Studies, therefore, is to reclaim its radical political vocation without jettisoning its hard-earned insights into the intricacies of identity, representation, and everyday life. Its central vocation, as pressing today as it was for Stuart Hall, remains: to comprehend the world in order to transform it. The critiques of its legacy are the essential navigational aids for this ongoing voyage.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1947. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford UP, 2002.
- [2] Andrejevic, Mark. *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*. Routledge, 2013.
- [3] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of

- Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139-67.
- [4] Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Routledge, 1989.
- [5] Fraser, Nancy. "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age." *New Left Review*, no. 212, 1995, pp. 68-93.
- [6] Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- [7] Gitlin, Todd. *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. Metropolitan Books, 1995.
- [8] Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- [9] Grossberg, Lawrence. "Cultural Studies: What's in a Name? (One More Time)." *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*, Duke UP, 1997, pp. 245-71.
- [10] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1980, pp. 57-72.
- [11] ---. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128-38.
- [12] ---. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1986, pp. 5-27.
- [13] ---. "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1992, pp. 10-18.
- [14] Hall, Stuart, et al. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Macmillan, 1978.
- [15] hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. South End Press, 1990.
- [16] McGuigan, Jim. *Cultural Populism*. Routledge, 1992.
- [17] Melamed, Jodi. "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism." *Social Text*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2006, pp. 1-24.
- [18] Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011.
- [19] Morley, David. *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*. British Film Institute, 1980.
- [20] Readings, Bill. *The University in Ruins*. Harvard UP, 1996.
- [21] Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Duke UP, 2014.
- [22] Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2000, pp. 33-58.
- [23] Williams, Raymond. **Culture and Society: 1780-1950**. Columbia UP, 1958.
- [24] Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.



A Right to Reasonable Inferences: Re-Thinking Data Protection Law in the Age of Big Data and AI

Ashikur Rahman

Master of Information Technology, Department of Computer Engineering, Belhaven University, Jackson, Mississippi

Orcid: 0009-0006-8069-2271

Received: 25 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Oct 2025; Accepted: 26 Oct 2025; Available online: 29 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The advent of Big Data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally altered the data processing landscape. The data-driven systems of today can make probabilistic inferences about individuals, predicting their characteristics, behaviors, and likely future actions. They are no longer restricted to using and collecting raw data. This paper argues that the core tenets of data protection law, particularly the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), are inadequately equipped to address the novel risks posed by inferential analytics. While the GDPR provides a robust framework for raw data, its application to inferences remains ambiguous and underdeveloped. Through systematically examining the GDPR's rights and obligations and analyzing the ECJ's jurisprudence, this paper demonstrates that inferences frequently fall into a regulatory gray area. The current legal framework struggles with inferences' subjectivity, verifiability, and qualification as personal data. As a result, essential rights like access, rectification, and objection are frequently rendered useless. This paper proposes a paradigm shift: recognizing a distinct "right to reasonable inferences." This right would consist of two core components: (1) a substantive principle requiring that inferences meet thresholds of acceptability, relevance, and reliability, and (2) a procedural right to contest inferences deemed unreasonable effectively. Finally, the paper suggests ways to strike a balance between the rights of data subjects and the legitimate interests of data controllers, addressing intellectual property and trade secrets law as a significant obstacle to such a right.*



Keywords— *Data Protection, GDPR, Inferences, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Big Data, Reasonable Inferences, Privacy, Fundamental Rights, Intellectual Property.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The economy of inferences is the digital economy. In

the age of Big Data and artificial intelligence (AI), the primary value is no longer derived solely from the raw data collected from individuals—their clicks, purchases, locations, and stated preferences. The sophisticated analytical procedures that process this data to generate new knowledge—predictions, classifications, profiles, and assumptions about individuals that they may not even be aware of themselves—confer the transformative power. A financial technology company infers our creditworthiness from our social network and typing speed; a hiring platform

infers our potential from patterns in our CV and voice tone; and a streaming service infers our mood from our viewing history. These inferences, powered by complex machine learning models, shape life-altering opportunities in employment, finance, healthcare, and justice.

European data protection law, culminating in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), represents the world's most ambitious attempt to regulate the processing of personal data and protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of natural persons. Together with a set of

individual rights, its principles of lawfulness, fairness, transparency, purpose limitation, and data minimization form a comprehensive framework for giving individuals control over their personal data. However, this framework was primarily conceived in a pre-Big Data era, focused on processing factual, provided, or observed data.

The central argument of this paper is that, despite its effectiveness, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) does not adequately address the difficulties posed by inferential analytics. The law's architecture is predicated on a model of data processing where the data in question is objective, verifiable, and directly linked to an individual. By nature, inferences are probabilistic, subjective, and frequently unproven. They are predictions about what a person is or might do, not facts about what they did. This creates a fundamental tension at the heart of data protection law.

This paper will argue that data protection law must be rethought and explicitly extended to include a right to reasonable inferences to meet the challenges of the algorithmic age. This is not merely a call for stricter enforcement of existing rules but a proposal for a new legal principle that directly addresses the qualitative nature of inferences themselves. The paper will proceed as follows. Part II will explore the paradigm shift from explanations to inferences, detailing the novel risks of inferential analytics and formally introducing the right to reasonable inferences concept. Part III will delve into whether inferences can even be considered "personal data" under the law, analysing the ECJ's three-step model and the challenges of subjectivity and verifiability. Part IV will provide a detailed analysis of the relevant jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice in cases such as *YS and M* and *S and Nowak*, extracting crucial lessons on the remit of data protection law concerning inferences. The practical efficacy of rights to access, rectification, objection, and erasure, as well as special protections for sensitive inferences, will be evaluated in Part V by systematically examining the GDPR's current protections against inferences. Part VI will formally propose the right to reasonable inferences, outlining its two core components: a justification requirement and a robust contestation mechanism. Finally, Part VII will address a significant practical barrier to implementing this right—the conflict with intellectual property law and trade secrets—and propose pathways to a necessary balance.

II. EXPLANATIONS TO REASONABLE INFERENCE

The digital revolution has precipitated a move from a world of documented facts to probabilistic predictions.

Traditional data processing involved recording and organising facts: an address, a salary, a purchase transaction. The individual's relationship with this data was often direct and understandable; they could confirm or deny its accuracy. The fair and accurate handling of this recorded reality was the function of data protection law. This model is destroyed by inferential analytics. In this case, the input data are merely the foundation upon which a brand-new, inferred reality is built. This inferred reality is not a record of the past but a prediction of the future or an assessment of a hidden present.

The Novel Risks of Inferential Analytics and a Right to Reasonable Inferences

The ability to infer introduces a new category of risks difficult to mitigate under current data protection guidelines: Opacity and Complexity: The algorithms that generate inferences, intense learning models, are often "black boxes." Even their creators are sometimes unable to fully explain why a particular inference was drawn for a particular person. This opacity directly undermines the GDPR's principles of transparency and fairness, as well as the right to an explanation.

The Problem of Verifiability: How does one verify an inference? If a system infers that Person A has a 85% probability of defaulting on a loan, what constitutes "accurate" data? The inference is a probability, not a fact. It cannot be proven "true" or "false" in a binary sense until a future event occurs—and even then, the fact that the person did not default does not necessarily mean the inference was "wrong"; it might have been a correct assessment of a 15% chance of non-default. Rights like rectification face fundamental difficulties as a result of this. Reiteration of Discrimination and Bias: Inferences do not arise in a vacuum. They are learned from training data from the past. If this data reflects societal biases (e.g., historical hiring discrimination against women), the model will learn to infer that being a woman is a negative predictor for hireability, thus perpetuating and automating discrimination at scale. The inference itself becomes a vehicle for bias.

Moral and Autonomy Harm: Inferences can create a "digital double" of an individual—a profile that may not align with their self-perception or identity. When decisions are made based on this digital double, it can lead to a loss of autonomy and self-determination. A person's ability to determine their own life path may be restricted if they are denied a loan because of an algorithmic inference about their "type." Chilling Effects: Self-censorship and a conformist chilling effect, in which people avoid exploring ideas or activities that could lead to undesirable inferences, can result from the awareness that one's behavior is constantly being analyzed and classified. These risks

demonstrate that the harm is no longer just about the misuse of data we provide, but about the construction of knowledge we never agreed to. The current GDPR framework, which focuses on data processing, is analogous to regulating factory ingredients but not finished goods. The inference—the output—is where the actual impact is. A new focus is required as a result: a right to reasonable inferences. This right posits that the act of concluding an individual is not a value-neutral, technical process but one that must be subject to normative constraints. **It shifts the question from "Was the raw data processed lawfully?" to "Is the inference itself reasonable and fair?"**

A right to reasonable inferences would encompass both procedural and substantive elements. Procedurally, it would guarantee individuals meaningful transparency into the logic of significant inferences and a practical ability to challenge them. It would logically entail responsibilities for data controllers to ensure that the inferential processes they use adhere to specific standards of dependability, relevance, and acceptability in a democratic society. It is a right that seeks to govern the quality of the conclusions drawn about us, not just the process of how they were drawn.

III. INFERENCES PERSONAL DATA?

This document applies to the application of the GDPR's extensive obligations, which is triggered by one crucial condition: the processing of "personal data." Article 4(1) defines personal data as "any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person." The crucial term is "information relating to." The gateway question for determining whether the GDPR apparatus applies is whether an inference falls within this definition.

A. Step-by-Step Method

A framework for interpreting "relating to" has been developed by the European Court of Justice and the Article 29 Working Party (WP29), which was followed by the European Data Protection Board (EDPB). This is often conceptualised as a three-step test:

Content: Is the information about a person? Does it reveal anything about that person? An inference such as "high credit risk" clearly refers to an individual. **Purpose:** Is the information used or likely to be used to evaluate, treat, or analyse a person in a certain way? The very purpose of an inference is to assess an individual for decision-making, easily satisfying this element.

Consequently, does the individual's use of the information affect their rights and interests? Given that inferences are used to make significant decisions, the result is almost always a potential impact.

Applying this test, most inferences would comfortably qualify as personal data. A credit score is information about a person (content), is used to decide on loan applications (purpose), and certainly impacts the individual's financial opportunities (result). The same logic applies to inferred interests for advertising, inferred health risks, or inferred job performance.

B. Subjectivity and Verifiability

The legal challenge arises not from the "relating to" test but the nature of the "information" itself. The GDPR's regime, particularly the rights of access (Article 15) and rectification (Article 16), implicitly assumes that personal data is largely objective and verifiable. An individual can access their data and request its correction if it is inaccurate. An address can be checked; a transaction can be confirmed.

Inferences defy this model. They are subjective conclusions, not objective statements of fact. They are a likelihood or probability. This creates a profound tension:

Access: A data subject has the right to "meaningful information about the logic involved" in automated decision-making under Article 15(1)(h). But what does "meaningful" mean for a complex neural network? Providing a list of the thousands of weighted variables is meaningless to a human. The right to access the "data" itself is complicated when the data is an inference. Does the controller have to disclose the inferred probability score?

Rectification: Article 16 provides the right to rectification of inaccurate personal data. However, how can an inference be corrected? If a model infers "person X is likely to commit fraud," what would rectification entail? A forced speech that interferes with the controller's analysis would move the controller to change the inference to "not likely." The data subject could argue that the underlying data is inaccurate, but the inference might be a mathematically correct output from that (flawed) data. The problem is the model, not the data point.

This subjectivity and non-verifiability create a risk that inferences, while technically falling under the definition of personal data, operate in a practical limbo where the core rights designed to protect individuals are difficult, if not impossible, to exercise effectively. The law recognises them as data but lacks the tools to manage their unique characteristics.

IV. JURISPRUDENCE OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE

The ECJ's rulings provide essential guidance on navigating the boundaries of data protection law, particularly concerning inferences and the nature of personal data.

A. Joined Cases C-141/12 and C-372/12: YS and M and S
This case concerned a third-country national's request for access to the legal analysis contained in a Dutch immigration authority's file, which was used to reject his residence application.

1. Inferences as Personal Data

The Court made a crucial distinction. The final decision (the rejection) was unquestionably personal data. However, the internal legal analysis—the notes, reasoning, and inferences made by the caseworker applying law to fact—was not considered personal data. The Court reasoned that this analysis did not constitute "information" about the applicant but was "information about the assessment and application of that law by the administration." It was an opinion about how the law applied to the facts, not a point about the applicant himself.

This is a highly formalistic and narrow interpretation. It suggests that pure analytical constructs, even if they directly and solely concern an individual and determine their fate, might be placed outside the scope of the definition of personal data if they are framed as "legal advice" or "internal analysis." This creates a potential loophole where controllers could argue that their algorithmic inferences are merely internal analytical models, not personal data in their own right.

2. Remit of data protection law

The ruling in YS underscores a traditional, limited view of the remit of data protection law: its primary concern is factual data about an individual, not the mental or analytical processes applied to that data. This view is ill-suited to the AI age, where the analytical method is the source of the new, impactful data (the inference). If a machine's "analysis" is afforded the same protection as a human's legal advice, the GDPR's applicability to algorithmic inferences is severely weakened.

B. Case C-434/16: Nowak

In contrast, the Nowak case offered a more expansive interpretation. It concerned a candidate's request to access his corrected exam answers under the Data Protection Directive (the GDPR's predecessor).

1. Inferences as Personal Data

The ECJ held that the written answers, the comments of the examiner, and the marks awarded all constituted personal data. Crucially, the Court stated that personal data "covers any information concerning the data subject" and that this "reflects the aim of the [GDPR] to ensure a high level of protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of natural persons." The answers revealed the candidate's knowledge

and intellect, and the examiner's comments reflected an evaluation (an inference) of his performance.

2. Remit of Data Protection Law

Nowak takes a much more expansive and goal-oriented approach. The key question is not the formal label of the information (e.g., "legal analysis" vs. "exam answer") but whether it relates to and affects the individual. The examiner's comments are inferences and evaluations, yet they were brought within the scope of data protection law because they were integral to a decision affecting the individual.

C. Lessons from Jurisprudence of the ECJ

The tension between YS and Nowak reveals the ongoing struggle of traditional legal concepts to adapt to new technological realities.

The Form vs. Substance Dilemma: YS prioritises the form of the information (internal analysis), while Nowak prioritises its substance and effect (evaluation of an individual).

A Narrow vs. Broad Remit: YS suggests a narrower remit for data protection law, potentially excluding analytical outputs. Nowak advocates for a broad, rights-centric remit that encompasses evaluative information.

The Human vs. Machine Problem: The reasoning in YS might be defensible for a human caseworker's internal musings. However, applying the same logic to a machine's output is dangerous. A machine does not have "internal thoughts"; its output is the data product. To exclude algorithmic inferences from the definition of personal data because they are "internal analysis" would be to create a catastrophic loophole.

The correct path forward, aligned with the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the GDPR's objective of ensuring a high level of protection, is to follow the Nowak rationale. The output of an algorithmic process—the inference—must be considered personal data if it is used to evaluate an individual or make decisions about them. Its status cannot depend on being a "final decision" rather than an "intermediate analysis." In an algorithmic system, the inference is the decision-making currency.

V. PROTECTION AGAINST INFERENCES UNDER DATA PROTECTION LAW

Assuming that inferences are recognised as personal data, the next question is how effectively the GDPR's existing rights and obligations protect individuals from the risks they pose.

A. The Right to Know About Inferences

Article 15 provides the right of access. For inferences, this right has several components:

Right to access the inference itself: The data subject should be able to know what has been inferred about them (e.g., "your inferred credit risk score is 650").

Right to meaningful information about the logic (Art. 15(1)(h)): This is critical. The individual must be explained how the inference was reached.

The practical implementation of Article 15(1)(h) is the subject of intense debate. Does "meaningful information" necessitate the algorithm's full disclosure? This could certainly not infringe on IP and reveal trade secrets. Does it require a simple, high-level description? This would be not very sensible. The emerging consensus leans towards a "functional explanation": an explanation that describes the main factors that contributed to the inference in a way that is understandable to the data subject. For example, "Your loan application was rejected primarily due to your high debt-to-income ratio and the short length of your credit history." While this does not reveal the algorithm's inner workings, it does provide useful information. However, for highly complex models, even providing a functional explanation that is both accurate and non-technical remains a significant technical and legal challenge. The right to know, therefore, while necessary, is often insufficient on its own.

B. The Right to Rectify Inferences

Article 16 provides the right to rectification of inaccurate personal data. This is where the nature of inferences creates its greatest challenge.

What does it mean for an inference to be "inaccurate"? One can distinguish two scenarios:

Inaccuracy in underlying data: If an inference is based on factually incorrect raw data (e.g., an incorrect late payment mark on a credit report), the path to rectification is clear: correct the underlying data, which should, in a well-functioning system, lead to a corrected inference.

Inaccuracy in the inference itself: This is the core problem. If the underlying data is correct, but the inference is perceived as unfair, biased, or wrong, can it be "rectified"? For instance, if a model correctly uses shopping data (bought pregnancy vitamins) to infer a woman is pregnant, but she is not, the inference is inaccurate. However, from a statistical perspective, the model performed correctly—it made a high-probability inference based on a strong correlate.

Rectifying this is not a simple matter of correcting a fact. It may require:

Appending a supplementary statement: The individual could have the right to add a note to their profile contesting the inference ("Subject has confirmed she is not pregnant").

Deletion of the inference: Treating the inference as data in its own right and requesting its erasure under Article 17.

Changing the model: Changing the biased or flawed model that led to the inference may be the real solution, not changing just one inference. However, Article 16 does not easily impose an obligation on a controller to retrain their entire AI system for one individual.

The right to rectification, as currently framed, is a blunt instrument for the nuanced problem of inaccurate inferences.

C. The Rights to Object to and Delete Inferences

1. Right to Object (Article 21): This right allows an individual to object to processing based on legitimate interests or public task. The controller must then stop processing unless it demonstrates compelling legitimate grounds. This could be a potent weapon against marketing or profiling inferences. An individual could say, "I object to you inferring my political opinions for ad targeting." However, the right is not absolute and can be overridden by the controller's compelling interests.

D. Protections against Sensitive Inferences

1. Can personal inferences be considered sensitive data? Article 9 prohibits the processing of special categories of personal data (e.g., data revealing racial origin, political opinions, health, etc.) unless an exception applies. A critical question is whether an inference can fall under this prohibition. Data "revealing" these characteristics is mentioned in the text of Article 9. This suggests that an inference ought to be treated as sensitive data itself if it is intended to reveal a sensitive characteristic or has the effect of doing so. For example, an inference that someone is "likely to have diabetes" or "likely a socialist" is data revealing health or political opinions and should trigger the strict protections of Article 9. This is a powerful application of the law: it means that creating sensitive inferences is presumptively unlawful unless a specific exemption is met.

2. Reliability and intention The complication arises with unintentional or unreliable inferences. What if an output that is correlated with a health condition is produced by a model that was not designed to infer health? Or what if the inference is highly unreliable? The GDPR does not require the processing to be intentional or reliable for Article 9 to apply. If the data reveals (or is used to treat someone as if it reveals) a sensitive characteristic, the prohibition is triggered. This places a high burden on controllers to ensure their models do not inadvertently generate sensitive inferences.

E. The Right to Challenge Inference-Based Decisions
Articles 21 and 22 provide specific rights regarding automated decision-making, including profiling. Article 22(1) establishes the general right "not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing... which produces legal effects or similarly significantly affects him or her." This is a crucial right directly aimed at the risks of inferences.

When such a decision is made, Article 22(3) mandates the right to "obtain human intervention on the part of the controller, to express his or her point of view and to contest the decision." This right to contest is a cornerstone of protection. It acknowledges that the fairness of the outcome may be the issue rather than the accuracy of the data.

However, its limitations are notable:

It only applies to solely automated decisions. Many systems use automation as a recommendation for a human, circumventing the article.

Procedural rights grant contest rights. It does not guarantee a particular outcome, only a right to be heard.

It only addresses the decision that was based on the inference, not the reasonableness of the inference itself.

VI. RE-ALIGNING THE REMIT OF DATA PROTECTION LAW IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA: A RIGHT TO REASONABLE INFERENCES

A regulatory void is revealed by the above analysis. The GDPR applies to inferences, but the tools it uses aren't suited to them. As a new interpretative principle and potential future legal reform, we propose the recognition of a freestanding right to reasonable inferences. As a direct normative standard for the act of inference itself, this right would complement and enhance the existing framework. This right would have two core, interdependent components:

A. Justification to Establish Acceptability, Relevance, and Reliability

The first component is substantive. Any significant inference used in decision-making would need to be justifiable as reasonable. Three factors would be used to determine this justifiability: Acceptability: The inference must be morally and socially acceptable. It should not be based on protected characteristics or lead to impermissible discrimination, even if it is statistically "accurate." An inference about a person's health from their grocery shopping may be reliable, but could be deemed unacceptable due to its intrusive nature and the risk of harm. Data analytics now has a moral boundary thanks to this

criterion. Relevance: The inference must be relevant and proportionate to the specific context and purpose for which it is used. The data and model used must have a verifiable and substantial connection to the outcome being predicted. Using inferred personality traits from social media to assess creditworthiness likely fails the relevance test, as the link is tenuous and unproven.

Reliability: A reliable, statistically sound, and empirically validated method must be used to draw the inference. It should be up to the controller to show that the model has been tested for accuracy and bias and is good enough for the job at hand. A "black box" model whose reliability cannot be demonstrated would fail this test.

This justification requirement would flip the current dynamic. Instead of the individual having to prove an inference is "inaccurate" (a near-impossible task), the controller would have a positive duty to ensure and demonstrate that its inferences are acceptable, relevant, and reliable before deploying them in a way that affects individuals.

B. Contestation of Unreasonable Inferences

The second component is procedural. It would create a strengthened, dedicated right for individuals to contest inferences they believe to be unreasonable, going beyond the contestation of decisions under Article 22.

This contestation process would involve:

A clear avenue for individuals to lodge a challenge against a specific inference or a type of inference.

a requirement for the controller to respond to a challenge with a more comprehensive explanation of the inference, possibly involving external auditors to verify claims without disclosing trade secrets. A meaningful review process. This could involve a dedicated internal role (e.g., an "Algorithmic Review Officer") or an easy path to refer the challenge to a data protection authority.

Meaningful remedies. If an inference is found to be unreasonable, the controller should be obliged to not only delete or correct that inference but also to review and amend the model to prevent similar unreasonable inferences in the future.

Together, the justification requirement and the contestation mechanism would create a system of accountability focused on the quality and impact of inferences, finally giving practical effect to the GDPR's principles of fairness and accountability in the age of AI.

VII. BARRIERS TO A RIGHT TO REASONABLE INFERENCES: IP LAW AND TRADE SECRETS

A formidable barrier to implementing transparency and contestation rights is the conflict with the protection of intellectual property (IP) and trade secrets. The algorithmic model of a business is frequently its most valuable asset, and disclosing its inner workings could destroy the competitive advantage of the business.

A. Algorithmic Models and Statistical Purposes in the GDPR

The GDPR itself acknowledges this tension. Processing for "archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes" is protected by Article 89. The development of AI models could be framed as a "statistical purpose." "insofar as it should be subject to appropriate safeguards for the rights and freedoms of the data subject," the GDPR should not apply to personal data processed for statistical purposes, as stated in recital 162. This could be interpreted to limit data subject rights, including access, in the context of model development.

Nevertheless, this is not a complete exemption. When the model is used to make decisions about individuals, it becomes operational rather than just "statistical." The protections for data subjects must then come first. At this stage of the deployment, the right to reasonable inferences would be most applicable.

B. Algorithmic Models and the EU's Trade Secrets Directive

The EU's Directive on the protection of undisclosed know-how and business information (Trade Secrets Directive) protects information that is secret, has commercial value because it is secret, and has been subject to reasonable steps to keep it secret. Algorithmic models squarely fit this definition.

Controllers will inevitably argue that disclosing information about the logic of inferences under Article 15 or during a contestation process would reveal their trade secrets. The GDPR does not override the Trade Secrets Directive. "Including trade secrets or intellectual property," according to GDPR's recital 63, "the right of access should not adversely affect the rights or freedoms of others."

C. Balancing and proportionality in conflict resolution.

The solution is not to allow IP law to trump fundamental rights, but to find a balance. Data protection authorities and courts must engage in a careful balancing test, weighing the data subject's fundamental right to protection against the controller's economic interests.

Several techniques can achieve this balance without disclosing core IP:

Functional Explanations: As mentioned, providing explanations of the key factors behind a decision without revealing their precise weighting or the algorithm's code.

Audited Compliance: Requiring controllers to have their models audited by independent third parties who can verify claims of accuracy, fairness, and the absence of bias without publicly disclosing the model's details. The auditor's certificate could be provided to the data subject and authority.

Strict Necessity and Proportionality: Any disclosure required for a contestation should be limited to what is strictly necessary. A data subject may only require evidence that a particular problematic variable was not used, rather than the entire algorithm.

Confidentiality Procedures: Implementing procedures for DPA officials or judges to review algorithms in-camera (in private) to adjudicate a claim without making the information public.

The right to reasonable inferences must be designed with this balance in mind. It cannot demand full algorithmic transparency. Even in the presence of legitimate trade secrets, it must instead demand accountability, which can be accomplished through effective contestation and verified justification.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This document The rise of inferential analytics represents a quantum leap in the power of technology to shape human lives. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which embodies data protection law, provides a solid foundation of principles and rights, but it is showing its age when faced with the particular difficulties of probabilistic inference. In spite of treating inferences as a unique type of personal data, the current framework does not provide the specialized tools necessary to guarantee that they are equitable, non-discriminatory, and subject to meaningful human control. Through an analysis of the ECJ's jurisprudence, we see a legal system grappling with the boundaries of its own concepts. Through a systematic review of the GDPR's rights, we see that while avenues for protection exist, they are often difficult to navigate and ineffective against the core problem of unreasonable inference.

The path forward requires a paradigm shift. The right to reasonable inferences is a new right fit for a world of predictions that requires us to move beyond a framework designed for a world of recorded facts. This right would establish that the act of drawing conclusions about

individuals is not a free exercise but must be justified against standards of acceptability, relevance, and reliability. It must be coupled with a robust and practical right to contest.

Inevitably, this right will clash with the economic interests embedded in intellectual property law. However, trade secrets cannot be used to silence fundamental rights. A balance must be struck through innovative governance solutions like audited compliance and functional explanations.

Re-thinking data protection law in the age of Big Data and AI is not an optional academic exercise; it is a necessary endeavour to preserve human autonomy, dignity, and fairness in the face of increasingly powerful technologies. Embedding a right to reasonable inferences into our legal fabric is the crucial next step in this ongoing evolution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Belhaven University for the research.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Aslan, *No god but God: The origins, evolution, and future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- [2] J. L. Esposito, *Islam: The straight path* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [3] T. Ramadan, *In the footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the life of Muhammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- [4] N. A. Rahman, "AI at War: The next revolution for military and defense," *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 1998–2004, 2025. doi: 10.30574/wjarr.2025.27.1.2735.
- [5] L. Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.
- [6] K. Armstrong, *Islam: A short history*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- [7] A. Rahman, A. Jony, M. Hosen, M. Priya, and Y. Arafat, "Information Technology Perspective on Business," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025. doi: 10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i04.53765.
- [8] S. H. Nasr, *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity*. New York: HarperOne, 2002.
- [9] E. W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [10] O. Roy, *Globalized Islam: The search for a new ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- [11] F. Mernissi, *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*, M. J. Lakeland, Trans. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991.
- [12] J. A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The challenge and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014.
- [13] C. Kurzman, Ed., *Liberal Islam: A sourcebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [14] R. W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- [15] A. R. Nazil, "AI-Powered Visualization is Transforming Modern Healthcare," *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, vol. 6, no. 8, pp. 1474–1478, 2025.
- [16] A. Rahman, "AI-Powered Visualization is Transforming Modern Healthcare," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025. doi: 10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i04.53087.
- [17] P. Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim politics: Reimagining the umma*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- [18] A. R. Nazil, "The GENIUS Act and the Future of Stablecoins: Balancing Innovation, Regulation, and Financial Stability," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29602880.v1.
- [19] A. R. Nazil, "A Comparative Analysis of Technological Trajectories in the United States and Japan," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29369222.v1.
- [20] A. R. Nazil, "Black magic effect technology: Understanding the Reality, Risks, and Remedies of Magic in Islamic Teachings," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29389832.v1.
- [21] A. R. Nazil, "AI-Powered Visualization is Transforming Modern Healthcare," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29877074.v1.
- [22] A. R. Nazil, "AI-Powered Visualization is Transforming Modern Healthcare," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29876651.v1.
- [23] A. R. Nazil, "Mastering Complexity: How AI Will Control and Transform the IT Industry by 2040," *figshare. Journal contribution*, 2025. doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29364962.v1.
- [24] J. R. Bowen, *A new anthropology of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [25] H. A. Agrama, *Questioning secularism: Islam, sovereignty, and the rule of law in modern Egypt*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- [26] Future AI cryptocurrency. (n.d.). <https://crajour.org/articles/300>
- [27] Sani, J. (n.d.). "Waste Management in Bangladesh: Current practices, challenges and policy directions." Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16894330>



Bonnets & Bimbos: Internalized misogyny in Austen and Brontë's work

Ariana De Andrade

Email: deandradeariana@gmail.com

Received: 27 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Oct 2025; Accepted: 28 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines how internalized misogyny manifests in the works of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Jane Eyre*. Through a feminist lens, it argues that while these novels are celebrated for their proto-feminist heroines, they simultaneously perpetuate patriarchal ideals by vilifying women who embody traditionally feminine traits. Characters such as Caroline Bingley, Lucy Steele, and Blanche Ingram are portrayed as superficial and vain for participating in the “marriage game,” while male characters exhibiting similar behaviors are often redeemed or celebrated. By drawing parallels between these nineteenth-century archetypes and modern social phenomena such as the “pick-me girl” and “bimbo” tropes, this paper reveals how female rivalry and self-policing are rooted in enduring structures of patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, the study contends that recognizing these contradictions does not diminish Austen’s or Brontë’s feminist contributions but instead deepens our understanding of how internalized misogyny continues to shape narratives about womanhood.



Keywords— Charlotte Brontë, Feminist literary criticism, Female rivalry, Internalized misogyny, Jane Austen.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is only in recent years that the dictionary has begun to fully embrace what could be called the social media vernacular. Words like “DM” and “emoji” have somehow, and much to the chagrin of language purists, managed to creep between the pages (digital or physical) of reputable sources such as the Cambridge Dictionary. However, the richness is such that not all social media terms are just a Google search away (to google has become a verb in and of itself), like for example the label “pick-me”. Basically, a girl or young woman who attempts to differentiate herself from other women and render them inferior in order to make herself more attractive to the opposite sex. This word has caused such a storm recently that I would need multiple essays to cover it, even though it is more than likely someone has already done it for me, but the sentiment behind it might be surprisingly old. Back in the late 1700s and early 1800s, we could already see examples of the “pick-me girl” in the work of renowned authors such

as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, although without the negative connotation. The protagonists of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* might not exactly be thought of as “pick-mes” by even modern readers, but they do emulate “the new ‘I’m not like the other girls’ phenomenon ... which describes a woman considering herself unique if she does not fit into the stereotypical perception of womanhood” (Rische, 2023, p. 6). The antagonists of said novels, Lucy Steele, and Caroline Bingley, respectively, are bashed by both the narrator and the protagonists in a fashion that is remarkably similar to how “pick-mes” might: caring for one’s appearance is seen as superficial, and a dislike or disinterest in reading is considered uncultured. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* fares no better, as the antagonist, Blanche Ingram, is a similar archetype: a beautiful but wretched and superficial woman. Now, the term “pick-me” itself is misogynistic, but it raises important questions about internalized misogyny, which is when “[d]ue to the omnipresent nature of sexist,

misogynistic messages in patriarchal societies, women may internalize a sexist ideology automatically without consciously noticing" (Rische, 2023 p. 6). Internalized misogyny pits young women against each other as they unknowingly begin to perceive feminine interests or attributes as inferior. The characterization of these female antagonists of both Austen and Brontë's works and the protagonist's treatment of them make it so that their empowering feminist message is partly obscured by internalized misogyny, as it is their classically feminine traits, juxtaposed by the protagonist's more masculine attributes, which are considered wrong and inferior.

II. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Pride and Prejudice is, arguably, Austen's most well-known piece of literature. It is a sarcastic review of marriage and society during her time period: marriage is treated as a game and it makes most, if not all, the players unhappy. Despite refusing to play, Elizabeth Bennett comes out the clear winner at the end, while Caroline Bingley, who is practically the MVP of the marriage game, is forgotten by the narrative. Like the "pick-me's target", Caroline cares about mainstream interests, in this case the marriage game, and is criticized for doing so by both the characters and the narrator. We, as the readers, are supposed to laugh at Miss Bingley's attempts at seduction, for example when she takes a turn about the room with Elizabeth in order to get Darcy's attention. But why does succumbing to the immense pressure women are under to marry makes her such a silly and vain character? According to scholar Ania Grant, Austen's "antagonists explicitly advertise their beauty, elegance, social connections, and feminine accomplishments, such as playing an instrument" (2020, p. 21) while the antagonists "demonstrate the superior qualities of their minds and characters: intelligence, kindness, honesty, and loyalty" (2020, p. 22). And yet, are these qualities really superior or are they simply less associated with women? Although Grant claims that "the conspicuous beauty of the antagonists is invariably trumped by other desirable traits of the protagonists (2020, p. 29)", Austen's protagonists are still considered beautiful. Elizabeth is more of a masculine character compared to Caroline, she is independent, sharp-tongued, and even has more rugged features. Darcy appreciates her dark intense eyes instead of Caroline's feminine beauty, but it is still "Elizabeth's physical attributes that first make it impossible for him to maintain indifference; when she arrives at Netherfield...his admiration of her dishevelled, physically exerted appearance after her walk evokes his physical attraction to her" (Barkley, 2014, p. 220). Therefore, is it really so superficial of Caroline to show off her looks

when men are clearly interested in such things? In the now infamous taking-a-walk-about-the-room scene, we are supposed to laugh at Miss Bingley when she takes Elizabeth's arm and strolls with her around the room, as she is sassed by Darcy for being "conscious that [their] figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking" (Austen, 2001, p. 39). And yet, is it not true that, a few pages beforehand, Darcy agreed with her assessment that all women "must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages...[and] possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking" by saying "all this she must possess"? (Austen, 2001, 27). His suggestion to improve oneself with reading does not negate the fact that beauty and grace are indeed important to him. Darcy, however, is not belittled for caring about these things. In fact, he is even given a hero's arc: "Darcy has to learn humility by putting aside his vanity in his own exalted opinion of his wealth, upbringing and status as an aristocrat" (Medow, 1988, 37) in order to win the strong-willed Elizabeth's affections. Some scholars even give him a pass by stating that his initial rude behavior, what needed to be changed, was simply "an inadequacy in the phrasing of a man who, in his shyness, and despite his sophistication, is unable to express himself properly to the girl he grudgingly loves" (Medow, 1988, p. 37). Why does Caroline not get a similar treatment, why is her rudeness and superficiality considered a flaw when Darcy, who agrees with what she has to say, gets to evolve, and even gets the object of his pursuit at the end? Internalized misogyny means that these traits are viewed more negatively in women, while in men they tend to mask a "heart of gold", and this gives "Darcy the opportunity to become what the reader has been waiting for - a hero!" (Medow, 1988, p. 38). While she might have been poised to seem like a comedic character, Miss Bingley actually seems a bit lonely: she has no friends because all women are competition, and her brother and his best friend seem to carry her along but pay no attention to her whatsoever. Although "Austen values distinctly sexualized and non-fraternal relationships that allow a heroine an exit from the family framework that threatens to impede her happiness" (Barkley, 2014, p. 214), it seems she will not allow her antagonists to do so. Caroline is, like Elizabeth, bold in her physical conception of romance. She acknowledges that men are interested, and perhaps are only interested, in her figure and looks and is not afraid to use them. This boldness should be praised as it is in Elizabeth, but it is not, because internalized misogyny makes it so that both Austen and Elizabeth fall victim to the same thing her antagonists are so shamed for doing, which is thinking of other women as competition. The novel pokes fun at Caroline for her failed attempts

but, is she not doing everything right? If anything, her story is more reflective of a sad truth rather than a knee-slapping failure: there is no power on this earth, be it money, magic, charm or beauty, that can force a person to fall in love with you.

III. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* may be her first step into literature, but it is by no means timid. The biting wit and commentary sprinkled throughout this novel is reflective of what would make *Pride and Prejudice* so great later on. We can find most of this commentary directed towards Lucy Steele, the "antagonist" of the novel, as she comes to stand between Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars's happy ending. She is meant to be a foil to Miss Dashwood, every flaw of the first is supposed to exalt the latter's virtues, but her characterization can become a bit misogynistic when viewed from a modern lens. Lucy is admitted to be a "considerable beauty" with "a smartness of air, which though it did not give actual elegance or grace, gave distinction to her person" (Austen, 2002, p. 87). This one compliment, however, is quickly offset with the assurance that she is "ignorant and illiterate...[deficient] of all mental improvement." (Austen, 2002, pp. 92-93) unlike Elinor and her sister Marianne who are exceptionally well-read and "cultured". Lucy's characterization is very reminiscent of the extremely misogynistic "bimbo" trope: "a young woman [who is] considered to be attractive but not intelligent" ("Bimbo"). She is admittedly beautiful but is considered to be worthless by her sisters due to her lack of education. Her standing in the novel gets even worse when she enters into competition for Edward's affection, even though "competition is part of our evolutionary heritage" and "being able to compete for scarce resources is crucial to our survival and reproduction" (Grant 2020). It seems that "[i]n fiction and in life, we dislike those who are hell-bent on winning, and we prefer to interact with those who can cooperate" (Grant, 2020, p. 29). Lucy is torn down because she is considered a threat; she aggressively goes for what she wants instead of exhibiting "genuine kindness and loyalty to friends and family...without a specific goal of self-promotion" (Grant, 2020, p. 23) like the typical Austen heroine. But is it not true that "[by] using third person narration and mixing heroines' internal monologues with seemingly impartial comments of the narrator, Austen lets her heroines derogate their rivals with impunity" (Grant 26), making it so that they are just as aggressive players stuck in the marriage game? The misogyny becomes clear when we compare the depiction of Lucy with Austen's treatment of Willoughby, who despite being strikingly handsome, is also incredibly dastardly.

Nevertheless, both Elinor and the novel give him a sort of redemption towards the conclusion, excusing his behavior due to a "too early independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation and luxury" (Austen, 2002, p. 235) Elinor (and Austen herself) forgive Willoughby, but they do not forgive Lucy when she marries Edward's brother instead of him, even though she is just doing what women were required to do back then and marry for money. Had Edward not been helped by Colonel Brandon; would Elinor still marry him so gleefully? The heroines and the author question those who marry for gain, but they are not exactly marrying poor either. The difference between the novel's treatment of Lucy and the Dashwood sisters seems to be rooted in internalized misogyny. Lucy, like Marianne, can be considered "a heroine of sensibility who loves children and who is extremely affected by the scene of Lady Middleton's child's suffering" (Uttama, 2016, p. 6). Being a heroine of sensibility has a negative connotation in Austen's work, but while Marianne is allowed to grow out of it and learn her lesson, when "Lucy's marriage of convenience to Robert confirms her as a woman who uses her sense to achieve financial prosperity as opposed to an advocate of marriage for love which was seen as part of the cult of sensibility", she is admonished by both the novel and scholars who say that "[her] elopement and subsequent marriage to Robert ultimately suggests that she never loved Edward and that she is a woman of (economic) sense" (Uttama, 2016, p. 12). Why is it that when Marianne marries Colonel Brandon instead of dashing Willoughby it is considered prudent and character growth, but when Lucy married Edward's older brother, who is also a more prudent match, she is considered superficial and a social climber? The fact that Lucy is more aggressive in her pursuits should be hailed by the scholarly feminists who praise the Austenian heroine's nonconformism. Instead, she is scolded for her "unceasing attention to self-interest" (Austen, 2001, p. 266), despite the fact that she made a choice which resulted in a prosperous marriage as "[t]hey settled in town, received very liberal assistance from Mrs. Ferrars, were on the best terms imaginable with the Dashwoods ... [and] nothing could exceed the harmony in which they all lived together" (Austen, 2001, p. 267). Austen undermines her own feminist message of women being able to balance both rationale and sensitivity, hence the title, by making fun of Lucy both when she demonstrates classically feminine traits, albeit dishonestly, like being interested in children and those which in a male we would find favorable like ambition or aggressiveness. Had Lucy Steele been a man, would Austen's readers and scholars still treat her with such contempt?

IV. JANE EYRE

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre is much less humorous than its Austenian counterparts, but the critique towards the beautiful, marriage-seeking woman is still palpable. Blanche Ingram is, perhaps, the least redeemable of our three antagonists: she is not only cruel to Jane, but also to Rochester's adoptive child, Adèle (he is equally dismissive, but being a man it is somehow more permissible) and drops all intentions of marrying when she is tricked into believing her suitor isn't as rich as initially thought. Both readers and the novel itself are quick to write her off as superficial and vain, but is not marrying into wealth the only way for women to make a living? Miss Ingram is, like Caroline Bingley before her, criticized for playing the marriage game as it is supposed to be played, as women were taught to do so:

Blanche has to make sure to find a wealthy man to marry if she wants to keep her position within the aristocracy. She does therefore not have the luxury of looking for someone that she loves, like Jane does, but rather settles on Rochester because of his wealth and position in society. However, unlike Jane, Blanche is not spiritually connected to Rochester and therefore has to find another way of convincing him to marry her. To do so, she uses the only trait that benefits her as a woman in the Victorian patriarchal society, her beauty... (Sylwan, 2015, p. 12)

Blanche also has a mother and sister to support, therefore the pressure to marry someone well-off becomes far more intense (à la Elinor), yet her choice of mate is criticized as superficial and she "is deemed both as too aggressive and too stagnant" (Sylwan, 2015, p. 14). This is reflective of internalized misogyny, where women's every move is viewed under a magnifying glass and picked apart and a movement towards either of the extremes is considered wrong. Even in our supposedly modern society, women are constantly having to walk the line between becoming a whore or a prude: "by portraying Blanche as both too mercenary and too stagnant, Jane successfully balances being both an emancipated woman and an ideal Victorian wife" (Sylwan, 2015, p. 18). Brontë is inadvertently sending us a misogynistic message through her characterizations because what is supposed to commend Jane to the reader over Blanche is how much more appealing the first is to a man. In her piece "CONTRADICTION IN JANE EYRE: CONVERSATIONS OF 19TH CENTURY FEMINISM", Audrey Clement states that "Jane, as a member of patriarchal society, may subconsciously criticize other women by measuring them against an unrealistic patriarchal standard" (2022, p. 53). Jane looks down upon Blanche's pursuit of Rochester, thinking to herself: "It seems to me that she might, by merely sitting quietly at his

side, saying little and looking less, get nigher his heart" and "[h]ow will she manage to please him when they are married?" (Brontë, 2001, p. 159). For a woman who once claimed "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will..." (Brontë, 2001, p. 216), Jane appears to be unwittingly vouching for patriarchal concepts such as the subservient wife who must do all she can to please her husband (never does she wonder whether someone as cold and reticent as Rochester will please Blanche), all due to internalized misogyny. We cannot forget that Jane's view of Blanche might also be tainted by her jealousy, fed by the misogynistic belief that her fellow women are competition. It is viewing "Miss Ingram as a threat to Jane's access to Rochester...[that] causes Jane to internally reject her" (Clement, 2022, p. 54). This behavior also seeps into the reader's conceptions of Blanche's character: "By pitting readers against certain women to support Jane, Brontë undermines the effective feminist advocacy of Jane Eyre from a modern perspective" (Clement, 2022, p. 55). Like with Austen's male counterparts, Rochester is also pardoned for his actions, even if they are far worse than anything Blanche ever did to Jane. He not only toys with both Jane and Blanche's emotions through disguising himself as a Romani person, but he also lies to her about Bertha, his previous wife who he has abused and locked up like an animal. How is this more redeemable than Blanche pushing Jane aside? "Jane's inability (or refusal) to hold Rochester accountable for his condescending, misogynist, or abusive actions shows how she has been trained by a patriarchal society to sympathize with Mr. Rochester over the women he is hurting" (Clement, 2022, p. 58). The biggest reason as to why Rochester's actions are more permissible than Blanche is simply because he is a man, although there might be an even more sinister force at play. "It is possible that women who have experienced abuse use internalized sexism to distance themselves from fears of harassment or abuse by deflecting blame and hostility to other women and aligning with the abuser — a form of identification with the aggressor" (Johnson 14), and not only has Jane suffered abuse at the hands of others in her past, but Rochester himself has emotionally abused her by making her believe he intended to marry Blanche and playing mind games with her. Overall, Jane and the novel's dislike of Blanche seems to come less from a place of valuing kindness and humility, but rather a subconscious set of patriarchal beliefs.

V. CONCLUSION

Austen and Brontë are, of course, still considered feminist writers, and their works did indeed open up the world of literature to include women who could think, feel, and go

on adventures which had been previously reserved for male characters only. Nevertheless, it is important for readers to notice the subconscious misogynistic beliefs they carry, for it is only through their analysis that they will be able to find them within themselves. The fact that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Jane Eyre* carry internalized misogyny does not mean that they should not be hailed as great feminist pieces, it simply means that we must learn to take the good with the bad. The overly sanitized and politically correct film remakes are proof that what readers want is not an erasure of these novels' weaknesses, but rather the acknowledgement that they are weak, and that great literature can indeed be wrong. Part of the reason as to why these novels have endured through time is because they are still teaching us so much, and they can help us reflect on modern phenomena like the "pick-me". It is only through questioning and revising these texts that we will get closer to what Austen and Brontë originally intended: a better world for woman and mankind alike.

REFERENCES

- [1] Austen, J. (2001). *Pride and prejudice: An authoritative text, background and sources, criticism* (D. Gray, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [2] Austen, J. (2002). *Sense and sensibility: Authoritative text, contexts, criticism* (C. L. Johnson, Ed.). W. W. Norton.
- [3] Barkley, D. (2014). Exit strategies: Jane Austen, marriage, and familial escape. *Persuasions*, (36), 214–222. ProQuest. <https://msmc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/exit-strategies-jane-austen-marriage-familial/docview/1726694141/se-2>
- [4] Bimbo. (n.d.). In *Cambridge dictionary*. Cambridge University Press. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bimbo>
- [5] Brontë, C. (2001). *Jane Eyre: An authoritative text, contexts, criticism* (R. J. Dunn, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [6] Clement, A. (2022). Contradiction in *Jane Eyre*: Conversations of 19th century feminism. *Magnificat*, 51.
- [7] Grant, A. (2020). "Sneering civility": Female intrasexual competition for mates in Jane Austen's novels. *EvoS Journal: The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium*, 11(1), 15–33.
- [8] Johnson, E. (2020). *The romanticization of violent male offenders: How trauma and internalized sexism can explain women's fascination with serial killers* [Master's thesis, City University of New York, John Jay College of Criminal Justice].
- [9] Medow, S. (1988). *Jane Austen's anti-heroes and heroes* [Doctoral dissertation, Florida Atlantic University]. ProQuest. <https://msmc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/jane-austens-anti-heroes/docview/193754064/se-2>
- [10] Rische, J. (2023). "I'm not like the other girls": The phenomenology of affect: How is female self-expression affected by internalized misogyny?
- [11] Sylwan, J. (2015). *The fallen woman and the corrupt aristocrat: The ideological function of Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*.
- [12] Uttama, C. (2016). Lucy Steele, the mistress of *Sense and Sensibility*, in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, 19(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-01902001>



Freud, Psychoanalysis, and the Tragic Psyche of Lady Macbeth: A Psychoanalytic Literary Study

Alfred Vivek Joseph

Department of English Literature, STG First Grade College, Chinakurali, Pandavapura, Mandya

Received: 26 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 24 Oct 2025; Accepted: 27 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This work investigates the implementation psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud to the play *Macbeth* by Shakespeare, with focus to Lady Macbeth. The concepts of the repression, unconscious, and development of psychosexual, and the concepts of id, ego, and superego provide a route for exploring Lady Macbeth's psychological fall from ambition and manipulation into madness and guilt. This paper further considers the patriarchal framework and implications of gender and power dynamics in culture. By placing the character Lady Macbeth with the theory of Psychoanalysis, the paper reveals how her character represents the consequences of suppressed guilt, the conflict unresolved, and transgression of gender expectations.



Keywords— Sigmund Freud; defence mechanism; Id-Ego-Superego; Lady Macbeth; psychological Conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

The link between Literature and Psychology has provided a huge amount of materials for analysis. At the beginning of the twentieth century and the end of the nineteenth century Sigmund Freud developed a psychological framework named Psychoanalysis and this theory is often used in a wide range of literary studies. Sigmund's ideas about the repression, internal conflicts, and the unconscious have largely influenced both clinical views on the behaviour of human and the methods in humanities. Long before Freud, Shakespeare has created characters with complexity that corresponds well with the psychoanalytical theory of Freud. Lady Macbeth from the Play 'Macbeth' is a mysterious, ultimately tragic, and ambitious character. Studying her through Sigmund's theory of psychoanalysis highlights her Psychological struggles and shows that the study of psychoanalysis remains relevant in literature and criticism.

II. FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

An Austrian neurologist, developed psychoanalysis as a theory of the mind and as a therapeutic practice. His

contributions include the idea of the repressed desires in an unconscious mind, the ideas of id, ego, and superego, the concept of psychosexual development, and dream analysis to disclose the hidden meanings in thoughts.

Although many critics criticise Sigmund's theory for being valid scientifically and biased against women, they remain significant in learning literature and human psychology. His theory provides insight into the characters in tragic stories, where guilt, repression, and desires shape their stories. The character, Lady Macbeth, a deeply conflicted character, is useful in a case study.

III. AMBITION AND THE ID

The reaction of Lady Macbeth to Macbeth's letter about the prophecy of witches beings her role as the driving force behind the Drama's act of murder. Her cry to the spirits to "unsex" her shows her denial to kindness and femininity. This connects her to the desire for power. Her influence on Macbeth by challenging and questioning his masculinity, using his insecurities to push him into the act of murder. At this stage, Lady Macbeth is almost a pure representative of the Id, pushing out her fear, and morality

to attain her ambition without hesitation. Her mental strength in the beginning appears stronger and superior to that of her husband, who swither in doubt before her persuasion

IV. GUILT, THE SUPEREGO, AND COLLAPSE

In spite of her ruthless ambition, Lady Macbeth gradually becomes submerged by her guilt. Sigmund describes the Superego as the part that governs and rules our morality and conscience, punishing wrong actions with guilt and emotional pain. Post murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth's struggle in Morality becomes more visible.

Her psychological suffering is highlighted in the sleepwalking scene. Her frequent washing and rubbing of her hands and her visions of the "damned spot" shows the repressed conflicts of behaviour coming through her compulsive actions or unconscious proposed in the theory of Sigmund Freud. Lady Macbeth, once a strong character, gets consumed by her Superego, which implements severe Psychological punishment.

V. DREAMS AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Sigmund's view on dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious" symbolises the hidden thoughts of hidden psyche. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking aligns with this idea; it acts like a wakeup dream where her repressed guilt surfaces uncontrollably. Her speech in her sleep reveals her unconscious confession of involvement in murder.

The recurring imagery of blood in her visions shows her guilt and the psychological behaviour of her actions. Her constant struggle to repress her inner conflict showcases Sigmund's belief that repressed thoughts occur back, often in harmful or disguised ways

VI. GENDER, POWER, AND REPRESSION

Lady Macbeth's ambition and quest for power challenges the gender roles from the times of Shakespeare. During that era, women were sought as submissive, passive, and nurturing characters. Lady Macbeth here tries to break this gender role by calling on spirits to erase her feminine feature. This goes against the norms set by the society where males are dominated.

However, her gradual downfall tries to validate her fears about female ambition, portraying it as harmful and unsettling. Sigmund's view of repression and hysteria in women has faced a lot of criticism for upholding these ideas of patriarchy. At the same time, the feminist psychoanalytic critics say that Lady Macbeth's tragedy portrays her internal struggles and wide societal issues

concerning the society established under the patriarchal roles.

VII. COMPARISON WITH MACBETH

The psychological comparison between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth shows their tragic partnership. In the initial stages of the play, Lady Macbeth takes charge; she is a ruthless, commanding, and ambitious character. On the other hand, Macbeth looks unsure and has a conflict with his morals. Likewise, as the story progresses, the roles get switched. Lady Macbeth falls under her burden of guilt, while Macbeth turns to violence form numb.

In accordance to the psychoanalytic view, the couple show a divided mind: Lady Macbeth incorporates the Id (the innate instinctive impulse), while Macbeth fights with his Ego. Gradually, Lady Macbeth drowns under the persistent demands of Superego. Their twisted but opposing ways reveal Shakespeare's exploration of guilt, ambition, and mental decline.

VIII. CRITIQUES OF FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Though Sigmund's theory offers practical tools for criticising and interpreting literature, they face significant challenges and criticism. Critics highlight the lack of Scientific Support and their beliefs in patriarchy. When psychoanalysis is applied without much enquires or questions, it makes literature as a platform for a case study under the clinical labels. The literature acts as a base to understand the behaviours of human nature. For example, when we see the character of Lady Macbeth, we can see spontaneous fluctuations of emotions and how unconscious motivations and repression makes a way for her destruction. This shows the on-going trends of Freud's ideas despite the debates around them

IX. CONCLUSION

In the play, 'Macbeth', we see the character 'Lady Macbeth' being overwhelmed by guilt. Initially we see her driven by the ambition of power but as the story proceeds we see this shift. This change illustrates the model of Human Conflict provided by Sigmund Freud. In the beginning, she incorporated the Id, persuading her husband to chase power without hesitation. However, she cannot ignore the demands of Superego, which gradually suppresses her with anxiety and despair.

This tragic portrayal depicts the ties with the ideas about repression and unconscious processes. Although Sigmund Freud's concept of Psychoanalysis has its own flaws, they

effectively highlight her Psychological decline. Lady Macbeth holds an important place in literary criticism and psychoanalytic study. She portrays and symbolises the harmful confrontation between her guilt and ambition, along with the clashes related to morality, human mind, and morality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hereby declare that the entire paper is my own work and I thank my mentors and friends for their guidance and support.

REFERENCES

- [1] Freud, Sigmund. The Interpretation of Dreams. London: Hogarth Press, 1953 (original 1900).
- [2] Freud, Sigmund. Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
- [3] Freud, Sigmund. Civilisation and Its Discontents. London: Hogarth Press, 1930.
- [4] Jones, Ernest. Hamlet and Oedipus. London: W.W. Norton, 1949.
- [5] Greenblatt, Stephen (Ed.). The Norton Shakespeare. 3rd ed. London: W.W. Norton, 2016.
- [6] Adelman, Janet. Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays. London: Routledge, 1992.
- [7] Neely, Carol Thomas. "Women and Men in Othello: What Should Such a Fool Do with So Good a Woman?" Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900, vol. 23, no. 2, 1983.
- [8] Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- [9] Showalter, Elaine. The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980. London: Virago, 1985.
- [10] Bloom, Harold. Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.
- [11] Levin, Joanna. Lady Macbeth and Daemonologie of Hysteria. Volume 69, Number 1, Spring 2002. Pp. 21-55
- [12] Shekhawat, A.A.S., & Nathawat, S. (2022). A study of the psychological effect: The Lady Macbeth effect. International Journal of Health Sciences, 6(S5), 4339-4346.



Sufi Symbolism in Diverse Literary Traditions

Dr. Shagufta Shaheen¹, Sumera²

¹Professor, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

Received: 28 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 26 Oct 2025; Accepted: 28 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Persian poetry enriched with Sufi symbolism has left an enduring legacy that spans generations. Regardless of the religion, language, or region, writers from various backgrounds have contributed to this legacy. This paper aims to trace the borrowing of Sufi symbols, like “wine” and “Beloved,” in the selected works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal. Poets from diverse cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds reinterpret these symbols to craft their own potent poetic ideologies. Goethe recast these symbols to create poetry that espoused universal humanism, while Dickinson’s poetry is contemplative; Allama Iqbal’s poetry embodies metaphysical nationalism. The study employs comparative literature methodology and intertextual analytical tools to uncover thematic and metaphorical connections. The primary textual analysis compares selected poems by Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal to determine which Persian poetry lineages they derive from and what forms of continuity and change they employ. The method examines each poet’s “strong misreading” as the site of creative resistance and reinvention using Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” framework. This paper will follow the cross-historical life of Persian poetical symbols through three divergent voices across history, showing that, although they may share common symbols, their varied imagery leads to different interpretations of spirituality and universality, thereby illuminating the lasting impact of Persian mysticism on world literature.*



Keywords— *Comparative literature, Persian poetry, Sufism, Symbols, Wine*

I. INTRODUCTION

Persian literary tradition is deeply permeated with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam; Sufi philosophy directly influenced the mystic characteristics emanating in the form of themes, symbols, and images within Persian literature (Chittick, 2003). Persian Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz significantly influenced Persian literature by setting a high poetic standard with their use of symbolism for the divine love and soul’s ascent, rendering subtle spiritual teachings in the form of beautiful verses, through which they presented their mystic view of the divine. Persian poetry is translated into different languages, and multilingual writers crafted newfangled composite poetry, borrowing symbols and themes from these translated writings. The paper attempts to decode the symbolism in the poetry of three different poets, including Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal. Though nineteenth-

century Europe, America, and early twentieth-century South Asia are culturally distinct from one another, each poet works with Persian mysticism to conjure up his personal and universal poetic imagination. Persian symbolism has been adapted and employed by renowned poets worldwide to enhance the aesthetic appeal and thematic depth of their poetry.

II. METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a comparative literary approach based on intertextual analysis to reveal thematic correspondences and metaphorical connections. The poems of three eminent poets, namely, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal, are discussed and compared with major pieces of Persian poetry to point out the borrowing of symbols. The study specifically uses Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’

paradigm to examine the ways in which each poet responds creatively to his precursors.

III. ANALYSIS

Throughout the nineteenth century, scholars argued whether Rumi and Hafiz's writings about wine and love were to be taken literally or were meant to be read as symbolic. Persian Sufi poetry (espoused by great poets such as Rumi and Hafiz), laced with symbols like the Beloved, wine, love, etc., symbolizes various stages through which the human soul passes to attain divine love and experience spiritual intoxication. Sufi manuals composed pedagogical texts to instruct readers on how to interpret Persian Sufi poetry within specific spiritual and theological frameworks. These manuals stress that the multiple symbolic idioms present in Sufi poetry, such as the Beloved and wine, among others, should be read ultimately with respect to God and the mystical relationship between the divine and the soul; "Hafiz views the relation between the creator and created as that of a lover and beloved" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 160). In the Sufi tradition, poetry is a veiled discourse in which the meanings are hidden and can only be accessed by those who possess spiritual vision. Spiritual mentors offer hermeneutical strategies for extracting allegorical, symbolic, and metaphorical meanings that transcend literal interpretations. This interpretive act ensures that Sufi poetry is regarded as something more than merely artistic or literary and as a sacred pedagogical device designed to direct readers. The term "Beloved" never refers to a human but instead symbolizes God, with all expressions of love representing different aspects of realization: ecstatic union with the Divine presence and immanence. Hafiz writes in his *Divan*, "Hafiz! if thou desire the presence (union with God Most High)—from Him be not absent: When thou visitest thy Beloved, abandon the world; and let it go" (Clarke, 1891, p. 3). Sufi manuals are designed to train the reader's mind along certain predetermined mysticism lines so that poetic symbols constantly refer back to God as the true meaning behind all allegory and metaphor. This didactic legacy protects the doctrinal and experiential integrity of Sufi poetry, encouraging a religiously infused and contemplative reading that is fundamental to its spiritual objectives. Hafiz in particular is celebrated often for his mystical ambiguity as a result of the multivalence of meaning in his verses. To guide readers in correct interpretation of these symbolic verses, Sufi manuals instructed that 'wine' should be understood along predetermined spiritual lines as a metaphor for divine intoxication rather than physical drinking. Wine symbolizes ecstatic spiritual experience in Persian Sufi poetry. In the Sufi lexicon:

For instance, cup-bearer is regarded as the spiritual guide that reveals spiritual secrets. Similarly, by wine is meant the fire of the love of God, which produces intellectual liberation and spiritual ecstasy. Tavern is a retreat where one communicates with the Beloved, and a drunkard is one who has gone beyond the realm of reason and has been initiated into divine mysteries (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 141).

The nineteenth-century influential American writer Emerson, in his poetry "Bacchus," imitates Hafiz and speaks of wine as something that takes him beyond time and space. Emerson writes, "Bring me wine, but wine which never grew/ In the belly of the grape" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 135). It resembles a translation that he made of a famous poem of Hafiz, called "Saqi-Namah." Emerson translates Hafiz's verses as, "Butler, fetch the ruby wine, which with sudden greatness fills us" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 137). An early critic of Emerson, Joel Benton, discovered the similarity of style in the poems of Emerson and Persian poets, especially translations of the works of Hafiz. He concluded that even his translations reflect more of Hafiz's style than of his own; the effect is balanced by how deeply his original verses draw on the inspiration and spirit of Eastern thought. Joel Benton comments on Emerson, "When he translated Hafiz, he was probably thinking of his own workmanship; when he described him, he was simply absorbed in the poet" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 117).

Emerson's writing style influenced nineteenth-century American writers, who echoed the Sufi symbolism in their works. Emily Dickinson, being one of them, often echoes references to wine in a subtle, often metaphorical manner. In the poem entitled "Indian Summer," she writes:

Permit a child to join;
Thy sacred emblems to partake,
Thy consecrated bread to break,
Taste thine immortal wine! (Pelka, 2019, p. 155)

Emily Dickinson borrows the Sufi symbol of wine in her poetry to communicate the soul's longing for spiritual intoxication. Dickinson's poetry is similar to Sufi mystical poetry, even though she came from a different religious and cultural background. The phrase "immortal wine" in her poetry does not refer to the earthly liquid but to a spiritual ecstasy. The line "Permit a child to join" symbolizes the call for humility and the desire for access to transcendence, just like Sufis testify to their unworthiness and ask to be allowed entry into the tavern of love just to receive a drop from the wine-cup of divine reality. By employing wine as a symbol, Dickinson transforms her song of self from an individual or religious perspective into

a universal expression of spiritual yearning. Her poetry mirrored closely the Sufi paradigm of nothingness against God's overpowering presence. Emily Dickinson, in another poem, tries to describe a similar experience of ecstasy, employing the symbolism of wine as "liquor":

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine

Yield such an alcohol! (Pelka, 2019, p. 92)

Emily Dickinson's verse "liquor never brewed" evokes a spiritual image that resonates closely with the Sufi symbolism of wine. In Sufi poetry, particularly that of mystic poets like Rumi and Hafiz, wine is not an alcoholic beverage but is instead a symbol for divine love, spiritual euphoria, and the soul's ecstatic experience of the divine. When Dickinson writes of tasting a "liquor never brewed" and claims that the vats on all of the Rhine do not yield such an alcohol, she is describing an effect of ecstasy that goes beyond ordinary human experience. Just as Sufis rely on symbols of wine, taverns, and intoxication to articulate the soul's ache for the divine's presence and union, Dickinson uses the word "liquor" to convey a similar transcendence. The "tankards scooped in pearls" allude to the element of purity and beauty in that experience, indicating that no earthly pleasure can surpass it and that it is beyond comparison. To Emily Dickinson as well as to the Sufi mystics, metaphorical drunkenness acts to represent states of spiritual inebriation, and they agree that ecstasy is not found at the bottom of a bottle or through any material pursuit but in the soul's encounter with something vast, enduring, and unspeakable. Emily Dickinson employs the symbol of Beloved in her poetry in a way similar to Sufi poets: "Abated—Distance is/Until thyself, Beloved" (Dickinson, 1960, p. 516). And so, Dickinson proposes that actual closeness is not about distance at all, but about the communion of spirits. The symbol of the Beloved is employed by Emily Dickinson in a manner highly parallel to certain Sufi poets, although its fielding and imagery remain patriarchally Western. Like Rumi and Hafiz, Dickinson's Beloved is often a divine presence, truth, or immortality rather than a human figure, for whom the soul pines with vast spiritual longing. In the poetry, love is a bridge between humanity and divinity that connects the soul to something infinite. Both Dickinson and the Sufis describe love as a way toward transcendence, wherein longing and separation foster spiritual receptivity.

Extending the literary tradition to Europe, the influence of Sufi poetry on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is apparent. Goethe wallows in the wine imagery, associating it with creative inspiration and socialistic wisdom. Goethe's admiration for Hafiz's poetry is evident in his compilation

of 12 volumes entitled *West-Eastern Divan*, which advocates for secular cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange between the Orient and the Occident. Goethe was introduced to Hafiz's *Divan* in 1814 through translations by Josef Von Hammer. His love for Hafiz's *Divan* in particular gave him a true understanding of mystical love. Poetry, being a process of dialogue, helped in bridging the gap between east and west. Goethe (ca. 1914), in his *West-Eastern Divan*, writes:

If Hafis should but take his share,

And quaff with me the Eilfer; Therefore to
Paradise I fleet,

Where ne'er, alas, of Eilfer The faithful drink!
May it be sweet,

Heaven's wine! yet 'tis not Eilfer. Quick, Hafis,
quick, and hasten thence,

A bumper's here of Eilfer (p. 152)

In this poem Goethe invokes the Persian Sufi master Hafiz to explore the contrast between spiritual ecstasy and earthly joy, using the symbolic image of wine. Goethe imagines himself fleeing to Paradise but laments that there they are denied the simple, joyful experiences that make earthly life rich. Goethe describes that the wine of heaven may be sweet, yet it lacks the earthly pleasure that familiarity condones. Goethe, through his poetry, indicates that he treasures the Sufis' acceptance of wine as a symbol for mystical union when inviting Hafiz out of Paradise to share a glass with him, interpreting the symbol of wine in his own way. In doing so he uses the Sufi symbol of wine to suggest that true paradise might not reside in some far-off spiritual plane but rather may be found immanently within the ecstatic experience of life in the present, a message perfectly tuned with Hafiz's own poetic vision. Goethe (ca. 1914), in his *West-Eastern Divan*, writes:

NORTH and West and South up-breaking!

Thrones are shattering, Empires quaking;

Fly thou to the untroubled East,

There the patriarchs' air to taste!

What with love and wine and song

Chiser's fount will make thee young (p. 1)

Goethe, in his poem "Hejira," contrasts the chaos of the political West with the peace and spiritual satiety of the East. By his verses "Fly thou to the untroubled East, / There the patriarchs' air to taste," he metaphorically commands the soul to take refuge in the wise and peaceful East. More precisely, in Goethe's works, the East is a land of spirituality and poetic inspiration. With the words "Chiser's fount," he indicates Khizr, who is a saint in Islamic

tradition. The Sufis believe that Khizr drank the water of life, so he is immortal. Therefore, by asserting “Chiser’s fount will make thee young,” Goethe suggests that by turning to the East, one can renew the spirit.

One of the critics of Goethe, Burdach, points out that Goethe was inspired by a historical character while referring to the “Beloved” in his poem in *West-Eastern Divan*. However, this question leads to a deeper secondary interpretation where it is mentioned in Goethe’s *Divan* that his “Beloved” may represent not only a young lady but also Truth, or more broadly, the Ideal (Goethe, 1914, p. 45). In this reading, the poem has a literal as well as a spiritual layer of meaning. On the level of apparent meaning, it speaks to human love and admiration; on a deeper level, it embodies the poet’s desire for divine truth, everlasting beauty, or supreme reality. This dichotomy is reminiscent of Goethe’s romantic feature, where terrestrial affection stands as a substitute for celestial passion, and the Beloved embodies an archetype of the divine or ideal that one seeks in the poet. Goethe’s poetry makes a deep connection to universal humanism as a celebration of the shared spiritual, moral, and creative capabilities of all humanity above race, nation, or religion. In works such as the *West-Eastern Divan*, Goethe meditates on the bond between East and West; he cites Persian poets, like Hafiz, and uses them as a source for expressing his appreciation for Islamic culture and Sufi mysticism. And in doing so, he provides a vision of the world as a place where civilizations can harmoniously coexist, which supports his notion of universal humanism.

Shifting the literary tradition to Asia, one cannot neglect the Sufi influence on Asian writers, mainly Allama Iqbal. He considered the Persian Sufi poet Rumi to be the epitome of love, the embodiment of knowledge, and the incarnation of action. Nicholson comments in the introduction of the English translation of Allama Iqbal’s book *Asrar-i-Khudi* that “Asrar-i-Khudi is composed in the metre and modelled on the style of the famous Masnavi” (Iqbal, n.d.). He further highlights that Allama writes in Persian style by invoking the Saki to fill his cup with wine: “Arise and pour pure wine into my cup, / Pour moon beams into the dark night of my thought” (Iqbal, verse 85-86). Allama Iqbal appropriates the symbol of wine in his poetry with a more philosophical tone. He invokes his spiritual master, Rumi, in his poetry:

There appeared the Master, formed in the mould of Truth,

Who wrote the Koran in Persian.

He said, “O frenzied lover,

Take a draught of love’s pure wine (Iqbal, verse 115-118)

The verses of Allama Iqbal are symbolic, referring to essential subjects and noumenal divine messages from tradition; at the same time, they are transcendental and autobiographical in nature. He conjures the figure of Rumi, whom he refers to as his “Master” and who is famous for deploying Persian poetry to articulate spiritual truths. Allama Iqbal praises Rumi for his command over the Persian language and for being instrumental in giving birth to mystical literature; by bringing his name into the equation, he invokes an entire tradition of spiritual teachers who aim to enliven a soul. The “draught of love’s pure wine” is standard Sufi imagery for spiritual intoxication or even divine revelation, while the advice is that the seeker (“frenzied lover”) should imbibe this transforming love and spiritually drink from it so that he can become more self-fulfilled and closer to divine. Allama Iqbal prompts the seeker to kindle that source of inner illumination that leads in the direction of truth. He writes, “There is a beloved hidden within thine heart” (Iqbal, verse 343). He gently directs attention to the fact that our final quest, the “Beloved,” is not outside us but inside our hearts. He describes love as the “Fountain of Life” (Iqbal, verse 334). Allama Iqbal writes for the enlightenment of the soul and spiritual awakening; through his poetry he tries to emphasize that the power of a community lies in the moral and spiritual awakening of its individuals. He aims to unite the nation beyond material and geographical boundaries, which are inherently defined by purpose, faith, and divine consciousness.

When analyzed with reference to the influence theory, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal shared common Sufi symbolism. Each of the three poets expresses their existential and spiritual lyrics by incorporating specific aspects of their individual cultural backgrounds and philosophical ideas to address issues related to the human experience and the search for higher knowledge. Each poet creatively absorbs and transforms the symbolism used by his predecessors: Goethe reinterprets Persian Sufi symbolism for a German Romantic audience; Allama Iqbal writes deliberately from within the Islamic tradition; Emily Dickinson, while less overtly related to Eastern literature, reimagines spiritual ecstasy and transcendence in a voice that is distinctively American. This interplay corresponds to Harold Bloom’s concept of “anxiety of influence,” in which each poet contends with his predecessors to create authentic expression. In terms of influence theory by Harold Bloom in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, “strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (p. 5). Emily Dickinson’s depiction of the soul on its way is inward and contemplative, a portrayal of inner change. Goethe includes this symbol in a universalist model

of human aspiration. Allama Iqbal's poetic profile is fluid and social, stressing individual as well as collective spiritual development. Finally, these three authors constitute a dialogue that is not restricted to imitation but treated as an integral aspect of their own respective work and philosophy. It is shown in comparative perspective that the three poets share a common symbolic legacy from Persian poetry but reshape it under unique cultural, ideological, and political circumstances.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the ongoing resonance of Persian poetic symbols across distinct cultures and languages, illustrating the way in which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal engage in a transhistorical dialogue that redefines mystical symbolism along divergent poetic trajectories. By tracing the path of these symbols, the study advocates for mysticism as a powerful force in world literature that drives creativity in spiritual and philosophical imagination. Sufi poetry, with its universal message of love and brotherhood, transcended borders and influenced the development of new poetic language and offered new modes of writing. It is a shared message of universal love and tolerance that brings together the mystical poetry of thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poets with the visionary outpourings of the poets of later generations to keep the nations united by sharing the common message of love and peace.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aminrazavi, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Sufism and American literary masters* (Foreword by J. Needleman). SUNY Press.
- [2] Bloom, H. (1975). *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Chittick, W. C. (2003). 'The pluralistic vision of Persian Sufi poetry'. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 14(4), 423–428.
- [4] Dickinson, E. (2019). *Poems* (T. Pelka, Ed.). Lulu.
- [5] Dickinson, E. (1960). *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson* (T. H. Johnson, Ed.). Kalyani Publishers.
- [6] Goethe, J. W. von. (ca. 1914). *West-Eastern divan: In twelve books* (E. Dowden, Ed.). J. M. Dent.
- [7] Ḥāfīz, K. S. M. (1891). *The Dīvān: Written in the fourteenth century by Khwāja Shamsu-d-Dīn Muḥammad-i-Ḥāfīz-i-Shīrāzī* (H. W. Clarke, Trans.). Government of India Central Printing Office.
- [8] Iqbal, M. (n.d.). *Asrar-i-Khudi (The secrets of the self)* (R. A. Nicholson, Trans., Introduction & Notes). Archive.org. <https://dn790009.ca.archive.org/0/items/AllamaIqbalBooks/Asrar-i-%20khuditheSecretsOfTheSelfAllamaIqbal.pdf>



Kamala Das and the Politics of Gender: Rewriting Womanhood in Indian English Literature

Dr. Sarbani Sankar Panigrahi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Odisha State Open University, Sambalpur, Odisha, India

Received: 30 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 23 Oct 2025; Accepted: 26 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Kamala Das, one of the most compelling voices in Indian English literature, redefined the contours of womanhood through her bold and unflinching literary expression. Her work, spanning poetry, short stories, and autobiography, confronts deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and exposes the emotional and sexual anxieties of women in a conservative society. This paper explores how Das engages with the politics of gender, particularly through her confessional style and her rejection of traditional roles assigned to women. Through works such as Summer in Calcutta and My Story, she challenges the expectations of femininity, marital obedience, and sexual repression, offering instead a complex portrayal of female desire, identity, and resistance. Das's writing becomes a powerful site of negotiation between personal freedom and societal constraints, making her a pioneering feminist figure in postcolonial Indian literature. By deconstructing the constructed ideals of womanhood, she reclaims female subjectivity and autonomy, contributing significantly to feminist literary discourse. This study analyzes her thematic focus, narrative voice, and linguistic choices to show how Das not only critiques gender-based oppression but also offers a transformative vision of womanhood rooted in honesty and self-expression. Her literary legacy continues to inspire new readings of gender and identity in Indian writing in English.*



Keywords— *Kamala Das, Gender Politics, Feminism, Indian English Literature, Womanhood*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das as a Writer

Kamala Das (1934–2009), also known by her pen name Madhavikutty in Malayalam, is one of the most iconic and influential literary figures in postcolonial Indian literature. Writing in both English and Malayalam, Das carved a unique space for herself with her bold, confessional style and fearless exploration of themes such as love, desire, female sexuality, identity, loneliness, and emotional trauma. She emerged at a time when women's voices in Indian English literature were often muted or confined to idealized portrayals, and she shattered these conventions with striking honesty and vulnerability.

As a poet, Kamala Das brought a new language of intimacy and rebellion into Indian English poetry. Her debut collection, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), was ground breaking for its candid expression of female longing and

bodily experience. Unlike her contemporaries, who often wrote within the safe boundaries of romanticism or nationalism, Das wrote unapologetically about the inner life of a woman—her desires, disappointments, and disillusionments—with an authenticity that was both unsettling and liberating.

In prose, particularly in her autobiography *My Story* (1976), Das further cemented her reputation as a writer unafraid to confront social taboos. The book stirred controversy for its open discussion of marital dissatisfaction, extramarital relationships, and the suffocating constraints of traditional Indian womanhood. Yet, it also garnered admiration for its raw, lyrical style and emotional depth. Her short stories in Malayalam, many of which explore themes of gender, class, and emotional estrangement, are equally powerful and showcase her narrative range and psychological insight.

Stylistically, Kamala Das is known for her confessional tone, directness, and emotional intensity. She blends the

personal with the political, the erotic with the spiritual, and the individual with the collective experience of women in a patriarchal society. Her language—at times stark, at times lyrical—mirrors the complexity of her subjects.

In essence, Kamala Das redefined what it meant to be a woman writer in India. Her refusal to conform to literary, social, or moral expectations challenged the foundations of a male-dominated literary tradition and paved the way for later generations of Indian women writers. Through her work, she continues to be a powerful symbol of resistance, autonomy, and the enduring struggle for self-definition.

Kamala Das as a Pioneering Voice in Indian English Literature

Kamala Das occupies a singular place in the landscape of Indian English literature as a pioneering and transformative figure who redefined the contours of poetic and narrative expression. At a time when Indian English writing was still in the process of finding a distinct voice, Das emerged as a bold and unapologetic presence, unafraid to transgress literary, social, and moral boundaries. She is celebrated not only for her stylistic innovation but also for her fearless engagement with themes that were largely taboo—female sexuality, desire, identity, loneliness, and emotional alienation.

What makes Kamala Das pioneering is her deliberate and powerful insertion of the female experience into a literary tradition that had historically marginalized or distorted it. Her debut poetry collection, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), marked a radical shift in Indian English poetry, both thematically and stylistically. Through a confessional mode reminiscent of Western poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Das crafted a deeply personal yet politically charged poetic voice. Her verses stripped away the romantic idealism often associated with women in Indian literature, replacing it with raw emotion, corporeality, and existential introspection.

In a predominantly patriarchal literary environment, Das's voice was revolutionary. She challenged the idealized image of the "self-sacrificing Indian woman" by writing openly about her dissatisfaction within marriage, her yearning for love, her complex relationship with her body, and her struggle for identity. This candidness was not only rare but radical, particularly in the context of mid-20th-century India. Her autobiographical work, *My Story* (1976), further solidified her position as a literary trailblazer. Though controversial, it was instrumental in breaking the silence around female agency, sexuality, and emotional repression.

Moreover, Das's significance extends beyond content—her linguistic choices also contributed to her pioneering status. Her writing fused Indian sensibilities with English idioms,

creating a hybrid literary voice that was unmistakably Indian yet globally resonant. She refused to adhere to Western literary conventions or cultural expectations, asserting instead a self-defined, postcolonial, and feminist voice.

In essence, Kamala Das opened new avenues for Indian women writers in English, offering them a model of authenticity, courage, and creative freedom. Her work laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of writers—such as Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, and Meena Kandasamy—who also seek to dismantle patriarchal structures through literature. As a pioneering voice, Kamala Das not only enriched Indian English literature but also reimagined it as a space for resistance, reclamation, and self-expression.

Kamala Das stands as a radical and pioneering voice in Indian English literature, renowned for her unflinching exploration of female identity, sexuality, and emotional complexity. Writing at a time when Indian women were expected to adhere to rigid social and gender roles, Das challenged dominant patriarchal narratives through her intensely personal and confessional style. Her poetry and prose—especially works like *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, and her autobiography *My Story*—gave expression to the inner lives of women, exposing the emotional void, sexual repression, and societal constraints that often define womanhood in traditional Indian settings.

The politics of gender in Das's work is not merely thematic; it is structural and deeply embedded in her literary choices. By foregrounding the female body, desire, and subjectivity, Das disrupted the sanitized and domesticated portrayals of women prevalent in earlier Indian literature. Her writing became a powerful medium through which gender could be interrogated, deconstructed, and reimagined. In doing so, she blurred the boundaries between the personal and the political, the poetic and the subversive.

This paper explores how Kamala Das's literary oeuvre rewrites womanhood by engaging with the politics of gender. It examines how her rejection of traditional feminine ideals, her celebration of individual desire, and her linguistic experimentation function as acts of rebellion against the patriarchal norms of both society and literary tradition. Situating Das within the broader context of postcolonial Indian English writing and feminist discourse, this study aims to highlight her enduring impact on the representation of women in Indian literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kamala Das has attracted considerable scholarly attention for her bold literary interventions in the politics of gender

and sexuality within Indian English literature. Her writings—marked by confessional candor, emotional intensity, and subversive themes—have been analyzed through feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial lenses. This literature review examines key critical engagements with Das's work to contextualize her contribution to rewriting womanhood in Indian English literature.

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's foundational anthology *Women Writing in India* (1991) positions Das among the foremost female voices challenging patriarchal structures in Indian literature. They emphasize her defiance of cultural taboos, particularly her articulation of female sexual desire and emotional alienation within the confines of domestic life. Das's portrayal of the female self—as fragmented, desiring, and defiant—breaks with traditional images of the self-sacrificing, silent Indian woman.

Meena Alexander (1992) views Das's work as an act of literary rebellion that draws from both Western confessional poetry and Indian cultural realities. Alexander highlights Das's negotiation between tradition and modernity, and her use of autobiography as a political tool. Her analysis points to the complex layering of identity, particularly how Das navigates her roles as mother, wife, poet, and lover in a postcolonial society.

Critics like Devindra Kohli have underscored the psychological dimensions of Das's poetry. He notes her obsession with love and rejection as symptomatic of a deeper conflict between societal expectations and personal authenticity. Kohli praises her linguistic boldness and narrative honesty, which expose the emotional costs of conforming to idealized femininity.

Feminist scholars such as Jasbir Jain and Sharmila Rege have focused on the ways Das's writing reclaims the female body and voice. They argue that her emphasis on corporeality—menstruation, sexual longing, aging—forces a re-evaluation of what constitutes acceptable female expression in literature. Her refusal to disguise female experience through metaphor or euphemism becomes, in itself, a radical literary strategy.

However, Das's work has also faced criticism, particularly from conservative scholars, who viewed her writing as narcissistic or vulgar. This reaction underscores the very gendered double standards she sought to expose: the discomfort with women speaking openly about their desires, fears, and dissatisfaction.

More recent feminist and postcolonial scholarship has reappraised Das's oeuvre in light of intersectionality and cultural hybridity. Her complex relationship with language—especially her choice to write in English despite being a native Malayalam speaker—has been interpreted as a form of resistance against linguistic nationalism and

gendered silencing. Critics argue that in claiming English as her own, Das created a space where she could freely articulate an identity unbound by regional and patriarchal constraints.

In sum, the existing body of literature reveals Kamala Das as a transformative figure whose writings continue to provoke, challenge, and inspire. Her engagement with gender politics is not only thematic but deeply embedded in her narrative form and linguistic expression, marking her as a foundational figure in feminist literary discourse in India.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Confession as Resistance

Kamala Das's literary oeuvre is deeply rooted in the confessional mode, a style often associated with personal revelation and emotional vulnerability. However, for Das, confession was not merely a form of personal expression—it was an act of resistance. By laying bare the intimate details of her emotional and sexual life, she directly challenged the normative expectations of womanhood in Indian society. Her writings confront taboos around female desire, bodily autonomy, and emotional dissatisfaction, exposing the hypocrisies of a patriarchal culture that demanded silence and self-erasure from women.

In poems like *An Introduction*, Das confesses: "I am sinner, I am saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed." These lines encapsulate the dualities that she embraced and exposed through her writing. By admitting to contradictions—between virtue and vice, longing and rejection—she refused to conform to the image of the ideal, passive Indian woman. Instead, she carved out a space where imperfection and emotional turmoil became valid subjects of literary exploration.

Her autobiography *My Story* (1976) further exemplifies confession as resistance. Written in prose that is raw, candid, and unapologetically personal, the book caused a sensation for its open discussion of love, infidelity, loneliness, and emotional emptiness within marriage. In a society where women's voices were largely confined to domestic or devotional roles, Das's willingness to articulate her desires and disillusionments was revolutionary. Through confession, she reclaimed control over her narrative, challenging the silence historically imposed on women.

Moreover, her confessional tone is often intertwined with her linguistic rebellion. In *An Introduction*, she famously asserts, "The language I speak becomes mine." Her use of English, a colonial language, becomes a medium through which she asserts identity and individuality, separate from the expected roles in traditional Malayalam-speaking

society. Confession, thus, is not only thematic but stylistic—her choice of language, tone, and structure all participate in the politics of resistance.

In sum, Kamala Das used confession as a powerful literary and political tool. By exposing the internal world of the female self—its desires, wounds, and contradictions—she resisted both literary conventions and sociocultural norms. Her confessional voice was not one of weakness but of assertion; it insisted that women's inner lives are worthy of attention, complexity, and above all, expression. Through this mode, Das did not just tell her story—she rewrote the possibilities of womanhood in Indian English literature.

Female Desire and Sexuality

Kamala Das stands out as one of the few Indian writers who brought female desire and sexuality to the center of literary discourse, particularly in a cultural context where such themes were shrouded in silence and shame. Her frank and unapologetic exploration of female sexuality challenged the traditionally repressive narratives that defined women's roles as chaste, obedient, and self-sacrificing. In both her poetry and prose, Das offers a complex, embodied portrayal of female desire—not as a metaphorical longing but as a physical and emotional reality.

In her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das writes with intensity and sensuality, describing the hunger for love and the pain of unfulfilled passion. Poems like *The Looking Glass* are particularly significant for their direct address of sexual intimacy. In this poem, the speaker urges women to embrace and own their bodies, advising: "Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of / Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts..." These lines dismantle the image of the passive, virginal woman and instead present female sexuality as active, desiring, and unapologetically real.

Her autobiography *My Story* (1976) continues this theme by recounting her emotional and physical experiences with stark honesty. Das speaks openly about marital dissatisfaction, extramarital affairs, and the loneliness that often accompanied sex without love. While critics have accused her of self-exposure or sensationalism, her writing is better understood as a radical act of reclaiming female sexual agency in a male-dominated literary and social world.

Female sexuality in Das's work is not romanticized; it is conflicted, vulnerable, and at times, disillusioned. Yet it is also insistent, refusing to be erased or moralized. Her treatment of desire reflects not only personal longing but also a deeper commentary on the societal denial of female sexual autonomy. She questions why desire in women is treated as shameful or dangerous, while men are celebrated for their virility and conquest.

Das also rejects the idealized image of love as pure or redemptive.

In her poem *The Old Playhouse*, she writes:

"You called me wife, / I was taught to break saccharine into your tea..."

Here, sexuality is framed within the monotony and subservience of marriage, where the woman is reduced to a domestic role, stripped of passion and identity. Such lines underscore the tension between societal expectations and personal truth that runs through much of her work.

In a literary culture historically dominated by male perspectives, Kamala Das's writing foregrounds the woman's body and voice. She refuses to disguise or sanitize female sexuality, instead offering it in all its raw complexity—longing, fulfillment, betrayal, and defiance. In doing so, she not only gave expression to female desire but transformed it into a powerful form of literary and social resistance.

Language, Identity, and Selfhood

Kamala Das's writings reveal a profound and often turbulent exploration of language, identity, and selfhood. For Das, language is not just a medium of expression but a site of struggle and empowerment, particularly in negotiating the multiple identities she inhabited—woman, writer, wife, mother, Malayali, Indian, and postcolonial subject. Her use of English, her engagement with her native Malayalam, and her confessional style all contribute to a complex portrayal of selfhood that resists fixed definitions.

One of the most powerful statements of her linguistic rebellion comes in the poem *An Introduction*, where she declares: "The language I speak / Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses / All mine, mine alone."

Here, Das asserts ownership over English—a colonial language that, for her, becomes a tool of self-definition rather than submission. This reclaiming of language reflects her broader quest for autonomy in a patriarchal and postcolonial context. By choosing to write in English, she not only defies linguistic nationalism but also asserts her right to speak in the language she feels most intimately connected to her inner self.

Das's identity is fluid and multi layered, shaped by cultural dislocation, emotional conflict, and the expectations placed upon women in traditional Indian society. Her writing often reveals a fractured self—torn between roles she did not choose and desires she cannot silence. In *My Story*, she candidly narrates her struggles with the role of wife and mother, roles that suffocate rather than complete her. She writes of feeling alienated within her own skin, her identity consumed by societal roles that ignore her emotional and sexual needs.

This fragmentation is echoed in her poetry, where the speaker often oscillates between defiance and vulnerability. In poems like *The Suicide* and *The Old Playhouse*, the poetic voice expresses a desperate need to escape the suffocating expectations of womanhood and reclaim a space for authentic selfhood. Her confessional tone becomes a form of self-construction, where the act of writing is also an act of becoming.

Das also engages in a gendered reimagining of the self. In many poems, she refuses to conform to traditional ideals of femininity, presenting instead a self that is complex, emotional, desirous, and rebellious. She challenges the cultural norm that denies women the right to be subjects of their own stories.

In *An Introduction*, she writes: “I too call myself I.”

This deceptively simple line is a radical assertion of individuality in a society where women's identities are often relational—defined as daughter, wife, or mother, rather than as autonomous beings.

Ultimately, Kamala Das's writings represent a continuous negotiation with identity—linguistic, cultural, emotional, and sexual. Her fearless articulation of inner turmoil, desire, and resistance allows her to construct a self that is fragmented yet authentic, oppressed yet expressive. Language, for Das, becomes the battleground on which identity is fought for and selfhood is asserted, making her work a powerful contribution to feminist and postcolonial literature.

IV. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das's literary legacy stands as a landmark in the evolution of Indian English literature, particularly in its engagement with the politics of gender and the redefinition of womanhood. Through her fearless exploration of female desire, emotional vulnerability, and personal identity, Das dismantled the conventional, patriarchal images of Indian women as silent, obedient, and self-effacing. Her writing—intensely confessional, unapologetically intimate, and stylistically bold—offered a voice to the silenced experiences of countless women and carved a space for female subjectivity within a male-dominated literary tradition.

Das's choice to write in English, her candid depictions of the female body, and her refusal to conform to idealized gender roles were all radical acts of resistance. She transformed confession into a tool of empowerment, desire into a form of defiance, and personal narrative into political discourse. Her work redefined what it meant to be a woman, not through abstraction or theory, but through lived experience expressed with raw honesty.

In challenging the societal norms that sought to confine women's voices and identities, Kamala Das not only reimagined womanhood but also reconfigured the possibilities of Indian literature itself. Her writings continue to inspire feminist thought, challenge cultural taboos, and speak to new generations of readers navigating questions of gender, identity, and freedom. Ultimately, Kamala Das did not just write about being a woman—she rewrote what it meant to be one.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alexander, M. (1989). *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*. Barnes & Noble.
- [2] Chaudhuri, R. (Ed.). (2016). *A History of Indian Poetry in English*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Das, K. (1965). *Summer in Calcutta*. Everest Press.
- [4] Das, K. (1967). *The Descendants*. Writers Workshop.
- [5] Das, K. (1976). *My Story*. Sterling Publishers.
- [6] Das, K. (1996). *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. D.C. Books.
- [7] Jain, J. (2002). *Writing Women Across Cultures*. Rawat Publications.
- [8] Kohli, D. (1975). *Kamala Das: An Introduction*. Arnold-Heinemann.
- [9] Lal, M. (Ed.). (2005). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings by Indian Women*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Mehrotra, A. K. (Ed.). (2008). *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. Permanent Black.
- [11] Narasimhaiah, C. D. (Ed.). (1978). *Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Sterling Publishers.
- [12] Nayar, P. K. (2008). *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Education.
- [13] Nair, R. B. (1992). *Narratives of Indian Modernity: The Cultural Politics of English in India*. Routledge.
- [14] Paranjape, M. (Ed.). (1993). *Indian Poetry in English*. Macmillan India.
- [15] Rege, S. (2006). *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan.
- [16] Rich, A. (1979). *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- [17] Roy, A. G. (2010). *Biting the Bullet: Women and Resistance in Indian Literature*. Atlantic Publishers.
- [18] Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press.
- [19] Sunder Rajan, R. (1993). *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- [20] Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1993). *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present (Vol. 2)*. Oxford University Press.



A Study of Female Biographical Writing in Officially Compiled Huizhou Local Gazetteers during the Qing Dynasty—Focusing on the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer

Huifeng Chen

School of History, Liaoning University, China

Received: 24 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Oct 2025; Accepted: 27 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Qing Dynasty witnessed a significant number of chaste and martyr women in Huizhou, and the biographical accounts dedicated to them in officially compiled local gazetteers expanded considerably. Among these sources, the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer stands out for its comprehensive content and particularly detailed and systematic categorization. An examination from temporal, spatial, and textual comparative perspectives reveals distinct characteristics in these biographies: a predominance of chaste widows, relatively fewer martyr figures, limited representation of talented women, and a pronounced degree of stylistic formulaism. Analysis of these patterns and features suggests that the prevalence of chaste and martyr women in Huizhou was closely linked to the prominence of female chastity ideals in the region. This phenomenon resulted not only from official promotion but was also reinforced by distinctive local cultural influences.*

Keywords— *Huizhou, officially compiled local gazetteers, female biographies*



I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, Huizhou has remained a prominent focus in Ming and Qing regional historical studies. The discovery and systematic compilation of a large number of Huizhou contractual documents have provided substantial source material for academic research on local societies during the Ming and Qing periods, particularly regarding social realities in Huizhou. Owing to their vast quantity and high historical research value, these documents are regarded as a major discovery in historical scholarship, comparable in significance to oracle bone

inscriptions, Han and Jin dynasty bamboo slips, Dunhuang manuscripts, and Ming-Qing palace archives. This has also given rise to a prominent field of study known as Huizhou studies. Since scholars such as Fu Yiling and Chen Xuewen pioneered research on Huizhou merchants, the scope of Huizhou studies has continuously expanded, with research areas gradually broadening. Nevertheless, the primary focus remains on the Huizhou merchant group, and related scholarly output has been remarkably fruitful. Notable works include Zhang Haipeng and Wang Tingyuan's *Studies on Huizhou Merchants*^[1], Wang

Zhenzhong's Ming-Qing Huizhou Merchants and Social Change in Huaiyang, ^[2] Wang Zhenzhong and Liu Daosheng's Huizhou Documents and Research in Chinese History^[3], as well as their recently published Journey Between Huangshan and Baiyue Mountains^[4].

While research on Huizhou merchants is undoubtedly representative and typologically significant, studies on other social groups in Huizhou should not be overlooked. This is particularly true for research on Huizhou women, who constituted half of the local population and served as crucial domestic supporters behind the Huizhou merchant groups. This demographic significance, however, is not matched by the current level of academic attention they receive. Moreover, existing research outcomes remain limited, often scattered within broader social discussions on Huizhou or treated as subsidiary to studies on Huizhou merchants. Therefore, this paper centers on Huizhou women, utilizing the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer as its main source, to explore several issues related to the writing of female biographies in officially compiled Huizhou gazetteers during the Qing Dynasty, with the aim of contributing to the study of Huizhou women.

II. CLASSIFICATION OF FEMALE BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

Four editions of the Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer compiled and preserved from the Ming and Qing periods exist, specifically those from the Hongzhi, Jiajing, Kangxi, and Daoguang reigns. Among these, the Daoguang edition is the most comprehensive in content and relatively well-structured in its compilation system, particularly in its richly detailed section on exemplary women (lienü zhuan). Therefore, this study focuses on the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer as the central text for analysis. By comparing it with other editions of the Huizhou gazetteer and with officially compiled local gazetteers from other regions, this paper aims to identify commonalities and distinctive features. In terms of content, the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition, like those in other versions and regions, revolves around a shared thematic focus: "filial piety, chastity, fidelity, and martyrdom" (xiao zhen jie lie). However, in terms of

compilation style, the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition exhibits unique characteristics compared to earlier versions.

Although the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer shares similarities in thematic content with those from other regions and overlaps with earlier editions, it significantly expands the content and refines the classification system. For instance, the Kangxi Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, compiled by Zhao Jishi and others, "did not distinguish between chaste widows (jiefu), faithful maidens (zhennü), or those who had or had not received state recognition; it merely noted the categories under each entry."^[5] In contrast, the Daoguang edition "divided the compilation into four categories: chaste widows, martyred widows, faithful maidens, and chaste martyrs, with filial wives, filial daughters, virtuous women, and talented women placed at the end. Those who received state honors and archways, official commendations, or who maintained their vows from youth for decades without recognition were all systematically arranged by category."^[6] This demonstrates that the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition placed greater emphasis on categorizing deeds by type. This change, on one hand, accommodated the sharp increase in the number of exemplary women in Huizhou during the Ming and Qing periods. On the other hand, grouping by category helped to highlight the moral themes intended for promotion, thereby enhancing the social edification function of the local gazetteer. Overall, the female biographies in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer can be classified into four main types: Chaste Widows (jie), Martyrs (lie), Filial Women (xiao), and Talented Women (wen).

The first category is Chaste Widows (jie), referring to women who remained faithful to their husbands and refused to remarry. This group typically constituted the majority in the lienü zhuan. It is evident that such accounts were the most promoted theme by the authorities, serving as exemplars of the traditional Confucian precept that "the husband is the guide of the wife." The mass recording of these women's deeds in officially compiled gazetteers essentially aimed to instill chastity ideals into local society, thereby upholding the established social and familial order. This inherently

determined that the dominant female biographical writing could not emphasize the individual characteristics of the women themselves; their significance existed only in relation to their husbands and marital families. This is reflected in the primary identification of a woman as "wife of so-and-so." The brief accounts of their deeds predominantly describe their contributions to the family and their commitment to preserving chastity after their husband's death.

The second category is Martyrs (*lie*). The terms *jie* and *lie* are often combined, as *lie* shares the fundamental characteristic of *jie*—fidelity to the husband. However, *lie* represents an extreme form of *jie*, upholding "chastity" at the cost of one's life. This could mean resolving to follow the husband in death after his passing or choosing death to protect one's chastity during periods of warfare, banditry, or social disorder. Figures in this category often share two characteristics: first, compared to chaste widows, martyr widows typically had no sons, thus avoiding the obligation to raise children; second, such figures frequently appeared during dynastic transitions, where relatively disordered social conditions made women more vulnerable to being forced into martyrdom to preserve their chastity.

The third category is Filial Women (*xiao*), primarily referring to devotion towards parents or parents-in-law. Filial deeds were often interconnected with chaste conduct. The section on chaste widows in the Daoguang gazetteer also includes many accounts of women who, after their husband's death, remained chaste and diligently served their husband's elders.^[7]

The final category is Talented Women (*wen*), or *caiyuan*, referring to women gifted in poetry and literature. This category is relatively unique and received the least emphasis in officially compiled gazetteers, placed at the end after the aforementioned categories.^[8] The number of recorded individuals is also very small.

From the perspective of compilation structure, the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer also shows a significant change compared to the Hongzhi, Jiajing, and Kangxi editions. It abandoned the earlier method of simple chronological organization, instead dividing entries first by region and then arranging them chronologically within each region. Huizhou was a

relatively stable political-geographical unit comprising six counties: Shexian, Xiuning, Wuyuan, Jixi, Yixian, and Qimen. The compilation of the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang edition was organized according to these six major regions. This was an innovation of the Daoguang gazetteer compared to previous versions. This method of organization made the geographical context of individuals clearer and the categories more distinct. Therefore, this can be regarded as a step forward in the writing of female biographies in Qing Dynasty officially compiled local gazetteers.

In reality, this progress benefited from the continuous practice of official gazetteer compilation over the years and the maturation of compilation philosophies. Simultaneously, the increasing number of exemplary women also drove changes in the compilation of local gazetteers. Similar changes appeared in gazetteer compilation from other regions during the same period. Large-scale, synchronous changes not only indicate a collective shift in official compilation ideology but also demonstrate that this change actually met the societal need for shaping and promoting specific female images at the time.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

The characteristics of female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou are reflected in the *lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Exemplary Women) of the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer. Some of these traits were more pronounced in the Huizhou region, while others represent distinctive features when compared to other categories of records or to accounts from different dynasties. Therefore, these characteristics are not absolutely unique, yet examining them through the dimensions of time, space, and text remains necessary, as it aids in understanding the evolution and specific features of female biographical writing.

First, there is a predominance of chaste widows (*jiefu*). A high proportion of chaste widows in the *lienü zhuan* is a common phenomenon across all officially compiled local gazetteers, determined by the dominant official ideology, inevitably resulting in varying degrees of

commonality. However, this phenomenon is more pronounced in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer compared to other regions. Taking Shexian County as an example, chaste widows account for over ninety percent of the total entries across all eight major categories. In terms of absolute numbers, the Daoguang gazetteer also records more chaste widows than gazetteers from other regions. This particular phenomenon was influenced by Huizhou's distinctive geographical and socio-cultural characteristics, which fostered a more prevalent cult of female chastity and fidelity, leading to a higher number of chaste widows. The specific connections behind this will be elaborated in the following section.

Second, there is a relative scarcity of martyr widows (*jielie*). This scarcity is relative to the number of chaste widows. The reasons are twofold: firstly, the extreme nature of martyrdom lacks universality; secondly, society at the time did not actively promote such drastic acts. Although martyrdom was emotionally stirring and could more sharply highlight the virtue of chastity, its excessive promotion could lead to other social problems, such as leaving young orphans and elderly in-laws without support. Consequently, accounts of chaste widows often include details where the widow initially intended to follow her husband in death but was persuaded by others to consider her children and parents-in-law, ultimately choosing a life of chaste widowhood instead. In fact, the inclusion of such details served to subtly advise women that, under normal circumstances, they should prioritize chastity widowhood over martyrdom.

Third, there is a notable scarcity of talented women (*caiyan*). This scarcity is also relative to the first two categories, but the numbers for talented women are even more extreme. The Daoguang gazetteer records only one talented woman from Shexian County, with no such entries for the other five counties. The category of talented women is most closely linked to female education. However, this scarcity should not lead to a denial of female education in Huizhou during the Ming and Qing periods. On the contrary, as a region deeply influenced by Zhu Xi's Family Rituals, Huizhou placed considerable emphasis on female education. Hu Zhongsheng, after analyzing numerous Huizhou genealogies, concluded that "Huizhou, renowned as a land of propriety and

righteousness, under the permeation of Confucian culture, particularly valued education. Women, especially those from the upper classes, generally received a good education."^[9] In reality, some Huizhou women did receive relatively good education through various means. However, these opportunities were primarily privileges of upper-class women; the vast majority of lower-class women lacked such access. Furthermore, even for upper-class women, the focus of education was on texts like the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, *Analects*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, and *Admonitions for Women*. Cultivation of literary talent and poetic skill was never the mainstream of female education, so those truly qualifying as "talented women" were indeed a minority. Nevertheless, this is not the primary reason for their extreme scarcity in the *lienü zhuan*. Even if not mainstream, some upper-class Huizhou women achieved proficiency in arts like poetry, so the solitary example of Huang Kexun seems anomalous. Considering the social context, the main reason lies in the fact that the official ideology's requirements for core female virtues did not prioritize literary talent ("wen") but rather emphasized chastity, filial piety, and loyalty. Consequently, the gazetteers did not devote significant space to shaping the image of talented women, focusing instead on promoting the deeds of chaste widows to achieve their stated goal of moral transformation.

Fourth, there is a pronounced phenomenon of formulization. Compared to the Hongzhi edition of the gazetteer, female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou exhibits severe formulization. Both in the recording of deeds and their expression, highly formulaic and homogenized patterns emerged. From the perspective of highlighting the intended themes, this phenomenon is understandable. However, the primary cause was likely the relaxation of state restrictions on commemorating women during the Ming and Qing periods, especially from the mid-Qing onwards, leading to a sharp increase in the number of exemplary women. This forced compilers of official gazetteers to adopt selective and abbreviated forms of recording, eventually resulting in the batch recording of individuals with similar deeds, often merely noting the woman's native place under the entry "Wife of X, née Y" without further details. This formulization might be loosely compared to that seen in Sui-Tang period stone

inscriptions. Both prioritized the need for thematic expression over highlighting the individuality of the women, akin to what Hu Zhongsheng described as emphasizing "the Confucian ethic of the husband as the guide of the wife and the kinship consciousness of the mother's status being determined by the son."^[10] Similarly, inscriptions on chaste widow arches in Huizhou also show this trend, often recording only numbers without names due to the vast quantities. While this type of formulization can create a sense of distortion for researchers, it centrally reflects the ideological priorities of the ruling elite of that time.^[11]

In summary, the biographical writing about women in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer's *lienü zhuan* section exhibits four distinct characteristics during the Qing dynasty. First, chaste widows (*jiefu*) numerically dominated these records to a far greater extent than in other regions, a phenomenon closely linked to Huizhou's unique geographical and cultural environment and the profound influence of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. Second, martyr widows (*jielie*) were relatively scarce. This scarcity stemmed both from the extreme nature of suicidal chastity and from the official stance, which discouraged such acts to avoid social problems like orphaned children and unsupported elderly parents. Third, records of talented women (*caiyan*) were exceptionally rare. Although female education in Huizhou was relatively widespread, influenced by Zhu Xi's Family Rituals, its curriculum focused primarily on moral indoctrination. Cultivation of literary talent was not mainstream, and official ideology prioritized promoting chastity and filial piety over literary accomplishment. Fourth, the biographical writing displayed a high degree of formulization, manifesting as narrative templates and content homogenization. This was an inevitable consequence of the Qing state's relaxed regulations for commemorating women, which led to a sharp increase in the number of recorded exemplars. Its essence was the reinforcement of the ethical norm that "the husband is the guide of the wife" through standardized writing. Collectively, these characteristics reflect the ideological imperatives of the Qing state in shaping the image of women through local gazetteer compilation. While this process somewhat obscured historical complexity, it

provides crucial textual evidence for researching contemporary gender ideologies.

IV. REASONS FOR THE PREVALENCE OF THE CHASTITY CULT AMONG WOMEN IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

The large number of women recorded in the *lienü zhuan* of the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer is a significant reflection of the prevalent female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou. The reasons for this phenomenon relate both to vigorous promotion at the state level and to various regional characteristics of Huizhou. Official advocacy provided an essential overarching direction, while regional characteristics represented an expression of local initiative, requiring deeper exploration of the unique local traits of Huizhou.

During the Ming and Qing periods, to meet the needs of social control, the state promoted and honored individuals such as filial sons, obedient grandsons, righteous husbands, and chaste wives throughout society. The early Ming Hongwu period stipulated: "Commoner widows who lost their husbands before age thirty, maintained their resolve, and did not remarry after age fifty shall have their family's corvée labor obligations exempted."^[12] The early Qing had similar regulations. Furthermore, after the Daoguang period, the Qing dynasty further lowered the threshold for applying for state honors, aiming to maintain local order and foster a social atmosphere that esteemed chastity and filial piety, thereby upholding moral norms. To achieve this, besides granting reputational recognition, the authorities also provided economic incentives. Such substantial reputational and material rewards not only increased the number of chastity arches commemorating clan women but also significantly strengthened the ideology of female chastity and martyrdom.^[13]

As official publications, local gazetteers were inevitably guided and influenced by mainstream state ideology, and Huizhou was no exception. The preface to the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer explicitly begins by stating, "Now the state's rites and teachings are widely disseminated, and people esteem moral integrity and chastity,"^[14] revealing a strong

emphasis on propagating Confucian norms and clear political direction. Therefore, it can be said that the language, narratives, and other aspects of female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou were constrained by the promotion of official mainstream ideology. However, this also resulted in very clearly articulated themes. Coupled with supporting systems and policies, this ultimately contributed to the prevalence of the female chastity cult in Huizhou.

While the influence of official advocacy was widespread, its reception varied across regions due to differences in culture, geography, and customs. As mentioned, the female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou was more pronounced than in some other areas. Interpreting this phenomenon requires attention not only to the macro social context of official promotion but also to the specific micro-level characteristics of Huizhou itself.

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, Confucian ethics underwent continuous secularization. After the Southern Song, Neo-Confucianism, which vigorously promoted feudal morality, became the official mainstream. Huizhou had deep connections with Neo-Confucianism. The founders of the Cheng-Zhu school, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, as well as its great synthesizer Zhu Xi, all traced their ancestral origins to Huizhou. Consequently, Huizhou earned the titles "Birthplace of the Cheng Brothers and Zhu Xi" and "Land of Neo-Confucianism." One characteristic of Neo-Confucianism was its emphasis on the lineage, promoting living in clan-based communities and strengthening kinship ties to maintain authority and local social order. Thus, the lineage atmosphere in Huizhou was particularly strong.^[15]

The organization of local lineages was both a social direction advocated by Neo-Confucianism and a social manifestation of its normative influence. As crucial grassroots units for implementing Confucian teachings, the organizational strength of lineages directly affected the process of secularizing these teachings and disseminating ritual norms downward through society. The prevalence of the female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou was also linked to its well-developed lineage social structure. Robust lineage organizations further facilitated the penetration of Confucian moral teachings, leading to stricter ritual constraints on women. Dense lineage

networks and a strong lineage atmosphere subtly but persistently reinforced the chastity ideology among women, as their behavior represented not merely themselves but was often tied to their lineage's honor. The pressure of public opinion within and between lineages was a factor women had to consider for their survival. Of course, lineages also provided support to women who conformed to their behavioral standards.

During the Ming and Qing periods, Huizhou merchants developed rapidly, forming a major nationwide merchant group, and the commercial atmosphere in Huizhou intensified. The Daoguang gazetteer mentions numerous examples of men leaving home for trade. The long-term absence of large numbers of Huizhou men meant many women became the mainstay of their individual households. This situation also created a more pressing practical need in Huizhou to reinforce the ideology of female chastity. The absence of men from the household, in another sense, drove local lineages to utilize the power of ritual teachings and morality to strengthen control over women. Under the long-term influence of this atmosphere, increasingly more Huizhou women consciously embraced the path of chastity and martyrdom, resulting in the frequent appearance of exemplary women and numerous chastity arches, which ultimately became distinctive regional symbols of Ming-Qing Huizhou.

The prevalence of the female chastity cult in Huizhou during the Qing Dynasty resulted from the interaction between state institutions and regional culture. At the national level, both the Ming and Qing dynasties systematically promoted ideals of female chastity and filial piety through commendation systems and policy incentives such as corvée exemption and the erection of memorial arches, thereby incorporating female virtue into the system of social control. That these institutions had a particularly pronounced impact in Huizhou stemmed from the region's unique cultural foundations. As the birthplace of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, Huizhou developed a highly organized lineage society that reinforced Confucian discipline through ancestral halls and clan regulations, intimately binding women's personal conduct to familial honor. Concurrently, the subsistence pattern of Huizhou merchants, characterized by prolonged trading expeditions, created an objective need to reinforce female chastity

norms to maintain family stability. This social ecology, shaped by both lineage ethics and commercial requirements, facilitated the deep penetration of official ideology, ultimately producing the exceptionally prominent cult of female chastity in Huizhou. Historians must recognize the power dynamics operating behind such representations, while also using these formulaic texts to examine the complex interactions between institutions, ideologies, and social structures in traditional society.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, Huizhou women were significant contributors to Huizhou culture and vital supporters behind the large Huizhou merchant groups. They "accumulated initial commercial capital for Huizhou merchants and provided a consolidated home base for those trading far from home." Not only did they generate capital for their families through handicraft production such as weaving and embroidery, but they also assumed comprehensive responsibilities—caring for the elderly, raising children, and managing family assets—while their husbands were away on business, thereby becoming the cornerstone of family stability. Although these economic activities and domestic contributions warranted thorough documentation, within the writing framework of officially compiled local gazetteers, their identities were reduced to singular moral symbols.

There is no doubt that Huizhou women made multifaceted contributions to the development of the Huizhou region, yet their significance and diversity were not adequately reflected in the female biographical writings of contemporary official gazetteers. Compilers of these gazetteers, guided by specific ideological imperatives, established an evaluative framework for women centered on "chastity, fidelity, filial piety, and martyrdom." This system rendered women's value entirely contingent upon men and their patrilineal clans, resulting in distinctly formulaic characteristics in biographical writing. The life experiences of diverse women were compressed into similar narrative templates, effacing the particularities of individual lives and ultimately producing a rigid image of womanhood. While this mode of writing diminished historical richness, it successfully constructed a

set of behavioral paradigms aligned with feudal ethical standards.

When contextualized within their historical setting and viewed from the perspective of feudal moral promotion, this writing strategy was undoubtedly successful. By subsuming the diverse lived experiences of women into a unified moral narrative, gazetteer compilers effectively reinforced societal expectations and norms for female conduct. These biographies served not only as instructional texts for women's edification but also, through their form as local knowledge, participated in shaping the cultural identity of the Huizhou region. Today, despite their limitations, these texts provide a unique window into understanding the living conditions of Huizhou women during the Qing dynasty. Beneath the surface of formulaic narratives, we can still glimpse women's agency and survival strategies within specific historical constraints. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a dialectical approach to the issues surrounding female biographical writing in Qing dynasty Huizhou gazetteers—acknowledging their value as historical sources while maintaining a critical awareness of the power relations embedded within these writings.

REFERENCES

- [1] Zhang Haipeng and Wang Tingyuan, *Studies on Huizhou Merchants*, Anhui: Anhui People's Publishing House, 2010.
- [2] Wang Zhenzhong, *Ming-Qing Huizhou Merchants and Social Change in Huaiyang* (Newly Revised Edition), Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2023.
- [3] Wang Zhenzhong and Liu Daosheng, *Huizhou Documents and Research in Chinese History*, Shanghai: Zhongxi Book Company, 2019.
- [4] Wang Zhenzhong and Liu Daosheng, *Journey Between Huangshan and Baiyue Mountains*, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2024.
- [5] Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, juan 13, "Biographies: Exemplary Women," p. 110.
- [6] Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, juan 13, "Biographies: Exemplary Women," p. 110.
- [7] Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, juan 13, "Biographies: Exemplary Women," p. 242.
- [8] Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, juan 13, "Biographies: Exemplary Women," p. 252.

- [9] Hu Zhongsheng, "Patterns of Controlling Women in Huizhou Genealogies under the Influence of Confucian Ethical Penetration," *Huizhou Studies*, No. 7, 2011.
- [10] Hu Zhongsheng, "Regulations on the Inclusion of Women in Qing Dynasty Huizhou Genealogies," *Journal of Anhui University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, No. 1, 2007.
- [11] Wang Xiaochong, "Huizhou Chastity Arches and Exemplary Women," *Social Science Review*, No. 3, 2007.
- [12] *Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*, juan 79, "Commemoration," p. 425.
- [13] Cao Yonghong and Xing Yu, "An Analysis of the Construction of Chastity Arches in Huizhou under the Background of Ming-Qing Huizhou Merchant Activities," *Beauty & Times*, No. 3, 2023.
- [14] *Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer*, juan 13, "Biographies: Exemplary Women," p. 110.
- [15] *Republican-era Shexian County Gazetteer*, juan 1, "Geography: Local Customs," p. 41.



A Study on the Discursive Construction of Economic Growth in World Economic Forum Discourse

Yuxia Xiao

School of English, Beijing International Studies University, No. 1, Dingfuzhuang Nanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100024, China

Received: 28 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 20 Oct 2025; Accepted: 27 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The World Economic Forum has compiled the content of global economic conferences as well as perspectives on various economic issues. Its focus spans multiple domains, including economics, technology, the environment, and society. This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and adopts a corpus-based linguistic methodology, selecting economic discourse from economic meetings centered on economic growth as the corpus, aiming to explore the discursive construction of economic growth in the World Economic Forum and its ideological implications. As an interdisciplinary and increasingly prominent subject in linguistic research, economic discourse has seen a growing body of studies in recent years. This paper summarizes the research background and content related to economic discourse, while also organizing theoretical and analytical frameworks along with research methodologies. The objective is to investigate how the World Economic Forum employs language to construct the concept of economic growth and to analyze the underlying ideologies and power dynamics within this discourse. This study offers valuable insights for policymakers into how discourse can be used to shape public expectations and enhance the legitimacy of economic policies.*



Keywords— *Economic discourse, Discourse analysis, Economic growth, Discursive construction.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The World Economic Forum (WEF) is a globally influential international organization dedicated to promoting economic growth, global cooperation, and sustainable development. Among its various areas of focus, economic growth has emerged as a prominent topic. Economic growth generally refers to the increase in the total output of goods and services in a country or region over a certain period, typically measured by the growth rate of GDP or per capita GDP. In WEF reports and articles, discussions on economic growth go beyond traditional GDP metrics, incorporating perspectives such as sustainability, innovation, inclusiveness, and globalization.

As a discourse system that facilitates communication in the economic domain, economic discourse can be used to analyze economic theories, phenomena, and relevant policies. To a certain extent, it reflects the discursive power of both enterprises and nations. Compared with economic discourse, more academic attention has been paid to political discourse, cultural discourse, and corporate identity construction discourse both domestically and internationally. Economic discourse can be classified into macro, meso, and micro levels, corresponding respectively to national, corporate, and individual perspectives. The economic discourse on economic growth presented in the World Economic Forum primarily focuses on the national

level. This discourse not only reflects the international community's views on economic development but also involves issues of ideology, power relations, and global governance.

Deligiaouri, Anastasia (2019) studied the construction of economic crisis discourse and media narratives, revealing the key “nodal points” of the Greek crisis discourse[4]. She emphasized the crucial role of media discourse during times of crisis, where information dissemination and news framing can significantly influence citizens, policies, and society as a whole. This suggests that studying the construction of economic discourse and its underlying ideologies can help further explore how the World Economic Forum uses language to construct the concept of economic growth and analyze the associated ideological and discursive power structures.

Preis, Jiří and Klika, David (2024) conducted a study on WEF texts based on the themes of sustainability and social media[15]. They examined sustainability articles published between 2016 and 2020, analyzing how audiences perceive sustainability and how the concept is shaped through language in the public sphere. Similarly, analyzing the discursive construction and ideology behind the theme of economic growth can help us better understand the ideological implications and discursive power embedded in this topic. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), proposed by Ruth Wodak and her team, is a research paradigm that integrates interdisciplinary theories and methods. It combines the social, political, and historical contexts of discourse with macro-level contextual analysis, discursive strategies, and micro-level linguistic realizations.

This study adopts the Discourse-Historical Approach to explore:

- (1) The specific realizations and operational mechanisms of economic discourse;
- (2) The underlying ideologies and power relations in economic discourse;
- (3) The discursive strategies employed in economic discourse.

The study first reviews relevant literature on economic discourse, then outlines the theoretical foundations and analytical framework of the research, followed by a summary of the methodology. It aims to uncover the

identity construction and ideological expressions embedded in economic discourse.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, international researchers have been continuously exploring the study of economic discourse. Zelentsova (2018), based on the attribute of discourse characteristics, divides economic discourse into three types: (1) institution-based, such as discourse in areas like business activities, banking, insurance, marketing, auditing, accounting, and securities trading; (2) discourse on economic topics by non-specialists and company leaders; and (3) genre-based, such as newspaper articles, economics papers, and economics textbooks that focus on economic topics[25]. Research on economic discourse is often conducted from the intersection of linguistics and economics, with theoretical frameworks often combining linguistics, management studies, and economics. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an important research theory used in this analysis. Criticism aims to change or even eliminate the conditions that lead to false or distorted consciousness. Criticism brings to light what was previously hidden, starting a reflective process within individuals or groups, leading to liberation from past suppression and domination (Connerton, cited in Fowler, 1987:483)[6]. Among them, Critical Discourse Analysis is an important research perspective. Cummings, Seferiadis & Haan (2020) used CDA to analyze the discourse of the private sector, exploring the political stance reflected in private sector discourse[3]. Clearly, these studies not only reveal the ideologies and power relations behind economic discourse, but also demonstrate the practicality of CDA in understanding economic texts. Economic growth, as an important issue currently being addressed at the national level, reflects the national image and ideology constructed around it, showing the attention and attitudes of countries towards economic growth.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Theory, as two closely related yet distinct theoretical frameworks, serve as important approaches to the study of discursive construction. Current research on discourse construction and ideology is primarily divided into two branches: Critical Discourse Analysis and Discourse Theory (Freeden, Michael, 2020)[7]. In studies of economic

discourse, the CDA perspective tends to explore features such as ideology and power rather than focusing on explanatory frameworks, whereas Discourse Theory emphasizes specific interpretive frameworks for economic issues. In recent years, economic discourse research has become increasingly diversified, with scholars examining it from various contextual perspectives. However, three main limitations persist: (1) Research corpora remain relatively homogeneous, with most studies relying on news journals and reports while overlooking representative texts such as those from the World Economic Forum; (2) Research perspectives are relatively narrow, predominantly concentrating on national and corporate levels, with insufficient attention paid to the micro-level (individual level); (3) Ideological analysis of discourse remains largely descriptive, making it difficult to uncover the underlying power structures and broader social implications. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by adopting a discourse-analytic perspective to investigate how the World Economic Forum constructs the concept of economic growth through language and to analyze the ideologies and power relations embedded within its discourse.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

3.1 Discourse-Historical Approach

Since the early 1990s, scholars such as Stubbs and Gerbig (1993)[21], and Hardt-Mautner (1995) have attempted to apply corpus methods to CDA[8]. At present, corpus-based CDA research paradigms have begun to attract widespread attention in academic circles in China. Through discourse analysis, researchers can further uncover the relationship between language, power, and ideology. As a research methodology, CDA comprises three analytical dimensions: discourse events (micro-level), discourse practices (meso-level), and social structures (macro-level), aiming to reveal how social ideologies operate and how social power changes (Van Dijk, 1993)[23]. As one of the major approaches within CDA, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) focuses on social issues, emphasizes the exploration of discourse strategies, and highlights the importance of situating texts within their socio-political context. It is shown in Table1 that Reisigl and Wodak (2001) systematically reviewed the DHA research paradigm and summarized five types of discourse strategies involved in language analysis: referential strategies, predicative strategies, argumentative strategies, perspectivization strategies, intensification and mitigation strategies[16].

Table 1: A selection of discursive strategies (adapted from Reisigl & Wodak)

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
referential/ nomination	discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events, and processes/actions	. membership categorization devices, deictics, . tropes such as metaphors, metonymies and synecdoches . verbs and nouns used to denote processes and actions
predication	discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena/events/processes, and actions (more or less positively or negatively)	. stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive (e.g., in the form of adjectives, appositions, prepositional relative clauses, conjunctive clauses, infinitive clauses and participial clauses or groups) . explicit predicates or predicative nouns/adjectives/pronouns . collocations . explicit comparisons, similes, metaphors and other rhetorical figures (including metonymies, hyperboles, litotes, euphemisms) . allusions, evocations, and presuppositions/implicatures . other

argumentation	justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness	. topoi (formal or more content-related) . fallacies
Perspectivization/ framing or discourse representation	positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance	. deictics . direct, indirect or free indirect speech . quotation marks, discourse markers/particles . metaphors . animating prosody . other
intensification, mitigation	Modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances	. diminutives or augmentatives . (modal) particles, tag questions, use of the subjunctive, hesitations, vague expressions, etc. . hyperboles, litotes, indirect speech acts (e.g., question instead of assertion) . verbs of saying, feeling, thinking . other

This paper focuses on how the World Economic Forum uses discourse strategies in texts on economic growth to construct identity and to uncover the underlying ideologies. Therefore, the framework of discourse strategies within the DHA approach in CDA provides an appropriate research foundation for this study.

3.2 Analytical Framework

Given the inherent subjectivity in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study also incorporates the method of corpus analysis. As Nartey (2019) points out, corpus linguistics can be applied to CDA, and Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis (CBCDA) provides a powerful methodological tool for discourse analysts and corpus linguists alike to address research questions related to discourse representation[13].

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) features a three-dimensional analytical structure:

- (1) identifying the specific content or topics of a discourse;
- (2) analyzing the discursive strategies; and
- (3) examining the linguistic means, including both types of linguistic devices and their context-dependent realizations (tokens).

In addition, DHA involves four contextual layers:

- (1) Immediate Co-text, referring to the linguistic environment within the discourse itself;
- (2) Intertextual and Interdiscursive Relations,

concerning references, responses, or imitations among different discourses;

- (3) Situational Context, which includes social variables and institutional frameworks, such as the time, place, audience, and speaker identity;

- (4) Broader Sociopolitical and Historical Context, encompassing wider social, political, and historical backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the DHA proceeds recursively through a series of analytical steps. In order to examine how the World Economic Forum (WEF) constructs discourse and ideology surrounding economic growth, the following eight steps are typically involved:

- (1)Literature Review and Theoretical Preparation: reviewing studies related to “economic growth discourse” and the connection between growth and ideology;
- (2)Systematic Collection of Corpus and Contextual Information: selecting recent articles from the WEF website related to “economic growth”;
- (3)Corpus Selection and Preparation: choosing representative texts for in-depth analysis;
- (4)Formulating Research Questions and Hypotheses: e.g., How does the WEF discursively construct “economic growth”? What ideological tendencies are embedded?
- (5)Preliminary Qualitative Analysis: tagging keywords and identifying initial discursive strategies;

(6) In-depth Case Analysis: conducting close readings of one or more texts, combined with keyword distribution and corpus statistics (with the help of corpus tools);

(7) Critical Interpretation and Explanation: analyzing the underlying power relations and ideological constructions;

(8) Applying the Results to Real-world Contexts: using the findings to discuss the ideological mechanisms of international organizational discourse and to provide critical suggestions or reflections.

According to different purposes, texts employ different discursive strategies and linguistic means. By applying DHA, this study investigates how the WEF constructs the concept of economic growth through discourse, what ideologies are reflected or implied, and what identities and roles are constructed. DHA emphasizes multidimensionality, interdisciplinarity, and a combination of critical and empirical approaches. Through this systematic methodology, it is possible not only to reveal how discourse exerts power, produces inequality, and constructs identity in social contexts, but also to offer researchers a potential pathway to link language studies with social transformation. At the same time, Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework also serves as a crucial theoretical foundation for this study. Building upon prior research, Fairclough redefined discourse by arguing that it not only reflects social reality but also actively constructs it. He advocated examining discourse through the lens of historical transformation, integrating linguistic analysis with social theory.

Fairclough (1989), based on systemic functional linguistics, pointed out that CDA can be divided into three steps: (1) Description of Linguistic Features: The first step involves describing the linguistic form characteristics of the text and revealing how the speaker uses language to achieve their communicative goals through these features. This includes examining the specific words, phrases, and grammatical structures chosen by the speaker. (2) Interpretation of Ideological Meanings: The second step entails explaining the ideological meanings represented by the specific context in which the text is produced and understood. This can be seen as the practical level of the discourse, where the conveyed meaning can vary depending on the context. It indicates that economists may use

euphemisms or indirect language during conferences to express their true intentions based on different contexts.

(3) Explanation of Ideological Intervention: The third step involves explaining how different contexts may have an intervening or influencing role on ideology. For instance, sentences with different structures may highlight different emphases, leading to variations in meaning. This suggests that the way information is structured can subtly influence how it is perceived and interpreted. Based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study first conducts an analysis of the discourse features of economic growth discourse, focusing on the collocations and semantic prosody of keywords such as "economic growth." It then moves to the level of discourse practice to interpret the ideological orientations behind specific discourses, such as neoliberalism, state interventionism, and the concept of sustainable development. Finally, from the perspective of social practice, the study examines how these discourses exert influence in policy-making, media representation, and public discussion. Therefore, analyzing the discourse at economics academic conferences from the perspective of critical discourse analysis theory allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the true intentions behind the speakers' words.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Corpus Data

The research corpus was derived from economic growth-themed articles published by the World Economic Forum. Following a chronological selection approach, we collected thirty articles archived in 2025 as the raw corpus. These texts cover diverse national contexts of economic growth, ensuring representational diversity in the research materials. The textual data underwent preprocessing using EditPad Lite8 as a cleaning tool, resulting in refined corpora for final analysis. The collected materials were subsequently compiled into a specialized Economic Growth Discourse Corpus, comprising approximately 49,000 words.

4.2 Research Method

This study adopts a corpus-based research method and has constructed a corpus of economic growth discourse by collecting thirty economic texts published in 2025 that focus on the theme of economic growth. This study, based

on discourse-historical analysis as the research framework, uses two research tools: WordSmith Tools 6.0 and UAM Corpus Tool 3.3. WordSmith Tools 6.0, developed by British linguist Mike Scott, is a classic corpus analysis software. Using WordSmith Tools 6.0, the established corpus undergoes thematic word analysis, collocation analysis, index analysis, and retrieval statistics. The UAM Corpus Tool, designed by Mick O'Donnell, is a powerful software for annotating and analyzing text and image languages. It allows for detailed linguistic annotation, analysis, and statistics. This corpus tool offers two methods for annotating text corpora: text coding and paragraph coding. Text coding is primarily used to define characteristics such as language type, text type, and register, while paragraph coding allows users to segment text into several paragraphs and assign features, such as emotional attributes, to each paragraph. Nurlela et al. (2025) used the UAM Corpus Tool to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes expressed in 10 international news articles reporting on the Kanjuruhan tragedy[14]. Using the UAM Corpus Tool to study the construction of economic discourse and ideology allows for a deeper understanding of how language shapes economic realities and conveys power relations, offering significant value in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL). In summary, using corpus tools in academic research can greatly enhance our ability to efficiently analyze the structure of discourse.

V. RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Economic Discourse Construction

Several scholars proposed that the first focus of economic discourse research is the study of discourse characteristics. International scholars have also shown a strong interest in the study of economic discourse characteristics. Victoria V. Sibul et al. (2019) selected 100 articles from popular economic media as the subject of discourse analysis, exploring the function of economic discourse in modern economic problem communication[19]. Roca (2015) studied the discourse characteristics in the "Development Issues" section of the Spanish NGO 2012–2013 Annual Report, and concluded that the discourse characteristics reflected a trend of weakening non-official cooperation in the context of the economic crisis[18].

Regarding the study of economic discourse construction with the theme of economic growth, it not only indicates that economic growth discourse construction can be an academic product, but also suggests that through specific discourse frameworks, particular forms of economic growth can be promoted. Using WordSmith's Concord function to retrieve discourse on the theme of economic growth, a total of 2,400 results containing "economic growth" were retrieved. Among these, the most frequent collocations with "economic growth" were "job" in first place and "strategies" in second place. This suggests that the issues emphasized in the economic growth discourse mainly focus on employment. Therefore, in constructing the concept of economic growth, job creation is regarded as an important goal of economic growth. In this context, discussions about economic growth often combine how to create more job opportunities to improve people's living standards, reduce poverty, and alleviate social inequality. In terms of policy, this may encourage governments to stimulate investment, provide subsidies, and implement incentive measures to promote employment growth, thereby reinforcing a market-oriented economic growth model.

The combination of "strategies" and "economic growth" reflects, to some extent, the strategic construction of economic growth discourse, thus promoting certain strategic components such as technological innovation and market opening. In summary, from the common collocations of "job" and "strategies," it is evident that the construction of economic growth discourse is highly focused on "employment" and "strategic planning," reflecting a close connection between economic growth and a market-oriented approach. Economic growth is viewed not only as a means to increase employment opportunities but also as a strategically planned objective, typically intertwined with issues such as technological innovation, market openness, and international competition.

5.2 Ideology

Linguistic ideology is a relatively new research field. It originated in the 1960s and 1970s with the spoken ethnography school, which emphasized the cultural concepts of language as these concepts were reflected in culturally distinctive speech patterns. Meanwhile, influential linguistic editors Joseph and Taylor (1990)

raised the question of the ideological foundations of “linguistic science” itself[9]. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) demonstrated how much the field had developed by the mid-1990s. Woolard (1998) provided a broader historical review of it[24]. Also, in later years, scholars like Kroskrity (2004) and Keane (2007) introduced “semiotic ideology” as a related but broader concept[10][11]. Silverstein (1979) offered an influential formulation of “linguistic ideologies” as “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use”[20]. Scholars have also produced substantial research on the ideological construction of images of enterprises, states, leaders, and so on. Lomeu Gomes, R. (2020) conducted research on multilingual families, pointing out that strategies for citing named languages can be linked to ideologies of one person, one language, one country, and also demonstrated how these strategies help us understand how family members navigate their complex national affiliations and persuade their multilingual selves to exist[12]. Vallada, A. D. (2020) discussed the theoretical connection between gender stylization and linguistic ideology, attempting to understand how linguistic ideology operates on gender stylization to produce and legitimize gender differences[22]. Therefore, through discourse analysis, researchers can further reveal the relationship between language, power, and ideology.

The discourse of economic growth emphasizes the relationship between economic growth and social employment. The close connection between “economic growth” and “job” highlights the causal chain of “growth-employment,” which may reflect a strong focus on market freedom, competition, and labor participation. Economic growth, as an important means of improving social welfare, also reflects concerns about the quality of life and social stability. Therefore, such a discourse could lead to the result of promoting social progress through the creation of employment opportunities. The association between economic growth and “strategies” suggests that economic growth always requires clear strategies to achieve stable growth within the global economic system. These strategies may involve free trade, investment incentives, and other mechanisms, revealing the discourse’s focus on global markets, innovation-driven growth, and capital flow. This

type of discourse typically views economic growth as an achievable goal through proper planning and strategies, reflecting trust in macroeconomic regulation, market mechanisms, and technological innovation. However, an overemphasis on strategy might overlook some of the negative effects such strategies could bring, such as environmental issues or widening wealth gaps.

Thus, the high-frequency co-occurrence of “economic growth,” “job,” and “strategies” reveals a dual focus within the discourse of economic growth on both “employment opportunities” and “paths to achieve growth.” This combination likely conveys an ideological balance between market mechanisms and government intervention. On one hand, it emphasizes how market freedom and innovative strategies can promote job creation; on the other hand, it may involve certain government regulation and policy interventions to ensure that the benefits of growth reach the broader population.

VI. CONCLUSION

All speakers use language in different contexts, under different circumstances, for different purposes (Biber, 2009: 9)[1]. The economic discourse in the World Economic Forum is precisely the discourse used for different purposes in different situations. As a popular topic in the field of economics, economic growth has attracted the attention of leaders from various countries. Therefore, studying economic growth discourse helps us understand the theoretical foundation behind economic policies and reveals the true motives of these policies, such as their policy direction and institutional intentions. In fact, under the context of globalization, different countries formulate relevant economic policies (such as stimulating consumption, encouraging investment, reducing taxes, etc.) based on their own economic growth concepts, which in turn affect the actual performance of economic growth.

From the perspectives of discourse construction and ideology, the study of economic growth discourse, from the viewpoint of discourse theory, focuses on the construction and representation of discourse, specifically how language is constructed in the social and cultural context and how its use influences individuals and groups’ understanding of a certain economic event. For example, how do economists or leaders use specific terms to express positive or negative

meanings? In the construction of economic growth discourse, different social actors play different roles, and the discourse theory perspective focuses on how these social actors, playing different roles, use language to build consensus and, in turn, influence the formation of social realities. Fowler argues that linguistics, as a descriptive discipline, has no right to comment on the materials it analyzes; it neither prescribes usage nor evaluates the things it investigates. The purpose of critical linguistics is to practice an understanding of the value of language use.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, the study of economic growth discourse focuses on how language interacts with power, social structures, ideologies, and inequality. For example, how does economic growth discourse support existing power relations? Through critical discourse analysis, the ideological components embedded in economic growth discourse can be revealed, and its social and political intentions can be analyzed. In the context of globalization, economic growth discourse involves political struggles between countries, the interests of multinational corporations, and inequalities between social classes. Critical discourse analysis can help scholars understand how discourse works in different social groups and how language is used to suppress negative voices. At the same time, by analyzing the implicit values in economic growth discourse, it can be revealed whether these discourses conceal issues such as unemployment and poverty, thus exacerbating social inequality.

Regarding the research methods of economic growth discourse, this study first adopts the corpus-based method as the research method with discourse-historical approach as the conceptual framework. Based on the establishment of a corpus, the study then uses Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to analyze economic growth discourse, aiming to explore how discourse reflects social reality and how it constructs social reality. Corpus linguistics offers a new approach to linguistic research by using authentic language data as the object of study. From a macro perspective, it analyzes a large amount of linguistic data to identify patterns of language use. Therefore, it is evident that this method enables us to understand the language surrounding economic growth in a more systematic and comprehensive manner.

Rivera, M., & Zucher, F. (2019) suggest that growth discourse is primarily governmental, yet paradoxically marginalized (decorative), without argumentative reasoning (dogmatic)[17]. These findings cannot be fully explained by communicative strategies or positions; instead, they point to the effects of non-historicized integrative discourse. Discourse, as a powerful tool for constructing ideology, influences policy-making, public opinion, and global economic dynamics. By analyzing how economic growth is framed through discourse, we can uncover the hidden power structures, political motivations, and social values, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the underlying factors behind economic decision-making.

With the widespread adoption of digital technology, the way discourse is constructed and its influence are also changing. The spread of economic discourse on social media platforms has not only accelerated the flow of information but also allowed more social groups to participate in economic discussions, fostering the emergence of diverse voices and dialogues. How to identify and deconstruct the ideologies hidden behind economic growth discourse has become an urgent issue in today's society. The study of economic growth discourse construction and ideology in the context of the global economy makes us realize that discourse not only shapes certain economic behaviors but also, to some extent, shapes our understanding and perception of the global economy. It reveals the complex role of language in reflecting and shaping social and economic realities.

REFERENCES

- [1] Biber, D., & Conrad, S. (2009). *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Cummings GG, Tate K, Lee S, Wong CA, Paananen T, Micaroni SPM, Chatterjee GE. (2018) . Leadership styles and outcome patterns for the nursing workforce and work environment: A systematic review. *Int J Nurs Stud*. 85:19-60.
- [3] Cummings, S., Haan, L., & Seferiadis, A.A. (2020). How to use critical discourse analysis for policy analysis: a guideline for policymakers and other professionals. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 15, 99-108.

- [4] Deligiaouri, Anastasia. (2019). Economic crisis and Greek crisis discourse: A discourse analysis of articles from The Economist referring to Greece (2009–2011). *Journal of Language and Politics*.
- [5] FAIRCLOUGH, N. Discourse and social change [M]. Cambridge: Policy Press, 1992.
- [6] Fowler, R. (1987). On critical linguistics [A]. In H. Tian & P. Zhao (eds.) *Critical Discourse Analysis: Essential Readings* [C]. Tianjin: Nankai University Press.
- [7] Freedon, Michael. (2020). Discourse, concepts, ideologies: Pausing for thought. *Journal of Language and Politics*.
- [8] Hardt-Mautner, G. 1995. Only connect: Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics [Z]. University of Lancaster.
- [9] Joseph, John, and Talbot J. Taylor, eds. 1990. *Ideologies of language*. New York: Routledge.
- [10] Keane, E. Webb. 2007. *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- [11] Kroskrity, Paul. 2004. Language ideology. In *Companion to linguistic anthropology*. Edited by Alessandro Duranti, 496–517. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [12] Lomeu Gomes, R. (2020). Talking multilingual families into being: language practices and ideologies of a Brazilian-Norwegian family in Norway. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 43(10), 993–1013.
- [13] Nartey, Mark & Mwinlaaru, Isaac. (2019). Towards a Decade of Synergizing Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Meta-analysis. *Corpora*. 14. 203-235.
- [14] Nurlala, N., Sinar, T.S., Rosa, R.N., Syahputra, F.P., Shafira, F., & Putri, D.M. (2025). Framed news positioning of attitude toward the Kanjuruhan tragedy: A corpus UAM tool analysis. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*.
- [15] Preis, Jiří & Klika, David. (2024). Sustainability as a Message on Social Media: A Case Study of the World Economic Forum's Twitter (Now X) Account *Zrównoważony rozwój w mediach społecznościowych: studium przypadku konta Światowego Forum Ekonomicznego na Twitterze (obecnie X)*.
- [16] Reisigl, M. & Wodak, R. The discourse-historical approach (DHA) [A]. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (3rd edn.) [C]. London: Sage, 2016: 23-61.
- [17] Rivera, M., & Zucher, F. (2019). Dogma, not Debate. *Economic Growth in Parliamentary Discourse*. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 60, 71-93.
- [18] Roca, M., Vives, M., López-Navarro, E., García-Campayo, J., & Gili, M. (2015). Cognitive impairments and depression: a critical review. *Actas espanolas de psiquiatria*, 43(5), 187–193.
- [19] Sibul, V.V., Vetrinskaya, V., & Grishechko, E.G. (2019). Study of Precedent Text Pragmatic Function in Modern Economic Discourse. *Functional Approach to Professional Discourse Exploration in Linguistics*.
- [20] Silverstein, Michael. 1979. Language structure and linguistic ideology. In *The elements: A parsession on linguistic units and levels*. Edited by Paul Clyne, William F. Hanks, and Carol L. Hofbauer. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- [21] Stubbs, M. & A. Gerbig. 1993. Human and Inhuman Geography: On the Computer-assisted Analysis of Long Texts [A]. In M. Hoey (ed.) *Data, Description, Discourse* [C]. London: Harper Collins.
- [22] Vallada, A. D. (2020). Gender stylization and language ideologies: theoretical connections.
- [23] Van Dijk, T. A. *Principles of critical discourse analysis* [J]. *Discourse & Society*, 1993, 4(1): 249-283.
- [24] Woolard, Kathryn. 1998. Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In *Language ideologies: Practice and theory*. Edited by Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity, 3–49. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- [25] Zelentsova, M.G. (2018). *Discursive-Cognitive Features Of The English-Speaking Economic Discourse*.



Allocation of Powers under the Principal-Responsibility System— An Analysis Based on PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 Results

Guan Xinyu

M.Ed. Candidate, Education Economics and Management, Shanghai Normal University, China

Received: 27 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Oct 2025; Accepted: 25 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Understanding how the scope of principals' authority in China differs from international practice is a prerequisite for rationalizing the scope and structure of principals' decision-making powers. Using samples from the PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 databases, this study examines international trends in school-level decision making on major matters such as teacher personnel, budget allocation, student management, and curriculum management. The findings indicate that high-performing PISA countries/economies tend to grant principals relatively broad authority, and OECD reports show a correlation between strong principal authority and higher PISA performance. By contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities studied have, on average, less authority over major school matters than principals in the high-scoring PISA jurisdictions. The paper recommends, in line with the *Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Organization in Primary and Secondary Schools (trial)*, strengthening principals' decision-making authority on major school matters—especially personnel, budget, student and curriculum issues—and building managerial supervision mechanisms to improve decision efficiency.



Keywords— principal-responsibility system; PISA 2022; PISA 2015

I. INTRODUCTION

Although China's implementation of the principal-responsibility system is relatively recent in historical terms, its evolution carries significant implications: it reflects how the education governance system has adapted to social change and reform needs. Since 1978, when a model of principals operating under Party branch leadership was proposed for full-time secondary schools, this governance arrangement has carried the task of promoting educational development and improving school management effectiveness. The initial designs emphasized Party organizations' leadership in schools—to ensure alignment with national education policy—while also allocating certain managerial and decision-making powers to principals.

Since 1949, China's primary and secondary school leadership structures have evolved through seven stages,

including systems such as school councils, principal responsibility systems, principals operating under Party branch leadership, local Party and education authority leadership models, revolutionary committees, and variations of the principal responsibility model. Li Shufeng (2005) traced this institutional evolution and argued for the necessity of introducing principal accountability under these changing governance arrangements. In 1985, the Central Committee's Decision on Educational System Reform further proposed gradually implementing the principal-responsibility system and establishing a national education committee to strengthen Party and government leadership of education. That decision represented a major shift: it reinforced the principal's role in daily school management and teaching activities and paved the way for enhancing school governance and educational quality.

In 1993, the Outline of China's Education Reform and Development extended the principal-responsibility system

to secondary and lower levels, accelerating reforms and modernizing school governance. The system's further implementation required principals to fully implement national education policies, mobilize staff to run schools, and exercise broad responsibilities—signaling a comprehensive recognition of principals' central role in school development and quality improvement.

The Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Organization in Primary and Secondary Schools (trial), issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee in January 2022, mark a new milestone. The document aims to strengthen Party leadership in primary and secondary schools while progressively implementing a Party-led principal-responsibility system. It reiterates the principal's central position in school governance, clarifying their roles and responsibilities in the contemporary governance context.

While the principal-responsibility system has promoted educational reform and improved management efficiency, it has exposed several problems. Typically, principals are appointed by and accountable to higher administrative authorities, which constrains school autonomy. In such regimes, principals often operate with limited *de facto* power and therefore find it difficult to take full responsibility for school affairs, hindering autonomous development. Conversely, in some schools power is excessively concentrated in the principal's office without adequate checks and balances, producing a "one-man rule" that undermines democratic and scientific decision making and increases the risk of power abuse. Consequently, an internationally comparative perspective on the distribution of school-level decision-making powers can reveal useful lessons.

This study uses PISA 2022 principal questionnaire data concerning responsibilities for major school matters to analyze the distribution of principal authority in PISA high-scoring jurisdictions and to provide policy guidance for the allocation of powers in China.

II. MAJOR SCHOOL MATTERS IN THE PISA PRINCIPAL QUESTIONNAIRE: CATEGORIZATION AND RATIONALE

The allocation of decision-making authority over major school matters is a central component of school governance. It not only indicates how power and responsibility are distributed internally among school leaders, teachers, students and families, but also how the school interacts with external actors such as local education authorities, national ministries, community organizations, and other stakeholders. This distribution shapes governance dynamics and reveals how various parties cooperate and negotiate to influence educational policies and practices.

The PISA principal questionnaire includes items designed to capture who is responsible for twelve major school matters, which can be grouped into four domains: teacher personnel, budget, student management, and curriculum (see OECD, PISA 2022). Examining PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 data and comparing the responses from the four Chinese provinces/cities with those from PISA high-scoring jurisdictions provides an international benchmark for evaluating the scope of principals' authority in China.

PISA 2022 covered 81 participating countries/economies. For comparative purposes this study selects the top four jurisdictions by combined student test performance in the three PISA test domains: Singapore, Ireland, Japan, and Macao SAR. The combined sample includes 561 schools; the sample counts per jurisdiction range from 46 to 182 schools. Based on the PISA principal report, responsibility for the twelve major school matters examined in the questionnaire includes: appointing/hiring teachers; dismissing/suspending teachers; setting teachers' starting salaries; determining teacher salary increases; preparing the school budget; deciding budget allocation; setting student discipline policies; setting student assessment policies; approving student admissions; selecting learning materials; determining curriculum content; and deciding which courses are offered. These items are grouped into the four domains noted above. Comparing PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 allows us to position principals in Chinese provinces/cities within the international landscape.

The following table (Table 1) presents the distribution (percentages) of responsibility for each of these major school matters across the selected jurisdictions and stakeholder groups.

Table 1. Distribution (%) of responsibility for major school matters

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/Hire Teachers	Dismiss/Suspend Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Approve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content (	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
China (B-S-J-Z)	Principal	21.36	13.19	3.72	4.80	18.67	25.49	21.63	19.22	13.05	4.80	5.77	9.74
	Teachers	4.44	1.36	0.46	0.84	2.26	4.71	18.85	22.56	3.11	8.83	14.11	7.14
	School Governing Board	26.52	21.01	10.61	17.70	34.76	56.65	49.04	43.68	24.49	12.82	16.34	20.13
	Local Education Authority	47.28	61.90	75.36	65.98	42.83	12.46	8.36	12.79	58.94	68.27	51.88	49.63
	National / Regional Authority	0.41	2.54	9.85	10.68	1.49	0.68	2.12	1.76	0.41	5.28	11.90	13.35
PISA Average	Principal	16.58	15.86	5.88	6.06	26.02	41.18	32.09	38.15	61.43	23.17	27.45	45.10
	Teachers	3.03	2.85	2.32	2.50	10.87	8.91	28.52	25.67	7.68	69.16	28.88	25.67
	School Governing Board	4.99	22.28	15.51	14.62	22.64	22.10	20.68	6.06	15.18	0.53	1.07	16.58
	Local Education Authority	22.28	29.59	25.66	22.64	25.49	23.88	15.33	3.56	0.71	0.89	3.56	2.49
	National / Regional	22.82	27.45	48.48	23.71	12.83	1.96	1.43	23.89	13.04	4.10	37.08	8.20

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/Hire Teachers	Dismiss/Suspend Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Approve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content (	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
	Local Authority												
Singapore	Principal	19.02	17.18	6.75	7.36	32.52	71.78	35.58	15.34	53.09	12.88	4.29	27.61
	Teachers	3.07	1.84	2.45	4.91	27.61	23.93	60.12	35.58	6.79	76.69	30.06	45.40
	School Governing Board	0.00	1.84	7.98	6.75	7.36	3.07	0.61	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.23
	Local Education Authority	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	National / Regional Authority	77.91	79.14	82.82	80.98	32.52	1.23	3.68	49.08	40.12	10.43	65.64	25.77
Ireland	Principal		8.24	2.35		25.29	31.18	32.35	28.82	42.35	10.00	5.29	39.41
	Teachers		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	10.59	13.53	0.59	79.41	27.65	5.29
	School Governing Board		47.65	2.94		36.47	36.47	47.06	17.65	48.24	1.18	2.35	47.06
	Local Education Authority		23.53	9.41		20.59	21.18	2.35	0.59	0.59	0.00	0.59	0.00

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/Hire Teachers	Dismiss/Suspend Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Approve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content (	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
	National / Regional Authority		14.12	78.82		10.59	4.71	1.18	31.18	1.76	2.35	57.65	1.76
Japan	Principal	20.33	14.84	4.40	7.69	17.58	22.53	35.71	76.37	93.96	48.90	74.73	73.08
	Teachers	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.65	12.09	0.55	47.80	21.43	17.58
	School Governing Board	12.09	17.03	25.82	24.18	23.08	24.73	18.13	1.10	1.10	0.00	0.00	2.75
	Local Education Authority	67.03	67.58	68.13	67.58	58.79	52.20	44.51	9.89	1.65	2.75	2.75	6.59
	National / Regional Authority	0.55	0.55	1.65	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.00	0.55	2.75	0.55	1.10	0.00
Macao (China)	Principal	54.35	43.48	21.74	17.39	39.13	43.48	4.35	4.35	32.61	6.52	4.35	17.39
	Teachers	26.09	28.26	19.57	13.04	34.78	23.91	89.13	89.13	65.22	89.13	58.70	63.04
	School Governing Board	13.04	21.74	47.83	58.70	23.91	26.09	4.35	4.35	2.17	2.17	4.35	13.04
	Local Education	6.52	6.52	8.70	8.70	2.17	6.52	2.17	2.17	0.00	0.00	30.43	4.35

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/Hire Teachers	Dismiss/Suspend Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Approve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content (	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
	Authority												
	National / Regional Authority	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.17	2.17	2.17

(Source: PISA principal questionnaire items, PISA 2015 & 2022 data compiled)

III. ANALYSIS OF PRINCIPALS' AUTHORITY DISTRIBUTION

Data caveat: Ireland's responses for "appoint/hire teachers" and "decide teacher salary increases" were missing and therefore excluded from statistics for those two items.

The PISA principal questionnaire items on major school matters fall into the four domains described earlier: teacher personnel, budget, student management, and curriculum. Below we analyze each domain with respect to principals' relative authority in high-performing PISA jurisdictions and the four Chinese provinces/cities.

3.1 Teacher personnel

Across the PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, the proportion of responsibilities allocated to principals for teacher personnel decisions exceeds 10% for each measured item. This indicates that principals play a meaningful role in teacher appointments/hires, dismissals/suspensions, setting starting salaries, and determining salary increases. Macao stands out: principals there show particularly strong authority across all four teacher personnel items, with over 50% responsibility for appointing/hiring teachers. This suggests Macao principals have a large influence on teacher workforce composition and, by extension, on teacher quality and school staffing structure.

Singapore and Japan show proportions roughly in line with the international average, reflecting a cautious approach to granting principals personnel authority—possibly

balancing principal prerogatives with teacher professional autonomy and the roles of other governance actors (e.g., school management committees).

By contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities show slightly lower shares of responsibility for teacher personnel compared with PISA averages. This may reflect constraints within China's education governance—either formal limits on principal decision rights or a more collective/shared decision-making mechanism in teacher personnel matters. Such an arrangement could indicate greater reliance on collaborative decision processes or greater involvement by higher authorities.

3.2 Budget

In budget matters, high-scoring PISA jurisdictions generally accord principals substantial authority—often above 20% for budget items. Singapore, Macao and Ireland present particularly high shares of principal responsibility for budget allocation. Singapore is notable: principals account for 71.78% of decisions on budget allocation, far above many other jurisdictions. This level of financial autonomy allows principals to allocate resources responsively to meet school-level needs and can be an enabling condition for school improvement.

By contrast, Japan and the four Chinese provinces/cities fall below the international averages for budget authority, suggesting a relatively centralized administrative model where principals' financial autonomy is limited.

3.3 Student management

Principals in Singapore, Japan, and Ireland have principal responsibility shares above the international average for student management tasks. Japan is especially distinctive: principals report extremely high authority for “setting student assessment policy” and “approving student admissions” (both above 70%), indicating considerable principal control over key student management decisions.

Conversely, the four Chinese provinces/cities and Macao show lower principal shares for student management relative to international averages, with a larger proportion of responsibilities delegated to school management committees and teachers. This pattern suggests that in these jurisdictions student management responsibilities are more distributed.

3.4 Curriculum

Most high-scoring jurisdictions grant principals relatively limited authority over curriculum setting, with curriculum design and content often controlled by teachers and national/regional authorities. Japan is an exception: principals there report more than 45% responsibility over aspects of curriculum setting, indicating a strong principal role in shaping curriculum content and course offerings. Such authority can enable rapid and context-sensitive curricular adjustments but presupposes principals’ curriculum expertise.

The four Chinese provinces/cities generally show principal authority levels below the international average for curriculum matters, reflecting the dominant role that national and local education authorities still play in curriculum control—a model that supports national consistency but may limit school-level curricular innovation.

3.5 International evidence on authority and student performance

OECD analyses (PISA 2022 Report) show patterns consistent with the above: in the bottom quartile of education systems by mathematics performance, human-resource responsibilities (hiring, dismissal, salaries) tend to rest primarily at the national/regional level. Conversely, in the top-performing quartile of about 20 education systems, principals hold primary responsibility for human resources. A similar pattern is observed for budgets: in higher-performing systems budgets are largely managed at the school/principal level, whereas in lower-performing systems budget responsibilities are shared or held by higher authorities. These findings suggest that strong school-level responsibility—entrusted to principals and teachers—is associated with better student outcomes. While causality cannot be definitively established from these cross-

sectional associations, the results indicate that authorities in higher-performing jurisdictions have learned to trust principals and schools with key responsibilities and have achieved strong outcomes as a result (OECD, PISA 2022).

IV. 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON ALLOCATING PRINCIPALS’ AUTHORITY

Based on the comparative analysis above, the study proposes the following policy directions for clarifying and optimizing the distribution of principals’ powers in China.

4.1 Strengthen principals’ authority over personnel and budget to enhance school autonomy and education quality

Compared with PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, principals in the examined Chinese provinces/cities have comparatively constrained decision-making authority in teacher personnel and budget matters. To meet contemporary educational challenges, measures are needed to grant principals greater autonomy—particularly consistent with the 2022 Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under Party Organization Leadership (trial), which stipulate that principals, under Party leadership, should lawfully and responsibly exercise powers including personnel management (e.g., entering into, terminating employment contracts according to regulations) and preparing and executing annual budgets while strengthening financial management and auditing. In practice, however, principals still face limits imposed by higher administrative authorities that impede effective decision making.

Under the current governance arrangement, principals appointed by higher authorities are accountable upward; this dynamic often channels principals’ attention to higher-level directives rather than school needs, constraining context-sensitive decisions. This restricts innovations in staffing, budget allocation and local initiatives—ultimately limiting improvements in educational quality. Principals’ limited personnel authority can hinder effective teacher incentives and accountability, affecting teacher stability and instructional quality. Likewise, limited financial autonomy reduces principals’ ability to allocate resources efficiently based on school priorities.

To address these issues, policymakers should carefully increase principals’ autonomy in personnel and budget domains while simultaneously establishing robust supervision and evaluation mechanisms. This ensures principals operate within legal and policy frameworks, exercise authority in ways that improve school outcomes, and are held accountable for performance. Strengthening

both authority and accountability can boost school autonomy and educational quality.

4.2 Optimize principals' role in curriculum development and promote school-based curriculum innovation

The analysis finds that principals in the studied Chinese provinces/cities have limited authority over curriculum decisions relative to many high-performing systems. China's centralized curriculum system ensures national coherence and standards—essential aims—but expanding principals' capacity to lead school-based curriculum adaptation and development (within the national framework) could better align schooling with local needs.

School-based curriculum management allows principals and school leadership to adapt national standards to their school contexts, develop localized offerings, and innovate in pedagogy and assessment. In recent years, national initiatives—such as the establishment of the National Textbook Committee in 2017 to strengthen textbook governance—have shaped curriculum governance. Going forward, authorities could broaden schools' curricular discretion under the requirement that national curriculum standards be fully covered, encouraging principals to integrate teacher capacity, facilities, and student needs in designing complementary school-based curricula. This would foster diversified, personalized learning opportunities and support educational innovation.

4.3 Increase principals' autonomy in student management where appropriate

Relative to many PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, principals in the studied Chinese provinces/cities enjoy lower autonomy in student management. While Japan's distinctive model shows very strong principal responsibility for student assessment and admissions, China's governance emphasizes multiple stakeholder participation—including school governing bodies, teacher representative congresses, and parent committees—to promote democratic management. While this multi-stakeholder system has benefits for deliberation and standardization, it may also slow down school-level responses and limit principal leadership.

To enhance responsiveness and raise overall education quality, policy reforms could clarify and, where appropriate, expand principals' authority for internal student management decisions while preserving broad stakeholder participation. This requires a clear division of responsibilities among stakeholders to avoid ambiguity and to enable principals to exercise prompt, school-specific decisions that reflect student needs and school mission.

4.4 Establish managerial supervision and accountability mechanisms for principals

Expanding principals' autonomy must be accompanied by proportionate governance safeguards. Increasing principal authority without effective oversight risks power concentration and potential misuse. Therefore, China should establish comprehensive, fair supervision and evaluation mechanisms that ensure principals' decisions align with legal, ethical, and educational quality standards.

A robust oversight system should include regular performance evaluations, financial audits, stakeholder feedback channels, and clearly defined consequences for malpractice. At the same time, the system should provide principals with constructive feedback and professional development opportunities to strengthen decision-making capacity. Multi-channel supervision—combining internal school governance (teacher representatives, parent bodies), external monitoring (local education authorities), and transparent disclosure—can ensure that principals' autonomy is exercised in service of school improvement rather than personal prerogative.

V. CONCLUSION

This study used PISA 2015 and PISA 2022 principal questionnaire data to compare the distribution of responsibilities for major school matters across jurisdictions. The evidence suggests that many high-performing PISA systems entrust principals with substantial responsibilities—particularly in personnel, budget, and (in some cases) curriculum and student management—and that this decentralization is associated with higher student outcomes. In contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities examined generally have more restricted authority, especially in key areas such as personnel and budget. The paper recommends carefully expanding principals' decision-making powers—within the framework provided by the 2022 Opinions—while simultaneously establishing sound supervision and accountability mechanisms. Such measures can promote school autonomy, improve resource use, and enhance educational quality.

REFERENCES

- [1] Li, S. (2005). The Necessity of Establishing Principal Accountability in the Context of Changes in China's Primary and Secondary School Leadership Systems [On the necessity of establishing principal accountability: From the evolution of China's primary and secondary school leadership system]. *Contemporary Educational Science*, (17).

- [2] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. (1985). *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the reform of the educational system* [Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational System]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_177/200407/2482.html
- [3] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China; State Council. (1993). *Outline of China's education reform and development* [Outline of China's Education Reform and Development]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2484.html
- [4] Zhao, D., & Wang, L. (2019). School Governance Structure and Its Impact on Students' Achievement: A Comparative Analysis of B-S-J-G(China) and PISA 2015 HighPerformance Countries/Economies [School governance structures and their effects on student achievement: A comparative analysis of four Chinese provinces/cities and high-performing PISA countries/economies]. *Global Education Outlook*, 48(06), 24–37.
- [5] Shen, X., & Xu, J. (2022). The Development Status and Improvement Path of Shanghai Teachers'Leadership —Based on the Secondary Analysis of TALIS 2018 Data Results [Status and development pathways of teacher leadership among Shanghai junior high teachers: A secondary analysis based on TALIS 2018]. *Educational Reference*, (01), 13–20.
- [6] OECD. (2022). *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*. Paris: OECD Publishing. (See especially pp. 217–218 for analysis of governance and responsibilities.)
- [7] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. (2022). *Opinions on establishing a principal-responsibility system under the leadership of Party organizations in primary and secondary schools (trial)* [Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under the Leadership of Party Organizations in Primary and Secondary Schools (Trial)]. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-01/26/content_5670588.html
- [8] Fan, G. (2005). School-Based Management and School Development Planning [School-based management and school development planning]. *Educational Science Research*, (02), 21–23.



Patterns and Equations of Relationship in Kavita Kane's *Tara's Truce*

Dr. Sreekala.B

Assistant Professor in English, NSS College, Pandalam, Kerala, India

Received: 30 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Oct 2025; Accepted: 29 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Kavita Kane's writings are from the perspective of mythological women characters, and she placed them as the protagonists of her fictionalized retellings. Their resourcefulness, diplomatic skills, intellectual capabilities, oratory skills as well as their longings, despair and helplessness are revealed through her narration. In Kane's *Tara's Truce*, the heroine is the Vanara woman Tara, who was the wife of the mighty Vanara king Vali. Her sense of astuteness, her fair and righteous dealings with people, her high sense of intelligence, her sense of handling situations in the most appropriate manner, her sincere and efficient oratorical skills while dealing with turbulent situations -all these contribute to create a woman infinitely worthy and strong. A significant element in the fictionalized retelling is the equations of the relationships of almost all characters portrayed in the work. Social exchange theory is a concept based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis. Social penetration theory also defines the types of relationship, and it was developed to explain how information exchange functions in the development and dissolution of interpersonal relationships. In the retelling, the truce that Tara entered is solely by counting the benefits, though she claimed her deeds as belonging to the highest form of self-sacrifice. The relationship equations in *Tara's Truce* could not be gauged completely by the theories of relationships. Even the protagonist Tara and almost all the major characters insisted on their selflessness in their relationships and their unconditional love for each other. But as we trace these relationships and observe them through the veil of the theories, we can't obliterate the relevance of the models of the Social Penetration Theory and Social Exchange Theory in *Tara's Truce*.



Keywords— *Mythology, Feminism, Relationships, Selflessness, Theories*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian mythological retellings are a flourishing and fertile field in the present scenario of Indian Writing in English. Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni - all made use of the potential of this immeasurably vast, abundant and rich repertoire of tales, plots, subplots and all kinds of characters. Kavita Kane always writes from the perspective of mythological women characters, and she placed them as the protagonists of her fictionalized retellings. Some of these women characters are mythological heroines while some are women who have no special significance in mythology. There are also purely fictional characters whose names have not appeared in the

narratives of mythology as in the case of Uruvi, who is portrayed as the wife of Karna by the author.

Whether it is *Lanka's Princess*, *Sita's Sister* or *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane took her heroines into confidence and narrated the retelling from their point of view. The writer traverses through the inner self of these women and gives voice to their otherwise silenced existence in a typical androcentric society. Their resourcefulness, diplomatic skills, intellectual capabilities, oratory skills as well as their longings, despair and helplessness are revealed through her narration. Whether it is considered as a sort of fictionalization or as an alternate representation, these retellings provide the readers with a possibility to direct

their thoughts and imagination to variegated channels of life.

II. DISCUSSION

In *Tara's Truce*, Kane's 2022 novel, the heroine is the Vanara woman Tara, who was the wife of the mighty Vanara king Vali, who defeated even the invincible Ravana of Lanka. Her sense of astuteness, her fair and righteous dealings with people, her high sense of intelligence, her sense of handling situations in the most appropriate manner, her sincere and efficient oratorical skills while dealing with turbulent situations -all these contribute to create a woman infinitely worthy and strong. The other characters paled into insignificance in the work as Tara was portrayed by Kane providing her with such impeccable qualities. She even went to the extent of establishing that Vali became the king of Kishkinda only because of the qualities of his wife.

Despite all these unique gifts and talents of Tara, a significant element that strikes the readers in the fictionalized retelling is the equations of the relationships of almost all characters portrayed in the work. Tara's character, though impeccable and in every respect praiseworthy, creates a certain pattern when analysed in the light of the theories of relationships.

Social exchange theory is a concept based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis. In other words, it is a metric designed to determine how much effort someone invests in a one-on-one relationship. The measurement of the pluses and minuses of a relationship may produce data that can determine whether someone is putting too much effort into a relationship. Social exchange theory's core assumptions establish a fundamental foundation of malleability: One size does not fit all. A person's expectations, as set by comparison levels, allow the theory to be viewed on a sliding scale, one that adjusts on an individual basis. This is perhaps the theory's most known commodity, as it establishes a "give and take" metric that can be analyzed to determine how much effort one person may be putting into the relationship. The social exchange theory was put forward by American sociologist George C. Homans in 1958 when he published an article titled "Social Behavior as Exchange." Homans devised the framework and in the years that followed, other studies expanded the parameters of Homans' fundamental concepts.

Social penetration theory also defines the types of relationship, and it was developed to explain how information exchange functions in the development and dissolution of interpersonal relationships. Social penetration describes the process of bonding that moves a relationship from superficial to more intimate levels. The

onion model is a useful metaphor for describing how social penetration theory operates, elaborating on social penetration as a process through which people "peel back" others' layers of personal information through interpersonal interaction to reach the core. It takes time to reach another's "core self," the most intimate details about another person. The public image is the outer layer of a person that is visible to many others. The private self is the innermost layer of a person that is revealed to others only over time through disclosure. Social penetration theory describes several layers including superficial layers, middle layers, inner layers, and core personality. The core personality is the most private information about a person.

In the retelling, the truce that Tara entered is solely by counting the benefits, though she claimed her deeds as belonging to the highest echelons of sacrifice. Though it is not in a completely material point of view, she was always conscious of the power she wielded and fiercely guarded it in every possible manner. Her namesake, the goddess Tara advised her,

Tara, you and I embraced our passions. We are the quintessence of sacrifice and love, of duty and desire. As price, we have to force our pain and humiliation aside, pledge away our broken promises so that others can have a life of harmony in a violent world. Tara, making this truce is our purpose (*Tara's Truce*, Prologue xiii).

Tara made the truce, but in her own terms, with the complete awareness of herself making a sacrifice for the sake of the harmonious existence of her family and her kingdom. But through the truce she safeguarded the interests of herself and the future possibilities of her son.

When they were young and independent, Vali realized that it was only with Tara that he found life a pleasing affair rather than a serious business. He weighed the pros and cons of making her a part of his life, even though he knows very well that her father will never endorse such a union since he is a person who has only dreams as his credentials. But later when his dreams became a reality as he defeated Ravana and emerged as the ruler of Kishkindha, it changed the equations of his relationships. In the assessment of the pros and cons of his union with Tara, she is more rewarded by marrying him. But to Vali his union with her is beneficial from a different standpoint. Her father Sushen readily agreed to the union the moment he came to know the mind of his daughter. The initial response of Vriksharaj in treating her as an object of discord between the brothers has changed with the change of situations. Thus, it is established that the demands in relationships also determine the comparative benefits or losses in the

relations, which underline the tenets of social exchange theory.

Even though Tara was in love with Vali, her reply to him when he became serious with their marriage shows that even her love to him is not unconditional. Social exchange theory has its impact in analysing her responses towards him at that time. Elements of costs and benefits are evident as she clearly states her reluctance to marry a man with no sense of responsibility. She mocked that he nurtured empty dreams, and their love had blunted his determination, and he lost focus. She beseeched him to seek more to be eligible for her. Though Tara tried to convince it as an attempt on her part to spur him to action and to drive him to fulfil his already blunted purpose of becoming a king, the relationship theory establishes it as an attempt on the part of a woman to maximize the benefits of a relationship in which she has a clear upper hand. Even her father Sushen noticed his daughter's absolute power over Vali. "Vali is like a wild horse. You, Tara, are the only one who can rein him in, not Sugriv or Vriksharaj. He listens only to you", (89) He revealed to Tara in a candid manner.

On the other hand, Tara's relationship with Sugriv even in its very beginnings is marked with a certain amount of vagueness. He is not satisfied with the share of attention he receives from her. "They were friends, but he wanted more. They chatted endlessly, but he could not get himself to voice his feelings for her" (52). Only when she became close with Vali that he realized that it is too late, and he had lost her forever. That sense of loss pervaded throughout in his relationship with her and he could neither obliterate nor overcome his loss. "Tara was his friend first.... Vali had got to know her much later.... Yet, it was Vali she had fallen in love with...He felt crushed under the weight of heavy hopelessness." (59) He was not able to hide the feeling of resentment which stems from jealousy and disappointment. Tara was able to decipher the strange behavior displayed by Sugriv and she suspected him and at the same time she wanted to disprove what was on his mind. She tried to behave as if nothing had happened and their relationship was just the same as it usually was, but she failed at times due to his response.

The pattern of relationship with Vali and Ravan is also based on this cost benefit aspect of the social exchange theory. Ravan, who was invincible, realized that he is no longer indomitable, as he is defeated and held as a prisoner by Vali. Hence, he controlled his anger in his dealings with Vali. He realized that he has much to lose if his relationship with Vali is inimical. He feels that he is not completely secure even by the boon from Brahma. He realized that his life, his power and even his kingship are based on Vali's decisions. Hence, he accepted Vali's elaborate gesture of a

request for friendship though he was at first reluctant to accept Vali as an equal partner by giving the part of his kingdom -Kishkindha- to Vali. He expressed his initial hesitation through the words "Don't be a fool, Vali.....You're only heading for trouble. You can't keep me here. My army will attack you before you can blink. I'll see you, right. You know what I mean." (109). But when he realized the gravity of the situation Ravan relented and he conceded to Vali's conditions to liberate him from his state of imprisonment. He even offered to build a magnificent palace for Vali.

Vali, who is completely immersed in his love for Tara, gave the credit of his defeat of Ravan to her, as the person who spurred him to action by challenging him to take risks. Vali's method of dealing with relationships is in a much more straightforward manner. When he heard that Sugriv eloped with Ruma with the assistance of his friend Hanuman Vali expressed his disapproval that how can their relationship be termed as friendship as Hanuman is Sugriv's minister and hence his subordinate. At the same time, he was very much conscious of the fact that Tara loves him because of his credentials and by no means is it a blind love."I know that you would have never married me if I was a failure, a loser."(137) But he was content of the fact that she loved him and allow him to love in return.

But the relationship between the two brothers had a different texture. Vali held his younger brother in low esteem and the younger brother in turn nurtured great antipathy towards Vali which he hides himself in a very skillful manner. He is pleased that his elder brother is not aware of his true feelings towards him. He thinks that Vali is a fool who blindly believes that everyone admires him. Since he knows the innermost layers of his nature he can estimate the true nature of his brother. The Social Penetration Theory is ascertained in his understanding towards his elder brother. The theory operates in Tara's understanding of Vali also, as is evident in her observations about him. She observed how he could be insecure about his authority. He watched his court and ministers suspiciously and if he felt any disapproval towards them, he would make them quit their own by making their life unendurable. Knowing the true nature of the two brothers and their mutual relationship she was sure that nothing could bring them close again. After the disappearance of Vali and the rumours about his death Sugriv's words on Vali throws light on the feelings he nurtured towards his elder brother. "Vali was no better than Ravan.... He was as ruthless and murderous. You well know it! His death is because of his ego and ambition. Not because of me!" (199). He was also so eager to marry the widow of his brother by holding on to custom as the backbone for the fulfillment of his desire. The crux of this

theory has its influence on Ruma's relationship with Sugriv also. When she came to know the innermost layers of his nature, she was confused about Sugriv's true feelings towards her and hence suspected whether he ever loved her at all.

Only when Tara felt that her imploring towards Vali had fallen in deaf ears that she remoulded the idol in her mind which she created on her own. She now recognized him as a ruthless egomaniac who cared only for himself- his power, ego and ambition." She saw him more accurately now, and he was a fiend. But most unbearable of all was the humiliation she now had to go through-to be the wife of such a monster". (162) When he appeared before her after his fight with the monster Dundufi, she recognized the changes in him and found a barbarian standing before her. She came to the conclusion that the other people who discerned the changes in him were correct in their judgement; he was morphing into an uncontrollable tyrant. But she could not overthrow the tyrannical love that enamoured her completely. His love was unlike hers; she felt that he possibly loved himself more than he loved her.

Sugriv's confession towards her after the disappearance of Vali reveals a different order of love. He explains himself as he tries to convince her,

I never expected you to love me; I didn't see any reason that you should. I was content being near you, as a friend, even as your brother-in-law. I was thankful to be allowed to love you, and I was satisfied when you were pleased with me or when you treated me with good humoured affection" (183)

He is of the opinion that in the give and take policy of relationship Vali received more than he had given. That is to say, he is more benefitted by the relationship. According to Sugriv "He and I worked together. He was smart. Do you know why? He had you! I wasn't so smart, that's why I am the king's minister. My brother's servant. His guard. His sentry- "(198)

Vali, after his reappearance suspected his younger brother of duplicity and hence kept him away though it costs him dearly. After Sugriv's exile Tara felt that the general opinion about Vali is based on a lack of understanding of the real situations as she is the one who penetrated into the intricacies of the events and relationships. Hence, she was embittered by listening to others. To those people who lacked awareness, Sugriv was the victim and Vali, the villain. But as a true observer of the situation, she was able to understand the sense of betrayal he was trying to grapple with. She knows that he has low cunning and high valour. But simultaneously she didn't fail to notice the people and

the relationships he estranged by his egoistical and vengeful actions.

According to Vali's view the once inseparable brothers have now irreconcilable differences, and they are thirsting for each other's blood as they lost trust in each other. Vali lost his trust in Sugriv the moment he realized that his younger brother is ambitious for his position and everything he had. Sugriv made use of the first opportunity he had in order to possess all that he longed for. Their relationship came to stagnation from that moment when Sugiv tries to raise himself from the position of a subordinate.

III. CONCLUSION

The relationship equations in *Tara's Truce* could not be gauged completely by the theories of relationships. Even the protagonist Tara and almost all the major characters insisted on their selflessness in their relationships and their unconditional love for each other. But as we trace these relationships and observe them through the veil of the theories, we can't obliterate the relevance of the models of the Social Penetration Theory and Social Exchange Theory in *Tara's Truce*. Though the writer's focus is on the feministic perspective of Tara as the protagonist and her relationship with her lover turned husband Vali the intricacies and the differentiated models of relationships in the fictionalized retelling did not fail to command the attention of the readers.

REFERENCES

- [1] Altman, I. & Taylor, D. Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships. Holt. ISBN 9780030766350. 1973.
- [2] Homans, George. Social Behavior as Exchange, American Journal of Sociology (1958)
- [3] ----- Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms. Harcourt, Brace and World. 1961.
- [4] Kane, Kavita. Lanka's Princess. Rupa Publications India, 2016.
- [5] ----- Sita's Sister. Rupa Publications India, 2014.
- [6] ----- Tara's Truce. Rupa Publications India, 2023.
- [7] ----- The Fisher Queen's Dynasty. Westland, 2017
- [8] Neelakantan, Anand. Many Ramayanas, Many Lessons. Harper Collins Publishers India, 2025.
- [9] ----- Valmiki's Women. Westland, 2022
- [10] Homans, George. Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms. Harcourt, Brace and World. 1961.



Unquiet Twins: Yoruba Cosmology and Generational Haunting in Ayana Mathis's *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*

Wilfried Enagnon. B. Adjovi¹, Sènakpon A. Fortuné Azon²

Received: 25 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 23 Oct 2025; Accepted: 26 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article examines the intersection of Yoruba cosmology and generational haunting in Ayana Mathis's *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* (2012), arguing that the novel's depiction of trauma requires analytical frameworks grounded in African diasporic spiritual and cultural traditions. By situating the premature death of Hattie's twin infants, Philadelphia and Jubilee, within the context of the Yoruba concept of *ibeji* (twin spirits), the analysis reveals how their unresolved spiritual status disrupts the cosmological balance of the Shepherd family, initiating a cycle of intergenerational suffering. The novel's multi-vocal structure, organized around Hattie's children, formally embodies the transmission of this haunting, illustrating how ancestral trauma manifests across generations. Moving beyond Western psychological models of trauma, this study emphasizes culturally specific reading practices that acknowledge the enduring presence of Yoruba cosmological principles in African American literary expression. Ultimately, the article contends that Mathis's work not only reflects the profound impacts of historical and spiritual rupture caused by the Great Migration but also imagines pathways toward healing through the recovery and adaptation of cultural memory.



Keywords— Yoruba cosmology, generational haunting, *ibeji*, Ayana Mathis, diasporic spirituality

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of generational trauma in African American literature has often relied upon Western psychological frameworks that prioritize individual experience and diagnostic categorization (Craps, 2013; Levy-Hussen, 2016). While these approaches yield valuable insights, they frequently overlook the cultural specificity of trauma manifestations and the spiritual dimensions of healing within diasporic communities (Sharpe, 2016; Eyerman, 2001; Carter, 2007). This article argues for the critical importance of culturally grounded reading practices that acknowledge the persistence and transformation of African cosmological systems in African American literary expression. Through an analysis of Ayana Mathis's *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* (referred to in this paper as *Twelve Tribes*), this study demonstrates how Yoruba cosmological principles, particularly those concerning twin spirits (*ibeji*) and spiritual balance (*àṣẹ*), provide a powerful framework for understanding representations of generational trauma and resilience.

Mathis's novel chronicles the multigenerational impact of early trauma through the story of Hattie Shepherd, who loses her infant twins during the Great Migration era. Rather than presenting this event as solely a psychological tragedy, the novel invites reading through the lens of Yoruba cosmology, wherein twins possess special spiritual significance and require specific ritual practices to maintain cosmic harmony (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). The absence of these rituals creates what Yoruba tradition terms *àná* (cosmological debt), manifesting as generational haunting that affects each of Hattie's subsequent children in distinct ways (Gordon, 2008). This interpretive approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how cultural memory persists and adapts despite historical disruption.

This article contributes to African American literary studies by challenging universalizing trauma theories and demonstrating the value of culturally specific frameworks for interpreting diasporic literature. The study begins with a review of the relevant literature on Yoruba cosmology and generational haunting. Its analysis then proceeds through

four parts. The first establishes Yoruba cosmological principles and their significance for understanding twin spirituality. The second analyzes the manifestations of spiritual disorder throughout Hattie's lineage. The third situates the novel within broader African and diasporic literary traditions through comparative analysis. The last explores the novel's potential for healing through Afrocentric spiritual frameworks rather than Western psychological models.

By centering Yoruba cosmology as an interpretive framework, this study reveals how Mathis's novel transforms conventional trauma narratives into profound explorations of spiritual inheritance and cultural resilience. The essay ultimately suggests that the lesson which the novel teaches is that healing historical wounds requires not merely psychological processing but spiritual recognition and the recovery of cultural knowledge fragmented by displacement and violence. In doing so, *Twelve Tribes* (2012) makes significant contributions to African American literary tradition by honoring the complexity of diasporic spiritual experience and offering innovative narrative forms for representing generational connection.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of twin figures (*ibèjì*) within Yoruba cosmology provides a critical theoretical framework for interpreting Ayana Mathis's literary exploration of generational trauma. In Yoruba spirituality, twins are believed to share a single soul and possess profound spiritual power, a belief reflected in the veneration of deceased twins through Èrè Ìbèjì figures (Leroy, 2002). The untimely death of one or both twins requires careful appeasement rituals to prevent misfortune and spiritual unrest for the family and community, as they are conceptualized as divine entities, often regarded as children of orishas such as Elegba, Ogun, and Yemaya, reflecting their profound spiritual status within Yoruba culture (Oruene, 1983). This cultural context elevates twinhood from a biological phenomenon to a cosmological signification with far-reaching implications for familial and communal stability, illustrating how twin symbolism extends from spirituality to folklore, and from lived experience to artistic refined artifacts, as demonstrated by figures like the Yoruba artist Prince Twins Seven-Seven, whose identity was rooted in the survival of multiple twin sets (Sharpe, 2016).

Such examples highlight the ways in which twinhood is conceptualized as a spiritual and cosmological reality with implications for family and community (Craps, 2013). This cultural framework provides an important lens for literary analysis, as it contextualizes representations of twins in

African and African diasporic literature, including Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* (Sharpe, 2016). Literary representations of twins powerfully explore themes of identity and trauma, yet their cultural connotations vary profoundly. Whereas Western traditions often position twins as figures of psychological disturbance and gothic anxiety, exemplifying inner conflict (Fisher, 2009; Hale, 2012), African and diasporic literature frequently draws on traditions like Yoruba cosmology, which venerates twins as spiritual blessings (Abimbola, 1976; Falola & Adebayo, 2000).

Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* aligns with this diasporic tradition by grounding its central tragedy, the death of the infant twins Philadelphia and Jubilee, in a specific cultural framework. While the novel acknowledges the sinister side of the twin experience and its resulting generational trauma (Fisher, 2009), it complicates this by framing the twins as spiritual entities. Their improper burial and unacknowledged status create not just psychological but cosmological disturbance, highlighting the intersection of trauma, spirituality, and inheritance that characterizes much African diasporic literature. Mathis thus uses the twin motif both as a metaphor for fractured subjectivity and as a catalyst for exploring how cultural rupture manifests as ongoing familial and communal haunting. By grounding the narrative of Hattie's twin infants within a culturally specific understanding of twin spirituality, the novel can be read as exploring generational trauma in ways that acknowledge both the metaphysical and communal dimensions of Yoruba cosmology (Craps, 2013; Carter, 2007).

Yoruba cosmology, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of the yet unborn, the living and the dead, offers particularly rich insights into how spiritual practices function as mechanisms for processing and mediating intergenerational trauma (Abimbola, 1976; Falola & Adebayo, 2000). This spiritual concept provides a framework for understanding how trauma becomes embodied and transmitted across generations, not merely as psychological residue but as an active spiritual presence requiring acknowledgment and ritual engagement. Such frameworks underscore how African diasporic literature can articulate intergenerational trauma through culturally specific spiritual paradigms, offering alternative tools for analyzing inheritance, memory, and healing (Craps, 2013). Within diasporic literature, this theory provides a critical lens for analyzing the enduring impacts of forced migration, slavery, and systemic oppression, highlighting how this inherited trauma shapes identity, belonging, and family relationships within displaced communities.

This study, *Unquiet Twins: Yoruba Cosmology and Generational Haunting in Ayana Mathis's Twelve Tribes*,

addresses several significant gaps in existing literary scholarship through its integration of trauma theory with Yoruba cosmological frameworks. First, it brings together two theoretical frameworks that have not often been integrated in analyses of African American literature, namely Yoruba cosmology and trauma theory.

Second, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on spiritual hauntings as distinct from psychological trauma. Yoruba cosmology provides a framework for understanding spiritual unrest not as metaphorical device but as literal belief with concrete ritual implications (Abimbola, 1976). This perspective challenges Western psychoanalytic approaches that might reduce spiritual beliefs to psychological phenomena, instead honoring the cultural integrity of Yoruba cosmological traditions as valid epistemological frameworks for understanding and interpreting trauma and inheritance. The concept of *àṣẹ* (spiritual debt) and the required ritual appeasement for *ibeji* offer concrete mechanisms through which generational trauma operates in spiritual terms, providing an alternative to purely psychological models of trauma transmission.

III. COSMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: ÀṢẸ, IBEJI, AND RITUAL RUPTURE

Yoruba cosmology presents an intricate understanding of the universe, human existence, and the interconnectedness of all beings, with, at its foundation, the concept of *àṣẹ*, the divine energy and authority that upholds cosmic order and enables all transformation and manifestation in the universe (Abimbola, 2006). This fundamental force permeates all aspects of life, from the supreme deity *Olodumare* through the pantheon of *orishas* (divine manifestations) to the natural world and human beings. The efficacy of any action, whether spiritual or physical, depends on the proper alignment with *àṣẹ* (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011).

Complementing *àṣẹ* is the concept of *ori*, which represents both the physical head and the spiritual destiny or inner head that each individual chooses before incarnation (Abimbola, 2006). The *ori* encompasses one's destiny (*ayanmo*) and serves as the conduit through which *àṣẹ* flows in an individual's life. The pursuit of *iwa pele* (good character) represents the ethical dimension of Yoruba cosmology, emphasizing the importance of balanced, gentle, and morally upright character as essential to fulfilling one's destiny and maintaining harmony within the community and cosmos (Olupona, 2011). These interconnected principles of *àṣẹ*, *ori*, and *iwa pele* form the foundation upon which specific cultural practices, including those surrounding twins, are constructed. Yoruba cosmology thus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the spiritual and ethical dimensions of existence, offering

valuable insights into the transmission of trauma and the processes of healing within diasporic contexts.

3.1 The Sacred Status of Twins (*Ibeji*) in Yoruba Tradition

Within Yoruba cosmology, twins (*ibeji*) occupy a position of exceptional spiritual significance. They are believed to share a single soul, possess extraordinary spiritual power, and are considered sacred children often associated with the orisha Shango (Lawal, 2012). This revered status means their treatment in life and death has profound implications for the entire family lineage, as they "stand between the human and the divine" (Idowu, 1994, p. 87).

Consequently, the passing of one or both twins necessitates elaborate ritual practices to ensure peaceful transition and maintain spiritual balance. According to traditional practice, parents commission a carved *ere ibeji* figure to serve as a physical vessel for the deceased twin's spirit (Drewal, 2012). This figure is not a mere memorial but a sacred object that must be washed, dressed, and fed—a ritual care that is essential to prevent the twin from becoming an "unquiet" spirit that brings misfortune. Neglect of these rituals, whether through improper burial or a failure to commission the *ere ibeji*, creates a spiritual debt (*àṇà*) believed to cause ongoing illness, infertility, or spiritual disturbance across multiple generations (Abimbola, 2006; Idowu, 1994). As Olupona (2011) notes, this is "not merely a cultural preference but a cosmological necessity" (p. 134).

The theoretical works of scholars like Abimbola (2006) and Olupona (2011) provide the framework for understanding this cosmology. Crucially for reading Mathis, these traditions were transmitted to the Americas through the transatlantic trade of enslaved West Africans, resulting in both preservation and transformation (Thompson, 1984). While the specific practice of *ere ibeji* carving did not survive intact, the conceptual understanding of spiritual continuity and the potential for unresolved death to create a generational disturbance remained a potent force in African American spiritual consciousness.

3.2 The Great Migration as Spiritual Dislocation and Roots of Ritual Failure

In Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes*, the protagonist's geographical and cultural displacement from the rural South to urban Philadelphia creates conditions that inhibit proper ritual response to the deaths of her twins. Hattie's migration during the Great Migration era separates her from the communal knowledge and support systems that might have provided guidance on proper mourning practices informed by African cultural retentions (Drewal, 2012; Thompson, 1984). Mathis (2012) illustrates the persistence of such communal knowledge through the character of Willie, who

performs traditional rituals like burying a child's afterbirth under a tree to keep its spirit close to home (p. 115).

As a result of her displacement, however, Hattie is unable to access this knowledge when she confronts the death of her twins, leaving her without the ritual tools to ensure their smooth, peaceful return to the realm of spirits and protect her family from spiritual disturbance. This is starkly illustrated in the narrative. Isolated, she relies on the doctor's prescribed "small dosage of ipecac" and cautioned-against "backward country remedies like hot mustard poultices" (Mathis, 2012, p.8). Her struggle is a solitary, desperate battle against the inevitable, using whatever is at hand. The Shepherds' state of distress is made obvious as "August paid three dollars for the visit and set to making mustard poultices the minute the doctor was out the door" (Mathis, 2012, p. 8). This scene, marked by broken medicine bottles, cold water, and a neighbor's helpless prayers, is the antithesis of the prescribed Yoruba rituals for *ibeji*. It is a portrait of ritual failure born of displacement.

This ritual failure establishes the cosmological foundation for the generational haunting that permeates the novel. The unquiet spirits of Philadelphia and Jubilee become active forces that disrupt the spiritual equilibrium of the Shepherd family, manifesting in the various traumas and struggles that affect each of Hattie's subsequent children (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011). Their persistent presence represents not only psychological grief but also cosmological imbalance, reflecting a rupture in the proper order of things that requires acknowledgment and ritual healing. Mathis employs Yoruba cosmology to explore how historical disruptions, such as the Great Migration, resulted not only in geographical displacement but also in spiritual disconnection with profound consequences for African American families (Idowu, 1994; Lawal, 2012).

IV. THE GENERATIONAL MANIFESTATIONS OF *ÀNÀ*

4.1 The Initial Cosmological Crisis and Matriarchal Transformation

The death of Hattie's infant twins, Philadelphia and Jubilee, from pneumonia in 1925 represents far more than a personal tragedy; it constitutes a profound spiritual and cosmological crisis. Their lives begin filled with the hope and promise of the Great Migration, a hope encapsulated in the names Hattie chooses—"names of promise and of hope, reaching forward names, not looking back ones" (Mathis, 2012, p. 7). In that idyllic early summer, Hattie imagines them "totter[ing] around the porch like sweet bumbling old men" the following year (Mathis, 2012, p. 7). This vision of the

future makes their subsequent death not just a loss, but the annihilation of a promised new beginning.

Within the framework of Yoruba cosmology, the simultaneous passing of the twins creates what Kola Abimbola (2006) identifies as a fundamental disruption in *àṣẹ*, the essential life force that maintains cosmic balance, and establishes *àṇà*, a spiritual disorder or cosmological debt that manifests across generations. This crisis is profoundly exacerbated by the context of their burial. The narrative emphasizes Hattie's profound isolation and poverty; she wraps her infants in nothing more than "a single white sheet" (Mathis, 2012, p. 15), a stark image of material and spiritual desolation. Given the family's financial precarity and Hattie's dis-location from the communal knowledge of the South, it is clear the specific rites required for *ibeji* were not performed. There is no indication that ere *ibeji* figures were carved to house their spirits or that rituals were conducted to appease them. This ritual lack is catastrophic, rendering Philadelphia and Jubilee "unquiet" spirits (Lawal, 2012), entities metaphysically stranded between realms, unable to join the ancestors and perpetually disturbing the living due to unresolved spiritual debt (*àṇà*).

This cosmological crisis had an immediate and transformative effect on Hattie herself, fundamentally altering her capacity for love, tenderness, and spiritual connection. The novel describes how "the loss of her firstborn children coarsens and reshapes her" (Mathis, 2012, p. 18), transforming her from a hopeful migrant into a hardened woman who raises her subsequent children "with grit and mettle and not an ounce of the tenderness they crave" (p. 224). This transformation represents more than grief or psychological trauma. It is a visceral and physical rupture of her spirit: the moment her children die, Hattie "felt their deaths like a ripping in her body" (Mathis, 2012, p. 17). That "ripping" signifies the tearing away of the tender, hopeful self she was and the creation of an emotionally scarred matriarch incapable of the proper maternal connection and the *iwa pele* (good character) essential to maintaining cosmic balance.

Hattie's response exemplifies what Afrocentric psychologists might call a survival mechanism in a world that "would not love" her children and "would not be kind" (Mathis, 2012, p. 236). However, it comes at a tremendous spiritual cost. Hattie's story reveals that she "believed in God's might, but she didn't believe in his interventions. At best, he was indifferent. God wasn't any of her business, and she wasn't any of his" (Mathis, 2012, p. 236). This spiritual alienation represents the first manifestation of the disorder triggered by the twins' death, a withdrawal of divine hope that permeates the family's existence and signifies a

fundamental break in the flow of *àṣẹ*. Hattie becomes the primary vessel for the *àṇà*, her emotional austerity and hardened character constituting the initial, tangible evidence of the cosmological imbalance that will now ripple through her lineage.

Thus, Philadelphia and Jubilee are active absences and Signifyin' ghosts (Gates, 1988) that continually reshape the family's present. Their unquiet spirits manifest through Morrison's (1987) concept of "rememory", which refers, not simply to remembered events but happenings that continue to exert force in the present (p. 36). The twins represent Gordon's (2008) notion of the "something-to-be-done", an unresolved spiritual obligation, or *àṇà*, that haunts the living and demands resolution (p. xvi).

This active absence manifests most powerfully in the novel's structure itself, which is organized around Hattie's twelve children while centering the trauma of the first two. Their names, Philadelphia ("city of brotherly love") and Jubilee ("jubilation"), take on an ironic significance by representing both a promised land that fails to provide refuge and a celebration that never occurs. This spectral presence links the family's personal tragedy to broader historical patterns.

Hartman (2007) describes this as the "afterlife of slavery", a condition in which the legacies of enslavement continue to disrupt family and spiritual structures (p. 6). The twins' active absence aligns with the Yoruba concept of *àṣe òkú*, a spiritual force created by the dead that continues to influence the living (Abimbola, 2006, p. 178). This force manifests not as literal ghosts but as persistent patterns of misfortune and emotional constraint. It is felt most acutely in Hattie's emotional withdrawal, which represents more than psychological defense. Abraham and Torok (1994) refer to this condition as incorporation, which is the encryption of unresolved grief that cannot be processed or expressed (p. 126). This mirrors Morrison's (1987) exploration of how profound loss makes "too-thick love" impossible for those who those left behind (p. 36).

4.2 Spectral Inheritance: Multigenerational Effects of Spiritual Debt

The cosmological debt (*àṇà*) created by the unresolved spiritual status of the twins manifests uniquely and catastrophically in each of Hattie's subsequent children, illustrating what Abimbola (2006) describes as the "multiple manifestations of *àṇà*" within a family system (p. 156). Each child embodies a distinct facet of this spiritual disorder, their individual struggles constituting the *àṇà*'s specific expression through their lives.

In Floyd, the *àṇà* encrypts itself as a psychic phantom of concealed homosexuality (Abraham & Torok, 1994), generating a "loud, internal confusion" (Mathis, 2012, p. 21)

that condemns him to furtive encounters he must "push[] from his mind" (Mathis, 2012, p. 29). His nomadic existence and musical artistry, using his trumpet to "carry him out to the edges of himself" (Mathis, 2012, p. 40), represent a failed attempt to escape this spiritual burden. His ultimate failure to defend Lafayette is not mere cowardice but the *àṇà* actively ensuring its own replication through further familial rupture.

For Six, the *àṇà* channels itself into a violent religious fundamentalism, a desperate and destructive attempt to impose order on inherited spiritual chaos. His story exemplifies the "search for cosmological certainty in conditions of spiritual fragmentation" (Olupona, 2011, p. 218), a search perverted by the unquiet spirits into a need for punitive control rather than healing. Cassie's schizophrenia represents the *àṇà* manifesting as a state of spiritual possession without ritual containment (Drewal, 1992). Her fragmented consciousness directly mirrors and embodies the twins' own fractured spiritual presence, signifying the family's ultimate failure to integrate the metaphysical disturbance.

The *àṇà*'s corruption of the maternal line is made literal in Ruthie, whose very conception during Hattie's affair marks her as a vessel of this spiritual imbalance. Her psychological fragility and eventual institutionalization demonstrate the *àṇà*'s physical and mental toll on the next generation. Finally, Ella's cancer and Alice's submission to an abusive marriage both reflect what Abimbola (2006) characterizes as the "turning inward" of *àṣẹ* (p. 167), wherein the life force, disrupted by the primordial spiritual debt, becomes self-destructive rather than sustaining.

Each child's narrative thus represents not merely individual psychological struggle but the precise mechanism by which the *àṇà*, as Gordon (2008) would argue, makes its "seething presence" known. The unquiet twins actively shape each sibling's destiny through these varied distortions. Furthermore, the spiritual disorder also generates what Weheliye (2014) terms a hematological line of trauma. The illness that killed the twins, pneumonia, reemerges when Hattie's granddaughter Sala develops asthma, materializing the unresolved past in the present body. The struggles of Hattie's children therefore represent more than isolated misfortunes; they are the inevitable outcomes of a cosmological imbalance that has not been ritually repaired. Until this disorder is acknowledged, the twins remain active absences whose unquiet spirits disturb the *àṣẹ* of each generation until the *àṇà* is resolved.

V. DIASPORIC LITERARY AND THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

5.1 Literary Dialogues: Intertextual Hauntings from Morrison, Okri, and Danticat

Ayana Mathis's exploration of generational haunting places *Twelve Tribes* in direct conversation with a rich tradition of African and diasporic literature that seeks to articulate trauma through spiritual and cosmological frameworks. The novel's engagement with these works reveals both shared thematic concerns and crucial distinctions that highlight the specificity of Mathis's Yoruba informed approach. The novel's structural haunting enters into a direct dialogue with Toni Morrison's oeuvre, particularly her novel *Beloved* (1987), in which the disturbing and vengeful ghost of Sethe's baby killed in slavery resurfaces to wreak havoc in the life of the whole family.

Both authors explore how improperly mourned deaths generate cyclical suffering, suggesting that, as Morrison (1987) shows that the life of the living is dependent upon the appropriate acknowledgement of the departed and the collective past traumas. However, a critical distinction emerges in the mechanism of this haunting. While Morrison's ghosts often operate through psychological haunting and rememory, Mathis's twins function through a spiritual imbalance rooted in the specific Yoruba cosmological principles of *ibeji* neglect and *àṇà*.

This distinction is critical because it fundamentally reorients the narrative's proposed solution from psychological reckoning with the past to ritual action meant to restore balance (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). It reflects a nuanced difference between a broader Afro spiritual sensibility and a culturally precise cosmological trauma, transforming ghosts from metaphors of historical violence into manifestations of a concrete spiritual disorder that demands ritual resolution.

While Morrison provides a domestic American context, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) offers a foundational West African intertext for understanding Mathis's engagement with spirit child traditions. Okri's protagonist Azaro, an *abiku* or spirit child bound to cycle between the spiritual and physical worlds, finds a compelling diasporic echo in Mathis's twins. Drawing on the work of Ato Quayson (1997), Philadelphia and Jubilee can be read as "refused *abiku*", spirit beings denied the ritual recognition required to resolve their cyclical passage. This connection frames Hattie's story as a cultural narrative emblematic of the broader African American experience of rupture, where the knowledge to appease such powerful spiritual entities has been fragmented. The key divergence lies in context and form. Okri situates the *abiku* within the magical realist turbulence of postcolonial Nigerian politics, while Mathis transposes the *ibeji* concept onto the

psychological realism of the Great Migration, rendering the haunting through emotional austerity and familial fracture rather than a blurred spiritual material realm.

A final instructive comparison can be drawn with Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), which shares Mathis's intense focus on matrilineal trauma and diasporic identity. Both authors foreground mother daughter relationships fractured by migration and historical violence, and both pointedly resist Western psychological models in favor of culturally specific epistemologies, Danticat through Vodoun concepts of ancestral memory and Mathis through Yoruba cosmology. A central convergence is their exploration of how trauma becomes embodied across generations.

Danticat represents this through the practice of *testing*, a bodily invasion that inscribes maternal trauma onto the daughter, while Mathis depicts it through the recurrence of illness, such as the pneumonia that killed the twins reappearing as asthma in her granddaughter Sala. This creates what Alexander Weheliye (2014) terms a *hematological line* of trauma, materializing the unresolved past in the present body. Furthermore, both novels complicate the North as salvation narrative of migration, showing how northern urban settings can exacerbate spiritual disintegration, and both imagine healing not through a return to a pure origin but through the syncretic adaptation of spiritual practices in a new world.

Collectively, these intertextual dialogues demonstrate how African diasporic literature operates as a ritual space for negotiating spiritual identity. Reading Mathis alongside Morrison, Okri, and Danticat advances critical theoretical interventions. It resists universalizing PTSD models by insisting on culturally grounded frameworks, remaps the Black Atlantic by foregrounding spiritual syncretism, and engages in a feminist reclamation of mythology to explore the specific burdens and resilience of women. This comparative reading underscores the necessity of approaching this literature through its distinct cultural and cosmological contexts. It reveals haunting not as Gothic ornamentation but as a profound meditation on history, memory, and the enduring search for balance, a search that in Mathis's framework requires ritual action rather than solely psychological processing (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011).

5.2 Toward a New Critical Framework: Implications for the Field

Collectively, these intertextual dialogues with Morrison, Okri, and Danticat demonstrate how Mathis's novel advances critical theoretical interventions for African Diasporic literary studies. First, it powerfully resists universalizing Western PTSD models by insisting on

culturally grounded frameworks. By situating trauma within the specific tenets of Yoruba cosmology, the novel challenges the individualistic, diagnostic focus of Western theory, arguing instead for an understanding of suffering as a collective, spiritual imbalance.

Second, these works facilitate a re mapping of the Black Atlantic by foregrounding spiritual syncretism. They illustrate how characters navigate multiple cosmological frameworks, from the Yoruba concepts in *Hattie* to the Vodoun influences in Danticat's work. This is seen in how Hattie's descendants, for example, adapt Christianity into a diasporic reinterpretation of ancestral veneration. This contestation of monolithic portrayals of Black trauma highlights the multiplicity and resilience of African spiritual retentions.

Finally, these authors collectively engage in a feminist reclamation of mythology. They center the experiences of women and matrilineal lines as the primary vessels through which cultural memory, trauma, and ultimately healing are processed and transmitted. Their works depict African diasporic literature itself as a ritual space for negotiating spiritual identity, offering narrative forms that can contain and process historical grief.

This comparative reading reveals haunting not as Gothic ornamentation but as a profound meditation on history, memory, and the enduring search for balance, positioning novels like *Twelve Tribes* as essential contributions to understanding the spiritual dimensions of the African diasporic experience.

Sala, Hattie's granddaughter raised as her youngest child, emerges as a potential figure of spiritual resolution within the novel's Afrocentric framework. Her generation represents what Hartman (2007) might term the "afterlife of slavery" becoming conscious of itself, the point at which inherited trauma might be transformed through awareness and deliberate intervention (p. 6). Sala's turn toward born-again Christianity can be read not as a rejection of African spiritual traditions but as what Olupona (2011) identifies as characteristic African diasporic syncretism, the adaptation of traditional spiritual practices within new religious contexts (p. 245).

Unlike Hattie, who represents the generation that experienced direct rupture from cultural traditions through the Great Migration, Sala seeks spiritual solutions to the family's inherited suffering. Her religious conversion represents what some scholars characterize as a distinctly African American spiritual practice that integrates Christian forms with African-derived concerns with ancestral reverence and communal healing (Douglas, 1999; Paris, 1995). Through Sala, Mathis suggests the possibility of what Danticat (2010) terms "creating dangerously," finding

innovative spiritual responses to historical trauma that honor cultural traditions while adapting to contemporary circumstances (p. 10). Sala's character illustrates what might be possible when generations born into displacement nevertheless seek spiritual frameworks to address inherited suffering.

The novel's conclusion offers a complex, cautiously hopeful vision of healing that operates within Afrocentric spiritual frameworks rather than Western psychological models. Mathis resists simplistic resolution, acknowledging the profound and lasting impacts of historical and personal trauma. However, she also suggests possibilities for incommensurate healing, forms of recovery that do not conform to Western therapeutic expectations but nevertheless facilitate meaningful transformation (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 241).

The ending emphasizes communal rather than individual resolution, reflecting African diasporic values of collective well-being over individual cure (Turner, 2006). Hattie's recognition of her children's "vibrating souls" (Mathis, 2012, p. 243) can be interpreted as a form of ancestral acknowledgment, a crucial step in Yoruba tradition toward addressing spiritual imbalance (Abimbola, 2006). This moment reflects the necessary recognition and response to haunting that allows for movement beyond repetitive suffering (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

Mathis ultimately presents healing not as eradication of pain but as "walking with the spirits," learning to incorporate historical suffering into contemporary identity without being destroyed by it (Danticat, 2010, p. 15). The novel suggests that for African Americans whose connection to specific African traditions has been fragmented by historical violence, healing may emerge through innovative spiritual practices that honor the past while creatively adapting to the present. This resolution acknowledges the profound losses of diaspora while affirming the resilience and creativity of cultural memory as it manifests through successive generations.

VI. CONCLUSION

This examination has established that Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* represents a significant literary innovation through its integration of Yoruba cosmological principles with the narrative of generational trauma. The analysis demonstrates how the premature death of Hattie's twin infants, Philadelphia and Jubilee, functions not merely as personal tragedy but as a cosmological crisis within Yoruba spiritual traditions. Their improper ritual passage creates a state of *àná*, or spiritual debt, that manifests across generations of the Shepherd family (Abimbola, 2006). The novel challenges Western trauma models by presenting

suffering and resilience through specifically African diasporic spiritual frameworks, suggesting that healing requires not only psychological intervention but also spiritual recognition and ritual repair (Lawal, 2012). Through its structural organization around Hattie's twelve children while centering the unresolved trauma of the first two, the novel embodies the persistent presence of absence that characterizes generational haunting (Gordon, 2008).

This study makes several significant contributions to African American literary studies. First, it expands the critical vocabulary available for interpreting African American literature beyond Western theoretical frameworks, demonstrating the value of culturally specific reading practices grounded in African cosmological systems (Asante, 2003). Second, it illuminates how the Great Migration involved not only geographical displacement but also spiritual dislocation, as communities lost access to the cultural knowledge and ritual practices that had previously provided frameworks for understanding and addressing suffering (Wilkerson, 2010). Third, it contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to recover and honor African cultural retentions that persist within African American communities despite centuries of violent disruption (Thompson, 1984). Finally, it positions Mathis's work within a broader literary tradition that includes Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, and Edwidge Danticat, authors who similarly explore the intersections of spiritual traditions and historical trauma through innovative narrative forms.

The interpretive approach developed here has significant implications for reading other diasporic texts. It suggests that critics should attend to the specific cultural and spiritual frameworks that inform literary representations of trauma and healing, rather than defaulting to universalizing Western psychological models (Brown, 1995). This approach could be applied productively to texts such as Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which explores themes of spiritual inheritance and generational haunting through specifically Southern African American cultural frameworks. It also provides a model for reading beyond metaphor in texts that incorporate spiritual elements, recognizing that authors often draw on specific cultural traditions with particular cosmological implications (Drewal, 2012). Furthermore, this approach highlights the importance of "cultural memory in the flesh," or the embodied transmission of historical consciousness that operates outside Western logocentric traditions (Dillard, 2012, p. 87). This perspective invites scholars to attend to ways diasporic texts encode knowledge through non-textual means, including spiritual practices, bodily disciplines, and ritual behaviors.

Ultimately, *Twelve Tribes* offers a profound meditation on the relationship between cultural knowledge, spiritual balance, and historical recovery. The novel suggests that for African American communities whose connection to specific African traditions has been fragmented by the violence of slavery and subsequent displacements, healing may require both recovery of cultural knowledge and creative adaptation of spiritual practices to contemporary circumstances (Olupona, 2011). Mathis does not present a romanticized vision of prelaps African purity but acknowledges the creative syncretism that has characterized African American spiritual life throughout its history (Paris, 1995).

The novel's cautious hopefulness resides in figures like Sala, who represents the possibility of new generations finding innovative ways to address old wounds while honoring the resilience of those who came before. Mathis ultimately suggests that spiritual balance requires more than recognizing the presence of the past, as encapsulated by Morrison's concept of *rememory* (Morrison, 1987). It demands active ritual engagement to address the spiritual disorder, moving forward with the creative work of building future possibilities through restorative cultural practices (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). In this way, *Twelve Tribes* (2012) makes its most significant contribution. It offers not just a story of suffering but a vision of how cultural knowledge and spiritual awareness can provide pathways through historical trauma toward greater wholeness.

REFERENCES

- [1] Danticat, E. (1994). *Breath, eyes, memory*. Soho Press.
- [2] Mathis, A. (2012). *The twelve tribes of Hattie*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [3] Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [4] Morrison, T. (2003). *Love*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [5] Okri, B. (1991). *The famished road*. Jonathan Cape.
- [6] Carter, R. T. (2007). Racism and psychological and emotional injury: Recognizing and assessing race-based traumatic stress. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(1), 13–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006292033>
- [7] Eyerman, R. (2013). Social theory and trauma. *Acta Sociologica*, 56(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699312466185>
- [8] Gone, J. P. (2013). Redressing First Nations historical trauma: Theorizing mechanisms for indigenous culture as mental health treatment. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 50(5), 683–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513487669>
- [9] Oruene, T. O. (1983). Cultic powers of Yoruba twins: Manifestation of traditional and religious beliefs of the Yoruba. *Acta Geneticae Medicae et Gemellologiae*, 32(3–4), 221–228. <https://scispace.com/pdf/cultic-powers-of-yoruba-twins-manifestation-of-traditional-4b846hw4eh.pdf>
- [10] Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative*

- Inquiry*, 20(6), 811–818.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530265>
- [11] Abraham, N., & Torok, M. (1994). *The shell and the kernel: Renewals of psychoanalysis* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.
- [12] Abimbola, K. (2006). *Yoruba culture: A philosophical account*. Iroko Academic Publishers.
- [13] Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus*. Oxford University Press Nigeria.
- [14] Abimbola, W. (2006). *Ifá: The ancient wisdom of the Yoruba*. Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- [15] Asante, M. K. (2003). *Afrocentricity: The theory of social change*. African American Images.
- [16] Brown, L. S. (1995). Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 100–112). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [17] Craps, S. (2012). *Postcolonial witnessing: Trauma out of bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [18] Danticat, E. (2010). *Create dangerously: The immigrant artist at work*. Princeton University Press.
- [19] DeGruy, J. (2005). *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing*. Joy DeGruy Publications.
- [20] Dillard, C. B. (2012). *Learning to (re)member the things we've learned to forget: Endarkened feminisms, spirituality, and the sacred nature of research and teaching*. Peter Lang.
- [21] Douglas, K. B. (1999). *The black Christ*. Orbis Books.
- [22] Drewal, H. J. (2012). *Yoruba art and language: Seeking the African in African art*. Cambridge University Press.
- [23] Drewal, H. J. (2012). Yoruba: A cosmological, political, and artistic history. In *Yoruba art and language: Seeking the African in African art* (pp. 15–53). Cambridge University Press.
- [24] Drewal, H. J., & Drewal, M. T. (1992). *Yoruba ritual: Performers, play, agency*. Indiana University Press.
- [25] Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
- [26] Falola, T. (2013). *Yoruba cosmology and culture in Nigeria: Essays on the foundation of its sacred and secular identity*. Carolina Academic Press.
- [27] Falola, T., & Adebayo, F. (2000). *Yoruba towns and culture*. Carolina Academic Press.
- [28] Gates, H. L. (1988). *The signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism*. Oxford University Press.
- [29] Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [30] Hartman, S. V. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [31] Idowu, E. B. (1994). *African traditional religion: A definition*. SCM Press.
- [32] Lawal, B. (2012). *Èjìwàpò: The dialectics of twoness in Yoruba art and culture*. Carolina Academic Press.
- [33] Long, C. H. (1963). *Alpha: The myths of creation*. George Braziller.
- [34] Olupona, J. K. (2011). *City of 201 gods: Ilé-Ifè in time, space, and the imagination*. University of California Press.
- [35] Paris, P. J. (1995). *The spirituality of African peoples: The search for a common moral discourse*. Fortress Press.
- [36] Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On Blackness and being*. Duke University Press.
- [37] Thompson, R. F. (1984). *Flash of the spirit: African & Afro-American art & philosophy*. Vintage Books.
- [38] Weheliye, A. G. (2014). *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and Black feminist theories of the human*. Duke University Press.
- [39] Wilkerson, I. (2010). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's great migration*. Random House.
- [40] Drewal, H. J. (1989). Image and indeterminacy: Thoughts on Yoruba twin figures. In W. A. Walker (Ed.), *African art studies: The state of the discipline* (pp. 25–42). National Museum of African Art.
- [41] Turner, R. (2006). African-derived religions in the Americas. In M. C. Brown (Ed.), *Afro-Latin America: A special teaching and research collection of The Americas* (pp. 56–65). Duke University Press.
- [42] Fisher, B. (2009). *The uncanny double in literature and culture*. Routledge.
- [43] Hale, D. (2012). *Doppelgänger and literary doubles: From Gothic fiction to contemporary novels*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [44] Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus*. Ibadan University Press.
- [45] Abimbola, W. (2006). *Ifá: The ancient wisdom of the Yoruba*. University of Ife Press.
- [46] Olupona, J. K. (2011). *City of 201 gods: Ilé-Ifè in time, space, and the imagination*. University of California Press.



The intersection of Crime and Social Inequality in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*

B. Hemavathy¹, Dr. T. Senthamarai²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, VELS Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Pallavaram, Chennai, India

²Professor & Head, Department of English, VELS Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Pallavaram, Chennai, India

Received: 28 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Oct 2025; Accepted: 29 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— The article focuses on how crime and social inequality intersect in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*, a post-millennial Indian novel. This post-millennial Indian fiction reflects crime and social inequalities. In *Six Suspects*, the murder of the protagonist, Vicky Rai, exposes how the investigation of his murder treats the suspects differently, who belong to different classes. Arun Advani narrates the lives of these suspects. Through a multi-narrative perspective, the novel examines the contradictions within modern Indian society. The novel explores how crime is entangled with societal structures, emphasising that the elite can protect themselves while the underprivileged are criminalised. It criticises the economic disparity and social inequality in contemporary Indian society.



Keywords— Crime, Social Inequality, Corruption, Economic Disparity, Post-Millennial India.

Post-Millennial Indian fiction represents the literary works produced by Indian authors after the year 2000. This era has resulted in substantial changes in Indian writing, which has focused on globalisation, multiple narratives, socio-economic transformations, urbanisation, corruption, and technological advancements. Varughese observes on this as, “of the texts also look to offer insight and understanding into new Indian society through the explanation of key cultural terms, practices and events” (21). She has examined how these narratives move beyond traditional postcolonial themes, delving into contemporary issues such as urbanisation, identity and speculative futures. Leigh Wilson says in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980-2018*, reading post-millennial novels, “...I want to suggest that parallel to a desire for a return the ‘real’ there runs an anxious awareness of the limits of the novel in achieving such a return” (02).

In particular, post-millennial Indian fiction has revealed the darker side of modern Indian society. Some of the prominent authors like Aravind Adiga, Vikram Chandra, Vikas Swarup, Meena Kandasamy and Arundhati Roy have exposed the contemporary issues of Indian society in the post-millennial era. Vikas Swarup is one of

the Award-winning contemporary Indian writers in English who portrays the reality of exploitation, pain, suffering and personal agony of underprivileged people. He depicts the realities of Indian society in his writings. He has raised crucial issues such as corruption, class, injustice, poverty, oppression, discrimination and crime in modern India. He is an admired novelist. *Q&A*, his first novel, was adapted into a film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. It has won several awards, including Oscar Awards. His second novel, *Six Suspects*, was adapted as a web series, ‘The Great Indian Murder’, by Tigmathu Dhulia. *Six Suspects* is a crime novel that criticises social inequality, corruption, and crime.

The novel explores how the crime is entangled with societal structures, emphasising that the elite can protect themselves while the underprivileged are criminalised. Through a multi-narrative perspective, the novel examines the contradictions of modern Indian society. The protagonist Vicky Rai's suspicious murder serves as a focal point of the novel. Arun Advani, an investigative journalist, says, “That is why the murder of Vivek ‘Vicky Rai’, the thirty-two-year-old owner of the Rai Group of Industries and son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has been dominating the news for the past two

days" (SS 13). Vicky Rai, a corrupt businessman, represents the uncontrolled power of an elite. The police suspect six people who are from different social classes: Jagannath Rai, Vicky Rai's father, a corrupt politician; Mohan Kumar, a former bureaucrat; Shabnam Saxena, a Bollywood actress; a tribe man named Eketi, Larry Page; Munna, a mobile thief; and a tourist from America. Arun Advani narrates about these six suspects.

Conversely, the novel focuses on systemic disparities, corruption, and injustice. Vicky Rai, a wealthy industrialist, was involved in bribery, scams, and murder. Despite committing various crimes, he uses his influence to escape legal consequences. Through the character Arun Advani, Swarup states that "how Vicky Rai engaged in insider trading at the stock market, defrauded investors of their dividends, bribed officials and cheated on his corporate tax. Still, he didn't get caught, always managing to exploit some loophole or other to stay out of reach of the law" (SS 13). His murder is the result of the anger of those who have been exploited by him. The Six Suspects in the novel represent different aspects of Indian society, from a wealthy person to a tribal man. The novel claims that the irony of Vicky Rai's death remains unclear.

Vicky Rai had the privilege and liberty to commit a crime with the support of wealthy politicians. His inhuman nature is evident when he runs over a homeless man. He had just stepped out of the car to check for his car damage, and without any glance or guilt, he drove away. This shows how Vicky Rai commits crimes without guilt, his disrespect for human life, and the fact that he avoided punishment for his ruthless crime reflect the social inequality and the protection given to the elite, highlighting that justice is unequal for all in society. Vicky Rai's murder is exposed in the section 'Solution' and Arun Advani says, "A violent crime is committed in Indian every three minutes, a murder every" (SS 515).

The novel highlights how crime leads to corruption. In Vicky Rai's murder, the fifth suspect is his father, Jagannath Rai. Valiyamattam states that, "He is a powerful politician who embodies the denigration of Indian politics. His political career is a chronicle of horrifying crimes" (191). Jagannath Rai, a corrupt politician, has no hesitation in committing crimes, even murder, in such matters. He killed the police officer Navneet Brar, who was an obstacle to him in doing illegal activities. Jagannath says, "First, I have to do something about that police officer. I have put Mukhtar on the job" (SS 201). Later, when the chief minister asks him about Navneet's death, he pretends to be ignorant and tells him, "The death of Navneet Brar in the landmine blast has come as a great shock to me" (SS 201).

Thombare states that, "This novel offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of modern India. It narrates various divisions of national culture. It shows the corrupt political system with subtle, serious issues" (3). Mr. Page's passport seemed fake to the official, and he was imprisoned. However, the official himself suggests how he can escape from the punishment. He asks for a hundred dollars as a bribe, but says that he is interested in foreign currency collection. The official said, "I collect foreign-currency notes, he whispered. I have all the notes from America except the hundred-dollar bill. Can you give me a hundred-dollar note? Just put it inside your passport and slide it over" (SS 224).

The novel criticises the economic disparity and social inequality in contemporary Indian society. Through the character of Eketi, a tribal man, Swarup addresses the exploitation of indigenous culture, illustrating the systemic injustice faced by marginalised communities. His story represents systemic injustice rather than an act of revenge. Eketi was punished for stealing; however, the elite who actually stole faced no repercussions. This exposes how social inequality corrupts the marginalised and encourages the elite to liberty. The story of Eketi highlights indigenous exploitation and shows that justice is uneven in contemporary Indian society.

Munna, a mobile thief, is a fourth suspect in Vicky Rai's murder. A boy born in the slums had to be invisible or become a criminal. If someone wants to live, he has to become criminals for their survival. It represents how poverty compels the marginalised people to commit crimes as a cause of survival. Munna, a petty thief, has become a criminal not because of greed or to be a wealthy person, but to fulfil his needs. This reflects the painful reality of economic inequality. He is an unemployed university graduate. Even though he has tried to do some minimal jobs, it did not work. When he worked as a servant, he experienced the heartlessness of the upper-class people. His masters are rude and criminals.

He reveals how poor people become criminals and take revenge on their masters: "Beware a servant's revenge. There are so many elderly couples in Delhi whose throats have been slit by their Bihari cooks and Nepali guards" (SS 73). He says that he worked as a book-keeper, supervisor and finally as a servant for the Bhusiyas. He was a failure in all three. As he faces inequality in all sides of his life, he decided to go back to his theft of stealing expensive mobile phones. Munna says, "There is no place for the poor in our metropolises. Doesn't matter how honest you earn a living; you can still get accused of thieving and thrown into a cell simply because you are poor and powerless. As long as I had the briefcase full of money, I had power" (SS 229). He

commits a crime to survive. Crime has become a key tool of resistance for marginalised people. Swarup claims that the rich manipulate the legal system to escape from crime while the underprivileged are trapped in it.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108649865.004>. Accessed on 15 May 2025.

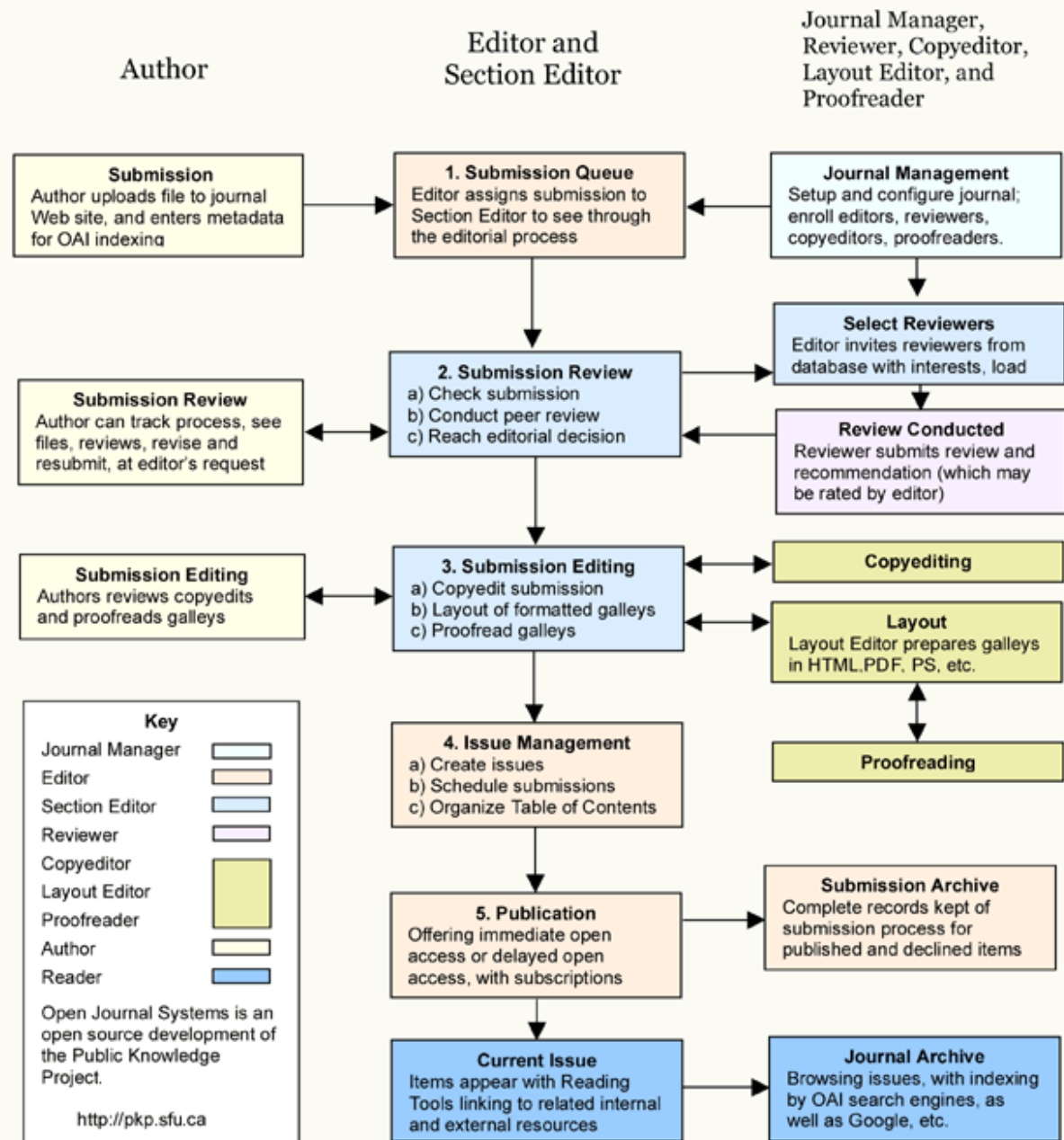
CONCLUSION

Six Suspects explores how social inequality in society changes people's lives. It decides who has to face criminal charges and who can escape from justice. In modern society, crime is a systemic problem where power and privilege define morality; however, it is hard for the underprivileged to attain justice. *Six Suspects* is a thriller which covers India's socio-political situation from the perspective of crime and corruption. Vikas Swarup presents an inspiring novel with multiple narratives. The novel critiques systemic issues which fortify a significant place in post-millennial Indian crime fiction. The novel is a typical example of post-millennial Indian fiction that exposes crime, corruption and inequality in a modernising society. The plot reveals how these suspects encounter societal inequalities, including class privilege, exploitation, injustice, and economic disparity, each shaping their involvement in crime. The novel fits into post-millennial Indian fiction, employing the themes of crime and corruption to criticise the wide gap between the rich and the poor, and the economic and social inequality of Indian society. The novel ends by highlighting the ambiguity of justice in society and how Vicky Rai had escaped from legal consequences but faces punishment outside the legal system.

REFERENCES

- [1] Swarup, Vikas. *Six Suspects*. Great Britain: Transworld Publishers, 2008. Print.
- [2] Thombare, Rupesh. "Representation of Contemporary Indian Society in the Novels of Arvind Adiga and Vikas Swarup." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol.12, no 09, 2024. <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2409264.pdf>. Accessed on 22 May 2025.
- [3] Valiyamattam, Rositta Joseph. *Personal and National Destinies in Independent India: A Study of Selected Indian English Novels*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. [file:///C:/Users/elcot/Downloads/personal-and-national-destinies-in-independent-india-a-study-of-selected-indian-english-novels-1nbsped-9781443814300-9781443897204_compress%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/elcot/Downloads/personal-and-national-destinies-in-independent-india-a-study-of-selected-indian-english-novels-1nbsped-9781443814300-9781443897204_compress%20(1).pdf). Accessed on 19 May 2025.
- [4] Varughese, E. Dawson. *Reading New India Postmillennial Indian Fiction in English*. India: Bloomsberry, 2013. Print.
- [5] Wilson, Leigh. "Post-millennial Literature." Cambridge University Press eBooks, 2019, pp. 47-66.

OJS Editorial and Publishing Process



~OJS Workflow~

Important links:

Paper Submission Link:

OJS:

<https://ijels.com/ojs/index.php/ijels/about/submissions>

<https://ijels.com/submit-paper/>

Editorial Team:

<https://ijels.com/editorial-board/>

Peer Review Process:

<https://ijels.com/peer-review-process/>

Publication Ethics:

<https://ijels.com/publication-policies-and-ethics/>

Author Guidelines:

<https://ijels.com/author-guidelines/>

Join Us a Reviewer:

<https://ijels.com/join-us/>

Journal Indexed and Abstracted in:

- Qualis-CAPES -Brazil
- Normatiza (Under Review)
- Bielefeld Academic Search Engine(BASE)
- Aalborg University Library (Denmark)
- WorldCat: The World's Largest Library Catalog
- Semantic Scholar
- J-Gate
- Open J-Gate
- CORE-The world's largest collection of open access research papers
- JURN
- Microsoft Academic Search
- Google Scholar
- Kopernio - powered by Web of Science
- Pol-Index
- PBN(Polish Scholarly Bibliography)Nauka Polska
- Scilit, MDPI AG (Basel, Switzerland)
- Tyndale University College & Seminary
- indiana Library WorldCat
- CrossRef DOI-10.22161/ijeab
- Neliti - Indonesia's Research Repository
- Journal TOC
- Dimensions.ai: Re-imagining discovery and access to research
- Citeseerx
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)
- Simpson University (USA)
- University of Louisville (USA)
- Biola University (USA)
- IE Library (Spain)
- Mount Saint Vincent University Library (Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada)
- University Of Arizona (USA)
- INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS (USA)
- Roderic Bowen Library and Archives (United Kingdom)
- University Library of Skövde (Sweden)
- Indiana University East (campuslibrary (USA))
- Tilburg University (The Netherlands)
- Williams College (USA)
- University of Connecticut (USA)
- Brandeis University (USA)
- Tufts University (USA)
- Boston University (USA)
- McGill University (Canada)
- Northeastern University (USA)
- BibSonomy-The blue social bookmark and publication sharing system
- Slide Share
- Academia
- Archive
- Scribd
- SJIF-InnoSpace
- ISSUU
- Research Bib
- DRJI
- journal-repository



Platform &
workflow by
OJS / PKP

Infogain Publication

International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science (IJELS)