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Editorial

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While starting with various directions in the new studies and analysis of Indian literature, it becomes imperative to know what the nature of modern or new Indian literature means. Is it about the whole new perspectives on postcolonial developments across various literary forms, or is it about the experimental and historical mechanisms that are constantly working on the language, the form and the essence of the literary outputs? What about the beginning and flourishing of modernism in Indian literature? Apart from English, there are various other languages are spoken in this country, for which the contribution of translation becomes extremely important. The political and social changes after the British period of colonization was over, was also instrumental in showing us the paradigmatic shifts in the literary canons, especially with the rising of the themes and plots of regional writings in English.

The current issue of Litinfinite Journal is trying to address 'Current Trends in Indian Literary Studies: Style and Contemporaneity.' The first paper in this issue titled 'Endogamy and the Human Body: Honour Killing as Social Discipline in GirishKarnad's *Tale Danda*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, and Iyayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter*' is a study of a comparative literary-sociological study of caste pride killing (commonly euphemized as 'honour killing') as a mechanism of caste discipline in three major South Asian literary texts: Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, and Iyayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter*. Drawing upon B. R. Ambedkar's structural theory of caste endogamy, Johan Galtung's concepts of structural and cultural violence, and postcolonial feminist theory, the study contends that so-called 'honour killings' are more accurately understood as caste pride killings – premeditated acts of social regulation intended to preserve caste endogamy, police women's sexuality, and reproduce entrenched hierarchies of power. Across these three texts, the transgressing female body emerges as the principal site where patriarchal authority and caste sovereignty intersect, while the Dalit male body remains structurally subordinated irrespective of education, professional achievement, or social mobility. Although the works differ in language, historical context, and literary form, they converge in exposing the enduring resilience of caste ideology and the limitations of liberal reform. The next paper is by Dr. Maroua Boubaker, and it is titled, 'Beyond Victimhood: Caste, Gender, and the Subversion of Cozy Detective Fiction in Tarquin Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos*'. While analyzing the paper, what becomes evident is, Tarquin Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos* through the frameworks of postcolonial feminism and intersectionality to explore its representation of Indian women. Challenging colonial and nationalist stereotypes that portray Indian women as passive victims, the novel foregrounds the intersections of gender, caste, and class through characters such as Tulsi, Kamlesh, Facecream, and Mummy-ji. The study argues that Hall reworks the conventions of cozy detective fiction to expose systemic social inequalities while emphasizing female resilience and agency. Ultimately, the novel transforms detective fiction into a powerful medium for critiquing caste, patriarchy, and social injustice in contemporary India. Dr. Nisha Thomji Varghese writes on Translation, Memory, and Dalit Feminist Aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby

Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Her paper examines the politics of translation, memory, and Dalit feminist aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Drawing on the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, it argues that these translated autobiographical narratives function as acts of cultural reclamation that challenge dominant literary paradigms through orality, fragmented memory, and embodied narration. The study explores translation as both an ethical and political practice, negotiating caste-specific experiences within English while extending their global reach. Ultimately, it contends that both texts redefine contemporary Indian literary aesthetics by foregrounding memory, resistance, and marginalized voices.

There is a form of supposed Indianness, Indian aura and attitude, and the use of a non-Indian language (English) as a creative tool and form to express the literary outputs. Carolina Rini P's research paper titled 'Carolin Brackets and Breakdowns: The Writerly Paradox of Mental Illness in Shaheen Bhatt's *I've Never Been (Un)Happier*' is a take on Shaheen Bhatt's *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* (2019) as a significant intervention in contemporary Indian feminist life-writing. Drawing on Aijaz Ahmad, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Roland Barthes, and Suzette Henke, it argues that the memoir's stylistic innovations—particularly its parenthetical title and self-reflexive prose—challenge clinical and confessional narratives of mental illness. The study contends that Bhatt transforms writing into an act of recovery, resisting both the pathologisation of depression and the commodification of celebrity suffering while redefining memoir as a space of healing and literary resistance. After this, we have a paper by Dr. Hakani SP Laloo and she examines 'Translation as Intellectual and Cultural Mediation in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century Khasi Hills'. While we analyze her paper, we understand how it talks about the transformative role of translation in the Khasi Hills from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. It argues that the introduction of the Roman script by Christian missionaries reshaped the Khasi oral tradition, fostering new literary practices and public discourse. Drawing on the theories of Itamar Even-Zohar, Susan Bassnett, Tejaswini Niranjana, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, the study analyses translation as a site of intellectual, cultural, and ideological negotiation that mediated colonial encounters while influencing Khasi literary production and collective consciousness.

After this, Dr. Aditi Jana focuses on Folk Culture, Heritage and Community in Patachitra Village Naya. Her paper examines the Patachitra tradition of Naya, Paschim Medinipur, as a dynamic medium for preserving Bengali folk culture, language, and collective identity. Integrating scroll painting with oral performance, the Patua community sustains indigenous histories, literary traditions, myths, and social customs while strengthening cultural and economic resilience. The study explores how this living heritage enhances community visibility, contributes to sustainable development, and projects Bengali cultural identity onto the global stage through the preservation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. This issue also has a paper by Shiv Nayan Prakash on Subaltern Archive and the Translator's Responsibility: Ethical Negotiation in the Representation of Bhojpuri Folk, where the writer focuses on the translation of Bhojpuri literature as an ethical and epistemological practice rather than a linguistic exercise. Drawing on the works of Bhikhari Thakur, Mahendra Misir, and Bhojpuri oral traditions, it engages the theories of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Lawrence Venuti, Tejaswini Niranjana, and Susan Bassnett. The study advocates a translation praxis that preserves Bhojpuri's cultural specificity, oral aesthetics, and subaltern voices while resisting epistemic and linguistic homogenization. The next paper is by Gopika B, titled, Visualizing Migrant Trauma: A Lacanian Reading of *The Goat Life*. This paper offers a Lacanian reading of *The Goat Life*, the cinematic adaptation of *Goat Days*, to examine the visual representation of migrant trauma. Focusing on the psychological journey of Najeeb Muhammed, it analyses how cinematic techniques reinterpret the novel's emotional landscape through psychoanalytic and visual frameworks. The study argues that the film extends the literary narrative by employing affective imagery and visual symbolism to deepen audience engagement with migration, identity, and psychological alienation.

And finally, in this issue, we also have a book review on the *Heart Lamp*, by Jyoti Kaushal. I hope our readers, scholars, researchers and faculty will derive the necessary academic nourishment from Litinfinitive Vol. 8, issue 1.

I express my heartfelt thanks to all our esteemed editors and contributors.

I offer my sincerest thanks to Penprints Publication, for their constant technical support.

Thanking You,
Sreetanwi Chakraborty
Editor-in-Chief
Litinfinitive Journal
Kolkata

Endogamy and the Human Body: Honour Killing as Social Discipline in Girish Karnad's *Tale Danda*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, and Iyayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative literary-sociological study of caste pride killing (honour killing) as an instrument of caste discipline in three major South Asian literary texts: Girish Karnad's historical play *Tale Danda*, Vijay Tendulkar's social drama *Kanyadaan*, and Iyayam's novella *Pethavan: The Begetter*. Drawing on B. R. Ambedkar's structural theory of caste endogamy, Johan Galtung's framework of structural and cultural violence, and postcolonial feminist theory, the paper argues that what is popularly euphemized as 'honour killing' is, in fact, caste pride killing, a pre-meditated act of social discipline designed to preserve endogamy, police female sexuality, and reproduce hierarchical power. All three texts dramatize the same fundamental contradiction: the body of the transgressing woman becomes the contested site where caste sovereignty and patriarchal authority converge, while the Dalit male body is rendered perpetually subordinate regardless of education, talent, or official status. The paper further argues that all three authors-writing in different regional languages, historical periods, and generic modes-arrive at a unified verdict: reform gestures such as inter-caste marriage cannot, by themselves, dismantle a structure that is, as Ambedkar argued, self-reproducing through social imitation and the terror of violence. By reading literature against lived history, this paper contends that the 'honour' invoked to justify such killings is nothing more than caste pride-the desperate self-defence of a hierarchy that cannot survive rational scrutiny.

Keywords: *honour killing, caste pride killing, endogamy, Dalit literature, structural violence, cultural violence, inter-caste marriage, patriarchy, graded inequality*

Introduction: Naming the Violence

The phrase 'honour killing' is among the most deceitful coinages in the vocabulary of social violence. It attributes honour to the perpetrator and erases the victim. When a village panchayat in Tamil Nadu condemns a young woman to death for loving a Dalit man; when a brahmin father is forced to promise publicly that he will poison his own daughter; when the parents of an inter-caste couple are dragged behind elephants through the streets of a medieval Karnataka town-there is no honour at work. What operates in each instance is caste pride: the ferocious, organized refusal of a dominant group to allow its boundaries to be crossed by the bodies, desires, or marriages of those it claims to own. Indian literature has recognized this reality long before journalism or policy discourse found adequate language for it. Three literary works, separated by geography, language, and era-Girish Karnad's *Tale Danda*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, and Iyayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter*-constitute a devastating account of

caste violence in which the desire for inter-caste love and marriage ignites catastrophic social retribution.

The theoretical scaffolding of this paper rests on three pedestals. First, B. R. Ambedkar's 1916 Columbia University paper, "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development," which identifies endogamy as the structural essence of caste and traces sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage to the arithmetic logic of keeping endogamy intact. Second, Johan Galtung's distinction between structural violence-the systematic use of social, political, and economic structures to violate basic human needs-and cultural violence-the norms, beliefs, and practices that legitimize such violation. Third, the postcolonial feminist insight that looks at how, in patriarchal caste society, the woman's body is simultaneously the territory on which caste sovereignty is inscribed and the primary casualty when that sovereignty is threatened. Together, these frameworks allow reading the three literary texts not as isolated tragedies but as representations of a single, continuous social machine.

The paper proceeds through five main analytical sections: an examination of the Ambedkarite framework as it applies to all three texts; a reading of honour killing as structural and cultural violence; a gendered analysis of the female body as caste property; a comparative analysis of the failure of reform and the complicity of idealism; and a conclusion that reads across the three texts to assess whether literature can offer what Ambedkar demanded--the annihilation of caste.

Ambedkar's Endogamy and the Structure of Caste Violence

Any serious engagement with caste violence in Indian literature must begin with Ambedkar. In "Castes in India," he demolishes every mystical, racial, or occupational explanation for caste and replaces it with a structural one: caste is the *superimposition of endogamy on exogamy*-the forced imposition of within-group marriage upon a population that had originally practised clan exogamy. He argues: "To the group that is desirous of making itself into a caste, the maintenance of equality between the sexes becomes the ultimate goal; without it, endogamy can no longer subsist. In other words, if endogamy is to be preserved, conjugal rights from within have to be provided for; otherwise members of the group will be driven out of the circle to take care of themselves in any way they can. For the same, the conjugal rights have to be provided for from within. It is absolutely necessary to maintain a numerical equality between the marriageable units of two sexes within the group desirous of making itself into a caste. It is only through the maintenance of such equality that the necessary endogamy of the group can be kept intact, and a very large disparity is sure to break it" (Ambedkar: 2014, vol 1. p. 10). Endogamy, then, is the load-bearing wall of the caste edifice. Sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage are not ancient traditions but functional mechanisms to manage what Ambedkar, with clinical precision, calls the 'surplus woman' and the 'surplus man'-the widowed or unmarried individuals who, if left free, might marry outside the group and rupture its closure.

This structural logic illuminates all three literary texts with particular force. In *Tale Danda*, the inter-caste marriage of Sheelavanta, a cobbler's son, and Kalavati, a brahmin girl, is not merely an individual love affair but a structural rupture. Basavanna himself understands this with unnerving precision:

Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this--this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of Varnashrama Dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years.

I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt, once the news spreads. (Karnad 38)

Basavanna's warning is prophetic. When the marriage is solemnized, it does not remain a private event; it becomes, in Ambedkarite terms, a direct attack on endogamy itself-which is to say, on the entire caste system. The brahmin establishment's response is therefore not disproportionate from the perspective of caste logic; it is precisely proportionate. Damodara Bhatta and Manchanna Kramita orchestrate a coup, and the new king Sovideva orders his soldiers to arrest and execute the parents of both bride and groom. The horror of the punishment-eyes gouged out, bodies tied to elephants' legs and dragged through the streets--is designed not merely to punish but to terrify every future generation into compliance with endogamy.

The same Ambedkarite logic governs *Pethavan*. Periyasami, a Dalit sub-inspector who has achieved educational and professional distinction, commits, in the eyes of his community's antagonists, an act of structural transgression by loving Bhakkiyam, an upper-caste woman. The village panchayat's verdict-that Bhakkiyam must be killed by her own father-is the activation of the ancient machinery Ambedkar described. Periyasami's education and government rank are irrelevant; he is, as Imayam insists, 'perceived as a Dalit first and as a sub-inspector later' (Imayam 4-5). His house has been set on fire twice; his cattle freed and slaughtered; his fields burned; his parents beaten: a systematic programme of annihilation directed not at a person but at the upward-mobile Dalit who has dared to approach the endogamous boundary from below.

In *Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar transposes the same structure into an urban middle-class register. Arun Athavale's very first extended speech to Jyoti, framed as a marriage proposal, is actually a vivid catalogue of caste degradation that the Dalit body has been compelled to inhabit:

Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt dal in my father's hut?
Without vomiting? Tell me, Jyoti, can you shit everyday in our slum's village
toilet like my mother? Can you beg, quaking at every door, for a little grass for
our buffaloes? Come on, tell me. (Tendulkar 17)

This is not merely a rhetorical question; it is an inventory of structural deprivation. Arun knows-and his knowledge is itself a product of caste socialisation-that the gulf between his body's inherited conditions and Jyoti's is not personal but systemic. Where Ambedkar identifies the mechanisms by which endogamy is maintained through violence against women, Tendulkar shows us the psychological interior of a Dalit man who has internalized the violence done to his community and finds in the brahmin woman an object simultaneously of desire and resentment. The marriage, therefore, is not-as Jyoti's father Nath imagines-an experiment in social integration; it is, from the outset, a site of unresolved structural antagonism.

Structural and Cultural Violence: The 'Khap Panchayat' as Killing Machine

Johan Galtung's tripartite framework-direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence-provides the most precise analytical vocabulary for what all three texts depict. Structural violence, as Galtung defines it, "can be characterised as the intentional use of physical or psychological power to violate the basic needs of individuals; it is a permanent state of violence as it is mostly accepted as the norms of the society which can be legitimized" (Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research" 167-91). Cultural violence is the set of norms, beliefs, and practices that "legitimize and naturalize structural and direct violence" (Galtung, 'Cultural Violence' 291-305). In the literary works under study, these three forms operate simultaneously and reinforce one another in precise, traceable ways.

In *Pethavan*, the village panchayat (Kangaroo Court) is the institutional form that structural violence takes. Its verdict that Bhakkiyam must die is reached not in secret but in public, with the full participation of women as well as men, old as well as young. A young woman carrying a baby on her hip advises Pazhani: "You should pour pesticide down her throat and lock her in a room. However much she screams or shouts, don't open the door and don't give her even a mouthful of water. In a short while the story will be over" (Imayam 2). This is cultural violence operating in its purest form: a woman demanding the murder of another woman, not from personal animosity but from the internalized logic of caste purity. The community is both the perpetrator and the legitimizing authority. As M. Elavarasan observes in his reading of Imayam, that this exploitation "becomes a legitimate one in the minds of the villagers and is thus transmitted to generations as culturally legitimated practice" (74).

The translator of *Pethavan*, Gita Subramanian, captures the peculiar quality of this violence in her translator's note: "No amount of clever crafting can substitute the kind of passionate repugnance that Imayam feels against this barbaric [practice] of preserving caste purity through murder" (iv). The word 'crafting' is telling: cultural violence is itself a form of crafting-the continuous manufacture of consent to atrocity. Imayam refuses that craft; his prose is deliberately stripped of aesthetic embellishment, forcing the reader to confront the violence without the pleasures of beauty.

Karnad's *Tale Danda* dramatizes the institutional complicity of both religious and political structures. King Bijjala initially offers protection to the Sharanas, but the moment the brahmin establishment and the new claimant to power, Sovideva, see an opportunity, the protective structure dissolves. The killing of the inter-caste couple's parents is state-sponsored murder. Gundanna's account makes the structural nature of the violence unmistakable:

It's harrowing! A while ago-the king's soldiers arrested Haralayya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there and then-as the city watched-they plucked their eyes out-plucked out their eyes with iron rods-bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets-tied to elephants' legs ... Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones-they died screaming! (Karnad, Act III, sc. xii 81)

The key phrase here is "as the city watched." The execution is public by design. It is not a crime concealed in shame; it is a spectacle staged to reassert caste sovereignty and to remind

the watching populace of the dangers of transgression. This is structural violence made theatrical-a performance of power intended, as Galtung argues, to be reproduced in every observer who takes its lesson home. The play's stage direction noting "a reaction of horror from those present" is significant: the Sharanas, who had welcomed the marriage as social progress, are now paralysed. The horror of the punishment neutralizes the moral courage of the reformers. Direct violence has accomplished what no argument could: the re-stabilization of the structural order.

Tendulkar's structural violence in *Kanyadaan* is subtler but no less devastating. The violence visited on Jyoti's body by Arun is not random domestic abuse; it is explicitly framed by Arun himself as a species of caste revenge: "What am I but the son of a scavenger? We don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. We drink and beat our wives ... We make love to them ... but the beating is what gets publicized" (Tendulkar 44). This confession reveals the depth to which structural violence has colonized the Dalit consciousness: Arun's violence against his wife is, in his own account, the downward transmission of the violence done to his ancestors by upper-caste men. He reproduces the structure he resists. Seva's analysis is the most clinically accurate in the play:

Your dalit son-in-law, who can write such a wonderful autobiography, and many lovely poems, wants to remain an idler. He wants his wife to work. On top of that, for entertainment, he wants to kick his wife in the belly...In this way he is returning all the kicks aimed at generations of his ancestors by men of high caste. (Tendulkar 47-48)

Structural violence, Galtung reminds us, is self-reproducing: when a husband beats his wife, it is violence; when a million husbands beat their wives, it becomes structure. Seva's diagnosis-that Arun's domestic violence is not aberrant but structural-is the most damning verdict Tendulkar offers on the impossibility of reform through marriage alone.

The Female Body as Caste Property: Gender and the Enforcement of Endogamy

Ambedkar's analysis of the 'surplus woman' as the central problem that caste endogamy must solve through sati, enforced widowhood, or child marriage reveals a foundational truth: women's bodies are not merely participants in the caste system-they are its primary site of regulation. All three literary texts make this explicit, each from a different vantage point.

Imayam's *Pethavan* is the most unflinching in its depiction of the female body as caste territory. When the villagers discover Bhakkiyam's relationship with Periyasami, their response is immediately and overwhelmingly sexualized: groups of young men expose themselves to her, asserting communal ownership over her body (Imayam 21). The sexual humiliation is not incidental but structural; it communicates to every woman in the village that her body belongs to the men of her caste, not to herself. An elder in the panchayat demands similarly degrading punishment to suppress her desire (Imayam 11). Rape is invoked as a disciplinary correction of female sexual autonomy-a clarification that the woman's body is communal property whose disposal is the community's prerogative, not the woman's own.

The title of Tendulkar's play, *Kanyadaan*—literally 'gifting the daughter'—encodes this proprietary logic in the very institution of marriage. The girl is a commodity transferred from her father's household to her husband's; she is not an agent choosing her own life. As Dhanavel, a literary commentator notes, Tendulkar "seems to suggest that such marriages can never be harmonious" not merely because of personality incompatibility but because the woman who crosses caste lines is simultaneously claiming bodily autonomy that the caste system has never conceded to her (100). Jyoti's mother Seva, the most realistic voice in the play, articulates the impossibility not in caste terms but in terms of embodied culture: "You have been brought up in a specific culture. To erase or change all this overnight is just not possible. He is different in every way. You may not be able to handle it" (Tendulkar 13). Seva is right, but for reasons she cannot fully articulate: the culture she is describing is precisely the caste system, which has shaped the bodies, habits, desires, and thresholds of pain of every character in the play.

Jyoti's transformation through the play—from a soft-spoken, highly cultured brahmin girl into a woman who declares her Dalit identity with fierce conviction—is the text's most radical proposition. She does not merely marry across caste; she re-inscribes her body within Dalit identity: "I am not Jyoti Devlalikar now. I am Jyoti Arun Athavale, a scavenger. I don't say harijan. I despise the term. I am an untouchable, a scavenger" (Tendulkar 70). And yet Tendulkar is too honest a playwright to make this an unambiguous triumph: Jyoti's declaration is made in the context of a marriage defined by violence, exploitation, and humiliation. The female body, even when it chooses transgression, remains the site of the most intense caste and gender punishment.

Karnad's *Tale Danda* addresses the female body as caste property through the figure of Kalavati, the brahmin girl given in marriage to the cobbler's son Sheelavanta. Kalavati is not a speaking character in the play; she is the occasion of the catastrophe rather than its agent. This silence is itself significant. The inter-caste marriage is celebrated by the Sharanas and condemned by the brahmins; it is planned, solemnized, and destroyed by men. Kalavati's own desire, consent, and suffering are absent from the text—a structural erasure that mirrors the erasure of the female in all discourses of caste honour. The play thus reproduces, even as it critiques, the logic it is anatomizing: the woman's body is the stakes of a contest between men. However, this does not diminish Karnad's critique; it sharpens it. By making Kalavati invisible, he shows us that the caste system's violence against women operates through invisibility as much as through spectacle.

In Hindu canonical literature, as the texts under study note, the caste hierarchy claims divine sanction: "The four-fold caste system was created by me by differentiating people according to their guna and karma ... It is better to follow one's own Dharma, righteously established, even with all its blemishes, than the Dharma of others" (Bhagavad Gita IV.13, III.35, qtd. in Dhanavel 100). The critical implication of this citation within the literary criticism of Karnad and Tendulkar is that the oppressed themselves internalize this logic, "accepting any insult or injustice, stoically enduring [it] because they are destined to be so" (Dhanavel 100). This is the deepest form of cultural violence: the victim becomes the enforcer. In *Pethavan*, Bhakkiyam's own mother, overcome by community pressure, turns against her daughter. The maternal body, which ought to be the last refuge, becomes an instrument of the panchayat's will.

The Failure of Reform and the Complicity of Liberal Idealism

One of the most significant contributions of all three literary texts to the discourse on honour killing is their unflinching scrutiny of liberal reform itself. None of the three authors allows the progressive characters in their narratives to escape complicity in the violence they nominally oppose. This is not cynicism; it is a rigorous analytical recognition that caste endogamy cannot be dismantled by individual acts of symbolic transgression—a recognition that aligns precisely with Ambedkar's argument in *Annihilation of Caste* that inter-caste marriage, while necessary, is insufficient without the demolition of the scriptural and structural foundations of caste itself.

Nath Devlalikar, the MLA and socialist idealist at the centre of *Kanyadaan*, is the text's most sustained study in the pathology of liberal complicity. When Jyoti announces her intention to marry Arun, Nath's response is rapturous:

Seva, until today, 'Break the caste system' was a mere slogan for us. I've attended many intercaste marriages and made speeches. But today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term. I am happy today, very happy. (Tendulkar 23)

The tragedy here is not merely personal but epistemological: Nath has confused his daughter's body with his political programme. He has invested Jyoti's marriage with the weight of his ideological project, making her suffering the collateral damage of his self-congratulation. By the final scene, when Nath delivers a hypocritical public speech praising Arun's autobiography in order to protect Jyoti from further beatings, his daughter strips away every self-deception: "Your speech today was not only lousy, it was a hireling's speech. You attended the meeting against your wishes, you praised that book against your wishes" (Tendulkar 66). The idealist has become a coward, and the daughter who was his experiment confronts him with that cowardice.

Basavanna in *Tale Danda* is a more heroic figure than Nath, but Karnad subjects him to the same analytical pressure. When the question of approving the inter-caste marriage arises, both Basavanna and the elder Kakkayya hesitate. Kakkayya's formulation reveals the gap between ideology and practice: "A Sharana boy marries a Sharana girl . . . But if you're going to see it as a Brahmin girl marrying a cobbler's son—well, we don't know how to answer you" (Karnad 37). The reformers have abolished caste in the language of the spirit but have not yet abolished it in the language of the body. When Basavanna finally gives his blessing and the wedding proceeds, his endorsement triggers the catastrophe he had feared. The play ends with virtually everyone dead—and the perpetrators of the caste order, represented by Sovideva, enthroned. Karnad's verdict is sombre: a twelfth-century reform movement that brought all communities together under the banner of devotion could not survive a single inter-caste marriage. Ironically, the institution of endogamy proved stronger than the vision of Basavanna.

Karnad, as Dhanavel observes, "has appropriated the historical material to suit his own dramatic design"; his aim is 'not so much to give a historical account of the incidents as to show their relevance to the contemporary Indian society' ('History and Mystery' 98). Written in the context of the Mandal-Mandir agitation of the late 1980s, *Tale Danda* asks its contemporary

audience to recognize in the spectacle of twelfth-century caste violence the same political dynamics that were tearing India apart in its own time. As Sukumar Muralidharan notes in his analysis of the Mandal-Mandir dichotomy, “Mandir seeks to deflect this quest for power by offering an illusion of power . . . to maintain the customary order of precedence in the social hierarchy through a ritual consolidation along religious lines and the subordination in perpetuity, of the minority community” (Muralidharan 24). The religious fanaticism that destroyed Basavanna’s reform is not a relic of the past; it is the grammar of Indian politics in every era.

In *Pethavan*, the failure of reform is the failure of education and the state. Periyasami has crossed every official threshold: he is educated, employed by the government as a sub-inspector, financially stable. The liberal democratic state has, on paper, granted him full citizenship. Yet the village panchayat—an institution that operates outside and beneath the state—recognizes no such citizenship. Its authority is older, deeper, and more immediately terrifying. The structural violence of the panchayat is a sustained programme of erasure that the state has consistently failed to counter. As the text makes evident, even when parents accept inter-caste marriages, “the society threatens the parents with weapons such as humiliation, social boycott and ostracization. As a result, parents break the marriage or they forcefully resort to honour killings as they need to be part of the system which is ready to throw them out” (Imayam).

Pazhani’s final act of sending his daughter away and then killing himself by drinking pesticide is the most devastating indictment of the failure of reform in all three texts. He does not save himself; he sacrifices himself so that his daughter might survive. It is an act of love that the caste system has made possible only through death. The novella ends abruptly: “In the morning those who went to the fields came running back and said, Vandikkaran House Pazhani has consumed Polidol and is lying dead in the fields. The dog is running in circles around the dead body. The whole area is reverberating with its howls” (52). Bhakkiyam escapes to an unnamed, unnarrated future. The abrupt ending is itself a political statement: the novel refuses to offer the consolation of resolution. Reform is incomplete, unfinished, haunted by the bodies it leaves behind.

Literature, History, and the Possibility of Annihilation

Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* argued that the destruction of caste required not merely political will or social goodwill but the demolition of its religious and scriptural foundations. “Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling,” he wrote; “Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind” (57). The three literary texts under study may be read as dramatizations of precisely this thesis. In all three, the physical violence of honour killing is preceded and enabled by a state of the collective mind—a set of beliefs, norms, and affects so deeply embedded that even those who consciously oppose caste (Nath, Basavanna, Pazhani) cannot escape the structures it has built inside them.

The role of religion in sustaining this state of mind is addressed most directly in the canonical texts invoked within the critical apparatus of the literary study. The Bhagavad Gita claims divine sanction for the four-fold caste system and counsels the oppressed to accept their lot as the just reward of past karma (Bhagavad Gita IV.13, III.35, qtd. in Dhanavel 100). The critical implication, as the comparative study of Karnad, Tendulkar and Imayam notes, is that

“the suppressed communities could not rise up as they should have. The developed communities did not lend an encouraging hand either. Politicians have played only a dubious role in their efforts towards social justice” (Dhanavel 100). All three texts confirm this analysis: the political establishment-Bijjala in *Tale Danda*, Nath in *Kanyadaan*, the village panchayat in *Pethavan*-either actively perpetuates caste violence or is too weak to resist it.

Yet literature does something that theory alone cannot: it inhabits the emotional interior of its characters. Imayam's Pazhani drinking pesticide in a field while his dog runs circles around him; Jyoti declaring herself an untouchable and telling her father not to touch her for fear of being scorched by 'my fire' (Tendulkar 70); the bodies of Haralayya and Madhuvarasa torn apart by elephants in a public square-these are images that lodge in the conscience rather than the intellect. They do not merely argue against honour killing; they make it viscerally, personally, irrefutably real. In this sense, all three socially conscious authors operate in the tradition Ambedkar himself exemplified: the insistence on making the invisible violence of caste visible, on naming it without euphemism, on refusing the consolation of aesthetic distance.

The comparative reading of the three texts also reveals important differences in the authors' implied prognoses. Karnad, writing from the vantage of history, suggests a cyclical pessimism: reform arises, flourishes briefly, is crushed by religious-political reaction, and the cycle resumes. Tendulkar, the realist playwright, refuses both optimism and nihilism: Jyoti's final declaration is an act of defiant self-identification that refuses to be absorbed into any easy political category. She is, as she says, "Jyoti Arun Athavale, a scavenger" (Tendulkar 70), and the fire she invokes is the fire of someone who has survived destruction. Imayam, the Tamil writer, offers the bleakest structural diagnosis: the panchayat system, the village community, and the family are all equally instruments of caste violence, and the only escape is flight, not transformation.

Taken together, these three texts constitute an implicit answer to the question Ambedkar posed: can caste be annihilated? They do not answer it with optimism. But they perform, through literature, the act of bearing witness that Ambedkar himself demanded-the insistence that caste violence be seen for what it is: not honour, not tradition, not divine ordinance, but the organized terror of a social system that has run out of any justification other than force. The real killer in *Pethavan*, *Kanyadaan*, and *Tale Danda* is not the panchayat, not the brahmin priest, not the Dalit husband-it is the centuries-old institution of caste endogamy, which has made every human relationship in the subcontinent hostage to the question of who may marry whom.

Conclusion: Caste Pride, Not Honour

This paper has argued, through a comparative reading of Karnad's *Tale Danda*, Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, and Imayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter*, that what is popularly called 'honour killing' is more accurately understood as caste pride killing. The three texts, in different generic forms and regional languages, converge on the same structural diagnosis: the violence is not an irrational excess but the logical operation of a system whose survival depends on the enforcement of endogamy, the policing of female sexuality, and the annihilation of any cross-caste desire that threatens the hierarchical order. Ambedkar's structural theory of caste provides the theoretical framework that makes this visible: endogamy is the engine; sati, enforced widowhood, child marriage, and honour killing are its fuel. Galtung's framework of structural

and cultural violence names the mechanisms by which this engine operates at the levels of institution, community, and consciousness simultaneously.

The three authors also share a critical diagnosis of liberal reform. Nath's idealism, Basavanna's revolutionary spirituality, the Indian state's formal guarantees of equality-all are shown to be insufficient against a social machine that reproduces itself through terror and through the deeply internalized consent of its victims. The inter-caste marriage in each text is not a solution to caste; it is a probe that reveals the depth of caste's hold on social life. The woman who crosses caste boundaries is punished most severely, confirming what feminist theory has long argued: she is the primary site on which caste sovereignty is inscribed, and therefore the primary target when that sovereignty is challenged.

The significance of these texts in the contemporary moment cannot be overstated. Honour killings continue across India-in Dharmapuri, in Udumalpet, in districts whose names appear again and again in reports that could be summarized as retellings of Iyayam's fiction. The fiction, in each case, preceded and predicted the fact. Literature does not merely reflect social reality; it reads it more accurately and more humanely than policies can. Karnad, Tendulkar, and Iyayam have, across five decades, provided their societies with the most rigorous and compassionate analysis of caste violence available in any medium. To read them together is to understand that the killing of Bhakkiyam, the destruction of Jyoti's marriage, and the massacre in Basavanna's Kalyana are not three separate stories but one-the story of a society that calls its violence honour and its fear pride, and that has not yet found the courage to call either by its true name.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar declared that "you cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster [caste]" (89). These most articulate writers, writing decades after Ambedkar, return the same verdict. Caste will not be killed by a marriage. It will not be killed by a speech, a law, a commission, or an election. It will be killed-if it is killed-by the accumulated weight of witness: by every reader who finishes *Pethavan* and cannot look away from the dog howling over Pazhani's body in the field.

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Beyond Victimhood: Caste, Gender, and the Subversion of Cozy Detective Fiction in Tarquin Hall's *the Case of the Love Commandos*

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Abstract

This article examines the manner in which the British writer Tarquin Hall represents major Indian female in his detective novel *The Case of the Love Commandos*, drawing upon the critical lenses of postcolonial feminism and intersectionality. While colonial and nationalist discourses have often reduced Indian women to passive victims of patriarchal oppression, Tarquin Hall's novel offers a more nuanced portrayal that foregrounds the complex intersections of gender, caste, and social status. The study argues that Hall appropriates and reworks conventions of the cozy detective novel to expose systemic inequalities embedded in contemporary Indian society while simultaneously underscoring women's resilience and agency. Through an analysis of characters such as Tulsi, Kamlesh, Facecream, and Mummy-ji, the article illustrates how the novel contests essentialist representations of Indian womanhood by depicting diverse experiences shaped by caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures. By integrating postcolonial feminist concerns into the investigative plot, Hall transforms the detective narrative into a vehicle for social critique. Ultimately, the article contends that *The Case of the Love Commandos* subverts the conservative tendencies traditionally associated with cozy detective fiction and gives testimony to the capacity of contemporary detective fiction to engage critically with questions of gender, caste, and social justice in India.

Keywords: *cozy detective fiction, postcolonial feminist criticism, intersectionality caste, Indian women*

1. Introduction

Cultural perceptions of Indian women have often been marred with essentialism. To legitimize British colonial endeavours in India, British colonial channels of representation have often constructed the image of Indian women as invisible and passive victims of patriarchal oppression (Singh 31–32). During the nationalist movement, Indian women came to be culturally represented as the epitome of national identity and indigenous values. The model of the New Indian Woman, defined by chastity, submissiveness, and self-sacrifice, was produced (Lopez 202). In the wake of Independence, and despite the crucial role they had played in the nationalist struggle, Indian women were required to return to their domestic roles (Lopez 206). In postcolonial India, in spite of the expanding women's engagement in the public sphere, particularly among the urban middle class, dominant social norms continue to prioritize domesticity and motherhood (Lopez 207). Against this historical and ideological background, Tarquin Hall's detective novels, which are set in twenty-first-century contemporary India, constitute a problematic site for analyzing female representation, as they are written by a British author and belong to detective fiction, a genre traditionally dominated by Western and masculinist perspectives. Accordingly, drawing upon the critical insights of postcolonial

feminist literary criticism, particularly intersectionality, this article explores the major ways in which Hall deploys the conventions of detective fiction in his portrayal of his Indian female characters in *The Case of the Love Commandos*. It demonstrates that Hall's novel gives insight into the diverse struggles undergone by many Indian women while emphasizing their agency against oppressive structures at the same time. Hence, this article will proceed into three main directions. First, an attempt to provide required contextualization will be offered by giving an idea about Tarquin Hall's detective writing, the cozy golden age subgenre, and the debate around the issue of cultural authenticity. Second, some critical insights about postcolonial feminist literary criticism will be foregrounded. Finally, it will explore how the generic framework of detective fiction is employed by Hall in the characterization of major Indian female characters in the novel under study.

2. A General Contextual Background

Tarquin Hall is a British journalist and writer who currently lives and publishes in India. He is best known for creating the fictional Punjabi detective Vish Puri. Hall's detective series, which were inaugurated in 2008, has achieved significant popularity and has been translated into multiple languages (Meyer 515). In the context of this study, emphasis is placed on Hall's work *The Case of the Love Commandos*. Unlike other detective fiction writers whose works have been extensively examined, Hall's novels remain underexplored in academic scholarship. Neele Meyer's *Glocalizing Genre Fiction in the Global South: Indian and Latin American Post-Millennial Crime Fiction* (2017) offers one of the few discussions of Hall's work, referring to the contribution of *The Case of the Love Commandos* to illuminate broader trends in post-millennial English-language crime fiction. However, Meyer's treatment remains limited to genre characteristics, leaving the critical analysis of Hall's representation of women largely unaddressed. Consequently, this lack of scholarly attention represents a notable omission in the study of multicultural detective fiction and underscores the relevance of the present research which seeks to examine how Hall's novels utilize major formulas of detective fiction to portray Indian women within intersecting frameworks of caste, gender, and patriarchy. To achieve this end, it is crucial to give a glimpse about the detective genre in general, and about the golden age or cozy paradigm in particular.

In broad terms, a detective story can be defined as a "story in which the principal action and focus of interest is the investigation of a crime or apparently criminal enigma by a detective figure, either professional or amateur" (Baldick 94). It is generally agreed that the detective genre was invented by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe in the first half of the nineteenth century. Poe is recognized for creating many of the now established conventions of the detective form. Since then, the detective fiction genre has developed in many ways, proving to be a highly dynamic genre. While it has been an unlikely subject for scholarly interest for a long time, it has been increasingly gaining momentum since the second half of the twentieth century: a wealth of academic literature has emerged on the history, the typology, the ideological frameworks, and the social contexts in which the detective novel is situated (Pyrhönen 46-48).

The novel under focus in this article belongs to the Golden Age or the cozy subgenre of detective fiction. In broad terms, golden age detective fiction refers to a body of detective novels that began to emerge in the 1920s, in the interwar period. In her book *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*, Lee Horsley maintains that the golden age of detective fiction was "[a] period of highly

stylized crime writing, it has also been labelled 'cozy', reflecting the preference for plots in which a comfortably recognizable pattern (a highly wrought version of the death-detection-explanation model) is acted out in a familiar domestic setting, with the restoration of reassuring orderliness guaranteed" (38). Golden Age detective writing is exemplified by the work of writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. The fictional sleuths created by such writers are characterized by their use of unique feminine and non-traditional tactics of detection such as intuition and gossip, which represents a major departure from the emphasis on the heroic scientific thinking associated with the male detective hero found in earlier classical detective novels (Ackershoek 120). The feminization of the golden age novels was consolidated by equipping female characters with agency. As a matter of fact, in the 1920s and 1930s, because of many factors such as women's undertaking of men's responsibilities during the war years, women in Golden-age detective fiction started to play active roles as investigators (Ackershoek 120). Besides, the golden age of detective fiction is characterized by its exclusive type of setting. Secluded country houses, small or enclosed communities like little villages or islands are recurring locales in Golden Age detective novels (Worthington 117). What is of paramount importance to note is that the restricted setting of golden age detective fiction goes hand in hand with its socially enclosed nature. Indeed, Golden Age detective novels are set within "the restricted milieu of fashionable society" (Horsley 37). Setting focus on the upper middle classes, such novels represent a "hierarchically ordered world" (Messent 128). In such a world, the motives of crimes are basically personal and private. Thus, at first glance at least, there is almost little reference to the existence of any injustices or inequalities resulted from the broader social system. (Messent 128). As explained by Susan Rowland, "[c]ozies feel 'cozy' because they end in a restoration of a relatively tranquil social group whose values are strengthened by one of their on solving the murder" (158). In such a manner, it can be said that cozies fulfil a restorative and a reassuring function, which shows the conservative nature of the form (Messent 15).

The fact that Hall is a British author who uses the cozy golden age subgenre to write a detective novel set in India brings to the fore the ongoing critical debate around the question of cultural authenticity. Indeed, on the one hand, many scholars hold the firm belief that only an insider can produce culturally authentic literature, which implies that white authors who write about other ethnicities and cultures are likely to create literature which contains stereotypical images and racist undertones (Cai 37). For example, in her book *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction*, the critic Maureen. T. Reddy argues that many white American writers fail to represent authentic ethnic American investigators despite their good intentions (189). She explains that the genre of detective fiction is "irremediably a white genre dependent on white readers", and hence, it is nearly impossible to avoid repeating and reproducing the white racist ideology that forms the basis of the genre (172). On the other hand, according to other critics such as Doreen Rappaport and Joseph Bruchac, an author can write about a culture outside their own with authenticity if they carry out thorough research and have personal experiences within the culture they write about (Oswald and Smolen 7). Other critics maintain that empathy is the most important factor that counts when writing about a particular culture (Oswald and Smolen 7). A major goal of what follows is to go beyond the simplistic insider/outsider dichotomy and to illustrate the fact that Hall can write across race, ethnicity, and gender in order to produce positive images of Indian women. To do so, focus will be set now on establishing the necessary theoretical and conceptual framework of this paper.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Part:

Postcolonial feminism represents a useful critical framework that serves to examine the representation of women in Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos*. In broad terms, postcolonial feminism extends the preoccupation of Black feminism with the necessity of tackling questions of race and cultural difference in feminist arguments. Indeed, the emergence and the development of Black feminism in the mid-1980s and the 1990s came as an oppositional reaction to patriarchy as well as to white western feminism (Nayar 109). As a matter of fact, postcolonial feminist criticism accentuates location and cultural difference among women, underlining how spirituality, language, and sexuality or motherhood are essentially context-based. In short, the assumption that the Western model of the feminine or feminism is the standard one is a major idea that postcolonial feminism seeks to contest (Nayar 113).

Postcolonial feminist analysis also underscores the significance of intersectionality. Grounded in Black feminist political activism, the concept of intersectionality is deployed in a wide range of contexts and disciplines for various political projects and has become the new buzzword in feminist criticism (Bartels et al. 156). It was first introduced by the critic Kimberlé Crenshaw who maintains that examining women's experiences by the use of a single-axis framework is actually a distortion of those experiences (Crenshaw 139). For her, women's experiences of discrimination are actually determined by multiple and intersecting factors. The critical concept of intersectionality, hence, is based on the firm belief in the urgent necessity of taking "different forms of oppression and their interplay into account without prioritizing any one form of oppression over the other, which signals a move away from additive models (like the idea of triple jeopardy/triple oppression used in earlier forms of feminist analysis)" (Bartels et al. 156). To put it succinctly, several axes of social inequality and oppression, such as gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, or sexuality to name only a few variables, are highlighted in intersectional analyses (Bartels et al. 156). By serving as a critical tool to study women's lived identities and experiences as intertwined with systems of domination, intersectionality serves to challenge traditional perceptions of gender and oppression, offering a more profound and a more inclusive understanding of how power dynamics function in society (PHI Learning Editorial Team 69).

The feminist notion of Intersectionality is essential to examine the women's experience and the system of patriarchy in the Indian context. As attested by Ananya Sharma, "[t]heorizing patriarchy in the Indian setting is much more complex than the Western model of patriarchy, which frames it as a binary gender issue" (1437). Indeed, patriarchy in India is profoundly entrenched within its social, cultural, religious, and economic structures, affecting gender roles and expectations for centuries. It "works through an intersectional lens – it is not merely about male dominance but about the layered oppression that women face due to their caste, class, religion, and regional identity" (Sharma 1437). Hence, the Indian woman's experience cannot be reduced into a singular category of oppression, but must be understood through the intricacies of caste, class, and gender (Sharma 1437).

The peculiar nature of Indian Patriarchy is essentially pivoted upon the caste system. According to *Social Issues of India*, "India is primarily a caste based society and caste is perhaps the dominant form of social stratification in India even today" (199). A caste is regarded as a 'closed system' of social hierarchy where groups, often divided on the grounds of their

occupation, rigorously followed codes of social interaction dictated by tradition. Broadly speaking, there are four major castes and the Brahmins are considered as being at the top of the social hierarchy. (Jodhka 243-244). The people who are called “Dalits” perform the most menial tasks, which relegates them to lowest ranks of society. Indeed, the term “Dalits” itself means “oppressed, downtrodden, or broken” (Kanmony ix). Notions of purity and pollution lie at the core of the caste system. The ritual ‘status’ of a group defined who they could interact with and who they could not. Hence, the ideas of untouchability, avoidance and discrimination in everyday social life were essential to caste (Jodhka 243). Today, most communities no longer pursue the jobs historically linked to their caste. Nonetheless, inequalities between upper and lower castes remain pronounced: caste remains a powerful marker of social inequality in contemporary India (Jeffrey and Harriss 20).

Having elucidated the theoretical and conceptual framework of this article, focus will be now set on the ways in which Hall uses the main formulas of the cozy novel in his depiction of female characters his novel *The Case of the Love Commandos*.

4. Analytical part

4.1. Subverting the Socially Enclosed World of the Cozy Novel

Examining the representation of major female characters in Hall’s *The Case of the Love Commandos* from a postcolonial feminist perspective discloses that the novel departs from major generic conventions of the cozy novel which are mainly its socially enclosed nature and its conservative ideological scope. As a matter of fact, as mentioned earlier, the classical cozy or golden age novel, spatially enclosed settings such as the isolated house or the village serve to underscore social homogeneity and harmony. A close feminist postcolonial reading of the novel under focus reveals that Hall adheres to generic rules by including spatially enclosed settings such as the isolated house and the rural village of Govind. Yet, what is of paramount significance to note is that such places are utilized mainly to bring the issue of caste into the fore and to give insight into the different struggles of major Indian female characters, highlighting the diversity of their experiences across gender, caste and class lines.

The suffering that many Indian upper caste women may endure is highlighted in Hall’s detective novel through the representation of the character of Tulsi. In the opening scene of *The Case of the Love Commandos*, Tulsi is introduced as the daughter of Vishnu Mishra, who is described as “a Thakur, literally ‘lord’—a hereditary landowner with no qualms about exploiting the caste system that still doomed tens of millions of low-caste Indians to subjugation and poverty” (Hall 2). From the outset, the novel situates Tulsi within a rigid caste hierarchy that confers social privilege upon her family while simultaneously restraining her personal freedom. Another crucial detail disclosed early in the narrative is Tulsi’s romantic relationship with Ram, an “untouchable,” or Dalit—a caste so stigmatized within orthodox Hindu society that, until recent times, even minimal physical contact with its members was considered polluting (Hall 3). The vehement opposition of Tulsi’s father to this relationship showcases the extent to which caste and gender intersect in shaping women’s lives in contemporary India.

To grasp the significance of Tulsi’s predicament as an upper-caste woman, it is useful to invoke Uma Chakravarti’s concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, which she defines as “a unique structure of patriarchy... in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, and

where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes”(Chakravarti 34–35). Within this system, patriarchal codes ensure the reproduction of the caste hierarchy through strictly regulated endogamous practices, organized into “closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and hierarchically ordered in relation to others” (34–35). As Chakravarti’s formulation makes clear, women are allocated an instrumental role in sustaining caste purity, rendering their bodies and choices sites of intense surveillance and control.

Caste endogamy thus emerges as a foundational pillar of Brahmanical patriarchy. In simple terms, it refers to the practice of restricting marriage strictly within one’s caste group (Ingole, 144). As Ingole observes, “a strict control of female sexuality by normalizing a discourse that attaches honour and pride of the group to the bodies of its women members, and legitimizing a culture of physical and moral securitization of female lives, are the most dominant ways through which caste endogamy is reproduced” (144). The enforcement of caste endogamy is therefore central to maintaining both inter-caste and intra-caste notions of purity and pollution. Within the hierarchical *varna* system, the control of women’s sexuality becomes indispensable, since preventing inter-caste unions is the only means by which caste boundaries can be preserved (Ingole 144). Tulsi’s forbidden relationship with Ram, consequently, constitutes not merely a romantic transgression but a direct threat to the ideological foundations of Brahmanical patriarchy itself.

Seen in this light, Tulsi’s relationship with Ram can be considered a direct threat to the ideological foundations of Brahmanical patriarchy itself. As an upper-caste woman, Tulsi is nevertheless a victim of patriarchal oppression: she is denied the right to marry the man she loves, her freedom is severely constrained, and her sexuality is tightly controlled. The description of Vishnu Mishra’s hostile reaction to her love affair with Ram illustrates the extent to which Tulsi’s individuality and agency are systematically erased. By preventing his daughter from seeing Ram again, blocking all communication between them, and confining her at home for several months, Vishnu Mishra exercises patriarchal authority in order to regulate female sexuality, prohibit inter-caste relations, and, by implication, enforce caste endogamy.

The assertion that “Vishnu Mishra would stop at nothing to prevent his daughter from seeing Ram again,” together with the violent threats he directs at the “Dalit dog,” exposes his readiness to employ intimidation and violence to preserve caste purity and uphold the hierarchical logic of the caste system (Hall 3). Such language not only dehumanizes Ram but also underscores the extreme measures through which caste boundaries are protected. Another strategy deployed to enforce caste endogamy is Vishnu Mishra’s reliance on an “upscale marriage broker” to secure a suitable match for his daughter (Hall 3). Tulsi’s description by Cupid’s Matrimonial Agency as “beautiful, homely, fair and proper height” reveals how upper-caste women are expected to conform to rigid gender norms that privilege domesticity, physical appearance, and submissiveness. Within this framework, Tulsi is reduced to a matrimonial commodity whose value lies in her ability to reproduce caste and patriarchal continuity rather than to exercise personal choice.

While *The Case of the Love Commandos* foregrounds the oppression experienced by upper-caste women such as Tulsi, the novel also exposes the vulnerable condition of Dalit women through the tragic figure of Kamlesh Sunder. The central crime investigated by Vish Puri, which is the murder of Kamlesh, Ram’s mother, serves as a narrative lens through which Hall

illuminates the physical, sexual, and structural violence inflicted upon Dalit women. Kamlesh's story reveals how caste, gender, and class intersect to render Dalit women particularly targets of exploitation, silencing, and ultimately, death. Kamlesh Sunder is repeatedly identified in the novel through her occupation as a midwife, a role that is highly defamed within the caste system. As Tulsi explains to Puri Ram "often talked about how she'd been treated badly... being a midwife, delivering babies. She was considered polluted" (Hall 235). More disturbingly, in the course of Puri's investigation, the revelation of Kamlesh's exposition to past sexual violation highlights the sexual dimension of Dalit women's oppression. Indeed, as attested by Bianca Cherechés, "Dalit women bear the burden of not only economic hardships and discrimination, but also the physical marking and weaponisation of their bodies, as they are constantly at risk of sexual violence and physical assault, and their bodies become symbolic battlegrounds for asserting caste dominance"(6). To state it differently, sexual violence against Dalit women serves as a means to assert superiority and reinforce hierarchy. As a Dalit woman, Kamlesh Sunder resigns to the fact that her body is a site upon which power is violently inscribed. Kamlesh's violation by a Brahmin physician, a figure of institutional authority, reveals how caste power operates not only in rural spaces but also within state institutions that are ostensibly neutral and protective. Her rape by a Brahmin doctor at a government hospital foregrounds the fact that Dalit women, as argued by Yashica Dutt, are viewed as a sexual property: caste Hindu men who feel entitled to their bodies (7). Kamlesh's inability to seek justice for this violation further underscores her marginalized position. As Sharmila Rege notes, Dalit women are frequently denied recognition as victims of sexual violence because they are presumed to possess no "honour" to be violated (120). This logic effectively silences Dalit women, rendering their suffering invisible and unaccountable. Kamlesh's later attempt to seek help from Baba Dhobi, a self-proclaimed Dalit leader, tragically culminates in her murder. As Puri reflects, "A Dalit who'd been oppressed all her life, treated worse than the stray dogs in the village... had gone to see the one person in the world she believed she could trust... Yet within a few hours Kamlesh Sunder, an innocent midwife, had been brutally murdered" (Hall188). Crime, in such a manner, far from being personal, for it is rooted in the social injustices committed against the Dalit and in the caste-ridden nature of the Indian society, which presents a deviation from the conventional idea of crime inscribed in classical cozies.

In addition to the character of Kamlesh Sunder, the plight of Dalit women is further underscored through the representation of other female characters. As a matter of fact, Facecream's meeting with three Dalit female characters demonstrates the multiple factors that shape the experience of Dalit women as subordinated subjects. The three women are desperate for the basic needs of life such as food. Their miserable conditions render their families eligible for Below Poverty Line Cards, which entitle them to thirty-five kilograms of rice or wheat each month (Hall 130). Nevertheless, owing to sophisticated administrative procedures, getting such cards has proved to be impossible. In this regard it is of pertinence to call attention to the fact that "[t]he foundations of Independent India's bureaucratic traditions are mired in its colonial legacy" (Aiyar 165). Indeed, Indian bureaucracy is founded upon the Indian Civil Service organizational framework, which was the major administrative structure used during the British colonial rule. Because Indians were regarded with profound distrust by the colonial administration, "the state was distanced from the people and organized to extract from them, rather than serve them" (Aiyar 165). Consequently, Independent India's bureaucracy has remained devoted to its colonial fondness of paper, and procedures. Files and written procedures and records have further entrenched themselves as the apparatuses through which

the bureaucratic hierarchy exerts its control over its subordinates (Aiyar 165). By highlighting the bureaucratic hurdles faced by the three female characters, Hall's novel casts light on the great role that bureaucracy plays in deepening the struggle of the Dalit women in postcolonial India. Furthermore, the reference to the "big green and yellow bruise" on the arm of one of the Dalit female characters serves to point to another dimension of their marginalization. The Institute for Cellular and Molecular Biology (ICMB), which is based on Agra and which takes blood samples from Dalits in the village of Govind, evokes the idea of biocolonialism. Briefly, biocolonial practices are manifested in Western and international endeavours to acquire and patent plants and animals and human genes as lucrative sources of medical, pharmaceutical and nutraceutical products or as 'raw materials' for the multi-billion dollar businesses of the twenty first century biotechnology revolution (Ashcroft et al. 29). What is of pertinence to note is that Hall associates these practices with Dalit communities whose social and economic marginalization hinders their ability to question or resist such interventions. From an intersectional perspective, this episode demonstrates that the oppression experienced by Dalit women cannot be reduced to caste or gender alone. Rather, their bodies become sites where multiple structures of power converge, including patriarchy, caste hierarchy, poverty, bureaucracy, and global systems of scientific exploitation. In this way, it can be said that the novel broadens its critique beyond local forms of discrimination to expose the complex networks of domination that remain to exert a toll on the lives of many women in postcolonial India.

In the light of what has been said so far, thus, it can be said that scrutinizing the representation of major female characters in Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos* from a feminist postcolonial point of view discloses that Hall departs from the socially restricted milieu traditionally associated with Golden Age detective fiction to emphasize how women's experiences are shaped by their differing positions within India's social hierarchy. Rather than limiting crime to personal motives within an insulated middle-class community, he foregrounds caste oppression, gender violence, bureaucratic exclusion, and social inequality. Consequently, the mystery becomes a vehicle for social critique rather than merely intellectual entertainment. What is worth noting is that Hall's strategic use of the generic conventions of the cozy novel not only aims to highlight the suffering of different Indian women but also to underline their resilience and resistance, which will be the focal point in what follows.

4.2. Reworking the Female Agency Tradition of the Golden Age Detective Novel

In his representation of major female characters, Hall not only expands the social milieu of the classical cozy novel in order to illuminate their diverse experiences with oppressive patriarchal structures, but he also develops the theme of female agency conveyed by many golden age detective novels. Hall's tendency to underscore the theme of female agency in his novel can be detected in his female character Mummy-Ji. From the opening scenes of the novel, Mummy-Ji is depicted as Puri's mother, a grand-mother, and at the same time as a woman who possesses "an uncanny knack of getting to the bottom of things (Hall 31)," echoing her intuitive and analytical aptitude for detective work. The image of Mummy-Ji as a woman detective calls into mind Agatha Christie's fictional detective, Miss Jane Marple. "Distinguished by her village geography (St Mary Mead) and pastimes – knitting, gardening, and bird-watching – Miss Marple has moral force, intelligence, an inquisitive nature, excellent knowledge of human behavior, and pays attention to details" (Gavin 263). Hence, Christie's Miss Marple and Hall's Mummy-Ji are both old and female investigators who deploy feminine methods of detection

such as gossip. What is of significance to note is that Hall's reliance on the familiar figure of Miss Marple serves to empower his Indian female detective by illustrating how she manages to resist patriarchal thinking. Indeed, despite the fact that her investigative competence is highlighted, Mummy-Ji's inclination toward detection is relentlessly rejected by her son. Puri believes that she should "stick to what she is best at: making *gulab jamuns* and all" (Hall 32), thus reproducing a gendered division of labor that consigns women to the private sphere and confines them to domestic duties. His assertion that he is "the only detective in the family" and that "mummies are not detectives" (Hall 33) aligns with both prevailing social norms and the masculinist conventions of classical detective fiction. Moreover, Mummy-Ji's abilities are similarly undermined by institutional authority figures such as Inspector Malhotra, who initially dismisses her insights, which serves to demonstrate the great extent to which gender bias can operate within official structures of power. However, a close reading of Hall's novel illustrates that Mummy-Ji is represented as an Indian woman who knows how to negotiate and resist the different constraints imposed upon her. Her success to identify the culprits behind both the theft of Puri's wallet and the planned robbery at the Vaishno Devi temple accentuates her resilience and her intellectual potential. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, it can be said that Hall adopts the established literary figure of Miss Marple in order to construct the fictional character of Mummy-Ji, a character who shatters both patriarchal expectations and colonial stereotypes of Indian women as passive and subservient. In this way, it can be concluded that Mummy-Ji is constructed as an empowered maternal figure that disrupts different intersecting norms: her agency subtly yet fruitfully challenges the gendered and colonial hierarchies underpinning the detective genre.

Another main female character that shows resistance to the oppressive force of patriarchy in the novel under study is the character of Facecream. Indeed, by the end of the first chapter, the reader comes to learn that Facecream, who usually features in the Vish Puri series as a Nepali female undercover operative, plays an instrumental role: she is deeply engaged in the Love Commandos organization by endeavoring to defy caste restrictions and unite Tulsi and Ram. "Love Commandos" is the name of a non-governmental organization that was founded in 2010 in Delhi. It "created a new political platform and course of action for addressing an old "problem": Indians attempting to cross lines of caste or community to marry someone of their choosing" (Sadana 39). Its major aims are putting an end to honour killings and offering "a safe haven for couples who are in imminent danger" (Sadana 39). By operating under the name Laxmi in the Love Commandos organization, Facecream emerges as a rebellious woman who directly opposes the most coercive aspects of Brahmanical patriarchy which is the tight control of women's freedom and sexuality.

Facecream's position as a central figure of resistance is further strengthened through her detective work. What is striking is that she assumes the false identity of "the new teacher" in the Govind village not only to collect clues to help resolve the case of the murder of the Dalit woman kamlesh Sunder, but more importantly, to enact social change. Indeed, she seizes the opportunity to help the poor pupils, to provide basic requirements, and more importantly to defy and challenge caste divisions among students (Hall 104). By asking the children to stand up and sing the national anthem, for example, Facecream actually espouses subtle pedagogical tactics to foster unity and promote equality. In such a manner, thus, it can be inferred that Facecream is represented as an Indian female character who manages to negotiate and resist the complex intersections of caste, class, and gender within a deeply stratified society. Besides, it

can be concluded that Facecream, by combining investigation and social intervention, departs from the traditional figure of the cozy detective whose mission is essentially the restoration of social order.

In addition to the characters of Mummy-Ji and Facecream, the characters of Tulsi and the three Dalit women equally help to convey the theme of female agency. Despite the fact that she has suffered from the patriarchal authority of her father, Tulsi shows a great resilience against the rigid norms of Brahmanical patriarchy. Tulsi is far from being the Brahmin passive woman who shows total submission to familial authority and whose role is just perpetuating caste purity. Indeed, by insisting on her right to choose her partner, Tulsi challenges the patriarchal attempts to regulate her sexuality and future. Throughout the novel, despite the tension and the dangers that she has faced, she persists, and in the end she succeeds to defeat caste barriers by managing to marry Ram. It can be said, thus, the wedding scene is actually a celebration of the two lovers' union, and more crucially a celebration of their success to overcome age-old caste restrictions. The theme of resistance is further extended in the epilogue of the novel which underscores the great resilience shown by the three Dalit women. Despite their relegation to the fringes of society, the three women refuse to be passive and helpless. Their journey to Lucknow to seek help from Kukreja Madam is meant to expose the role played by official authorities in keeping the Dalit community in the margin of society and to underscore their determination to speak for their rights (Hall 286). By accepting Kukreja Madam's assertion that change cannot be overnight, and by showing their readiness to "stand for what was rightfully theirs" (Hall 287), the three Dalit women as powerful figures of resistance.

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be said that a postcolonial feminist reading of Tarquin Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos* reveals that it employs the formulaic framework of the cozy classical novel in a strategic manner in order to present a nuanced portrayal of Indian women, reflecting both the constraints of patriarchy and the diverse forms of female agency. Through characters such as Tulsi, Kamlesh Sunder, Facecream, and the three Dalit women, the novel discloses how gender, caste, and class *intersect* to shape women's experiences, laying bare forms of oppression that cannot be understood through a single lens or Western feminist frameworks. By foregrounding these intersections, the present article challenges essentialist and derogatory representations of Indian women. Indeed, a postcolonial feminist reading demonstrates that Hall's detective novel stretches the generic boundaries of the classical cozy novel in order to capture the specificity of Indian women's predicament within particular historical and cultural contexts. It equally illustrates how popular detective fiction can critically engage with both social hierarchies and postcolonial exploitative structures. While giving insight into the struggle of both Upper-caste and Dalit women, the novel empowers them by showing their sense of resilience and their agency. In such a manner, Hall's *The Case of the Love Commandos* proves to be a productive site for postcolonial feminist critique, for it demonstrates how genre fiction can engage critically with the gendered, caste-based, and postcolonial realities that still have a lingering impact on Indian women's lives.

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Translation, Memory, and Dalit Feminist Aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics of translation, memory, and Dalit feminist aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Originally composed in Tamil and Marathi respectively, both texts have achieved national and international visibility through English translation, entering broader conversations on subalternity, feminist resistance, and literary contemporaneity. The paper argues that these works are not merely autobiographical narratives but acts of cultural reclamation that destabilize dominant literary conventions through oral rhythms, fragmented memory structures, community-centred narration, and embodied language. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, among others, the study explores how translation functions simultaneously as ethical encounter and political act. It analyses the tensions involved in translating caste-specific experience into English – a language historically associated with colonial modernity and upper-caste privilege – while recognising that translation also enables subaltern narratives to acquire transnational resonance without entirely surrendering local specificity. Ultimately, the paper contends that *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* redefine contemporary Indian literary aesthetics through their insistence on memory, voice, and resistance, demonstrating that translation is not merely the movement of words across languages but the movement of histories, wounds, and silenced identities into public consciousness.

Keywords: *Dalit Feminism, Translation, Dalit Autobiography, Subaltern Studies, Caste*

Introduction:

The emergence of Dalit literature marks one of the most consequential transformations in contemporary Indian literary history. By centering the lived experiences of caste oppression, humiliation, labour, gendered violence, and social exclusion, Dalit writing fundamentally reorders the moral and aesthetic coordinates of Indian letters. Dalit women's writing presses further still – confronting the double marginalization inscribed by both caste and patriarchy, and producing literary testimonies that refuse the twin imperatives of silence and invisibility that dominant culture has imposed upon them.

Two foundational texts of this tradition are Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Originally composed in Tamil and Marathi respectively, these autobiographical narratives have become indispensable to Dalit feminist discourse. Their English translations allowed these deeply regional experiences to enter national and global literary conversations, thereby reshaping how Indian literature imagines itself and its subjects.

Translation occupies a profoundly paradoxical position in this context. On one hand, it renders marginalized voices legible across linguistic boundaries, enabling subaltern narratives to circulate beyond the communities that first produced them. On the other hand, it carries the ever-present risk of flattening culturally specific experience into consumable form for elite readerships. This tension is especially charged in Dalit women's autobiography, for language itself – in its textures, idioms, and silences – bears the historic marks of caste hierarchy.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation that "translation is the most intimate act of reading" (Spivak 180) acquires particular urgency here. To translate caste experience is not merely to transfer meaning across tongues; it is to enter into ethical relation with histories of violence, exclusion, and survival. Translation is an encounter with social suffering as much as it is a linguistic act. Sharmila Rege deepens this understanding by insisting that Dalit women's testimonies are not simply autobiographical records but "counter-public narratives" that actively challenge dominant historical accounts (Rege 13). Sara Suleri's observation that postcolonial life-writing is characterized by "an obsessive attempt to narrate the body into history" (Suleri 758) finds pointed resonance here, where the body is the site upon which caste inscribes its most brutal meanings – and upon which resistance is articulated.

This paper argues that *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* redefine contemporary Indian literary aesthetics through their resistant narrative strategies and complex negotiations with translation, examining how Dalit feminist texts do not merely enter literary discourse – they transform it.

Dalit Literature, Feminist Resistance, and the Aesthetics of Testimony

Dalit literature emerged as simultaneously a literary movement and a political intervention, rooted in sustained resistance against caste oppression. Inspired profoundly by the thought of B. R. Ambedkar, it sought not merely representation within mainstream literary culture but a wholesale restructuring of its values, hierarchies, and silences. Ambedkar diagnosed caste as a system of graded inequality that dehumanized its victims at the most fundamental registers of social life. His rallying call to "educate, agitate, organize" became the animating principle of Dalit political consciousness, and literary production was understood as inseparable from that larger emancipatory project – a form of testimony and protest at once.

Arjun Dangle locates the literature within this horizon of aspiration, defining it as writing "associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who have been subjected to untouchability and humiliation for thousands of years" (Dangle xiv). What distinguished Dalit writing from upper-caste literary traditions – which frequently aestheticized suffering, sublimating it into metaphor or spiritual resignation – was its insistence on foregrounding raw experiential reality. The suffering in Dalit literature is not ornament; it is evidence.

Dalit women's writing complicated this discourse further by exposing patriarchal structures operating not only within caste society but within male-dominated Dalit movements themselves – spaces where gender was often subordinated to caste solidarity. As Gopal Guru influentially argues, Dalit women speak from a position of "difference within difference" (Guru 2548), occupying a site of compounded marginalization that neither mainstream feminist nor Dalit male discourse could adequately account for. Their narratives reveal that caste violence is

always already gendered, experienced on and through the female body in ways that demand their own literary and theoretical vocabulary.

Karukku and *The Prisons We Broke* exemplify this intersectional resistance with particular force, foregrounding collective suffering while asserting fierce female subjectivity through markedly different formal strategies. Bama's *Karukku* is intensely fragmented, lyrical, and emotionally charged – its title drawn from the serrated palm leaf, encoding pain and spiritual conflict from the outset. The narrative moves through memory associatively, shaped by oral storytelling cadences rather than linear realist convention. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* adopts a wider collective lens, repeatedly expanding outward into communal narration across generations of Mahar women, refusing the individualism autobiography typically presupposes.

What unites both texts is a thoroughgoing rejection of conventional literary decorum. Their language is direct, corporeal, and politically deliberate – exposing hunger, humiliation, and bodily suffering without euphemism. This stylistic refusal is itself resistance. Dalit feminist aesthetics decline upper-caste literary refinement because such refinement has historically depended upon the suppression of subaltern realities. To write with polish about caste violence would be to reproduce, at the level of form, the very erasure the content seeks to undo.

Translation, Power, and the Politics of Linguistic Alterity

The translation of Dalit literature into English occupies a position that is at once controversial and necessary within Indian literary studies. English carries an undeniable historical burden – it remains the language of colonial administration and upper-caste cultural prestige – yet it simultaneously functions as a language of mobility, wider circulation, and access to audiences that regional languages cannot always reach. This doubleness makes translation not merely a literary question but a profoundly political one.

The English translations of *Karukku* by Lakshmi Holmstrom and *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit carried these texts into international academic and literary spaces, transforming them from regional testimonies into texts of global significance. Yet this passage across languages was not without cost, and the translations brought with them urgent questions regarding cultural specificity, linguistic texture, and the irreducible losses that accompany any act of inter-lingual transfer.

Spivak's critique remains the sharpest theoretical instrument for examining this problem. She warns that translation frequently becomes complicit in the global commodification of marginalized narratives – that in striving for transparent readability for dominant audiences, translators risk erasing the very linguistic grain that makes a text irreducible. Ethical translation, she insists, demands that the translator surrender herself to the “rhetoricity of the original” (Spivak 188), attending to its rhetorical and formal texture rather than subordinating it to the expectations of a target readership. This demand is nowhere more pressing than in Dalit literature, where caste is not incidental to language but embedded within it. Dialects, idioms, terms of abuse, proverbs, and patterns of speech carry layered social histories – histories of humiliation and survival – that resist clean equivalence.

In *Karukku*, Bama writes in a colloquial Tamil deeply rooted in Dalit Christian community life. The rhythms of her prose reflect intimacy, shared labour, and the textures of collective survival; they are inseparable from the social world the text inhabits. Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation navigates this challenge with considerable care, retaining certain Tamil words and syntactic structures that preserve something of the oral grain of the original, even as the translated text necessarily opens itself to readers who have no prior acquaintance with Tamil cultural contexts. The result is a translation that is neither fully domesticated nor entirely opaque – one that holds its foreignness in productive tension.

Maya Pandit's translation of *The Prisons We Broke* confronts an analogous challenge. Kamble's Marathi is dense with idiomatic structures rooted in Mahar social experience, and to render such expressions into English is to risk severing the meaning from the communal life that produced it. Pandit's approach similarly seeks to honour the specificity of the source while acknowledging the inevitability of negotiation.

Tejaswini Niranjana provides a useful theoretical frame for understanding what is at stake in these choices. Arguing that translation is always implicated in relations of power because it fundamentally shapes how cultures are represented (Niranjana 2), she reminds us that translation is never politically neutral – it either reproduces prevailing hierarchies of cultural value or creates conditions for more ethical forms of cross-cultural encounter. This argument resonates powerfully in the context of Dalit translation, where the stakes of representation are inseparable from histories of violence and erasure.

Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translation is equally illuminating here. Venuti argues that domestication, by producing fluent and transparent target texts, risks rendering "the foreign work recognizable and therefore consumes it" – absorbing difference into the familiar rather than preserving its resistance (Venuti 5). A foreignizing practice, by contrast, registers the linguistic and cultural otherness of the source, making the reader aware that they are in the presence of a world not wholly translatable into their own.

By this measure, the translations of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* achieve something significant. They preserve the emotional intensity and political urgency of their source texts, declining the fully domesticated form that would make them more palatable but less honest. Traces of linguistic alterity remain – and these traces matter, because Dalit narratives resist assimilation into dominant literary frameworks by design. Their stylistic abrasiveness is not incidental but constitutive: it is the formal signature of historical violence, and to smooth it away in translation would be to perform, at the level of aesthetics, the very erasure these texts exist to oppose. Translation, then, is both enabling and incomplete. It permits Dalit women's testimonies to enter broader literary and political conversations while simultaneously marking the limits of what language can carry across the borders of caste, community, and tongue.

Memory, Fragmentation, and Narrative Form in *Karukku*

Bama's *Karukku* occupies a unique position within contemporary Indian literature because it combines autobiography, spiritual reflection, social critique, and collective memory within a radically fragmented narrative structure. The text does not follow linear chronology.

Instead, memories emerge through associative movement, mirroring the psychological experience of trauma. This fragmented structure reflects what Cathy Caruth identifies as the disruptive temporality of traumatic memory (Caruth 4). The opening sections of *Karukku* foreground bodily humiliation and social exclusion. Bama recalls moments of caste discrimination from childhood with painful immediacy. One of the most memorable incidents involves an elder from her community carrying food packets by their strings to avoid “polluting” upper-caste recipients. The scene becomes transformative because it reveals the internalized violence of caste hierarchy. Bama writes:

“I saw that the elder went meekly to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand holding the string with his other hand” (Bama 15).

The visual image of bodily bending becomes symbolic of caste oppression itself. The scene also illustrates how memory operates in *Karukku* not as private recollection but as political awakening. Bama’s narrative style is deeply oral. Repetition, anecdotal shifts, conversational rhythms, and direct address create a sense of communal storytelling. The text frequently moves between personal experience and collective commentary. This stylistic strategy challenges dominant autobiographical conventions that privilege individualism and linear self-development. Dalit autobiographical writing often foregrounds collective identity because caste oppression itself is communal.

Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit women’s autobiographies should be read as “testimonios” rather than purely individual memoirs because they speak for collective histories (Rege 18). *Karukku* exemplifies this collective orientation. The body occupies central importance in Bama’s narrative aesthetics. Hunger, exhaustion, labour, and physical humiliation recur throughout the text. The body becomes a site where caste power is violently inscribed. Yet the body also becomes a site of resistance. Bama’s refusal to conceal bodily realities challenges upper-caste literary notions of purity and refinement.

Religion further complicates the text. As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama exposes the persistence of caste discrimination within Christian institutions. Her eventual disillusionment with convent life reveals how caste structures survive even within supposedly egalitarian spaces. The title *Karukku* itself symbolizes double-edged experience. Bama explains that the serrated leaves “cut both ways” (Bama 2), suggesting pain as well as resistance. The fragmented form of the text thus becomes aesthetically significant. Fragmentation reflects not literary inadequacy but the fractured realities of Dalit existence.

Collective Memory and Community in *The Prisons We Broke*

Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* differs from *Karukku* in tone and narrative structure, yet both texts share a commitment to exposing caste violence through memory. Originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha*, the text combines autobiography with social history. Kamble repeatedly shifts from personal memories to broader reflections on Mahar community life. The collective orientation of the text is evident from its opening passages. Kamble does not foreground herself as an isolated protagonist; instead, she situates her experiences within communal suffering. This collectivism reflects Dalit feminist epistemology. Individual identity cannot be separated from caste structures because oppression itself is systemic. Kamble’s

narrative style is stark and unsentimental. She documents poverty, hunger, child marriage, domestic violence, and caste humiliation with directness. One of the most powerful aspects of the text is its portrayal of Dalit women's labour. Women emerge as the primary sustainers of community survival despite enduring extreme deprivation.

Kamble writes:

"The women toiled endlessly. Their stomachs were empty, but they continued to work as though they were made of iron" (Kamble 42).

The imagery of iron suggests resilience forged through suffering. Yet Kamble refuses romanticization. Labour appears exhausting rather than heroic. The text also critiques patriarchal structures within Dalit communities. Kamble exposes alcoholism, domestic abuse, and gender discrimination while remaining committed to anti-caste politics. This dual critique distinguishes Dalit feminism from mainstream upper-caste feminism, which often ignored caste realities. The influence of Ambedkar remains central throughout the text. Kamble portrays Ambedkar as a transformative figure who enabled Dalit self-respect and political consciousness. Education emerges repeatedly as a symbol of liberation. Literacy becomes an act of resistance against caste-imposed ignorance. The title *The Prisons We Broke* itself carries profound metaphorical significance. The "prisons" refer not only to caste structures but also to internalized oppression.

Translation plays an important role in shaping the reception of Kamble's work. Maya Pandit's English translation preserves much of the original's directness while enabling wider readership. Yet the text's emotional force depends significantly upon culturally specific expressions and oral rhythms that resist complete translation. The translated narrative therefore exists within productive tension between accessibility and linguistic loss.

Dalit Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Style

Dalit feminist writing has effected a profound transformation in contemporary Indian literary aesthetics, challenging dominant assumptions about what literature is, what it should look like, and whose experience it exists to articulate. At stake is not merely a widening of the canon but a fundamental questioning of the values — beauty, refinement, universality, aesthetic distance — upon which it was built. Traditional upper-caste literary criticism privileged abstraction, symbolism, and cultivated detachment, an aesthetic never ideologically innocent: it depended upon the suppression of bodies, voices, and experiences that refused sublimation. Dalit literature rejects this distancing precisely because it emerges from conditions of immediate social violence that cannot be aestheticized without betrayal.

Sharankumar Limbale provides the most rigorous theoretical articulation of this counter-aesthetic. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he argues that Dalit aesthetics are grounded in lived experience rather than detached artistic pleasure (Limbale 23). Suffering, in this framework, is not transformed into tragic beauty for the contemplation of disinterested readers; it is rendered as politically significant testimony — evidence of a social order that demands not appreciation but accountability.

Karukku and *The Prisons We Broke* embody this alternative aesthetic with particular clarity. Their language is deliberately unornamented. Everyday speech, colloquial idioms, and the structures of oral storytelling displace the conventions of elite literary prose, and this displacement is not stylistic naivety but ideological intention. By privileging the speech forms of marginalized communities, Dalit feminist writers directly contest Brahmanical authority over literary language – the long-standing assumption that certain kinds of expression are inherently more literary than others.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's observation that Indian literature cannot be understood through homogenizing frameworks, because linguistic plurality so fundamentally shapes literary experience (Mukherjee 14), is pertinent here. Dalit feminist texts press this plurality to its most consequential extreme, foregrounding subaltern linguistic worlds that mainstream Indian literary culture had systematically rendered inaudible. In doing so, they do not merely diversify the literary landscape; they expose the exclusions upon which its apparent coherence depended.

The body functions as a central aesthetic and political category within this framework. Where upper-caste literary traditions frequently spiritualized suffering – sublimating material pain into metaphysical resignation or transcendence – Dalit feminist narratives insist on corporeal specificity. Food and its absence, labour and its exhaustion, menstruation, childbirth, sexuality, and physical degradation recur across both texts with an insistence that refuses euphemism. This corporeality is not gratuitous; it is principled – disrupting received notions of literary purity by asserting that aesthetics cannot be meaningfully separated from material conditions of life. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that such texts enact a "re-scripting of the real" – forcing literary culture to confront the embodied histories it had consigned to silence (Tharu and Lalita 37). This formulation captures precisely what is at stake: not shock for its own sake, but the insistence that the real cannot be edited out of literature without consequence.

Orality, too, constitutes a significant aesthetic resource. Repetition, conversational narration, communal anecdote, and performative storytelling structures reflect oral cultural traditions systemically marginalized within elite literary discourse. These are not residual features but formal choices that carry the memory and solidarity of communities whose knowledge was transmitted through speech rather than sanctioned through script.

Translation introduces particular pressures upon these stylistic elements. The rhythmic and affective force of oral prose is notoriously difficult to carry across languages. Yet even in translation, Dalit feminist texts continue to reshape literary expectations – introducing narrative forms and syntactic textures that contemporary Indian literature had not previously accommodated. Their entry into translated form is less an arrival than a disruption, and it is precisely as disruptions that these texts do their most important work.

Religion, Conversion, and Spiritual Resistance

Religion occupies a position of profound ambivalence in both *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke*. Neither straightforwardly oppressive nor simply redemptive, it functions in these texts as a contested terrain – a space where the structures of caste domination are simultaneously reproduced and, at moments of extraordinary ethical courage, refused and reimaged.

In *Karukku*, Bama's engagement with Christianity traces an arc from expectation to disillusionment to a more hard-won and complex spiritual reckoning. The convent initially presents itself as a space of refuge — offering educational mobility, spiritual community, and implicit distance from the degradations of caste life outside its walls. Yet Bama gradually comes to recognize that caste hierarchies do not dissolve at the threshold of religious institutions; they persist within them, reorganized and at times made more insidious by their contradiction with Christianity's own egalitarian professions. The gap between theological ideals of human equality and the lived social practices of those who profess them becomes, for Bama, a source of both profound disillusionment and political clarity.

Yet *Karukku* does not resolve into a simple rejection of faith. Bama's quarrel is with institutional religion — with the Church as a social structure complicit in caste — rather than with spirituality as such. What she seeks, and tentatively locates, are alternative forms of ethical community grounded in compassion and justice rather than hierarchy and ritual propriety. This spiritual dimension sets *Karukku* apart from purely secular Dalit autobiographical narratives. Suffering in the text is not only a social and political fact; it is entangled with questions of faith, theodicy, and the possibility of redemption — questions that Bama refuses to surrender even as she dismantles the institutional frameworks that claimed to answer them. Eleanor Zelliot's observation that Dalit engagement with religion has consistently involved "a search for a faith that affirms human dignity rather than denies it" (Zelliot 16) illuminates precisely this dimension of *Karukku*. Bama's spiritual restlessness is not a retreat from politics but an extension of it — a refusal to accept any framework, sacred or secular, that does not begin from the full humanity of Dalit persons.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, religion operates with a different but equally transformative force. Here it is Ambedkarite Buddhism that emerges as the central vehicle of liberation — and Kamble's account of conversion is among the most politically charged dimensions of the text. Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism in 1956, undertaken alongside hundreds of thousands of followers, was an act of radical rejection: a formal repudiation of the Hindu caste order and an assertion of human dignity on terms that Hinduism, as Ambedkar understood it, was structurally incapable of providing. Kamble renders this collective act of conversion not as mere religious change but as psychological liberation — a reorganization of consciousness that enabled Dalits to imagine and inhabit identities no longer defined by caste degradation and its attendant shame.

Religious transformation in *The Prisons We Broke* is thus inseparable from linguistic and cultural transformation. To convert is not only to change one's metaphysical affiliations but to step into a different relationship with oneself, one's community, and the language through which one narrates both. Translation, in this light, extends the transformative logic already at work within the text itself — carrying these local histories of spiritual struggle and collective reimagining into wider intellectual spaces, where they press against and disturb the settled assumptions of dominant literary and religious discourse alike.

Together, these two texts suggest that for Dalit women writers, religion is neither simply a consolation nor simply a target of critique. It is, rather, one of the most charged arenas in which

the struggle for dignity — personal, communal, and political — is continuously fought and reimagined.

Translation, Global Readership, and the Politics of Literary Visibility

The English translations of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* fundamentally shaped the trajectories of these texts beyond their originary linguistic and cultural contexts. By making these narratives accessible to readers outside Tamil and Marathi literary worlds, translation enabled them to enter university curricula, feminist scholarship, postcolonial studies, and transnational conversations about systemic oppression — spaces in which they have since become indispensable reference points. Yet this expanded visibility is not an uncomplicated good, and the questions it raises are as important as the opportunities it creates.

Who, precisely, reads translated Dalit literature? How are caste narratives interpreted — and potentially misinterpreted — within global academic spaces that lack the cultural and historical intimacy that shaped them? Does the passage of political testimony into international literary circulation risk transforming urgent witness into consumable cultural commodity, palatable to elite readerships precisely because its most abrasive edges have been softened in translation? These are the constitutive tensions of Dalit literature's global life.

Spivak's warning against the "sanctioned ignorance" through which privileged readers consume subaltern narratives without confronting the structural inequalities that produced them (Spivak 172) remains acutely relevant here. There is a real risk that global readership, however well-intentioned, encounters caste as an exotic or historically remote injustice rather than as a living system with structural analogues in their own social worlds. The consumption of Dalit testimony can, under such conditions, become a form of liberal self-congratulation rather than genuine ethical reckoning. Yet the alternative — refusing translation and thereby confining Dalit narratives within linguistic boundaries — would be its own form of injustice, trading the risks of visibility for the certainty of silence. Translation remains necessary despite its limitations, and the task is not to resolve this tension but to remain rigorously attentive to it.

Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" of enunciation is instructive here. He argues that cultural translation opens a space where meanings are neither simply source nor target but something produced in the encounter between them — a space that can "displace the histories that constitute it" and open new possibilities of cultural negotiation (Bhabha 55). Applied to Dalit feminist texts, this suggests that translation need not be only loss or compromise; it can generate new forms of political and literary meaning that neither the source nor the target culture could have produced alone.

This generative possibility is borne out in the expanding comparative frameworks within which Dalit feminist literature now circulates. The international recognition of these texts has extended conversations about caste well beyond India's borders, enabling scholars to examine structural connections between caste, race, indigeneity, and other global systems of hierarchical oppression. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* increasingly appear alongside African American, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminist writings within transnational academic discourse — a comparative proximity that illuminates both the specificity of caste experience and its resonances with other histories of marginalization. Sara Ahmed's argument that feminist

scholarship must remain committed to “making connections across different forms of oppression without dissolving their specificities” (Ahmed 6) captures precisely the ethical imperative governing this comparative project. Global solidarity that effaces difference is not solidarity at all; it is another form of erasure.

It is by this measure that the translations of Bama and Kamble must ultimately be assessed. Their relative success lies not in producing seamless readability for global audiences but in preserving traces of linguistic and cultural resistance that resist full assimilation. The foreignness that remains — the idioms that do not quite domesticate, the rhythms that carry the memory of another tongue — is not a failure of craft but its most significant achievement, ensuring these texts continue to make demands upon their readers rather than simply rewarding them.

Contemporary Relevance and Literary Contemporaneity

The enduring significance of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* within contemporary Indian literary studies is not merely a matter of historical recognition. These texts remain urgently, uncomfortably present — not as monuments to a struggle safely concluded but as testimonies whose referents continue to define the lived realities of millions. Despite decades of legal reform and constitutional protections, caste discrimination persists with striking tenacity — operating through educational exclusion, labour exploitation, sexual violence, and entrenched social segregation, not as aberration but as structure. Dalit students continue to encounter institutional discrimination within universities; incidents of caste-based violence surface with a regularity that belies any narrative of steady social progress. These are not archives of a past injustice; they are diagnoses of a present one.

The literary contemporaneity of these texts extends beyond their political urgency. Their formal strategies — fragmentation, testimonial narration, hybrid structures, oral aesthetics — align with broader trends in contemporary global literature that have moved decisively away from linear narration and unified subjectivity. Yet this alignment demands careful qualification, because the resemblance conceals a fundamental difference of origin and intent. Where postmodern literary experimentation adopted fragmentation as aesthetic philosophy — a self-conscious interrogation of form undertaken from positions of relative security — Dalit feminist writing developed these same strategies as responses to historical violence. The fractured, non-linear structures of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* do not reflect a theoretical position on the instability of narrative; they reflect the actual conditions under which Dalit women’s lives were lived and remembered. This distinction is decisive, because it foregrounds the material conditions that shape literary form and resists the absorption of Dalit aesthetics into a postmodern framework that would aestheticize what is, at its core, a record of suffering and survival.

Judith Butler’s argument that “precarious life” generates its own modes of narrative and representation — that those whose lives are rendered structurally vulnerable develop distinctive ways of bearing witness to that vulnerability (Butler 20) — illuminates precisely this dimension of Dalit feminist writing. The formal innovations of these texts are not chosen from an open menu of stylistic possibilities; they are necessitated by the specific histories of dispossession and erasure the texts seek to articulate. Neil Lazarus similarly cautions against readings that celebrate formal hybridity and fragmentation in postcolonial and subaltern literatures without

attending to the historical conditions that produced them, arguing that such readings risk “aestheticizing what are in fact the scars of a very specific social violence” (Lazarus 44). His warning applies with particular force to the reception of Dalit literature within global academic spaces, where the temptation to assimilate these texts into familiar theoretical frameworks – postmodernism, post colonialism, world literature – can efface the caste-specific histories that give them their distinctive character and political urgency.

Contemporary Indian literary studies has increasingly recognised that aesthetics and politics are inseparable – that how a text is written cannot be divorced from the social conditions within which it was produced. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* have been central to this reorientation, pressing critics to rethink literary value itself – to ask not only whether a text is formally accomplished but what work it performs in the world, whose realities it renders visible, and what demands it places upon its readers. Translation amplifies this challenge by carrying caste realities into intellectual conversations far beyond the communities that first articulated them, extending the ethical imperative of these texts outward – insisting that the discomfort they produce is not incidental but necessary, and that literature’s most important work is sometimes precisely its refusal to comfort.

Conclusion

Bama’s *Karukku* and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* occupy transformative positions within contemporary Indian literary studies not because they expanded an existing canon but because they exposed the exclusions upon which that canon depended and demanded, in doing so, a fundamental rethinking of what literature is for. These are texts that redefine the relationship between literature and memory, between testimony and aesthetics, between translation and political responsibility – and their significance only deepens as the conditions that produced them persist.

Formally, both texts mount a sustained challenge to dominant literary aesthetics. Through fragmented narration, oral storytelling structures, corporeal imagery, collective memory, and language that carries the grain of caste-marked social worlds, *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* refuse the conventions of detachment, refinement, and universality that upper-caste literary culture had naturalized as the very definition of literary value. Their English translations carried these formal and political provocations across linguistic and national boundaries, enabling Dalit feminist narratives to enter global conversations about caste, subalternity, and the politics of representation – conversations these texts have not merely joined but transformed.

Yet translation remains ethically complex terrain. Caste-specific experience – embedded in dialect, idiom, bodily knowledge, and communal memory – resists complete linguistic equivalence. The translations of Holmstrom and Pandit succeed not by resolving this resistance but by preserving it, allowing traces of linguistic and cultural alterity to remain within the translated text. In doing so, they demonstrate that translation is not the neutral transfer of meaning across languages but an encounter with cultural histories and embodied suffering – an act carrying its own political and ethical stakes.

Dalit feminist aesthetics, as these texts make luminously clear, reject abstraction and aesthetic distance in favour of experiential immediacy. By foregrounding hunger, labour, humiliation, spirituality, violence, and resistance without euphemism, *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* insist that literature cannot be meaningfully separated from the material conditions that produce it. They challenge mainstream feminist discourse by demonstrating that gender cannot be analytically or politically isolated from caste – that the specificities of Dalit women’s experience demand frameworks capacious enough to hold both oppressions simultaneously, without subordinating one to the other.

bell hooks’s insistence that margin and centre are not fixed positions but sites of ongoing political negotiation – that “the margin is the space of radical openness” from which transformative cultural work becomes possible (hooks 149) – finds its literary correlative precisely here. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* were produced at what dominant culture designated as the margins of literary life; yet it is from that position that they have generated their most consequential challenges to the centre. Michel Foucault’s observation that “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 52) resonates equally here. Dalit feminist writing enacts this seizure with full political consciousness – appropriating the authority of literary form, autobiography, and published testimony, turning it toward ends the dominant literary order had neither anticipated nor sanctioned. To write, to publish, to be translated, and to be read across the world is itself an intervention in the distribution of discursive power.

Ultimately, Bama and Baby Kamble transform literature into testimony, memory into resistance, and translation into cultural intervention. Their works remind readers – and demand that literary critics reckon with the reminder – that literary language is never innocent of the social orders within which it moves. It carries histories of oppression, but it also holds the possibility of articulating what has been suppressed and imagining what has not yet been made possible. In contemporary Indian literary studies, Dalit feminist writing has emerged not at the margins of debates concerning style, ethics, contemporaneity, and representation but at their very centre. To engage seriously with *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* is to engage seriously with what literature can do when it refuses to look away – and with what literary criticism must become if it is to meet that refusal with the seriousness it deserves.

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Carolyn Brackets and Breakdowns: The Writerly Paradox of Mental Illness in Shaheen Bhatt's *I've Never Been (Un)Happier*

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Abstract

Shaheen Bhatt's *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* (2019) announces its formal project in a single typographical gesture. It is the parenthetical *un* suspended within its title, destabilising meaning in both directions simultaneously. This paper argues that this stylistic paradox is the governing formal principle of a memoir that uses language against itself to express what conventional discourse such as the clinical and confessional cannot adequately hold. It draws on Aijaz Ahmad's argument that literary forms are always inscribed within histories of ideology, Meenakshi Mukherjee's reflections on the negotiation between colonial inheritances and postcolonial assertion in Indian English writing, and Roland Barthes' theory of the writerly text. The paper reads Bhatt's formal choices such as the parenthetical title and the philosophical self-interrogation of the prose as a distinctly contemporary Indian literary intervention. Mental illness remains heavily stigmatised and the discourse of celebrity confession threatens to reduce suffering to spectacle in this cultural landscape. Bhatt's style performs a double resistance against the pathologising language of clinical depression and against the sentimentalising language of Bollywood privilege. The paper further draws on Suzette Henke's concept of scriptotherapy to argue that Bhatt's memoir constitutes her recovery through its formal enactment. The writing itself is the healing, and the style is its evidence. The paper contends that Bhatt's memoir represents a significant and undertheorised contribution to the emerging tradition of feminist life-writing in India by situating *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* within the contemporary moment of Indian literary studies.

Keywords: *Scriptotherapy, Writerly paradox, Depression memoir, Indian women's life-writing, Cultural stigma, Style as resistance*

I. Introduction

Shaheen Bhatt's *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* (2019) begins with a provocation quietly embedded in its own title. The parenthetical *un* suspended between brackets destabilises the title's meaning. Is she saying she has never been unhappier? Or that she has never been happier? The brackets hold both possibilities open simultaneously insisting that the experience of depression cannot be captured by a single and unparenthetical declaration. In four words and one typographical gesture, Bhatt announces the formal project of her memoir. It is to use language against itself and to find in paradox and instability the only honest mode of expression available to someone writing from within the experience of mental illness.

This paper argues that this stylistic gesture is the governing formal principle of a memoir that is about the inadequacy of available language to express what depression feels like from the

inside. Bhatt is a screenwriter by profession. She is someone acutely attuned to the relationship between form and meaning, between what is said and how it is said. The formal self-consciousness of *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* takes several distinctive shapes. There are the diary entries that precede the chapters which are raw by the retrospective understanding that the memoir's main prose achieves creating a counterpoint between the experiencing self and the narrating self that is one of the text's most formally interesting features.

To read *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* as a work of literary style rather than merely as a personal document or a cultural intervention in the discourse of mental health is to situate it within the critical conversations that this paper draws on. Aijaz Ahmad's foundational argument in *In Theory* (1992) that literary forms are "always already inscribed within histories of class, nation, and ideology" (Ahmad 43) provides the paper's first theoretical lever. Bhatt's stylistic choices are ideological, shaped by and responding to the specific cultural conditions of contemporary India in which mental illness is stigmatised and the Indian English literary memoir is a form with particular social and cultural stakes. In the preface Bhatt states, "It took me a long time to understand the nature of the illness I was living with since as a condition, depression is particularly stigmatized in Indian society and not to mention widely misunderstood in general." (Bhatt, Preface) This is Bhatt herself naming the ideological conditions such as the Indian cultural stigma that Ahmad's framework illuminates.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's reflections in *The Perishable Empire* (2000) on the negotiation between colonial inheritances and postcolonial assertion in Indian English writing provide the second. Bhatt writes in English. She writes in a confessional mode with deep roots in Western literary tradition. Roland Barthes' distinction between the readerly and the writerly text, between texts that position the reader as passive consumer and texts that demand active participation in the production of meaning provides the paper's central formal framework. Bhatt's memoir is a writerly text in Barthes' sense, one whose formal paradoxes and instabilities demand that the reader do interpretive work that the text itself refuses to do. The paper draws additionally on Suzette Henke's concept of scriptotherapy. It is the idea that writing trauma can itself be a form of healing. It is the act of narrating suffering as a constituent part of it. It is to argue that Bhatt's formal choices are not separable from the memoir's therapeutic project.

I've Never Been (Un)Happier was published by Penguin India in 2019. It has received considerable popular attention, particularly in the context of growing conversations about mental health awareness in India. Yet its critical reception has focused almost entirely on its value as a personal testimony and a contribution to mental health discourse. It has not yet subjected its formal and stylistic dimensions to sustained literary theoretical analysis. This paper attempts to fill that gap and in doing so to situate Bhatt's memoir within the emerging tradition of contemporary Indian feminist life-writing. The stylistic innovations deserve the same critical attention that has been lavished on the more celebrated names of Indian English literary culture.

The paper proceeds in four further sections. Section 2 examines the parenthetical title as the memoir's governing stylistic paradox, drawing on Barthes. Section 3 reads the diary entries through Ahmad and Mukherjee to situate the memoir's formal structure within the ideological conditions of contemporary Indian literary culture. Section 4 applies Henke's scriptotherapy to argue that Bhatt's style enacts rather than merely describes her recovery. Section 5 concludes by

situating *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* within the contemporary landscape of Indian literary studies.

II. The Parenthetical Self: Barthes and the Writerly Title

Roland Barthes differentiates between the readerly and the writerly text in *S/Z* (1974). He begins with a fundamental proposition about the purpose of literary work: "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). For Barthes, the readerly text that is *le lisible* positions the reader as a passive consumer of stable and pre-determined meaning, leaving them with "no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum" (4). The writerly text that is *le scriptible* by contrast, refuses this reduction. It is not a thing to be consumed but a practice to be entered, "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds...we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" (5). The writerly text demands active and productive engagement. It multiplies meaning and its plurality "is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible" but an assertion of difference itself (5).

Bhatt's title is writerly in precisely this sense. *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* produces two contradictory meanings simultaneously which are absolute misery and absolute joy. It refuses to adjudicate between them. The brackets hold both open readings, creating exactly the plurality of entrances that Barthes describes. The parenthetical *un* is a galaxy of signifiers compressed into a single typographical gesture. It governs the entire memoir that follows as a permanent reminder that the experience being narrated resists the singular and readerly language that the dominant recovery narrative demands.

This formal paradox is an epistemological claim about the nature of depression itself. It is about what it feels like to live with a condition that presents itself as a complex and often invisible state that conventional language is structurally ill-equipped to express. Bhatt makes this claim explicitly in the memoir's prose. Depression is the uncanny neighbour of happiness. It is a condition that can coexist with privilege, success, and laughter in ways that make it invisible to others and bewildering to the sufferer herself. The parenthetical *un* enacts this coexistence formally. It places the unhappiness and the happiness in the same typographical space. It refuses to separate them into before and after, suffering and recovery, illness and health.

Barthes' writerly text is characterised by what he calls the plural of the text. He calls its capacity to generate multiple and irreducible meanings that cannot be subordinated to a single authorial intention or a single interpretive framework. *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* is plural in this sense in its formal architecture. The memoir is structured around a counterpoint between two distinct registers of writing which are the diary entries that precede each chapter and the retrospective prose of the memoir itself. These two registers create a productive tension and a writerly instability, that is one of the text's most formally interesting features. The diary entries are raw and present-tense. They record the experiencing self in the moment of crisis, before understanding and before the retrospective composure that memoir conventionally requires. The memoir's prose is reflective and retrospective. It is the narrating self-looking back on the experiencing self with the understanding that time and writing have made possible.

This formal instability is ideologically significant. It is here that Barthes' framework must be supplemented by the more politically grounded frameworks of Ahmad and Mukherjee. A readerly memoir of depression is the one that delivers a stable, unequivocal narrative of suffering, diagnosis and recovery would reproduce the very discursive structures that Bhatt's memoir is implicitly resisting. The clinical discourse of depression produces readerly narratives. This is what depression is, this is what it feels like and this is what recovery looks like. The celebrity confessional produces readerly narratives. This is my suffering and this is my journey from darkness to light. Bhatt's writerly title and writerly form resist both of these readerly conventions. They insist that depression is an experience whose meaning is always in brackets. It is always simultaneously unhappier and happier, always refusing the closure that both clinical and confessional discourse demand.

The parenthetical self of Bhatt's title is a formally radical gesture in the context of contemporary Indian literary culture. It is this radicalism that the following section examines through the frameworks of Ahmad and Mukherjee.

III. Form, Ideology, and the Contemporary Indian Literary Memoir

Aijaz Ahmad's foundational argument in *In Theory* that literary forms are "always already inscribed within histories of class, nation, and ideology" (43) is a proposition that bears directly on *I've Never Been (Un)Happier*. Ahmad further notes that the Indian university's relation to its British and American counterparts is one of fundamental dependence, such that "knowledges produced there become immediately effective here, in a relation of imperial dominance, shaping even the way we think of ourselves" (44). Bhatt's choice to write in English and to publish her depression memoir through Penguin India in a form recognisable to both Indian and global anglophone readers. This is an ideological decision shaped by precisely these conditions of literary production and circulation that Ahmad describes. The confessional memoir form she adopts has deep roots in Western literary tradition. Its deployment in the Indian context carries with it the full weight of the metropolitan literary culture within which Indian English writing circulates and is evaluated.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's reflections in *The Perishable Empire* illuminate the specific ideological stakes of Bhatt's formal choices with considerable precision. Mukherjee argues that in the history of Indian writing, "the language in which they wrote seemed to automatically determine the way this reading would be processed for creative purposes" (18). Furthermore, Mukherjee identifies a historical assignment of Indian women as custodians of interior and mother-tongue expression, "the separation of the interior as sacral space uncontaminated by the West and woman as its preserver" (22). Bhatt's memoir violates this assignment doubly. She writes her interior life in English, and she makes that interior life public. They are in Mukherjee's terms, an "ideological reconstruction moulded by an implicit political agenda in which language has a determining role" (8). The parenthetical *un* is written in English and that too is a political act.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument in *Provincializing Europe* that European thought is "both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations" (16) It illuminates the specific formal condition of Bhatt's memoir with considerable precision. Bhatt's writerly style is the renewal of an inherited form "from and for the margins" (16) It is a formal negotiation of the partly opaque relationship

between the European categories she must use and the Indian life-world she is actually writing from. The parenthetical *un* of her title is the most concentrated expression of this negotiation. It uses the inherited language of happiness and unhappiness while refusing to let that language settle into the stable and singular meaning that the European confessional tradition demands.

Bhatt's memoir inhabits this double bind in a particularly acute form. On one hand, it is recognisably and specifically Indian. It is embedded in the culture of Bollywood, the social dynamics of a Mumbai celebrity family and the specific ways in which privilege and suffering coexist in a society of extreme inequality. She says,

There is a cultural reverence for fame and celebrity that has insidiously convinced us all that we're not enough the way we are, and when the person in the bedroom next to yours is someone who's wildly famous there is bound to be an extended amount of confusion. (Bhatt 51)

This is Ahmad's inscription of ideology within literary form made flesh. This shows how Bhatt's depression is inseparable from the specific ideological conditions of Bollywood celebrity culture. On the other hand, it aspires to and achieves a universality of emotional and philosophical register that reaches beyond the specifically Indian context. Bhatt is writing about the experience of depression as a human condition. Her philosophical reflections draw on a wide range of Western intellectual traditions including Stoic philosophy and contemporary psychological research. The memoir negotiates this tension between the local and the universal, the specifically Indian and the broadly human. It negotiates through its style, and particularly through its essayistic and philosophical prose register that refuses both the narrowly confessional and the narrowly sociological.

Mental illness in India is shaped by cultural narratives about weakness and the incompatibility of suffering with privilege. Bhatt addresses this stigma directly and repeatedly in the memoir's prose. But she also addresses it formally through the very act of writing and publishing a memoir about depression in English. It is from within a position of Bollywood celebrity that she is performing a cultural intervention that the style of the writing must carry. Bhatt's writerly style is its philosophical composure and its counterpoint between diary rawness and memoir reflection. She navigates between these two risks, claiming the authority to speak about depression without either exposing herself to the stigma's most damaging effects or surrendering the personal and embodied truth of her experience to the abstractions of clinical discourse.

Ahmad's argument about the inscription of literary form within ideology is also relevant to the memoir's most distinctive formal feature. It is the diary entries that precede the chapters. The diary is a form with a complex ideological history in Indian women's writing. Bhatt performs a formal gesture that is also an ideological one by incorporating diary entries into a published memoir. She brings the private into the public and insists on the legitimacy of the unguarded emotional record alongside the composed philosophical reflection. This shows the experience of mental illness is not separable from the public cultural conditions that produce and sustain its stigma.

The tradition of Indian women's life-writing within which Bhatt's memoir situates itself is one long marked by the erasure and concealment that Mukherjee identifies as characteristic of Indian English women's writing. Kamala Das's *My Story* (1976) is the foundational text of this tradition. It opens with a scene of authorial erasure that resonates across decades. Das's poem, read aloud to a distinguished visitor, is attributed to Shirley, the white girl with golden ringlets. While "the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet" (Das 3). The woman writer is present but not named. Her work circulates but her authorship is invisible. This condition of invisibility runs through the tradition, from the figure of Ammalu who is Das's great-great-aunt who wrote poems in secret and whose notebooks were discovered only thirty years after her death to Bhatt's own acknowledgement that writing about depression in India means writing against a culture that prefers its suffering hidden. "Her writings disturbed me," Das says of Ammalu. "I felt that after thirty years she was trying once again to communicate with the world and with me" (Das 17). Bhatt's memoir refuses this thirty-year silence. It communicates now, in the present tense of a woman who will not wait to be discovered posthumously.

Kirkpatrick's narrative framework for understanding mental illness experiences identifies what she calls counterstories. These are narratives that "offer resistance to dominant or master narratives either implicitly or explicitly, attempting to replace an oppressive identity with one that commands respect" (63). Bhatt's memoir is a counterstory in precisely this sense. The dominant cultural narrative of depression in India that it is a weakness, a luxury and unworthy of public acknowledgement is the master narrative against which her writerly style is constructed. Kirkpatrick notes that "illness and oppression both silence a person's voice; it is for this reason that telling one's story can be so empowering" (65), and crucially, that "at any cultural moment, society is ready to hear some stories but not others. However, rights for any group members begin with the narratability of their stories" (65). By publishing her memoir in India in 2019, Bhatt is claiming its narratability at a cultural moment when the Indian public discourse on mental health was only beginning to open. The style of the memoir such as the parenthetical title and the philosophical register is the form that this claim takes. It is a writerly counterstory against a readerly master narrative of silence.

It is this ongoing quality and the insistence on the coexistence of unhappiness and happiness that connects the memoir's formal ideology to the scriptotherapeutic argument of the following section. For if the style of *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* is an ideological intervention in the cultural conditions of contemporary India, it is also and simultaneously a therapeutic one.

IV. Scriptotherapy and the Style of Healing

Suzette Henke's concept of scriptotherapy was developed in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma, Testimony, and Women's Life-Writing* (1998). She defines it as a narrative frame through which traumatic experience is "aesthetically controlled" (26). It is a formal practice of writing that organises the flood of repressed and painful memory into something survivable. Henke cites H.D.'s own description of her writing as words of a spell "that in a sense... keep me alive" (27). It is a formulation that maps onto Bhatt's memoir with striking precision. Bhatt's diary entries, spanning from age thirteen to twenty-eight and including the age twenty-eight entry "I won't do it though. Never. But I want it," are precisely this kind of spell. The writing keeps the writer alive through the moment of crisis. Henke further argues that scriptotherapy is deliberate. It is

a writer “deliberately writing autofiction in the context of scriptotherapy” (39). They choose formal strategies that enact therapeutic recuperation. Bhatt’s professional background as a screenwriter makes this deliberateness credible. Her parenthetical title and her philosophical prose register are carefully constructed formal choices whose therapeutic function is inseparable from their aesthetic one.

This distinction between healing as achievement and healing as process is one of the memoir’s most significant formal and philosophical contributions. The recovery narrative is the dominant form through which mental illness is narrated in both clinical and popular culture. It is structured around achievement. It is a before state of illness and an after state of recovery. This structure is readerly in Barthes’ sense. It delivers a stable and reassuring meaning. It closes down the complexity of the experience into a manageable arc. It positions the reader as the passive recipient of a lesson about suffering and its overcoming. Bhatt’s memoir refuses this structure. Its healing is a practice. It is something that must be done again and again, in the writing of each diary entry and in the ongoing act of finding language for what continues to resist easy expression.

The diary entries are the most visible formal evidence of this scriptotherapeutic practice. Each diary entry is a record of the experiencing self in the moment of crisis. It is raw, unmediated and emotionally unguarded. These entries are presented as evidence of how bad things once were before the recovery was achieved. They are presented as part of the memoir’s present tense. They are presented as the writerly counterpoint to the philosophical prose. They remind the reader at every turn that the experiencing self and the narrating self coexist within the same text just as the unhappiness and the happiness coexist within the same parenthetical title. The diary entries are scriptotherapy in its most immediate and unmediated form. Writing happens in the moment of trauma as a way of surviving the moment rather than narrating it retrospectively.

The relationship between the diary entries and the memoir’s main prose is therefore scriptotherapeutic in a double sense. The diary entries represent the first stage of scriptotherapy. It is the immediate and survival-oriented act of writing through the crisis. The memoir’s reflective prose represents the second stage. It is the retrospective and understanding-oriented act of narrating the crisis from the vantage point of partial recovery. But crucially, Bhatt does not present these two stages as sequential. It is presented as if the diary entries belong to the past and the memoir’s prose to the present. She presents them as simultaneous as the formal enactment of her central argument that depression and its overcoming are coexistences. The scriptotherapy of *I’ve Never Been (Un)Happier* is a continuing process and the memoir’s form is the evidence of its continuity.

The *Chime* framework expanded as Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment was developed by Leamy et al. through a systematic review of 97 studies of personal recovery. It defines recovery as “a deeply personal, unique process of changing one’s attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills and/or roles... a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness” (445). This definition maps precisely onto Bhatt’s memoir as a narrative of living meaningfully alongside depression, of demanding lessons from pain. The *Chime* framework identifies “rebuilding and redefining a positive sense of identity” and “overcoming stigma” as among the most frequently documented recovery processes, present in 57 and 40 of the 87 studies reviewed respectively (448). Bhatt’s

scriptotherapy is her act of writing and publishing a memoir about depression in the specific cultural context of Bollywood India. It is precisely this kind of identity rebuilding and stigma overcoming. It is performed through literary form. Furthermore, Leamy et al.'s subgroup analysis of studies focusing on individuals from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds found a "greater emphasis on spirituality and stigma" and identified "culturally specific facilitating factors and collectivist notions of recovery" as additional dimensions not present in majority-culture recovery studies (445). This finding is directly relevant to Bhatt's memoir where her recovery is shaped by the specific stigma of mental illness in Indian society and the cultural reverence for celebrity that she explicitly names as complicating her relationship with her own suffering. The clinical literature thus confirms what the literary theoretical analysis has argued. Bhatt's recovery is culturally specific and formally enacted through the very act of writing that her memoir performs.

Henke's framework also illuminates the memoir's philosophical register. It is the essayistic and reflective prose that distinguishes it from more straightforwardly confessional life-writing. For Henke, scriptotherapy works through the construction of meaning. It works through the interpretive acts by which the writer organises suffering into a framework that makes it comprehensible and survivable. Bhatt's philosophical reflections and her engagements with Stoic philosophy and contemporary psychological research are scriptotherapeutic in this sense. They are functional acts of meaning-making and the specific ways in which Bhatt constructs the interpretive framework through which her experience of depression becomes writable. The philosophy is the therapy. The style is the healing.

This is perhaps most visible in Bhatt's treatment of the relationship between depression and identity. It is one of the memoir's most recurring and most carefully developed philosophical preoccupations. Depression is not something that happens to a self that exists independently of it. It is a condition that shapes and reshapes the self from within. It inflects perception, memory and self-understanding in ways that make it impossible to say with confidence where the depression ends and the self begins. This is a philosophically sophisticated claim. It is one that the memoir's style enacts as well as states. The parenthetical *un* of the title is a formal paradox about the self, about the impossibility of a stable and unparenthetical identity when one lives with depression. The self of Bhatt's memoir is always parenthetical. It is always simultaneously the self that depression has made and the self that exists alongside and despite it, always both unhappier and happier. It always refuses the closure of a single and unbracketed identity.

The clinical research on mental health recovery narratives provides important empirical grounding for this literary theoretical argument. Llewellyn-Beardsley et al. define mental health recovery narratives as "first-person lived experience accounts of recovery from mental health problems. This includes elements of both adversity/struggle and of self-defined strengths, successes or survival" (2019, 5). By this definition, Bhatt's memoir is a recovery narrative. But it deploys those elements in formally unconventional ways that the clinical literature itself identifies as both legitimate and underrepresented. The same authors warn that approaches to recovery narratives risk inadvertently constraining "the kinds of story that individuals feel they can tell within these contexts," and may "needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model" (2019, 4). Bhatt's writerly style such as its parenthetical title and its refusal of the upward trajectory is precisely the kind of narrative that resists this constraining template. The

2020 refinement of this framework further identifies what it calls “compulsory positivity” as a characteristic failure mode of dominant recovery narratives. It is a generic requirement for emotional uplift that, as the research shows, can “perversely make things worse” for recipients who do not recognise their own experience in the upward trajectory the dominant form demands (Llewellyn-Beardsley et al. 2020, 304). Crucially, the clinical literature itself confirms that “a core domain of recovery is its non-linearity” (Llewellyn-Beardsley et al. 2019, 20). This is a finding that validates Bhatt’s formal insistence that healing is process, ongoing, and always parenthetical.

Henke’s scriptotherapy reveals the memoir’s deepest formal and philosophical claim. It is the act of writing. It is the act of finding style for the parenthetical self, of constructing the writerly paradoxes and formal instabilities that this paper has been analysing. She writes her recovery into existence. The style of the writing is the formal enactment of everything that recovery means. It is the ongoing and formally self-conscious practice of living with the brackets,

Depression has taken a lot from me and it has also given me a lot, but only because I eventually demanded it. I demanded my lessons and I took them head on. ‘You must not allow your pain to be wasted, Shaheen,’ my father once said to me. I chant that quietly to myself – ‘My pain must not be wasted,’ I say – and I try to learn, I try to do. I grieve and cry and hurt but I also take my medication and go to therapy. I watch my soul being bent and twisted into painful, unnatural shapes and then I marvel at how I’ve never seen it from those angles before. (Bhatt 60)

This is scriptotherapy at its most explicit. The writing is the demanding, the insisting and the refusing to waste the pain. The final image that is watching the soul from angles never seen before shows how writing produces new self-knowledge. It is this practice its formal dimensions and its significance for the contemporary landscape of Indian literary studies that the conclusion draws together and situates within the broader critical conversation that this paper has been contributing to.

V. Conclusion

Shaheen Bhatt begins *I’ve Never Been (Un)Happier* with a typographical gesture. The parenthetical *un* is suspended between brackets, and refuses the closure of a single stable declaration. This paper has argued that this proposition governs the memoir at every level from the counterpoint between diary entries and reflective prose to the philosophical register of the writing itself. Reading it through the theoretical frameworks of Barthes, Ahmad, Mukherjee, and Henke reveals a text of considerably greater formal sophistication and ideological complexity than its reception as a mental health memoir has yet acknowledged. Bhatt’s father’s dialogue through the very end is the philosophical core of the memoir,

You’re exhausted because you’re always pretending to be something you’re not. You’re constantly trying to reach this non-existent, ideal state of emotional well-being. It’s not real. You’re being set up to fail... Take off the mask. You aren’t happy? Fine, you aren’t happy. One day you will be. And then you’ll be sad again. Accept that and stop wasting your energy chasing something that doesn’t exist. You can’t spend your life feeling bad about feeling bad. (Bhatt 55)

This is the fullest articulation of the post-melancholic position the paper argues Bhatt occupies. The father's words are the memoir's counter-text to the dominant recovery narrative's compulsory positivity. The paper's argument has proceeded in three movements corresponding to the three theoretical frameworks it has applied to the memoir.

The first movement established the memoir's writerly character through Barthes. It establishes its resistance to the stable and unequivocal meanings that the readerly recovery narrative typically delivers. The parenthetical title is writerly in Barthes' precise sense. The diary entries and the memoir's reflective prose create a writerly counterpoint. It creates a formal instability that enacts the memoir's central argument that depression and its overcoming are coexistences. The writerly form is an epistemological claim. The experience of mental illness cannot be rendered in readerly language without falsifying it.

The second movement situates this writerly form within the ideological conditions of contemporary Indian literary culture through Ahmad and Mukherjee. Ahmad insists that literary forms are always inscribed within histories of ideology. It illuminates the specific resistances that Bhatt's stylistic choices perform. Mukherjee's framework illuminated the memoir's negotiation of the double bind of Indian English writing. Its simultaneous embeddedness in the specific cultural conditions of contemporary India and its aspiration to the universality of philosophical reflection transcends those conditions. The diary entries and their formal gesture of bringing the private into the public were read as an ideological act. It is the insistence that the personal experience of depression is not separable from the cultural conditions that produce and sustain its stigma.

The third movement argued that Bhatt's style is a therapeutic intervention through Henke. The writing enacts the recovery it narrates. The distinction between healing as achievement and healing as process emerged as the memoir's most significant formal and philosophical contribution to the genre of the depression memoir. Bhatt's scriptotherapy is a continuing process, formally enacted in the coexistence of diary rawness and memoir composure. It exposes experiential immediacy and retrospective reflection, unhappiness and happiness within the same parenthetical title. The philosophical prose was read as functional meaning-making. Scriptotherapy is most intellectually ambitious and through the construction of an interpretive framework, depression becomes writable. The style is the healing and the parenthetical self of the title is the formal signature of a recovery that refuses to pretend it is finished.

These three movements together form a memoir that is a contribution to contemporary Indian literary culture. The paper seeks to examine how Indian literary production is being reshaped by contemporary aesthetic and theoretical developments. *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* is precisely such a voice and precisely such a style. It is genuinely new in the context of Indian English women's life-writing. It does so from within a position of Bollywood celebrity and the specific stigma of mental illness in contemporary India. This gives its formal interventions particular ideological weight and cultural significance.

It also invokes Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that "the present is not a homogeneous time but one that is shot through with multiple pasts and futures." Bhatt's memoir is a text shot through with multiple temporalities such as the past of the diary entries, the present of the

reflective prose, the future of the recovery that is always still in process. To read it as a contribution to contemporary Indian literary studies is to recognise that the contemporary moment in Indian writing is a moment of new formal possibilities. These new ways hold the brackets open and insists that the most honest thing a writer can do is to place the *un* between brackets and let it stay there.

Bhatt's parenthetical *un* is the most contemporary of formal gestures. It is a gesture that belongs to a moment in Indian literary culture when the discourse of mental health is finally, beginning to find public language. It holds its contradictions open and refuses the closure of either pure happiness or pure unhappiness and insists on the coexistence of both. *I've Never Been (Un)Happier* is the formal enactment of that insistence. It is a work of stylistic originality and ideological seriousness that the critical conversation on contemporary Indian literary studies urgently needs to acknowledge.

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Translation as Intellectual and Cultural Mediation in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century Khasi Hills

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Abstract

The Khasis are one of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. The Khasi society prior to the colonial encounter was an oral society. They recorded events and captured the essence of their ideas by weaving them into stories. This gradually changed with the arrival of the missionaries in the Khasi hills. The introduction of the Roman script gave rise to a plethora of translated texts both vernacular and Christian in nature. Translation played a crucial role in the construction of public opinion and facilitation of cross cultural communication. The aim of this paper is to examine the pivotal role of translation as a tool of intellectual and cultural mediation in the Khasi Hills, analyzing how it shaped local consciousness and literary production during the late 19th to the early 20th century. By incorporating an array of theoretical perspectives from Itamar Even Zohar, Susan Bassnett, Tejaswini Niranjana, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha this paper will also focus on the politics of translation in the late 19th and early 20th century Khasi hills.

Keywords: *Translation, Colonialism, Khasi Culture, Cultural Mediation, Indian Literature*

The Khasi Hills, situated within the Northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, encompass a geographical expanse of 22,547 square kilometers and serve as the ancestral homeland of the Khasi people, one of Meghalaya's three principal tribal groups. The Khasis call themselves *Hynñiewtrep* as they believe that their ancestors were the seven clans or *Hynñiewtrep* who came down from heaven to reside on this earth. The term Khasi has a particular significance as 'Kha' means born of and 'Si' refers to an ancient mother and therefore Khasi means born of a mother (Bareh 10). Prior to the mid-19th century, Khasi cultural transmission relied predominantly on oral tradition. The arrival of Thomas Jones, a Welsh missionary, and the subsequent adoption of the Roman script in 1841, are conventionally recognized as pivotal events in the genesis of written Khasi literature. However, scholarly discourse acknowledges alternative perspectives, suggesting the potential existence of a pre-1841 Khasi script, thereby challenging the singular attribution of literary origins to the Roman script's introduction.

The formal adoption and implementation of the Roman script enabled the dissemination of literary texts throughout the Khasi hills. The early publications after this adoption of the Roman script were mainly translations from the Bible and other Christian writings which were predominantly projects undertaken by the missionaries. Translation has always played an important role in the building of the British Empire across its global colonies. This phenomenon was also mirrored in the Khasi Hills. Tejaswini Niranjana in her article "Translation, colonialism and the Rise of English" argues that translation participated in the fixing of colonized cultures,

making them seem static and unchanging (Niranjana 773). Employed in the different kinds of discourses like missionary writing, historiography or education it also produced strategies of containment by employing certain modes of representing the other (773). This framework can also be observed in the missionary translations of the late nineteenth century Khasi hills. The central argument of this paper is that translation played a crucial role in the construction of public opinion and facilitation of cross cultural communication. It aims to look at the role of translation as a tool of intellectual and cultural mediation in the Khasi Hills. This paper is divided into three sections to elucidate the argument: Translation and Education, Translation and Religion, Translation and Identity.

Translation and Education

As noted earlier, the transition from an exclusively oral tradition to a written literary corpus among the Khasi people commenced in 1841 with the introduction of the Roman script. The establishment of a printing press in Sohra by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission in 1861 further catalyzed this literary development, facilitating the production of both mission-related and governmental publications. While some of these publications were secular in nature others had mostly Christian values embedded in them. One of the leading missionary writers of the time was John Roberts. His books titled *Khasi Third Reader* (1891¹) and *Khasi Fourth Reader* (1895²) included translated excerpts from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Longfellow's poem "A Psalm of Life", Joseph Addison's "A Vision of Mirza". These narratives aimed to impart moral instruction to the Khasi children. By featuring Biblical characters like Moses, Adam and Abraham, Roberts wanted to instil in them theological concepts such as sin, heaven and salvation. Roberts believed in the missionary impulse therefore most of his books were included in the syllabus of the missionary schools. The inclusion of these books into the curriculum disturbed the Khasis. However, the precipitating factor that led to the intellectual strain between the Khasis and the missionaries was Dr Roberts speech at Oswestry (Wales) where he said (as printed in Britain's Anglo-Indian 50 years report of 1902), "We make no distinction between the day school and the Sunday school; the only difference is, seeing that our education is that of the nature I have pointed out, that we have a Sunday school, not on one day, but on seven days of the week" ("Skul ha" 3). This clearly showed the underlying principles of the missionaries who were mostly driven by the missionary impulse or the need to convert the natives. It was this desire for proselytization that led to the attempts of translating the Bible into Khasi language. These divergent perspectives led to a debate between the missionary educators and the Khasi intelligentsia. The missionaries justified the inclusion of these translated Christian texts citing their ubiquity while the Khasi intelligentsia advocated for Khasi-authored texts to promote indigenous cultural values among students thereby challenging the dominance of foreign cultural content ("Skul ha" 3).

These contrasting viewpoints led to the rise of many Khasi- authored texts in the Khasi hills. Translation became a site of negotiation and resistance for the Khasis (Bassnett and Trivedi 3). Along with various missionary activities in the late nineteenth century, this period also saw the emergence of the Khasi intelligentsia. The establishment of the Ri Khasi Printing press by Jeebon Roy in 1896 facilitated the printing of Khasi books and pamphlets that were secular in nature.

¹This book is probably written before 1895/1896 even though the exact year is not known.

² There is uncertainty in the year of publication of this book as some writers are of the opinion that it was written in 1896 and not 1895

Jeebon Roy, a learned Khasi writer, produced numerous translations and contributed to the documentation of Khasi religion. His notable works include *Ka Kitab Chaitanya* (1900), *Buddha Deb Charitra* (1901), and the *Hitupodesa* series (1899). Roy was a central figure in the Khasi cultural and religious revival, advocating for the preservation of indigenous traditions, as seen in *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1897). He also emphasized strengthening Khasi connections with the broader Indian community. The late nineteenth century witnessed a surge in publications by Khasi intellectuals, shifting the focus from foreign cultural content in missionary texts to indigenous Khasi values. Works like Jeebon Roy's *Ka Kot Pule Khasi* (1899), S.M. Amjad Ali's *Ka Myntoi* (1888), and Radhon Singh Berry's *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen I and II* (1902-1903) served to educate Khasi children about their own culture. These books bridged the gap between oral and written Khasi traditions, integrating informal and formal learning. Radhon Singh Berry's works, presented in oral forms, effectively combined indigenous and Western educational practices, serving as repositories of Khasi cultural knowledge.

Translation and Religion

The publications of the late nineteenth century also illuminated the divergent religious perspectives in the Khasi hills. While the Khasi people possessed an indigenous religious framework, colonizers and missionaries operated with contrasting, externally constructed definitions of 'religion.' P. R. T. Gurdon's *The Khasis* (1907), authored by a British administrator serving as Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam, illustrates this divergence. Gurdon described the religion of the Khasis as animism or evil worship. According to him, the Khasis did not believe in the concept of heaven or hell neither did they believe in punishment after death. Gurdon, in the preface, declares his intent to offer a systematic description of the Khasi people, covering their cultural practices, ethnological connections, legal systems, religious beliefs, folklore, origin stories, and language (Gurdon V). While the work provides significant anthropological and statistical information, the manner in which the Khasi people are presented warrants critical scrutiny.

Dr. John Roberts, a missionary, and Miss Williams, a church worker, contributed to the colonial construction of Khasi religious identity. In a sermon delivered at Oswestry, Wales, Dr. Roberts characterized the Khasis as lacking a developed conscience and possessing an impaired capacity for moral discernment. Similarly, Miss Williams employed the term 'heathen society' to critique Khasi social structures. Dr. Roberts' speech, which critiqued Khasi culture, provoked strong reactions from the Khasi intelligentsia. In response, they utilized the monthly newspapers *U Khasi Mynta* and *U Nongphira* to publish critical rebuttals, challenging Dr. Roberts' perceived disregard for Khasi cultural practices and beliefs.

The Khasi intelligentsia understood Dr. Roberts' and Miss Williams' portrayal as a product of Eurocentric perspectives. Their 'tribal' categorization reflects typical self-conscious missionary narratives, which positioned Europeans and natives along moral and colonial hierarchies. The emphasis on 'conscience' reveals a moralistic worldview. The Khasis need for constant rebuttal is indicative of colonial representational burdens. The stereotypical gaze of Dr. Roberts and Miss Williams, which suggested a Khasi 'lack,' reinforced the 'savagery-civilization' dichotomy. One of the Khasi writers who responded and challenged this Eurocentric view was Jeebon Roy. He wrote the book titled *Ka Kitab Ba Pynshynna Shaphang U Wei U Blei* (1900) for the Khasis, particularly members of the Seng Khasi, an organization dedicated to the preservation of the

indigenous Khasi religion. In his book, Roy argued that religious understanding and love for the creator are essential for spiritual development within the Khasi people. Jeebon Roy also authored *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1897), a work that elucidates the fundamental tenets of the Khasi religion. In addition to Roy's publications, numerous articles concerning Khasi religious practices were disseminated through the monthly newspapers *U Khasi Mynta* and *U Nongphira*. The publication of these religious articles contributed to the documentation of both Khasi religious practices and the broader Khasi culture.

Translation and Identity

Gurdon's text provides not only a description of Khasi religion but also a portrayal of their physical characteristics and social customs. A prominent feature of his narrative is an emphasis on cleanliness (Gurdon 6). He draws a stark contrast between converted Khasis, whom he characterizes as clean, and those who maintained indigenous practices. He further posits that converted women displayed improved attire and demeanor, while Christian villages exhibited superior housing (6). This delineation underscores Gurdon's role in establishing a social hierarchy based on religious conversion. J.B. Shadwell, in his note on the Khasis titled "The Inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1871" described the Khasis as a group of people who were filthy. According to him, they hardly washed themselves and were content with only a pair of clothing which they wore for an infinite number of times. He was also of the opinion that the Khasis liked drinking, were treacherous, revengeful and suspicious all the time. Dr. Roberts' statement, claiming the Khasis lacked a conscience, illustrates the colonial practice of dehumanizing the native people, effectively equating them with brutes and savages.

This discussion demonstrates a consistent objectification of the Khasis by colonial and missionary forces. This 'dehumanization' (Smith 39) forced the Khasis to constantly redefine their humanity against the implication of 'savagery' (Smith 25). Gurdon's perspective exemplifies Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, wherein the West justified its colonial expansion by asserting the need to 'civilize' the East, masking its imperial ambitions. Gurdon's and Miss Williams' viewpoints encapsulate the prevailing colonial ideology, which posited a hierarchical and supremacist relationship between colonizer and colonized (Kortright 4). This colonial conception of identity, rooted in the colonizer's homeland model, as demonstrated by Gurdon's administrative actions, constructs a binary opposition between the metropole and the Khasi Hills (Memmi 104). This extends beyond physical landscapes to encompass the imposition of English morals, customs, and lifestyles. Consequently, the colonized Khasis are depicted as 'wretched souls,' subject to a systemic devaluation that permeates all aspects of their existence (Memmi 111). Anthony P. Cohen (1993) identifies British cultural blindness, arguing that ignorance of culture is ignorance of integrity (199, 205). Gurdon's portrayal of Khasi culture exemplifies this prejudice. This aligns with the colonial refusal to acknowledge the colonized, as discussed by Albert Memmi, who highlights the denial of indigenous traditions and the colonizer's disavowal of their social integration.

Dr. Roberts' statements stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of the differing conceptions of God between Christianity and Khasi religion, a blindness shared by colonizers. Memmi argues that colonizers sought to rapidly transform the colonized, rejecting their existing cultures. This is evident in missionary-Khasi relations. Dr. Roberts' statements, portraying the Khasis as backward and lacking conscience, justified missionary intervention. Both the British

colonizers and missionaries failed to understand Khasi religion and culture, imposing Western religious paradigms. Christianity served as the norm, justifying a 'civilizing mission.' Gurdon's work, despite anthropological claims, reveals ethnocentric bias. Both Gurdon and Dr. Roberts defined Khasi religion through a Western lens, creating a binary between Christianity and indigenous practices. Drawing on Said, the colonizers stereotyped the Khasis, standardizing culture. Dr. Roberts' discourse exemplifies this superiority. As the Comaroffs (2009) argue, this involved colonizing consciousness, creating a boundary between colonizer and colonized.

The Khasis hence negotiated their identity through counter-writings, asserting their humanity against these colonial narratives. A comprehensive understanding of Khasi culture and Khasi identity necessitates an examination of its three foundational principles: *Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei* (knowledge of man and God), *Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha* (knowledge of one's kinsmen), and *Ka Kamai ia ka hok* (earning righteousness on earth). Amjad Ali's *Ka Myntoi* (1888) features poetry on life, knowledge, and truth, including works dedicated to Khasi dance festivals and the Khasi people. The poem "Synshar 'Riw Khasi'" is significant for its call to courage and the pursuit of knowledge as essential for a modern society. Moreover, it addresses socio-political concerns, urging the Khasis to liberate themselves from a form of oppression through divine assistance, knowledge, and education. The monthly Khasi newspapers, Jeebon Roy's texts along with Radhon Singh Berry's *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen I* (1902) and *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen II* (1903) collectively address themes of Khasi identity and belief systems.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrates the dual nature of translation as a tool of colonial power and a catalyst for indigenous cultural expression. While translation was employed to spread colonial ideology, manipulate information, and suppress local languages and cultures, it also facilitated the documentation and reclamation of Khasi cultural heritage. The late nineteenth-century Khasi Hills witnessed a significant power shift in literary production, revealing the intricate politics of translation. The missionaries' monopolization of biblical translations fostered discontent among the Khasis, whose subsequent counter-narratives and cultural documentation enriched Khasi literature. Thus, translation profoundly shaped the political, religious, and cultural narratives of the Khasi people.

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Folk Culture, Heritage and Community in Patachitra Village Naya

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Abstract

This paper is all about the Bengali folk community, culture, and heritage of Naya in Paschim Medinipur. The village offers the folk culture in the forms of visual painting and oral singing. This paper aims at projecting how the *patua* preserve the document of Bengali culture, language and identity. There are paintings and singing about the indigenous Bengali community also. The *patuas* of Naya with the help of the scroll paintings and oral songs preserve the rich texts of Bengali literature, history and culture. We propose to examine how through this profession an entire community of artisans gains visibility, economic stability and sustainability. The folk practice of Naya attains the different types of Sustainability Goals also. To preserve the intangible folktales of the past the Bengali artists use both the oral and visual methods. I propose to explore how the stories take one to the mythical world of *Manasamangal*, *Radha-Krishna*, *Rasleela* as well as to the Bengali rituals and philosophy related to love, marriage, courtship etc. The indigenous communities establish their identity by expressing themselves through the paintings and songs of *Patachitra*. I examine how *Patachitra* craft of Naya paves the way for presenting the communal identity to the global stage.

Keywords: folk, culture, Heritage, community, indigenous

To explore Naya is to excavate the history of a community and to examine the potential of a community through the rich cultural *patua* craft. *Patachitra gram* of Naya in Paschim Medinipur is unique in its nature of celebrating folk culture, community, heritage and tradition. The community of Naya's *Patachitra Gram* in a form of engagement, participation and co-operation create, re-create and express the beauty of incredible storytelling *patua* culture of Bengal. The inimitable folklores of *Patachitra gram* become the voice of Bengal's art and aesthetics. The community of Naya helps the *Patachitra* craft of Bengal gain a global status by reaching and attracting customers from all over the world. The community of Naya can become tomorrow's prominent cultural hub for cultural exploration with a post-national appeal. The oral storytellers celebrate their national, ethnic, cultural, regional, linguistic, economic, mercantile identity in the post-national scenario of plurality and globalization. Naya's *patuas* restore and imprison the indigenous community woven in the artifacts through their intense passion for life and vibes for positivity. Naya's community can create a new history of Bengal by transporting art across borders. Naya's cultural heritage is a journey of the border-crosser *patua* community. They have every possibility to delimit the rural borders of Naya to receive an

international recognition and standard by reaching the global market. The pictures of the tribal community depicted on potteries, cloth, garments remind one of Keats's "Grecian Urn."

The *patua* community of Naya of West Midnapore stands for the inimitable, incredible folkloric identity of Bengal. Pingla- *Patuas* keep up the tradition of unique storytelling and painting for Generations after generations. The community live through their oral tales. Decades ago when radio, television were not invented, the *patuas* used to sing songs and tell stories for "madhukari" while they described their paintings on scrolls of clothes. The age-old profession of the soulful artists filled in the bower of Bengal's culture. The *patuas* of Naya become synonymous and identical with Bengal's folk identity. The folk rhythm of these innocent community remains an unparalleled as well as unforgettable experience for all. The unfathomable *patua* -self becomes their very essence and identity. That's why all of them are titled as "Chitrakar". Let us explore the intangible heritage world of Khandu Chatrakar, Bapi Chatrakar, Tagar Chirtarakar, Rabeya Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar, Ahed Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar and many more. The very vibes of the Adibasi, tribal culture in the artifacts of the Naya *Patuas* make Bengal pulsating, animating with all the colours of aesthetics; Naya is such a place where the folk community allures you to the densely decorated and passionately painted world of myths and legends of Tusu, Marang Guru, Manasa, Chandi, Laxmi, Behula and many more. Here the community invites to explore the collective lives of the *santals*, tribals.

The practice of scroll painting and oral storytelling unfolds the tale of empowerment. It excavates the history of a community and examines the potential of a community. The traditional craft of *patachitra* celebrates folk culture, community and heritage of incredible storytelling *patua* culture. It represents Bengal's art and aesthetics. It transports art to outside world. Many *patuas* mainly women cross borders to participate in art exhibition organized in other countries. There are several outcomes of community engagement in *Patachitra Craft*. i) Arts Festival and Art market (Pato Maya) held in winter in *Patachitra* village help the artistes in getting into contact with so many art-lovers from all over the state. They exhibit their scroll painting and other artifacts there. Tristi Brownett says "Festivals also stimulate self-efficacy, which facilitates participation, an emotional response, and may lead to a sense of personal wellbeing, with a living legacy for the community" (1). Richard Crane Ings Nikki and Cameron Marsaili (2012), "Be Creative Be Well: Arts, Wellbeing and Local Communities - An Evaluation", say "Arts festival participation can stimulate a sense of ability to succeed and be in control, themed here as 'self-efficacy' (Quoted from Brownett). ii) The world of *Patachitra* village is all about participation, involvement and engagement into folk community of Naya. iii) This practice is all about the wellbeing and sustainability of the folk community. This achieves the goals of social, economic, environmental sustainability. The men and the women are equally engaged in economic advancement here. They increase the social capital also. In *Patachitra* village some folk artists are Muslim by religion, but they paint and sing from the Hindu myths, culture, rituals, festivals without hesitation. They celebrate the values of humanity there. They are the representatives of humanity at large.

Naya in the district of West Midnapore of West Bengal is all about culture, colour, stories, heritage, folktales, folk painting, resilience and dedication to art. Naya's *patua* community unfolds the Indigenous Bengali culture with all its beauty in the *patachitras* and other art objects. In my research proposal I have emphasized on Naya's *patuas* who with their impeccable artistic sense are trying to overcome all socio-economic obstacles in their life.

Practising folk art, preserving heritage, building up an economically sustainable society, protecting environment and elevating the legacy of Bengal's culture remain their sole aim. I intend to focus on the fact that no matter how ordinary, simple they are, they sustain Bengal culturally and they can turn Naya into an internationally recognized centre of intangible heritage. I intend to show how the border-crosser women artists of Naya bear the legacy of Bengali culture to the European and other first world countries. I have examined how their folk art of storytelling and painting are getting appreciated globally. Through this research, I send my plea to the state and Central governments also to take more initiatives to attract more tourists and art lovers from all over the world. Naya's *chitrakars* deserve to be appreciated for their capability to raise art to a new status. My research will be all about their active roles in leading and sustaining the society and community. Their participation, engagement and collaboration in the preservation of Bengali folk culture which is both oral and visual can turn Naya into an international cultural trade hub. For this purpose they require to be more and more showcased. National and global exposures will be instrumental in spreading this legacy of intangible heritage. The interaction and collaboration between the local and the global will be very vital in the preservation of culture and heritage. I examine how *Patachitra* craft of Naya paves the way for *patuas'* identity formation through preservation of heritage and displaying that to the borderless world. The artists here can be the flagbearers of the postnational approach to art, humanism, and society.

I have gone through Keya Mandal's article titled "Naya-A Village of Scroll Painters: Some Lights on Their Economic Development" in *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* in 2017. The writer has termed the *patuas* as "professional artists" than mere "craftsmen". They belong to the marginalized and economically challenged group. In the postcolonial period the Government of India has tried to uplift the condition of the *patuas* through different types of projects. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna and Self Help Groups are formed to encourage them and improve their socio-economic condition. The author feels that in the face of rapid commercialization, this *patua* art is being endangered. We need to protect this thousand year old art of Naya. The writer has mentioned the names of notable male *patuas* like Dukhushyam Chitrakar, Shyamsundar Chitrakar Manu Chitrakar, Gurupada Chitrakar, Sambhu Chitrakar who have carried the legacy of art to India and abroad. She mentions that *Patua Mahila Unnayan Samity* formed in 1998 became very popular with Swarna Chitrakar, Rani Chitrakar, Ayesha Chitrakar, Yumuna Chitrakar, Moyna Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar, Manimala Chitrakar, Rubela Chitrakar, Guljan Chitrakar, Snehalata Chitrakar, Meena Chitrakar, Joba Chitrakar, Rukmini Chitrakar and Putul Chitrakar. Among these women artists cum performing artistes Swarna Chitrakar and Rani Chitrakar attained national and international acclaim. The author focuses on the period before the formation of Self Help Groups also when the artists used to sing their *pater gaan* from door to door and collected rice or paddy in return. She observes, As their economic condition was not healthy the *patua* community often turned to other occupations like snake charming, mat-making, rickshaw pulling, harvesting etc. She refers to Gurusaday Dutta's poem entitled "Patua" that was published from Calcutta University Press in 1939. In this poem Gurusaday Dutta expressed his concern over the poverty of the *patua* community, "Patuas people call them, and their calling is the painters' art. Lean are their half-starved bodies, and half-tumbled are their huts. Poorer than e'en their poorest neighbours is their lot" (1-3) (quoted from Mandal). Keya Mandal feels the urgency to protect this inherited tradition of art and culture in an engaging way.

In the article titled “The Chitrakars in Naya: Emotion and the Ways of Remembrance” (2018) in *Journal of the International Oral History Association* the writer Reeti Basu examines memory, oral history, lineage of the *patua* community of Naya. The first section of the article titled “Space, time and authority” is all about the settlement of the community in Naya and the second part titled “Lineage, time and identity” is preoccupied with the attainment of the surname “Chitrakar” by the *patuas*. The author shows how the *patuas* have reconstructed their past through memory. She documents the experiences of Dukhusyam Chitrakar, one of the oldest *patuas* of the village. She notices how some other veteran artists like Nanigopal Chitrakar, Ananda Chitrakar, Meena Chitrakar also claim that they came to Naya first during 1950s- 1960s. According to her, “Other sorts of the accounts hold that the Chitrakars had their roots in a primitive age, when people were unable to speak and they used painting as a means of communication. It was much before human beings became civilized” (12).

All the previous articles uphold the creative potential of Naya. Still what I feel to be lacking is the sufficient focus on the women power in transforming a rural village into an advanced cultural centre of heritage preservation. The women of Naya are capable of earning International recognition for *patua* art and craft. The previous researchers have not unearthed the fact that the local women-artists can build a sustainable, resilient society which is one of the major aims of *Viksit Bharat* also. *Viksit Bharat* has a special focus on the power of the women and their capabilities of leading a society intellectually, culturally and economically. There is no such special and sufficient focus exclusively on the sector of the women *patuas* in Naya who bear the cultural and linguistic roots of a civilization in them. The women artists have engaged themselves in portrayal and singing of the colonial past of the Indigo movement as well as the latest Covid affected world. The scholars have not examined the significant role of Naya’s women in documenting social reality. Since time immemorial the women have been the associates and helpers of running their family, forming a sustainable society and developing as well as sustaining a country like Bharat along with the other male members in their community. The rural women with the little scope of exposure have been most modern in their outlook. There are some brilliant veteran female painters cum artistes in Naya whose stories are less explored. Naya is outstanding with its extraordinary women *patuas* who can be the national and international cultural icons and ambassadors. Naya can be a centre of creative excellence with the women who have overcome all hurdles with their determined creative spirit. What I feel necessary is to showcase them, share their stories from the perspective of women. Naya is rich in artists like swarna Chitrkar who have travelled, China, England, France, Germany, Sweden Australia, and the United States, Rani Chitrakar a much travelled artist, Tagar Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Sabek Chitrakar, Sonali Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar and many more. The present generation of women *patuas* need to be explored to understand the rich lineage and hereditary and intergenerational transmission of the craft. Through my research I propose to promote the art of the rural folk women also in the urban setting to help them step out of their rural and local limits. I request for more and more initiatives from the Government to showcase and project these highly talented and creative women artists in the international space. In order to project Bharat globally, Governments should rely on the capabilities of the local women *patuas*. I propose to analyse their experience and perspectives through the intersectional theoretical issues of gender, cultural identity, folk art, sustainability and wellbeing which I feel were not done aptly before. In this age of artificial intelligence when Ghibli art moves people we need to get back to the folk art originating with human touch and human voice. In order to gain rich, experience based, contextual experience of women artists I need to conduct an in-depth, theory-

based research on the said topic. The research is qualitative and ethnographic by nature. Field Study is of immense importance here as I need to collect their experiences. It is of utmost importance to unfurl the stories of these exceptionally creative though economically backward women artists to understand their perspective and their bold steps to empower society. No research article has theoretically analysed them in a broader, wider space.

My research is important for multiple reasons. The crucial issues of Indigenous culture, folk art, heritage, decolonization of art, sustainability, language, cross-border engagement, environmentalism are addressed by the *chitrakars* through their unique storytelling art. It showcases *patua* community and their capability in the dynamic development and evolution of a society. The local artists of grassroot levels are trying to uphold the cultural assets of our nation to a wider world. These adorable *patuas* can be the befitting representatives of the *Viksit Bharat*. Their absolutely artistic perception will usher in a new age of progress and prosperity in India. Though they are underrepresented, they will break through all challenges with their indomitable spirit of struggle. Their life stories will inspire innumerable ordinary artists to be economically and emotionally self-dependent. The gender issue in the preservation of art and heritage is prioritized in my issue. The assertion of womanhood will play the key role in the formation of *Viksit Bharat*. The dedicated women artists of Naya set the perfect examples of work-life balance. Indian civilization has always emphasized on the preservation of nature. The women artists celebrate their colourful world of art with the help of homemade colours. Their unparalleled artistic, aesthetic and ethical sense prevent them from using any kind of chemicals in their *Patachitras*. They weave their colourful oral stories with the ethics of preserving indigenous Bengali culture. The warmth of mirth and merrymaking of the *Adivasis* are never missing in their *patua*. My research shows how they are restoring indigenous culture in the *patachitras* to reclaim Indian tradition and decolonize art and heritage from the foreign dominance. My research will explore the re-reconstruction of indigenous identity through the folk artists of Naya and formation of self-sufficient marginalized women's identity also. This heritage of Naya not only unfolds the cultural history of the indigenous community but also the very beliefs, values, ethics and experiences of the *patua* women also. The *patachitra* craft stands for their rootedness, belongingness, and financial and cultural sufficiency. Even in the age of artificial intelligence when Ghibli art has a tremendous rate of followers, we do feel the need of human painters pulsating with true emotion, true feelings and creating lives on the canvas. In the age of rapid globalization, the *patuas* of Naya need to be more and more showcased globally to open up new avenues of international trade market and tourism. During my survey in Naya I met such gifted *patuas* who despite the traditional roles of a woman, have surprised the world with their art. This research emphasizes the necessity of giving focus on the astounding art of painting and storytelling of the women of Naya. They need to be explored to re-construct India's cultural identity also. Through my research I share their stories with the borderless world. We should take every effort to revive our indigenous past, heritage nurtured by *patuas* of Naya lest it gets marginalized.

The themes of folk songs and painting are quite fascinating. Each painting has a story in it. The marriage of the fish, the marriage of birds, *Manasamangal*, *Ramer Banabas*, *Krishnaleela*, *Chandimangal*, *Tusu*, *Poush-Parban*, *Nabanna* all bear the documents of Bengali culture and community in them. The very painting of *Chaksudan* is all about the indigenous belief where the family of a deceased pays the artist to give the eyes to dead in order to travel peacefully in after

life. The portrait of the dead one remains without eyeballs first. After *Chaksudan* ritual it gains sight.



Figure 1 Chaksudan: tribal ritual

During *Nabanna*, the indigenous community used to store the corns to their granary. They used to engage in merrymaking and rejoicing in time of their affluence. In the picture below one can identify the indigenous community in the mood of dancing beside the granary. In the first picture we can see the tribals are busy in bearing the bridegroom in a palanquin to their home. This is the celebration of marriage. The third and the fourth patachitras also are all about their engagements into festivals and merrymaking.

The *patua* community of Naya of West Midnapore stands for the inimitable, incredible folkloric identity of Bengal. Pingla- *Patuas* keep up the tradition of unique storytelling and painting for Generations after generations. The community live through their oral tales. Decades ago when radio, television were not invented, the *patuas* used to sing songs and tell stories for “madhukari” while they described their paintings on scrolls of clothes. The age-old profession of the soulful artists filled in the bower of Bengal’s culture. The *patuas* of Naya become synonymous and identical with Bengal’s folk identity. The folk rhythm of these innocent community remains an unparalleled as well as unforgettable experience for all. The unfathomable *patua* -self becomes their very essence and identity. That’s why all of them are titled as “Chitrakar”. Let us explore the intangible heritage world of Khandu Chatrakar, Bapi Chatrakar, Tagar Chirtarakar, Rabeya Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar, Ahed Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar and many more. The very vibes of the Adibasi, tribal culture in the artifacts of the Naya *Patuas* make Bengal pulsating, animating with all the colours of aesthetics. There are 155 families in *Patachitra gram* of Naya. Each and every member of each family practice this art of oral storytelling and folk painting. This is something unique. Even the each house, wall, doors of the village bear this mark of folk identity. The houses in this mesmerizing village are all painted with various art forms bearing the semblance of folk identity. One can see paintings everywhere in Naya. Naya is such a place where the folk community allures you to the densely decorated and passionately painted world of myths and legends of Tusu, Marang

Guru, Manasa, Chandi, Laxmi, Behula and many more. Here the community invites to explore the collective lives of the *santals*, tribals. Please have a look at the Chitrakars' world.

Santal janmokattha is a captivating tale of the first parents of the tribals i.e. prichukha and Pirchubai. The gripping tale of the marriage of the seven sisters and seven brothers, the marriage ceremony, rituals of the drinking *tari* and the very act of preparing it, dancing and merrymaking, the harvesting scenes during *Nabanna* and *Poush-Parban* are amazingly and flawlessly captured on scroll painting, pot-painting and vessel painting. The *patuas* of Naya are gifted artists. The human forms painted everywhere are reminiscent of Greek art or Hellenic art where the painters and the sculptors explored themselves through the rich communal, social life painted on art-objects. In that sense, we can say that the very *patachitras* of Naya's *patuas* have a post-national appeal. They do resemble the human figures painted on Ajanta cave.

The chitrakars of Pingla have travelled far and wide. The women community of this place are a host enlightened, empowered women who have travelled to USA, Germany, Norway and many more countries for reaching a global market. A community is engaged in protecting the environment and maintaining its sustainability. The community of Naya are eco-friendly. They try to protect its purity by using all natural organic colours. They aim at developing a sustainable environment through their art. The folk art of *Patachitra* painting and singing is instrumental to the sustainable development of Naya's *patua* community.

The *patua* community of Paschim Medinipur's Naya are unique from every aspect. This art deserves the status of intangible cultural heritage. With the help of this status the Bengali art, culture and literature will draw the attention of more global audience. We can project this as one of the major cultural hubs of India. UNESCO has visited the place. It is our responsibility to struggle for its heritage status. More and more workshops are to be organized. The export of art-objects should be more easy and more smooth. More and more initiatives should be taken so that the artists can travel far and wide to sell their products and promote the folk culture of Bengal to a global stage. Bengali philosophy and Hellenistic philosophy have a striking similarity. Hellenistic art was realistic as well as dynamic. Hellenistic art featured subjects, such as scenes from ordinary life the pictures on the pottery often depicted heroic and tragic stories of gods and human beings. The Greek painters were Humanists, So are the chitrakars of Naya. The very style of painting is reminiscent of that of Jamini Roy. This research work raises voice for a sustainable society, sustainable community and sustainable environment. The sustainability goals of Naya align with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The relevant sustainable goals are SDG 1 No Poverty and SDG 2 Zero Hunger : Naya's *patuas* strive towards no poverty and zero hunger.

SDG 5 Gender Equality : *Patachitra* art and craft of Naya paves way for gender equality. Women are equally participating with the male members to earn. They are equally collaborating like their male members to produce something meaning. The women of Naya are the bold examples of women empowerment. The women with their little scope try to expose themselves in splendid folk art. These women are trying to be empowered socially, culturally, and economically. They are trying to build both individual and collective identity. The documentation will spread their tales of all conquering spirit everywhere. Their stories will be an asset for the society. The women play the role of leadership when they transmit their oral and pictorial folk art to the future generations.

SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth : The more the local artists get an access into the European and other First World countries to share their oral tales and paintings is better for India's economic growth. The research lays emphasis on the setting up of internationally acknowledged cultural trade centre at Naya also. Economic sustainability is gained through the practice of folk art. This art promotes entrepreneurship and other small business. The workshops conducted here encourage the young practitioners in this field. The women of Naya lead to economic sustainability for the whole society.

SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure : Naya is all about tradition and innovation. The *patuas* experiment the production of various cross-cultural products by mixing their art with other artistic style. There are archives in Naya. New art- industries with modern technology and infrastructure should be formed here to help the women engage in new experiments.

SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities : The artisan- community of Naya is all about collaboration, involvement, participation in the workforce. All of them are very particular about work-life compatibility. The integrity of the community is conspicuous during the festival, exhibition, or the visit of dignified visitors. The women maintain all their household duties like cooking, sweeping, child rearing and their other engagement like farming. Through the patachitra world one gets the opportunity of meeting and greeting a sustainable self-reliant and self-dependent community. There will be detailed discussion based on the interviews and case studies.

SDG 13 Climate action : The women of Naya paint and sing folk stories based on climate issues. Like the ecofeminists they promote pro-environment awareness. Painting and songs on climate.

SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions : The women call for a peaceful, harmonious, inclusive sustainable society. Many *patuas* are Muslim by religion. Still they are comfortable with working on Hindu epics.

SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals : National and international partnerships are encouraged here for global trade and tourism.

Last but not the least, I invite all of you to West Midnapore, to Naya to soothe your eyes with the breathtaking beauty of folkloric Bengal as expressed through the participation , engagement and co-operation of a the whole of *patua*-community of Naya.

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Subaltern Archive and the Translator's Responsibility: Ethical Negotiation in the Representation of Bhojpuri Folk

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Abstract

Bhojpuri is widely spoken on the land of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The language also has a significant hold amongst the global diaspora communities as a second language in Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius, Suriname and others, yet has been systematically marginalized by the mainstream literary canon as folk or rustic despite being a vital source for social critique. This paper interrogates translation as a profound mode of epistemological engagement, not as a mere linguistic transfer. A radical gesture toward what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's terms as 'epistemic freedom' (1986). This research, grounding itself in the works of Bhikhari Thakur whose drama tackles the structural violence of caste, migration, and gender centers on the 'between language and culture' framework explores the ethics of rendering Bhojpuri poetry into English; it further extends into the devotional couplets of Mahendra Misir and the anonymous oral tradition of Bhojpuri speaking women. This research tries to address the central ethical dilemma: How does one carry these voices across languages without flattening their visceral effect? The paper draws upon the concept of 'intimate responsibility' given by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) and argues for a translation praxis that rejects 'domestication' in favor of Lawrence Venuti's 'foreignization' (1995). Such preserves the strangeness and cultural logic of the original texts and resists the colonial habit of treating the non-dominant languages as raw material for western or mainstream consumption. Incorporating Tejaswini Niranjana's critique of 'epistemic violence' (1992) and Susan Bassnett's (2014) emphasis on performance, the analysis suggests that the translator must account for rhythm, tone and essence inherent in Bhojpuri's oral roots.

A refined linguistic analysis of the affective suffixes (-wa, -iya) reveals a fidelity of feeling that exceeds literal conversion. Through thick translation, this work demonstrates how translation serves as a counter-archive, a form of reclamation for poetics dismissed as parochial. Ultimately, the study posits that 'translational justice' is an act of solidarity that insists on Bhojpuri's presence as living, urgent literature, serving as an essential instrument for decolonial futurity and cultural survival.

Keywords: Bhojpuri Folk, Cultural translation, Ethical translation, Linguistic marginality, Oral tradition

Introduction:

Language is a repository of collective memory. It is not a neutral vessel, it carries culture and most importantly, language is a site of intense political struggle. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1996) in his paper *Decolonizing the Mind* argues that the reclamation of indigenous language and literary forms is an important act of epistemic freedom. When we speak, write or translate a

marginalized language, we take part in a radical movement towards decolonial future. The language Bhojpuri which is so spoken across the globe by more than half a million people but yet remains paradoxically invisible in the mainstream literary discourse must be located within the framework of epistemic freedom.

Bhojpuri holds a very precarious position in the linguistic landscape. From the rural heartland of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the Black Waters territories of Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, and Trinidad, it is a language of migration, labor and resilience. It gets boxed in as 'folklore,' seen as something rural, raw, and unpolished rather than a legitimate medium for literature. While English and standardized Hindi hold the prestige, Bhojpuri is often treated like a relic, its profound social critique ignored simply because it lacks the polish of the metropolitan elite. To center Bhojpuri in literary discourse is, therefore, to challenge the very foundations of who gets to speak and whose voice is considered civilized.

The title of this inquiry, 'Subaltern Archive and the Translator's responsibility: Ethical Negotiation in the Representation of Bhojpuri Folk' signals a departure from translation as a mere linguistic transaction but a profound mode of cultural and ethical engagement. The central challenge lies in highlighting the voices that have long existed in the shadows of both literary canons and political histories. We listen to the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri, Bhikhari Thakur, Mahendra Misir and most crucially, we listen to the anonymous Bhojpuri women whose voices live on through oral traditions; songs of longing, labor and resistance.

English is a language which always favors the metropolitan structures that marginalized Bhojpuri. The act of translating these songs into English is fought with peril. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) rightly warns that translating texts of the subaltern is never neutral. It requires a relationship of 'intimate responsibility.' The translator is not simply converting words but is entering into a relationship of accountability with the vulnerable speaker. The question remains, how do we translate such voices, rhythms, metaphors and lived histories without flattening their affect and without displacing the cultural world they emerge from?

This study is not simply about poetry but about power. Translational justice is being explored as a form of engagement that does not surrender the text to sound natural or fluent in English. If we erase the strangeness of Bhojpuri to make it sound comfortable or fluent in English, we engage in what Tejaswini Niranjana calls 'epistemic violence.' This molds the indigenous perspective to fit in the western categories of knowledge, looting them of their internal coherence and complexity. In order to translate languages like Bhojpuri, one must follow what Lawrence Venuti (1995) calls 'foreignization.' One must preserve the metaphors, the syntax, and the visceral rhythm of the original, even if it creates a sense of discomfort for the target reader.

Fluid, emotionally resonant, embodied and a living one is the Bhojpuri archive. Its oral traditions are dynamic articulation of the present layered with histories of caste violence, feminine endurance, and diasporic grief, not simply some echoes of the past. Be it the people singing *biraha* during the harvest season or the indentured labors carrying those songs in their heart across the ocean, Bhojpuri folk songs are voices that contribute and carry in themselves a vibrant literary culture that demands more than mere documentation. They demand a translation that honors their 'fidelity of feeling' (Trivedi, 2005). Meaning in this context is not just in the words, it is in the rhythm of the *dholak*, the tone of the performer, and the ritual setting of the song.

This paper explores how translation serves as a form of reclamation for cultures, for memories and for poetics that have been sidelined as parochial. By utilizing a 'thick translation' approach, one that uses annotations, cultural notes, and rhythmic markers, we can build a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994). In this space, Languages does not need to be rescued, they simply need to be heard on their own terms. This paper argues that through humble and rigorous translation we can move toward a radical Bhojpuri storytelling that refuses silence and insists on its own radical presence in the world.

Literature review

This study is situated within three intersecting fields of scholarship: the postcolonial translation theory, the politics of Bhojpuri linguistic archive, and the gendered dimensions of oral performances. Taking these fields in consideration, this study argues that translating Bhojpuri is not just a technical transfer, but a site of 'epistemic freedom' (Thiong'o, 1986).

The theoretical foundation of this study is largely based on the cultural shift that states that translation is always embedded in power dynamics. Lawrence Venuti (1995), in *The Translator's Invisibility*, says that the dominant translation strategy is 'domestication,' that smoothes the idiosyncrasies of the source to produce an easy to read English version. Venuti argues that this is an act of ethnocentric violence that removes the otherness of the original text.

This study is further deepened by Tejaswini Niranjana's critique in *Sitting Translation* (1992). She explains how translation was historically utilized by colonial administrators to create a suitable identity by making it static or putting it into manageable categories. Spivak (1993) further refines this ethical obligation of 'intimate responsibility' in her work *The Politics of Translation*. She warns against the appropriation of Third World texts by translators who prioritize accessibility over originality.

Within the Indian literary landscape, G. A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903) remains a foundational text. Alok Rai (2001) in *Hindi Nationalism* elucidates how the standardization of Hindi in the 19th and 20th centuries structurally silenced regional variants like Bhojpuri, relegating them to the status of 'folk' rather than 'literature.'

Against this backdrop, Bhikhari Thakur emerges as a critical site of inquiry. B.N. Verma (2012) highlights Thakur's role as a social reformer whose work highlights the codified trauma of the migrant labor economy. V. Mishra (2007) in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* explores how this migration of language created 'structure of feelings' (Williams 1977) that connected Bihar to plantation colonies abroad.

Significant scholarly focus of also there on the gendered dynamics of the subaltern archive. Sherry Simon (1996) in *Gender in Translation* argues that women's voices are often doubly marginalized reminding one of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls a 'silenced past.'

Susan Bassnett (2014) words that in oral traditions, meaning is performative aligns with Harish Trivedi's (2005) notion of 'fidelity of feeling,' suggesting that the translation of Indian literary forms must account for the emotional essence rather than just literary equivalence. S. Yadav (2015) also examines the *Birha* tradition as a counter-narrative to official histories.

To bridge the gap, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1993) conceptualized 'Thick Translation.' This methodology encourages the use of annotations, which supports Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'Third Space,' where translation does not seek an equivalence but creates a new space of negotiation.

Research Methodology

A departure from the traditional philological approaches moving instead a structural framework grounded in decolonial ethics and subaltern studies is required for translating Bhojpuri folk poetry. Because Bhojpuri exists at the intersection of caste-oppression, rural marginalization, and diasporic displacement the act of carrying it over to the global *lingua franca* of neoliberalism and colonial legacy, English, demands a rigorous guardrail to prevent the dilution of its specific cultural affect. This study processes four critical frameworks to construct a methodology of translational justice.

Intimate responsibility and the subaltern subject: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gave the concept of 'intimate responsibility' in her work *The Politics of Translation*, establishing the idea's foundational ethical pivot. Spivak argues that while dealing with a subaltern, a translator must surrender to the text and treat the text as a living articulation of a marginalized subject rather than a passive object of study. Intimate responsibility dictates that we do not prioritize fluency for the English reader over the clutter of the source culture. By attending to the silences and the untranslatable soul-residue of the Bhojpuri verse, we enter into a relationship of accountability with the speaker, ensuring that their specific socio-political location is not homogenized into a generic folk identity.

Foreignization as Political Resistance: This study adapts Lawrence Venuti's (1995) strategy of *foreignization* to make this responsibility operational. Venuti argues that domestication; a translation that reads so smoothly that it makes the translator invisible, is an act of ethnocentric violence. In translating Bhojpuri, domestication would involve stripping away local metaphors with western or normative ideas of the target language. By intentionally preserving the strangeness, unique syntax, affective suffixes and specific environmental imagery in translated text we force the English reader to acknowledge the text's otherness, thereby honoring its cultural difference rather than flattening it for convenience and fluency.

Sitting Translation and Epistemic Violence: Tejaswini Niranjana through her 1992 work 'Siting Translation' provides a crucial historical lens. Niranjana explains in her work that how translation was used as a tool of 'epistemic violence' during the colonial era to construct an Indian identity fit for European consumption that was both fixed and primitive. This study argues that Bhojpuri has always been a victim to such a colonial gaze, hence, often categorized as non-literary or dialectal in contrast to Hindi or English.

An ethical framework must, therefore, actively resist these colonial habits. It must refuse to treat Bhojpuri as raw material to be refined into literature, instead, it must treat the folk archive as a sophisticated system of knowledge, a counter-archive that possesses its own internal coherence and intellectual rigor.

The Body and the Performance Archive: Finally, Susan Bassnett's work on performance and translation reminds us that meaning in oral literature is not confined to the lexeme. Bhojpuri poetry is inherently kinetic and communal. Drawing on Bassnett, this framework treats the poem as a performance script. The meaning resides in the rhythm of the labor song, the tone of the lament, and the gestural history of the speaker. Translation, in this case, is an act of cultural mediation that seeks to carry over the performance energy of the original.

By using these four methods together we can move towards 'thick translation' (Appiah, 1993) that makes use of annotations and critical glosses. This framework aims to create a 'third space' (Bhabh, 1994) rather than an English equivalent.

Discussion:

The Subaltern Bard and the Poetics of Displacement:

Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971) represents the most potent manifestation of subaltern agency in the Bhojpuri literary archive. Born into the barber caste, a community situated on the lower rungs of the traditional varna hierarchy, his emergence as a playwright, poet, and performer was not merely a literary phenomenon but a social insurrection. Unlike the high modernist poets of the metropolitan centers who looked toward Europe for stylistic cues, Thakur's modernism was forged in the heat of the rural and the migration hubs of the early 20th century. His work occupies a liminal space between oral tradition and printed drama, rooted deeply in the *Naach* folk theater tradition. His theater was a theater of the displaced, catering to the millions of laborers who migrated from the Bhojpuri heartland to the jute mills of Calcutta or the *Kala Pani* colonies across the oceans. What Raymond Williams (1997) calls a 'structure of feeling' is very well articulated in Thakur's work. A specific, lived experience of the subaltern that was yet to be codified by official histories.

Bhikhari Thakur's most iconic work, *Bidesiya*, serves as the definitive chronicle of the Bhojpuri migration experience. 'Bidesiya' (the foreigner) is not any ethnic other in this poetic drama but the husband who has left for the city leaving behind a widowed household. The linguistic core of this displacement is captured in the plea:

"*Bidesiya jaa na ja, mor jiyara ghabraaye.*"

Searching for English equivalents is not enough to translate this line. The term *jiyara* is derived from 'ji' which refers to life-force while *ghabraaye* denotes a visceral, bodily trembling. Contextually, this 'trembling' is not a domestic anxiety, it is an articulation of economic abandonment. Migration in Thakur's work is observed as a rupture of the eastern social system. Translating *jiyari* as 'heart' or 'soul' can risk sanitizing the physical dread that migration imposed on the women left behind. Thakur forces the audience to confront the wounds of the labor economy. This is a task the translator must carry over by maintaining the percussive, urgent rhythm of the original verse.

Bhikhari Thakur never romanticized folk, instead, he was a champion of the marginalized. He delivered blistering critiques of the internal rot within the Bhojpuri speaking belt using his poetic authority. In *Beti Bechwa*, He confronts the commodification of young girls sold into marriage to

elderly men. The language here is sharp, ribald, and confrontational. The voice of the girl in Thakur's poetry is not of silent suffering but of vocal defiance.

Similarly, in *Gabarghichor*, Thakur questions the foundation of patriarchal inheritance and family legitimacy. The play centers on a dispute over the biological versus social paternity of a child born while the husband was away for fifteen years. Thakur uses the character of the wife to destabilize the "moral" authority of the husband, suggesting that the labor of the mother grants her a higher "claim" than the legalistic claim of the father.

The Challenge of Translating the *Naach*:

Translating the works of Thakur means translating performance as well. His poetry was written to be staged, to be enacted, often featuring gender-fluid performances where men played women's part (*Launda Naach*). The language shifts between erotic, political and the devotional reflecting the fluidity.

As Susan Bassnett suggests, the meaning is in the 'gesture.' In Thakur's work, the use of sound words and repetitive refrains mimic the clatter of the train taking the migrant away. To translate these smoothly is to silence the village square. The translator must instead aim for a 'rhythmic fidelity' that allows the English reader to hear the crack in the singer's voice. Bhikhari Thakur remains the 'People's Bard' because he did not only write about the subaltern, he wrote as a subaltern, turning his work into a language of universal human suffering and resistance.

To rigorously engage with the Bhojpuri poetic archive, one must transcend the superficial gloss of vocabulary and descend into the language's intricate morphological syntactic and phonetic architectures that constitute its distinct epistemological world. A deeper look into the Dialectical Stratification of the language shows that in the performative text of Bhikhari Thakur, the language is percussive, relying on the auxiliary *-ba*, *-wa*, and a density of retroflex sounds to create a rhythmic urgency essential folk theatre. However, as the language migrated across black waters to Mauritius and the Caribbean, it underwent a profound structural shift resulting in a more egalitarian linguistic structure closer to indenture system. The language employs diminutive and affective suffixes which function far beyond simple indicators. When a speaker modifies a noun, shifting from *Piya* (beloved) to *Piyawa*, they are not merely describing a person, moreover, they are injecting a vocalic sign into the syntax. Adding a suffix loads the noun with intimacy, vulnerability, possessiveness or lament and thus loads the noun with emotions which might not necessarily be inherent to the word. To translate the sentence:

'Mora piyawa bideshwa gailen'

Simply as 'My husband went abroad' is to compromise the emotional depth of the sentence taking away its subjective ache. This essentially is an act of epistemic violence as Niranjana calls it. *Bidesh-wa* denotes the specific locus of separation.

This leaves the translator with a difficult mandate to find equivalents capable of carrying such distinct, proprietary grief. It requires seeing these suffixes for what they truly are, emotional markers, as unique to the speaker as a fingerprint.

Bhojpuri also relies on a complex network of pronouns to indicate the social gap among people. It is a system that indicates respect and intimacy and authority with precision. Through these honorifics, the language represents the social hierarchy, carving out distinct boundaries between the speaker and the one being addressed. The distinction between the non-honorific *Tu/Te* and the reverential *Ruaa/Raur* is a map of caste and power. When a subaltern speaker addresses a feudal lord or a caste superior with a dismissive *Tu/Te*, it topples the hierarchy verbally with its intimacy and dismissiveness. Modern English, however, flattens this distinction with a universal 'You.' This makes translation difficult for the ethical translator.

Without 'relational footnoting' or the strategic use of social distinction through language, the subversive power of the original text evaporates. Thus, refining the linguistic analysis of Bhojpuri requires an acknowledgment that its grammar is never neutral.

Anonymous Storytelling and the Biraha of the Fields

While Bhikhari Thakur became a named, modernistic anchor for Bhojpuri Literature, a vast portion of the Bhojpuri archive remains anonymous, preserved in the collective memory of women. This feminine-counter archive exists primarily in oral genres such as the *sohar*, the *biraha*, and the *kaharwa*. In these verses, the Bhojpuri woman is not merely a subject of the poetic gaze, she is the narrator, the critic, and the witness to the structural violence of caste, patriarchy and the migrant economy.

The *Biraha*, or the song of separation, is the foundational aesthetic of the Bhojpuri heartland. While classical Hindi/Sanskrit literature often romanticizes *Viraha* as a state of aestheticized longing, the Bhojpuri *Biraha* is a grit-filled articulation of economic and emotional abandonment. The women left behind in the villages of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh are not simply longing for their partners but also managing the ruins of a household fractured by the money-order economy.

For instance, the recurring trope of the beloved leaving for *Pardes* (the foreign land), the *Pardesi* husband is often viewed with a sharp, ironic edge.

One popular verse says:

'Kahe ke kaam na aayil, mor piya pardeswa jaayil.' (What use was my devotion, when my beloved left for distant lands?)

Given the economic state, this is a political cry. It challenges the virtue of the migrant husband, suggesting that his economic mobility is predicated on her domestic immobility and suffering. As Sherry Simon (1996) argues in *Gender in Translation*, women's voices in folk traditions are often muffled by male translators who see only the material or the melancholic and miss the subversive. To translate the *biraha* ethically, one must capture this underlying rage, the texture of the voice that grinds grain while critiquing the global labor market.

Other forms like *sohar* are that are traditionally sung to celebrate the birth of a child (usually a son) provide another site for linguistic subversion. These songs do fulfill a patriarchal function

on the surface but the lyrics often mock the father, mother-in-law, or the local midwife, that creates the carnivalesque space where domestic household hierarchies are inverted.

Attention towards 'cultural meditation' as Susan Bassnett calls it, is required while translating the *sohar*. The meaning is not just in the celebration of birth but in the communal laughter shared by the women performers. A literal translation often fails to transfer the satirical wink in the verse. A way that a women used to assert her presence and voice in the household which otherwise demands her silence. Domestic wit and ribaldry must be preserver as characteristics of these oral performances resisting the urge to sanitize them for the English audience.

Another embodied genre of Bhojpuri are the work songs, such as *kaharwa* and the *jatsari*, sung while working or grinding grain. In these songs, the rhythm of the songs is based on the rhythm of the body. The meter follows the physical exertion of the arms and the breath.

In these songs, women discuss ecological wisdom, caste violence, and erotic agency. They speak of the thirst of the soil and the heaviness of the stone mill. When translating these, the translator must account for what Spivak calls the 'body-text.' The words are inextricably linked to the labor. If we translate the *jatsari* without accounting for the percussive clack of the stone or the grunt of the breath, we lose the epistemic weight of the labor itself.

Storytelling as testimony:

The anonymous women of the Bhojpuri archive perform what can be termed as acts of testimony, archiving histories of survival that the state and the formal academy often overlook. These sons remind us that Bhojpuri is not just a language of 'men and migration,' as often depicted in the works of Thakur, but also a language of 'women and witnessing.'

To translate these voices is to engage if the politics of care. It involves acknowledging the collective ownership of these verses and the resilient poetics they embody. The translator's job here is to make sure that when these stories are presented on the English page, they are not done so as exotic specimen to woo the readers as mere folklores, instead they must be presented as living literature and the undefeated spirit of the women who couldn't be silenced by history.

Annotation as Ethical Intervention:

Traditional translation often views footnotes as a sign of failure. This can, and more than often, means that the translator couldn't find the exact word in the target language. However, in the case of a language so marginalized and marked by caste, as Bhojpuri, footnotes, in reality serve as a tool of archival recovery. It permits the translator to slow down the reader and highlight the complexities that a fluent English sentence would otherwise won't bother about.

Consider the phrase, '*Maai ke godiya bina sooni sooni lage la aangna.*' A fluent English translation might read as 'The courtyard feels empty without mother's lap.' While being linguistically accurate, this translation fails to capture the cosmology of the *aangna* (courtyard). In Bhojpuri imagination, the word *aangana* is the gendered epicenter of the household, a space of ritual, labor, and safety. If we provide the annotation that explains that the *aangana* is the symbolic

womb of the community, we can prevent the English reader from interpreting it as a mere domestic architecture.

Similarly, when we translate other descriptive terms used like *goriya* (a woman of fair complexion), it is of immense importance that we mention annotations to navigate the colorism and caste. In Bhojpuri songs, complexion is not merely an aesthetic standard or beauty but a connotative marker of caste as well as sexual desirability shaped by patriarchal society. We need to provide the English reader with contextual nuances without which the one can easily end up romanticizing the very social ailment that the writer tries to critique. Thus, annotations are important in to unravel the power dynamics of the society as documented or satirized in the original text.

Conclusion:

Bhojpuri language is loaded with artistic merit and critical observations. The fact that it has not received the due literary recognition is a result of systematic marginalization. Bhikhari Thakur's works are formidable critique of migration and caste. In the anonymous archive of women's songs, we discover a resilient poetics of witnessing, a feminine storytelling that uses irony and rhythm to survive economic and emotional abandonment.

The theoretical frameworks of Spivak, Venuti, Niranjana, and Basenett have guided this paper towards a translational praxis that prioritizes intimate responsibility over fluency. This paper understands that to translate subaltern languages in English is an act of solidarity. In doing so, one must refuse to let the wit, context, and nuances of the rural life be flattened in the process.

To conclude, translating Bhojpuri folk is an act of decolonial storytelling. It is an insistence that the experiences of the migrant, the laborer, and the rural woman possess a universal intellectual and emotional validity. By carrying these voices across languages without silencing them, we participate in what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'decolonization of the mind.'

Bhojpuri does not need to be 'saved' or 'civilized' by translation. It is already a vibrant language full of its own life. Translation, when done with humility and rigor provides that space. It allows the percussive rhythm of the *dholak* and the visceral tremor of the *jiyara* to resonate beyond the borders of the village and the constraints of the 'standard.'

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Visualizing Migrant Trauma: A Lacanian Reading of *The Goat Life*

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Abstract

Adaptations of literature into films generally alter the textual narratives into visual form, catering to the needs of varied audiences. Several movies have been seen by people around the globe that have similarities, and they depict the emotions of the literary works by mirroring the feelings embedded in the lines. The paper titled "Visualizing Migrant Trauma: A Lacanian Reading of *The Goat Life*" aims to evaluate a film portraying the life of the migrants, *The Goat Life*, a cinematic adaptation of a well-known Indian novel, *Goat Days*, from the perspective of Lacan's psychoanalytic film theory. This research attempts to understand the psychology involved in the film through various cinematic elements, with special emphasis on 'Najeeb Muhammed.' Moreover, this article discusses the deliberate visual scenes adopted to capture the attention of the viewers using the story's emotional plot that deviates from the rational path. Films not only present the textual narrative but also the realism of the plot using actors and directors. This research paper analyzes the cinematic portrayal of migrants through psychological aspects, with an added emphasis on additional visual scenes adopted to keep the audience engaged in the movie.

Keywords: *emotion, cinema, migrant, audience, and psychology*

Introduction to Early Desert Scenes

Cinema, as a form of art, has a unique capability of transforming the inner world of emotions and thoughts into outer manifestations through images. *The Goat Life* by Blessy shows this unique characteristic by taking the audience deep inside the psyche of the migrant through visual representations of the psychological and existential condition of Najeeb. In spite of being inspired by the acclaimed book by Benyamin called *Goat Days*, the movie takes a different approach in its visual depiction of events and even goes beyond the rationality of the text. In doing so, the film not only exposes the extreme nature of migrant work but also leaves room for psychoanalytic interpretation of the movie. With the aid of Lacanian film analysis, it can be concluded that the movie is a representation of psychological disintegration and alienation of the migrant.

The movie starts with a visually interesting scene involving a sandstorm. There is no equivalent of this scene in the source text, but this choice of an opening is effective in setting the right psychological mood for the entire story. A storm of sand, where camels are helpless in their posture and goats scatter, becomes the metaphorical representation of the instability in Najeeb's journey ahead. Rather than introducing the desert as a geographical location, the filmmaker

makes use of its vastness, repetition, and silence to symbolize the Lacanian concept of “Real,” a realm inaccessible through language and one where symbolic meaning breaks down. As the viewer moves from day to night, experiencing both blazing sun rays and a dark sky full of stars, they are placed in the position of Najeeb, who experiences various shifts in mood throughout his traumatic journey. The opening ends with a shot of Najeeb drinking water from a goat, which, together with the herd of goats surrounding him, symbolizes the loss of his humanity.



Fig. 1: Najeeb's existence and survival among a herd of goats

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

At this stage, however, the structure of the movie differs drastically from that of the book. In the case of the latter, the story starts out by narrating about Najeeb's imprisonment in jail, but the former goes for a different strategy altogether by choosing a chronological storyline, beginning right from the airport. The result of this choice is that the spectator can accompany Najeeb on his journey from the hopeful immigrant to being trapped in labour. Nevertheless, there are instances where additions made to the story become somewhat incongruous. One such example would be the one where Najeeb and his friend try to phone the agent's office from the airport. It becomes confusing later on as to why Najeeb keeps begging for the opportunity to phone his family.

The psychoanalytic notions developed by Lacan assist in understanding such deviations. For instance, the airport scene depicts the last time Najeeb remains in the Symbolic Order as part of the world of communication, rules, laws, and meanings. Nevertheless, his failure to establish contact during the very same moment hints at his imminent disintegration. In other words, the fact that the boy can only express himself via gestures, uneasy looks, and naive facial expressions suggests his weak symbolic existence. Moreover, his passport being taken away by the Kafeel as a result of misidentifying him demonstrates the actuality of the symbolic collapse of his existence. After all, a passport is the Name-of-the-Father made real, and its absence means losing one's symbolic position in society.

The trip from the airport into the desert serves to exacerbate this phenomenon even further. The musical score that changes from being slightly uplifting to being slightly ominous parallels the change in Najeeb's psychological state. When the car moves off the road into the desert sands, there is a cinematic cue indicating the crossing over into a threshold experience. In the desert, the individual experiences another part of the Lacanian Real, where Najeeb's fantasy of prosperity in the Gulf evaporates. The departure from Hakeem by Najeeb at this point, through scenes of yelling and coercion, accentuates the process of fragmentation. The viewer sees through the cinematographic language how the unconscious mind of Najeeb accepts fear as an enduring presence.

Even in brief instances of relief after arrival at the masara, there exists psychological uneasiness. After enjoying the relief derived from taking his first gulp of water, Najeeb is thrown into a state of dread by the sudden appearance of a camel from out of the dark. Analytically, this is an indication that the subject has not been able to find solace in Imaginary images that give the impression of safety. Rather than comfort, Najeeb finds himself receiving a dose of terror, emphasizing the primacy of the Real over the Imaginary. Interspersed throughout the movie during this particular segment of the journey are flashbacks depicting life in Kerala, including beautiful green landscapes, rains, and family bonding.

In the book, Najeeb is shown sleeping alongside an eerie character at the masara, but the movie changes the scene to show a peaceful and more ambiguous situation. It is through such scenes in the movie that we get to understand the psychology of dreams and flashbacks. The appearance of Kerala in the midst of the desert space shows the unconscious effort of Najeeb in re-establishing a symbolic order. However, this balance is suddenly disrupted by a violent act of kicking and dragging of Najeeb by the Kafeel. Najeeb cries out in his native tongue, Malayalam, which is not understandable to the Kafeel. He uses a high angle view on Najeeb to make him appear helpless and a low angle on the Kafeel to give him dominance.



Fig. 2: The dominance and oppression of Kafeel over Najeeb

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Psychic Breakdown, Flashback, Violence by Kafeel

In the morning of the following day, Najeeb wakes up hearing the barking of goats; this is how the irreversible journey to his new reality starts. What starts as normal animals soon takes on a symbolic meaning in the movie. The spooky character in charge of these goats makes the disturbing statement: "When you don't produce milk anymore, you are meat for the dogs." This sentence, although said to animals, serves as a psychic accusation against Najeeb's predicament. At this point, Najeeb finds himself in a position where he becomes an object within the discourses of the master, and his value is determined according to one aspect of usefulness only. This is the stage when the identity of the migrant starts getting broken down. The filthy clothing and stinking shoes thrown at Najeeb are symbolic weapons used in the process of transformation, during which Najeeb gets transformed from a subject into an object, from being a human being to a beast. His fear, hunger, and confusion prevent him from comprehending what is going on around him.

Tearing up of the visa note, now the only remaining document proving Najeeb's legitimate right to migrate, causes further destruction to his fragmented identity. When Kafeel tears the paper, it is not just the removal of the last elements of Najeeb's legal existence but also the symbolic destruction of his very existence. According to Lacanian theory, the Symbolic Order depends upon the use of signifiers, including names, papers, and one's social standing. With the ripping up of the one paper that could tie him back to his old life, Najeeb finds himself ejected from the Symbolic Order and thrown completely into the harsh realm of the Real.

The shame and embarrassment continue as Najeeb is taunted during his Khubus ordeal. The torturous act of swallowing the old bread slowly and painfully, tears trickling down his cheeks, symbolizes the erosion of his humanity through visual imagery. In this case, the visual depiction in the movie is more powerful than the narrative in the novel because of the psychoanalytic theory that claims that trauma is frequently inscribed on the body. This is evident in the manner in which Najeeb swallows the bread, choking on it as an attempt to rebel against the new status quo that was imposed on him. "I feel as if I am caught up in the middle of the sea, Sainu," indicates the Lacanian concept of lack in which there is an absence in the subject.



Fig. 3: The wide shot highlights isolation and alienation in the desert

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024

However, his failed attempt to write a letter is a symbolic resistance and an attempt to get back to the Symbolic world through language. However, the wide shots of the desert show how futile it is. Moon, which he remembers as an object symbolizing love to Sainu, now reminds him of the outside world, which is forever lost for him. In Lacanian film analysis, such motifs usually point to the gaze of the Other, a sign from the outside world reminding the subject about its lack. Hence, the moon is both a symbol of love and a reminder of his helplessness.

There are romantic scenes with Najeeb and Sainu included in the movie, although they were not in the novel. However, in a Lacanian context, they play an important psychological role by reinforcing the Imaginary order, which provides him with some comfort for his descent into madness. The romantic scenes, kissing, playful interaction, and ritualistic actions provide the viewers with rich images that symbolize warmth and passion. They create a stark contrast against the desolate desert landscape. From a Lacanian perspective, they symbolize an idealized ego – the Imaginary ego as opposed to his broken identity.

A further horrifying scene depicts Najeeb trying to wash himself using water, only to be brutally beaten for doing so. The warning by the Kafeel that he will break his hands if he tries washing himself using water shows domination not just of Najeeb's body but also of the fundamental right of man to be able to keep clean and maintain his dignity. The element of water, which is generally seen as a symbol of cleansing, is completely stripped away from him. This is symbolic of total lack of any autonomy.

This act of violence by the use of the water tanker serves to further exacerbate Najeeb's mental breakdown. The musical score accentuates the fear as the Kafeel beats him with a rope and even with a gun. As Najeeb tries to grab hold of the rope for his own safety, he provokes an excessive reaction in the form of fury from the Kafeel, who displays an excess of power through

his acts of violence. The shift from the excessive water in the desert to the peaceful river in Kerala brings more meaning to the psychoanalytical interpretation of the film. The sudden flashback scenes not only evoke nostalgia but also bring out the comparison between the Real and Imaginary. The images of the rivers are those of Najeeb's escape from reality into safer territory.



Fig. 4: Overhead angle depicts the subject's state of trap between past happiness and present misery
Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

In time, as Najeeb slowly wakes up, his consciousness comes back to life accompanied by an expression of sorrow. This is a musical motif that comes back over and over again in order to mark the return to the present and suffering once more. As goats then attack Najeeb and he faints due to the pain, the film deviates from the book one more time to make the viewer feel the emotions more. A goat showing affection for Najeeb becomes a disruption of the violent scene. It may symbolize a Lacanian Imaginary moment.

These sudden changes in time in the desert symbolize the breakdown of Najeeb's sense of continuity. In the absence of quantifiable days and routine, he finds himself unable to comprehend time, which is a fundamental element of the Symbolic Order. After seeing his image in the mirror of a truck, he is surprised by how he looks. In this instance, the mirror acts as the opposite of the Lacanian mirror stage. Rather than assisting him in developing an ego, it fractures it. He sees a foreigner who has a disfigured face with sunburn and dirt. The statement, "How many days has it been? I can't remember anything," perfectly sums up his state of confusion.

The spiritual crisis of Najeeb does not take much time either. The desperation of his words: "If there were God, I would not have such a fate" expresses that Najeeb realizes that the last symbolic system fails to exist for him – the faith. Many immigrants find solace and comfort in their beliefs. However, even this symbolic system falls apart for the protagonist in the desert. Filled with despair, Najeeb begins to run desperately through the sand only to come across a dead body of the terrifying man who used to scare him so much. The half-eaten carcass of the man by the desert eagles represents the inevitable destiny of all those who happen to end up in this hellish place.



Fig. 5: The animated Eagle battle shows the struggle for survival

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

As night descends upon the stage, Najeeb eats a pickle made by his mother emblematic of home and identity. Food becomes the link to his lost sense of self. As his desire to leave takes him once again, it is no longer fueled by mere fantasy but rather by a basic need for survival. Yet, what follows on the next morning crushes all of that newfound willpower. The physical pain inflicted upon him by breaking his foot and mashing his hand symbolizes the breaking down of his very capacity to act.



Fig. 6: Highlights the exploitation and dehumanization

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Brought close to the masara during night, Najeeb experiences the most psychologically insightful moment in the film. As he drags his injured body to the water tank of the goats, he drinks the same water with them. In a way that is already seen during the prologue of the movie, the symbolism of the initial scene materializes. By drinking the water with the goats, Najeeb

enters the state of existence that is fully animalistic. Such a sequence reflects Lacan's concept of the subject's entrance into the Real.

Escape, Hakeem, Ibrahim, Dissociation, and Identity Collapse

An unexpected hailstorm disturbs the life of Najeeb, an extremely rare event when nature seems to rebel against the uniformity of the desert landscape. The storm overwhelms him, hitting his body with hailstones while he is desperately looking for somewhere safe. However, what initially seems like a devastating event becomes a trigger of one of the most important transformations in his life: he meets Hakeem. The setting in which they meet, portrayed through an emotional tone, is among the added scenes in the movie that are not present in the novel. The hug they share conveys despairing relief, showing how humans have a tendency to connect when shocked.



Fig. 7: A temporary moment of relief and empathy

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

The appearance of Hakeem rejuvenates Najeeb with life, but this happens not out of any hopes but due to empathy. He tries to save himself from the hail stones that fall on them under a rock formation where they take refuge. The cinematography of this movie utilizes very close-ups of hands trembling and breath that make their pain visible. His crying mixed with the melted hail stones show the combination of his physical and emotional suffering. The storm is the image of the mental storm in Najeeb's soul the same one that rages within a migrant's mind. This aggressive intervention in the empathizing between two people proves that the power of the Real is above everything else.

Very quickly, this movie introduces a new character called Ibrahim, which becomes the turning point in this story. The peaceful behavior of this person and his advice can be viewed as a kind of psychological support to a young man because unlike Kafeel, he does not want to dominate and intimidate this boy. As Ibrahim tells Najeeb, "The master usually leaves after a few days" – this phrase can serve as some form of psychological support. Here, the character of Ibrahim plays the part of the missing Symbolic Father for Najeeb. To use the terminology of

Lacan, he serves as a kind of crutch for Najeeb, giving him some advice, knowledge of the area, and company.

This is demonstrated in various ways in the movie as Ibrahim looks at things suspiciously, breathes heavily when remembering past events of torture, and confesses that those who try to run away get killed. The emotions portrayed make Ibrahim appear as someone who has experienced life under his own real world, coming out of it alive but mentally traumatized. Ibrahim's insistence on getting Najeeb to eat, rest, and avoid conflicts reflects his experience of survival tactics learned over many years spent in the desert. In his cautioning of Najeeb not to run away when he sees a dead body of a stranger, it becomes evident how Ibrahim fears such a thing could happen to him.

Nevertheless, despite Ibrahim's efforts to persuade Najeeb, his urge to run away becomes stronger. His nostalgic thoughts about Kerala are depicted using flashbacks that make his life even harder because he feels both attracted and repelled by them. Lacan's idea of desire-as-lack becomes crucial here since the farther from reality his goal is, the more Najeeb wants to achieve it. Throughout the film, we see scenes of Najeeb gazing at the horizon, tears in his eyes, and muttering Sainu's name as if calling back the lost world. Thus, the horizon, which he can never reach, turns into the embodiment of desire.

After Najeeb makes the final decision to escape and is joined by Hakeem and Ibrahim, the mood of the film changes dramatically. An existential and suspenseful air emerges in the story. The protagonists slowly and carefully tread on the sand, coming nearer and nearer to the distant horizon. Darkness with moonlight becomes the transition between the state of imprisonment and freedom. The emptiness of the desert enhances the impression of vulnerability, as each step may either take them to freedom or cause death.

As they attempt to flee, Hakeem falls to the ground, overwhelmed by tiredness and dehydration. His frail body falls to the sand as Najeeb struggles to get him up. This particular addition is one of the most compelling scenes in the movie. The shaky voice of Hakeem as he confesses that he can no longer walk, the whisper of his cry for help shows the mental toll that suffering takes on a person. As Najeeb declares, "I'm not leaving without you," the utterance captures the struggle of being torn between emotions and survival.



Fig. 8: Lacan's concept of Real screamed through the sands

Source: Screenshot from *The Goat Life*. Directed by Blessy, Visual Romance Image Makers, 2024.

Najeeb's trauma of his next death will forever divide his psyche. Najeeb's hands tremble as he attempts to shut Hakeem's eyes. Symbolically, this shot represents a perfect example of isolation through composition as the figure of Najeeb is shown huddled next to the dead body with nothing but the vast desert landscape around him. This is the point where Lacan would call upon the Real as the death of Najeeb's friend can never be explained through symbols. All that remains is the scream into the empty space of the desert.

Now that both Hakeem and Ibrahim have departed, the fantasies of Najeeb increase, showing that the Imaginary Order is falling apart. Najeeb imagines some images from his days in Kerala – hearing the voice of his mother talking to him, seeing the face of Sainu and feeling the coolness of the river flowing in Kerala – but these brief visions fail to make sense of his mind that is rapidly deteriorating. Apart from the comparison of the harsh light of the desert with the cooling colors of Kerala, one of the symbolic representations of the destruction of the mind of Najeeb is portrayed visually. During this stage, he begins addressing himself in an attempt to ask for water, forgiveness, and cleansing.

As Najeeb kneels before a car with a number of Arab men inside it, he asks for some water. As soon as they recognize how dehydrated he is, the mutual distrust at the onset turns to pity. Here, the Arabs join yet another group of external saviors who rescue Najeeb from being involved in violence any further. By letting him board and giving him some water, they help re-integrate him into the world of civilization. It is evident that even as he takes a sip of water, his trembling body reflects the dominance of his subconscious experiences.

Najeeb's journey to the police station becomes another turning point as it signals a change from his experience of physical torture to that of emotional turmoil. While being treated with compassion by the policemen, Najeeb seems to struggle with social norms, as evident from his hesitation while talking, the way he flinches from loud noises, and his inability to keep eye contact with the officers. Even though he can access the Symbolic Order once more, Najeeb finds it impossible to fully merge into it.

In the hospitalization of Najeeb, there is a space for healing. There is the sterility of the atmosphere, the sheets of the bed, and the soft lighting of the room. These elements contrast with the harshness of the desert. Even at this point, Najeeb has been unable to escape from his haunting experiences. In the phone call with Sainu, there is evidence of his troubled condition since his voice shakes with nervousness. There is a mixture of happiness and sadness in the sobs coming from the other side. Although the call represents an imagined reunification, the mental process has not been achieved. Najeeb is unable to recognize who he is because of the fragmentation of his identity. His lack of answers to Sainu's cries reflects the distance from his desire to return to a safe world of love and home.

Reunion and Meaning Making

While Najeeb's return from the desert could be considered a homecoming victory, on the contrary, it is shown as an emotionally heavy process for the protagonist, who must integrate himself into a world that has changed since his departure. The reunion in Kerala, with its subdued coloring and lack of music and fast-paced camera work, symbolizes the state of weariness that the man experiences. The images that represent the natural beauty of greenery and river waters create a stark juxtaposition with the dryness of the desert, which had been taking up so much of his time. At the same time, what used to make Najeeb feel a sense of belonging now seems to push him further away, according to Lacan's Imaginary coherence of the self.

However, in the early parts of the novel, when Najeeb remembers his time in jail, his recollections are presented in a detached manner. In contrast, in the last parts of the movie, the camera captures the painful moments of his long journey home as he approaches his family members. The physical weakness of his appearance, the pallor of his skin, the slumped shoulders, and the way he holds onto the airport railing convey the sense that he is a prisoner between two realms. Though he may be back physically, mentally, he is still in the desert.

The blank look on his face and sunken eyes reflect much about the sense of emptiness brought about by years of dehumanization. It is evident that their reunion is bittersweet as is indicated by the fact that his wife is clearly distraught and sobbing profusely. The scene shows the deep emotional strain between them, as she attempts to bridge their gap by talking to him in a shaky voice. Despite his loving wife's warm welcome, his replies are brief and monosyllabic. This is because he lacks the words to communicate the depths of his soul.

The Lacanian gaze is crucial in this final reunion scene. While everyone else around him gazes at Najeeb, he is unable to return their looks, thereby highlighting the gap between himself and the community that sees him as someone familiar. He is no longer able to identify himself according to the rules governing Imaginary identification within family and community circles. For the community, the gaze that meets Najeeb is full of tenderness, but it signifies his difference to him because the identity that it addresses is now different from the one he had before entering the desert.

The ending lines in which the narrator refers to the story as "not just the story of Najeeb" and "the grief of many thousands" place the narration in its wider socio-political context by switching the focus from the single story to the story of all the others. It gives this narrative a

cultural dimension that allows us to see in the character of Najeeb something more than just a single case – something more than just one man. The desert is no longer just geography but a metaphor for exploitation and alienation. The final scenes do not help Najeeb recover from his trauma. Instead, the film ends with Najeeb in a psychological limbo, not completely healed but not permanently scarred either. This method adheres to the Lacanian approach in the sense that a trauma can never become part of the Symbolic Order. It will keep recurring, disrupting one's routine life. The way Najeeb stammers in his conversation, his awkward gestures, and his silent tears are examples of such unhealed trauma.

Conclusion

In turn, the movie reveals the connection between all three orders described by Lacan, namely: the Real order – revealed through desert severity, violence, physical pain, and close-to-death moments; the Imaginary order – represented through recollections about his native place Kerala, dreaming about home, remembering Sainu and hallucinating; and the Symbolic order, which suffers throughout the movie because of Najeeb's inability to speak, problems in communicating, disintegration of the self-image, and then gets restored through contact with his relatives. As Lacan himself argued, these three orders are inherently interconnected, and the disruption of any of them automatically results in ruptures in others (Lacan, *Ecrits* 145).

Hence, it could be argued that the hero of the movie faces both psychological and existential metamorphosis. The latter left his homeland and moved to the Gulf, motivated not only by economical ambitions but also by his feelings towards his beloved ones. In turn, Najeeb returned home as an altered man, who will never be the same thanks to his experiences in the Gulf. In addition, the problems faced by the character make the viewer aware of the bitter reality of life on the margin, breaking their dreamy idea of Gulf success stories. First of all, it needs to be mentioned that cinematographic treatment makes it possible for *The Goat Life* to be much more than a mere film adaptation of a novel. Some alterations in the plot are made, which leads to the creation of a new narrative, narrated from an emotionally charged perspective. Furthermore, various cinematic devices such as close-ups, sounds, settings, silence, and switching from memories to the present time are employed in order to engage the audience in the progressive psychological destruction of Najeeb. Kaplan emphasizes that, in general, the cinema often employs fragmented temporality and sensory disruption to mirror the nature of traumatic experience (Kaplan 23).

Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that *The Goat Life* highlights how migration involves not only physical displacement, but rather a separation from one's identity and history. Najeeb is expected to cross the desert, symbolizing the psychological distance that migrants need to overcome throughout their journey, involving hardship, difficulty, and moments of despair combined with brief instances of hopefulness. According to Bhabha, migrants occupy a liminal "third space" between their origin and destination, creating instability and uncertainty with regard to identity and self-concept (Bhabha 36). The state of being in between is captured vividly by the film, where the endless desert represents the external metaphor for the psychological state of being displaced that Najeeb feels. In a psychoanalytical reading of *The Goat Life*, this element will be evident clearly. As Lacan has pointed out, the subject exists because of the symbolic order, and when the symbolic order breaks down, identity breaks down (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 203). The story contained within the film lends itself naturally to interpretation through

Lacan's tripartite framework, precisely because Najeeb's experience enacts, in visceral cinematic terms, what it means for a subject to be stripped of the linguistic and social structures that ordinarily hold the self together.

By the end of the movie, the spectator witnesses an image of a traumatized Najeeb standing at his home, vulnerable, weakened both physically and mentally. Indeed, by the end of the movie, Najeeb seems changed. Caruth reminds us that trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence but returns repeatedly and intrusively, inhabiting the subject long after the original event has passed (Caruth 4). This is precisely the structure of Najeeb's experience — the desert does not remain behind when he leaves it; it continues to live within him, surfacing in his silences, his fractured speech, and his hollowed gaze. In fact, he seems completely broken and is unable to restore himself by means of his own strength; however, it appears that with the help and support of his family members, he might still be able to rebuild his life and come back to it step-by-step and gradually.

This cinematic portrayal of a migrant's disintegration and tentative reconstruction is precisely what positions *The Goat Life* as a landmark film in the discourse surrounding migration narratives in Indian cinema. What the film does not do is provide the comfort of the hero's triumphant return, since, in reality, it is much closer to the fact that those returning migrants will never again be the person they were before leaving. The desert landscape changes them physically, emotionally, linguistically, psychologically, and no return can change that. Through this means, the film refuses the mythological lure of the Gulf dream and instead gives the far more realistic representation of what migration entails. As Naficy notes, exilic and diasporic films always use nostalgia and longing as a means of maintaining identity, since displaced individuals require those mechanisms to hold together something of themselves that displacement tore apart (Naficy 152).

In terms of the Lacanian analysis presented throughout this paper, the cinematic depiction of Najeeb's migration is a long metaphor for subjectivity itself. The migration process, as represented in *The Goat Life*, is more than just the physical act of passing through geographical boundaries; rather, the migrant has stepped into a place that Lacan would call the realm of the Real, which is a place where the usual structural support of language, recognition, and desire no longer holds (Ecrits 167). This is because when Najeeb stops communicating in ways that the Symbolic Order dictates, when his name is taken away and he becomes a mere number or entity, then that order, which used to define him, is no longer there. All that is left of him is a subject stripped of all social constructs, left to survive on instinct, on memories and on a nameless desire of the world to which he belongs. According to Fink, every time the subject encounters the Real, it is an experience that can only be seen as a crisis point for the fiction of self created by the Symbolic Order (Fink 25).

This cinematic grammar used in the film, especially the depiction of the desert, makes this point clear. But it is only here that he may find refuge in the Imaginary, even if the imaginary comforts become more and more unstable and delusional with each passing moment. His recollections of Kerala, of Sainu, of his homeland's lush and rainy lands, operate not as a simple matter of nostalgia but rather as a psychological lifeline that allows him to cling on to a fragile semblance of his identity. As Hall notes, diasporic identity is never static but always in the

process of formation and reformation as it is informed by the experience of being displaced (Hall 222).

At the end of the day, *The Goat Life* can be said to contribute greatly to the cinematic representation of migrant life not through the dramatization of migrant suffering but simply in giving it the seriousness it deserves. With the application of Lacanian theory to the film, it is hopefully clear now how migration stories that are properly treated artistically and intellectually allow one to delve into profound questions regarding the nature of identity, desire, language, and humanity itself. As Žižek says, “ideology operates through filling the gap opened by the Real” by providing its subjects with an ideology of completeness and satisfaction, which ultimately conceals the impossibility of satisfying desires (Žižek 45). In this regard, the Gulf dream can be considered another ideological comfort, and *The Goat Life* can be understood as a deconstruction of the Gulf dream as well. Najeeb’s story, therefore, is not only a personal journey of struggle for survival in the Arabian desert. It is a story of displacement not only from one’s home country but from oneself. And it reminds us that behind each statistic of migration, each employment contract, and each transaction of money sent back home there is always a person struggling with the most difficult journey one may experience: staying whole despite a world trying to break them.

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Reviewing Heart Lamp from the Lens of Women's Writing

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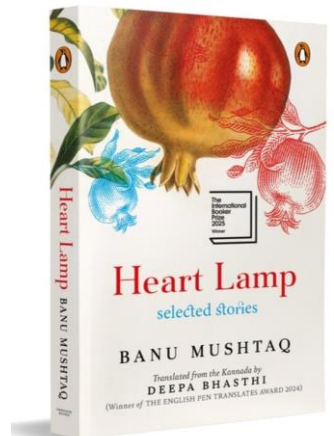
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'Heart Lamp' is not just about any particular people or community or any religion, but it is about the shared experiences, agonies, silences and brutally strangled desires of women. The work as a translation is highly praiseworthy, along with the translator Deepa Bhashti, to retain all the nuances of colloquial language which kept alive the essence that Banu Mushtaq wanted to provide through this collection.

Banu Mushtaq has ensured the diversity of experiences by portraying the stories of women belonging to various age groups, backgrounds, and social realities. She has poignantly portrayed the female experiences by representing their voice herself as a woman. It can be seen as one of the best examples of 'écriture féminine' (women's writing) which is given and explained by Helen Cixous in The laugh of Medusa.

Cixous states, "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing...When I say "woman", I am speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (875-876). Here she is urging women to create a history of their own as the history which has been written till now, there is no mention of women's struggles, their achievements, their experiences in that version of history. Women have been obliterated from the history which has been written in "the phallogocentric tradition" (Cixous 879). This is what Banu Mushtaq has done through this collection of short stories; she has created a history of women with their lived experiences.

Each story of the collection, starting from the story of Zeenat and Shaista, followed by several subsequent women characters, provides a vivid portrayal of women's reality in a constrained patriarchy. The stories are about different experiences of women coming from different social strata, but all share common experience of social subjugation. Collectively, these stories depict how women have been treated as the "other", the

“subaltern” in the terms of Gayatri Spivak, to male characters in a patriarchal society, as if men are the center and females are seen in the light of this center.

One of the significant points which it highlights is the neglect of education and pressure of early marriage on women. Banu Mushtaq has poignantly portrayed how women are denied education and married off early and keep on serving their partners as slaves, even when they mistreat and leave them, still the women have no choice but to endure everything due to lack of any other financial security. Poverty of women is one of the main concerns which becomes a hurdle for them to leave the toxic relationship. She depicts how patriarchy works with its underlying power structure by ensuring to deprive women of all her means of independence be it financial or emotional, to ensure her servitude towards her male counterpart.

Violence against women is considered so casual, in every small fit of anger, husbands are allowed to exercise physical violence against their spouses. Even some women have internalized it and consider it ‘okay’, because that is what has been instilled in their minds. These subtleties are considered causal in conservative society, it is the actual ground reality which is portrayed by the author. It also denotes the insecurity which has been created in women regarding themselves, they started taking themselves for granted in front of unjustified actions of their spouse.

Banu Mushtaq has addressed the taboo topics and one of them is divorce, specifically in the context of conservative Indian society, by adding the colloquial proverbs like “The house that your dholi goes to should be the house from your dhola comes out”. She has used colloquial colors in her language, which made it way more effective. She shows how women are stuck in toxic marriages and are not allowed to get divorced and return to their parents' house, just for the sake of the ‘honour’ of their family. The burden of family honor always and only falls on women, which keeps restricting their boundaries of freedom.

The house duties and family responsibilities have all been given to women. No matter what, she becomes the one who is responsible for fulfilling the needs of family members and taking care of them. She is burdened with unending physical labor and emotional burden, and still her efforts are always unacknowledged. Even if she is a working professional and earning equally to her husband, she is still expected to do all the house labour and take care of her children and family by herself, because somehow it is considered ‘a woman's duty to take care of her family and nurture children’. After marriage, when her husband decides to leave her, he is free to do so, and she has to bear the burden of all her children. Banu Mushtaq has ensured to carefully pick all these undiscussed topics around the life and struggle of common women, and portray them all in her stories so as to make her readers aware of all the ordeals a woman has to face just for being a woman in an orthodox patriarchal society.

Mushtaq has depicted how the body of a woman has become the place of possession of her husband, which he uses however he wants, without any concern for the consent or feeling of his partner. “My body was his playground, my heart a toy in his hand” (Mushtaq), here the main concern intended to discuss is that even ‘the own body’ which is the most private and least possession one could have, is denied to women. They can't make decisions about their own body, about their own sexual and motherhood decisions, as these are all decided by her husband, her in-laws and society. It entails the ways patriarchy reinforces itself to control the life of women.

Along with many of the above discussed things, the desires of women is another significant aspect which Mushtaq brings to light. It is portrayed in the story of 'Yaseen bua' who, even after being crushed under the rough and heavy wheel of poverty and patriarchy, still desired something for herself, just one desire which she wanted to fulfill firmly. It makes women human, not a 'Devi'¹ figure who likes to sacrifice her whole being. Just like any ordinary human, women too have desires which they want to fulfill.

Apart from shared experiences, Mushtaq has effectively portrayed the differences of women led by the different privileges. So the idea of class and social hierarchy along with political themes has also been discussed. It is to show how men are immersively concerned with political and outside concerns but is still called that 'he is raising his family just by providing money'. When the actual truth is, it is a woman who actually shed her blood and sweat for her family and children, and still remains the unacknowledged bearer of these responsibilities.

By concluding the above discussion, it can be ensured that it is a collection of resistance against the ages-long silence which has been imposed on women. Deepa Bhasthi, the translator of the book, also called the writings of Mushtaq 'Bandyā', in her translator's note, which means the literature of resistance in Kannada, against the domineering upper class and patriarchy in male writing, which has portrayed women as per their perception till now. Mushtaq has written the female writing as per female tradition, to give a firm voice to all the unacknowledged women, and added to the creation of women's history.

This collection is recommended for all readers who are keen to dig into the engraved narratives of women, and want to have a better understanding of their actual experience beyond the mainstream patriarchal narrative about them. The language is simple yet poignant with its own flow, that added to its quality as a women's writing, beyond the constraint and structure of male dominated language.

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¹ Devi is used in the Indian context of Hindu religious belief. It is used for a female figure who is ready to sacrifice her whole life for others.