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Netflix and Crime: Identification with the Characters of *La Casa de Papel* Spanish Series

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Abstract

This study examines the Netflix Spanish series *La Casa de Papel* as a pragmatic example of a series that addresses questions of criminal justification. In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 Saudi participants. The findings suggest that the Saudi viewers justified the characters' crimes influenced by fundamental attribution error. Viewers' identification with the characters could be seen in their empathy with the robbery team and their desire for threatening characters to die. Viewers also stated that they did not want the criminals to be caught. In fact, viewers felt sad and emotional when the characters were shot or caught. Participants ranked the Professor, Tokyo, Berlin, and Nairobi as the most liked characters. Conversely, the least liked characters were Arturo Román and Sierra because they threatened the success of the robbery. Finally, participants accepted the banker joining the team, while they opposed detective Lisbon joining it.

Keywords: identification, La Casa de Papel, money heist, Netflix, Saudi Arabia, Spanish series

La Casa de Papel is a Spanish series originally produced by Netflix. The police series, also known as *The Professor* and *Money Heist*, has been highly rated at 8.8 out of 10 by 34,438 viewers (González Rosero, 2019). It has attracted viewers internationally and become very popular. The series, which has been released in four seasons, is about highly planned robberies committed by the main character, "the Professor," and his carefully chosen team members known as: Tokyo, Berlin, Nairobi, Oslo, Rio, Denver, Moscow, and Helsinki. Later, two more women decide to join the team: the detective investigating the heist and a bank clerk who is pregnant after having had an affair with a married man.

Throughout the seasons, the team members commit robberies wearing Salvador Dali masks and red jumpsuits and singing "Bella Ciao," a song used as an anthem by the Italian anti-fascist resistance during World War II. The song is used in the series as a way to motivate and cheer up the team members. Like the mask and the jumpsuit, this song about resistance has become a global symbol. In Saudi Arabia, these symbols have gained popularity at football stadiums, private parties, coffee shops, and vibe and cigar stores. Stores and cafés wanting to gain the attention of young buyers dress the staff and decorate the store in a style that references the series. A store in Jeddah that sells electronic vibes and cigars is named "The Professor" and has become so famous that young individuals have been waiting in lines to buy products even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, costumes are being sold on Instagram stores for those wanting to personalize their party or store.

In July 2019, fans of the Saudi football team known as "Al-Etihad," meaning "The Union," raised a banner referencing *La Casa de Papel* in a stadium. The banner depicted team manager José Luis Sierra and team members. The colors of their clothes were yellow and black to match the football team's colors (Alriyadh, 2019, n.p.). The second season of the series made reference to how the masks have inspired people on an international level, including football fans in Saudi. In one episode, the Professor gives a speech to his team and shows examples of how the mask has become a global symbol. He shows pictures of protests and a football match, saying: "This is a peaceful march against corruption in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, feminist protests, Colombia, Rome, Paris, the 20th conference in Hamburg." Then a sign appears that says "freedom, resistance, equality." Then the professor proceeds: "We have inspired a lot of people…even in a stadium in Paris…in Saudi…and they have now become in our team."

Figure 1
Saudi Football Fans of "Etihad" Making Reference to the Series

Popular YouTubers have posted videos imitating and commenting on the series. For instance, in a YouTube video titled "The Professor, The Saudi branch" (Mashahir tuyub, 2019), a Saudi character imitates the Professor's style and lectures two men and a lady in Spanish about a future robbery. This video was viewed 508,798 times and was liked by about 8,500 viewers. Another YouTube video was posted on April 2018 showing a professor in Saudi traditional clothing lecturing a number of people, including a woman in the veil and niqab, a religious man, and three other men. Similar to the series, this professor explains the rules of a robbery on the board while individuals sit at school desks. This video was viewed by 53,459 viewers (لاكاسا دي المنفوحة La casa de papel, 2018). Another droll video imitating the series was titled "La Casa de Al-Shamal," meaning "La Casa of the North" and was viewed 63,568 times. In this YouTube video, the team members are named after Saudi regions, such as Tabuk, Al-Qassim, and Arar, and a local song is played instead of "Bella Ciao" (Qanat sundaqa, 2021). The number of views, likes, and comments for these videos indicates that Saudi viewers are highly engaged with and attached to the series.

A Saudi social media celebrity known as Darin Albayed, who has 4.2 million followers on her Instagram account, posted a video titled "The Professor: Jeddah. The Most Important and Most Dangerous Fan." The video was viewed 396,741 times on YouTube, and 1,114 people commented on the video. Darin suggests that she would like to act in the series under the name Jeddah, which is the second-largest city in Saudi, and claims that she has memorized all the episodes after watching them 30 times (Netflix MENA, 2019). In the video, she is wearing the costume and pretends to be acting in the series; she also plays the song "Bella Ciao" on a piano. She says, "When Berlin died, I felt that I lost one of my brothers." Then she enters a room with papers all over the walls, saying, "I've been working for a year to prove that Berlin did not die and he will appear again." This was a promotional video by Netflix to attract Saudi viewers days before launching the third season.

Previous literature has examined aspects of this particular series. González Rosero (2019) conducted a discourse analysis and found that the series presents crime as business and thus signals to viewers that robbery is a legitimate way to make money. Furthermore, her study showed how the robbers are presented as revolutionaries acting against an oppressive system, which makes their actions socially understandable. Another recent quantitative study conducted on a sample of 400 Saudi viewers of *La Casa de Papel* confirmed that 85% of the respondents perceived the Professor, who is the main character planning the heists, as a mastermind and guardian angel (Qutub, 2020, n.p.). Moreover, 62% of the participants in the study found the crimes to be acceptable and justifiable. This qualitative study intends to investigate whether viewers identify with the characters in the series and how. It also attempts to convey viewers' opinions of the characters, scenes, and scenario. Furthermore, the study discusses viewers' emotional responses to scenes from *La Casa de Papel*.

Identification with "Morally Complex" Characters

Previous studies have suggested that viewers are attracted to "bad boy" characters and morally complex characters (Keen, McCoy, and Powell, 2012; Raney and Janicke, 2012). Some of the trending examples of such characters in Netflix productions include Walter White, the chemist in *Breaking Bad*, the drug dealer in *Narcos,* the title character in *Joker*, the title character in *Dexter*, and the Professor in *La Casa de Papel*. Although these characters appear to be psychopaths according to the producers and the scenario, audiences like their unpredictable roles and empathize with their motives and actions, which include robbery, kidnapping, killing, drug dealing, and deception.

From a psychological perspective, people are able to empathize with villains or bad boys when they are provided with lots of information about the social and environmental forces that affect them. This information allows viewers to avoid the fundamental attribution error; because they are aware of the social and environmental situation, they attribute the criminal acts to external factors in the environment rather than misattributing them to internal factors (Keen, McCoy, and Powell 2012). This attribution results from viewers' identification with characters and repetitive exposure that leads to a familiarity with these characters and the series. According to Raney and Janicke (2012), viewers have a tendency to empathize with "morally complex characters" who have both good and bad traits. This type of character with complex ethics is increasingly popular in contemporary series.

In the case of *La Casa de Papel*, the majority of the participants in the study admired the characters of the Professor and Berlin, the Professor's brother who died in the first season. Referring to Berlin's role and character, the series director said that "The audience expects something big…so there's nothing better than a villain who also provokes feelings of empathy…he's contemptible. He's a misogynist, a narcissist, and a psychopath in many ways" (Lejarreta and Alfaro, 2020). There are scenes where Berlin is suffering from a health issue that has no cure, so viewers identify with the character regardless of his harassing and violent actions. As for the Professor, the director described him as:

> A very smart and brilliant character…the head of a criminal organization at the same time he is a loser…we shaped him almost like a nerd who wants to stay away from society…he has problem with dealing with women…he is a sociopath in many ways. Such an ordinary person was able to create something so big. (Lejarreta and Alfaro, 2020)

In the first season, the viewers learn that the Professor planned the whole thing to fulfill his father's dream. Information about the Professor's motive and Berlin's health condition allows viewers to identify with the characters and justify their actions. Thus, two of the most morally complex characters have become the two most liked, based on the series review and a previous study (Qutub, 2020, n.p.).

Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted in this qualitative study. In-depth interviews provide rich descriptive information about the phenomenon being researched, allowing participants to describe their worlds and to construct their own narratives (Tracy, 2013). The current study seeks to understand individuals' opinions and perceptions of the series. For this reason, we selected qualitative interviewing to allow participants to express their experiences using their own words rather than numeric data. The interviews were conducted with 17 Saudi viewers of the series ranging from 19 to 22 years old. The face-to-face interviews consisted of 15 women and 2 men. All participants had seen at least seen two seasons of *La Casa de Papel*. The interviews were conducted after the third season was released on Netflix and before the fourth season launched. Participants were Saudi university students from various majors, including computer engineering, media, management, business, and art. There were two freshmen who did not have a major yet. Participants were asked 30 open-ended questions and the interviews lasted 35–55 minutes.

Results

The study explored Saudi viewers' opinions and perceptions regarding the characters and scenes of *La Casa de Papel*. First, we will address the results regarding participants' perceptions of the characters, followed by an analysis of the five most influential scenes.

The Most Liked Characters

According to the participants, the Professor was the most liked character, followed by Tokyo, Berlin, and Nairobi. Although this study included only 17 participants, Qutub's recent (2020) study with 400 Saudi viewers confirms this finding; in this study, the Professor was ranked as the most liked character (chosen by 36.3% of participants), followed by Berlin (27.5%), Tokyo (about 18%), and Nairobi (about 11%). The current study placed Tokyo in the second position rather than Berlin.

To understand what attracted the audience to these characters, we asked participants about the roles and personalities of the characters. Seven participants indicated that they liked the Professor due to his intelligence, creativity, and patience. For instance, Manal said, "I liked the Professor because of how he planned everything ahead and things are going just as he wants." Viewers thought of him as a mastermind; when asked about her reason for liking this character the most, Sara said, "because it was all his plan and idea."

The Professor's ability to come up with alternative plans, as in the first season when he had to burn a car and dress up as a homeless man to conceal his identity, was another trait that attracted the viewers to this character. This feeling was expressed by Raghad: "I love the Professor because of his intelligence and his ability to find alternative plans in a short period of time." His ability to solve problems is crucial for the success of the operation and therefore greatly appreciated by viewers who want the team to prevail. His patience was another trait pointed out by viewers. Rotana explained, "I really like his character because of his intelligence and delegation skills. I also admire his patience for years to implement his plan and how he carefully selected his team and reached them before the police."

Tokyo was chosen as a favorite character by five participants, making her the second most liked character. For instance, Raghad, who is a 20-year-old design student, said, "I really liked the personality of Tokyo because her personality is similar to my personality. Also, we are both the same."

In third place was the character of Berlin, who was the Professor's brother. Three participants said Berlin was the most liked character in the series. Roba, who is 19 years old, said, "I like Berlin because he was able to deal with all these incidents." Another participant said, "I liked Berlin because of a number of situations." Nairobi was chosen as a favorite character by two participants for her charisma and ability to lead. Sarah, a 19-year-old media student, said, "I like how she has a strong personality and leadership skills." Abdullah, a 19-year-old freshman, said that he liked Denver mostly "because he lives in the moment." Three participants said they did not have a favorite character.

The Most Hated Characters

We asked participants if there were any characters who they wished to eliminate or hoped would die in the series. Participants mentioned that they disliked three characters: Arturo Román and the two female detectives. Three participants mentioned that they wished Arturo Román had been killed. As Rotana explained: "Arturo was useless to the team. In fact, he

always distracted them from their main mission." Raghad added: "I didn't like his character at all nor his appearance…I hated his character." Two participants disliked detective Lisbon, who was perceived "as an obstacle for the Professor," as participant Sara described. On the other hand, participants felt irritated at the other female detective named Sierra "because she was very smart."

Characters and Role Playing

To understand viewers' identification with the characters, we asked them, "Which character would you choose if you were to be invited by the producer to play a role in the series and why this character?" Participants' answers included the following characters: Tokyo, Nairobi, Berlin, Rio, the Professor, detective Lisbon, and Denver.

Table 1
The Character Participants wish to Role-Play and their Reason

The number of participants	Gender	The character chosen for role-playing	Described as
8	7 Female, 1 Male	Tokyo	Strong, cute, similar to my personality, nice but has flaws
4	Female	Nairobi	Rational, logical, strong, leader, non-judgmental
2	1 male, 1 female	Berlin	Great, important, responsible
1	Female	Rio	Hacker
1	Female	The Professor	Highly Intelligent, incredible planner
1	Female	Detective Lisbon	Unexpected
1	Male	Denver	Lives the moment
1	Female	None	•

Surprisingly, 8 of the 17 participants said that they would choose to play the role of Tokyo. These participants were all female, except for one. Reasons for this selection revolved around liking the character and thinking she had a strong personality. A couple of participants mentioned, "I would have played Tokyo's role because she has such a strong personality." Khloud, who is 23 years old, said, "Tokyo's personality is the total opposite of who I am, so I would like to play her role to experience life from her point of view."

Four participants mentioned that they would have chosen to play the role of Nairobi. Viewers appreciated her rationality and leadership skills the most. For instance, Sara described her in this way:

> I feel that she is different from the rest…she is not impulsive…she thinks. Also, you feel that Nairobi is the opposite from the rest of the members because she does not attack others and she tries to fix things instead of creating problems…she is peaceful and her thinking is stable.

Ghada, who is 20 years old, explained: "I am fond of Nairobi because she thinks…I feel she is a leader and accurate and has discipline, so I like her personality a lot."

Participants' responses showed that they often compared Nairobi's character to Tokyo's character. Participants liked that these women have a strong personality, yet they critiqued the impulsiveness of Tokyo; they complained that when she is motivated by her emotions, she messes up the plan. On the other hand, Nairobi's rationality was what attracted female viewers to her character. Placing both Nairobi and Tokyo among the most liked characters indicates that viewers crave roles of female leaders and heroes who play major roles.

Two participants mentioned that they would like to play the role of Berlin. Ammar, who is a 22-year-old male participant, explained, "I would like to play Berlin's role because he is a responsible person whom you could count on." Similarly, Shahad, who is a 20-year-old media student, justified her selection with a smile: "honestly, Berlin is a GREAT personality in the series." When asked whether she formed this opinion before or after Berlin's death, Shahad said, "Berlin was such an important character before he sacrificed his life in the first season." It is interesting to know that participants of both genders were this influenced by Berlin's psychopathic personality and would like to play his role.

Surprisingly, Samerah, who is a 20-year-old student majoring in computer engineering, mentioned that she would like to play the role of Rio. According to Samerah, "Rio is a hacker and I wish to become a hacker myself." This shows how viewers identified with both the personalities and actions of the characters. Of all the robbers, Samerah liked the person whose background was related to her specialty and wished to follow in his footsteps, regardless of the ethical issues involved with becoming a hacker.

Comparing Detective Lisbon and Mónica Joining the Robbery Team
In the series, there are two female characters who were not originally part of the team but join it later: Mónica the banker and detective Lisbon. Lisbon joined the team because she fell in love with the Professor (the leader). On the other hand, Mónica, who is later known as Stockholm, joined because she was feeling frustrated with her situation; she had told Arturo (the married man whom she was in love with) about her pregnancy, and he had abandoned his responsibilities. As illustrated in the Table below, participants had opposing opinions on these women joining the team.

Table 2
Participants' Opinions on the Banker and Detective Joining the Team

Participant	Opinion on detective Lisbon joining the team	Opinion on Mónica joining the team
Raghad	"I did not like that Lisbon suddenly joined the team because I felt she couldn't be trusted after she changed her principles. Her ambition was to fight for what is right before meeting The Professor."	"I liked Mónica joining the team because she wanted to help and support the team after being an ordinary citizen."
Khloud	"Lisbon's union with the team doesn't make sense at all…it is an unacceptable thing to do as a policewoman…also the love feelings seemed exaggerated."	"I liked Mónica joined the team because she wanted to help and support the team after being an ordinary citizen."

Manal	"I thought Lisbon's transference to the team was stupid because it was a sudden move. I mean she was a strong woman and she tried very hard to find them and suddenly when she fell in love, she changed sides!! I also felt that the team underestimated her value after she joined the team."	"I liked how Mónica joined the team because she saw an opportunity and took it and was able to change her life 180 degrees."
Rotana	"I totally oppose Lisbon's transference to the robbery team because it is her duty to accomplish her mission and to capture the robbers not to identify with the robbers and I couldn't accept that her love for the professor as a reason to change her goal."	"I was empathetic with Mónica being a victim and helpless. And I understand that she wasn't able to ignore her love feelings for one of the gang members."
Abdullah	"Lisbon is a personality that cannot be trusted…but she was useful to the team in the third season…I mean I didn't really like her but she was smart."	"I guess it was ok in her case."
Ghada	"It was Dangerous for Lisbon to do so. However, the team later gained benefits from her, Lisbon."	"It was ok for Mónica to join the team."
Ammar	"I support Lisbon's move to the team's side. It was the right action. I believe that love is superior to being a cop or being professional."	"Mónica's shift is very ordinary"
Shahad	"I could not stand Lisbon's shift to the team; you don't just give away your career for love and become a robber especially since she was in charge of this case."	"As for Mónica, she had an ordinary career so it was ok for her to change sides unlike Lisbon."
Samerah	"The detective joining with the team was wrong and provocative because she changed her loyalty from the police."	"Mónica's situation was not that important so it wasn't a big deal."
Mashael	"It was stupid of the detective to join the robbers…a policewoman taking the side of the criminals!"	"I think it was wrong of Mónica to join the team as well."
Norah	"Lisbon's action is unacceptable because she betrayed her country and this may signal to viewers that it is somehow acceptable to betray your country."	"Mónica's action is wrong but it is less harmful because she did not harm anyone."
Razan	"I believe it is wrong to quit one's job and life for a person."	"Mónica's case was ok because she loved someone and got pregnant and he abandoned her and she was alone."
Ranem	"I think women may do anything for love and the series was loaded with romantic relationships which led to their failure sometimes. But Lisbon was totally wrong when joining the team because she was in charge and she knew the consequences but still she chose to join them instead of capturing them."	"She was wrong but not as wrong as Lisbon."

Afaf	"It was wrong of both of them to join the team. I mean they were on the right track and then took a wrong turn. The leader succeeded in attracting them to join the team."
Taif	"I felt happy when both Lisbon and Mónica joined the team and I wished that there were more members because they would bring enthusiasm to the series."

As shown, most participants found it to be acceptable for Mónica to join the robbers, while they were against Lisbon joining the robbery team. The majority of participants highlighted two reasons for their objection to detective Lisbon's shift to the team. First, Lisbon represents law and safety, so her shift to the criminal side created discomfort. Second, viewers thought that love was not an adequate motive for her to throw away her career and everything she believed in to become a member of the criminal team. During the interviews, participants indicated that they liked Tokyo and Nairobi for their strong personalities and ability to lead. With that in mind, Lisbon's shift from being a policewoman to becoming a criminal was perceived as motivated by weakness and influenced by emotions. On the other hand, participants were empathetic with Mónica's situation and involvement with the team. Mónica was perceived to be in a weak position, and her job as a banker did not raise concerns or result in a dilemma for the viewers.

Although both Lisbon and Mónica are motivated by their feelings towards a member of the robbery team, participants justified Mónica's case and criticized the detective for changing sides. Participants' rationale and judgment of both women reveal a double standard; this was particularly obvious in Rotana's explanation when she couldn't accept that love guided the detective's decision, but at the same time she was empathetic with Mónica's feelings towards Denver, who is a member of the robbery team. This position was heavily influenced by the type of profession each woman had. As the table outlines, viewers opposed Lisbon's decision to abandon the obligations of being in the police sector in order to become a criminal and described her action as "stupid, unacceptable, dangerous, totally wrong, and provocative." In their view, the detective should have fought to uncover the truth.

There were a few participants, including Afaf, Norah, and Mashael, who criticized both women for joining the robbery team. Ammar, a male participant, had a unique point of view. He was the only participant who supported Lisbon's move because, in his opinion, love is superior to anything else, including job duties and acting logically. Taif also did not condemn either Lisbon or Mónica because, in her view, their engagement with the team added suspense and enthusiasm to the series.

From a critical point of view, the plot of *La Casa de Papel* includes some gender stereotypes, as in the case of Lisbon and Mónica. Both women had to give away their life and career to join their male lovers, even though the lovers were criminals. However, the series did not include a man who had to make sacrifices or take an extreme action, such as joining a robbery team, for the sake of his loved one.

Scenes

Participants were asked to describe the scene(s) that most influenced them. Participants mentioned four scenes: Berlin's death, Nairobi being shot, the sky raining money from the blimp, and Berlin pushing Tokyo out of the building. Out of the 17 participants, 10 participants said that Berlin's death was the scene which influenced them the most. Berlin was the most

hostile character as he sexually harassed some of the kidnapped students and was mean to the team members. At first, he was a mysterious villain, but then he decided to sacrifice his life so that the rest of the team could escape after the police found their location. Figure 2 illustrates the scene in which Berlin was targeted and about to be shot. Seconds earlier Berlin had said to the hostage he was holding: "I've spent my life being a bit of an asshole but today I feel like dying with dignity." When asked to comment on this scene, a number of participants said they felt very sad and cried when watching this scene.

Figure 2
Berlin's Death in the Tunnel in Season 1

Note. Hannah Shaw-Williams. (2020, June 03). Money Heist season 5 theory: How Berlin could still be alive. Screenrant. Retrieved from https://screenrant.com/money-heist-season-5-berlin-death-still-alive/

Manal said, "I was so touched when Berlin sacrificed his life for others." Another participant said, "I felt so emotional when watching Berlin's death and knowing that he was the Professor's brother." It was surprising how a character with such a provocative style and negative energy was so loved by the viewers.

Berlin was portrayed as a misogynist and psychopath who was guilty of killing, bullying, and sexual harassment. However, he is always ranked in the top three most loved characters. It is as if his final sacrifice, which led to the team's successful escape, outweighs his previous actions. In Qutub's (2020) quantitative study, which was conducted with 400 Saudi viewers of the series, Berlin was ranked as the second most liked character (chosen by 112 participants), with the Professor ranked in first place. In fact, Berlin's personality motivated viewers to continue watching the next episodes, as expressed by Ghada:

> Berlin's personality made me want to continue viewing the series…I mean when I saw in the first episode Berlin and knew that they had a personality that has more leadership skills compared to the Professor, I decided that I wanted to continue watching…the Professor has a weak personality in my opinion.

Although Berlin and the Professor represent psychopathic personalities in many ways, as the series and its producer convey, both this study and the previous quantitative study (Qutub,

2020) confirmed that Saudi viewers were attracted to and identified with the characters. Morally complex characters who are neither entirely good nor entirely evil have become increasingly popular in Netflix series (Raney and Janicke, 2012).

The police shooting Nairobi in front of her child was the second most liked scene for participants. According to one female participant:

> I got so emotional when Nairobi was shot and she was feeling happy because she was able to see her child and she wasn't feeling sad or in pain because she was going to die. Instead, she was filled with joy because she saw her child.

Figure 3
Nairobi after being Shot by a Police Shooter from the Window

Note. Castillo, S; Fernandez, C; & Davis, A. (2020, April 03). La Casa De Papel/Money Heist Season 4 Is Streaming Now—and is "The Most Shocking" Yet. Oprah Daily. Retrieved from https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/tv-movies/a28448500/la-casa-de-papel-money-heist-season-4

In addition to the previous four scenes, we asked participants to comment on the following two scenes to understand how they felt about the characters when they faced a challenging situation, as in Figure 4 and Figure 5. In the scene in Figure 4, the situation has escalated and the police force is about to attack the building. Participants stated that their feelings included sadness, fear, shock, and nervousness while watching this particular scene. These negative feelings can be understood in relation to viewers' identification with the characters and their desire for the mission to succeed.

Figure 4
The Police Attack in Season 1 while Tokyo and Rio are Prepared to Shoot

Note. Netflix (July 19, 2019). Money Heist Series. Part 3, Episode 8 "Astray" (54:46).

Figure 5 shows the Professor right after the sound of the gunshot targeting his lover Lisbon. Although this gunshot was faked by the police agent, the Professor thought that Lisbon had been killed and had a breakdown. Raghad said, "I was so pissed off at Lisbon's stupidity as she didn't follow the plan and I thought the timing of the Professor's breakdown was totally wrong." Another participant commented on this scene: "I felt happy when watching this scene because I didn't like Lisbon from the beginning and I hoped that she would die because she was an obstacle to the team's progress." The majority of participants showed concern about the Professor's feelings and the progress of the robbery.

Figure 5
The Professor after Hearing the Sound of Lisbon Being Shot

Note. Weber, R. (2021, April 05). Image: Netflix changes its view of La Casa de Papel and may disappoint fans. Sprout Wired. Retrieved from https://www.sproutwired.com/netflix-changes-its-view-of-la-casa-de-papel-and-may-disappoint-fans/

In addition to the four scenes discussed, participants also referred to the scene in which money was falling from a blimp; they mentioned the joy of the people in this scene and how they became attached to the characters. This particular scene illustrated a good deed as the robbers were giving money to the public. However, this action was initially planned to distract the

police and buy the team more time. Regardless, both the people who received the money in the series and the viewers were touched by this action. Qutub's (2020) study reported that this particular scene followed a Robin Hood robbery pattern in which money was stolen from the rich and given to the poor.

Conclusion

This study revealed that Saudi viewers identified with the group of robbers in *La Casa de Papel* in a number of ways. First, viewers justified characters' actions through the fundamental attribution error. Second, viewers were extremely empathetic with psychopaths like the Professor and Berlin. Third, viewers wished that threatening characters like detective Sierra and Arturo did not exist. Fourth, viewers expressed that they did not want the criminals to be caught, as in the Rio scene. In fact, viewers felt sad and emotional when characters like Berlin, Nairobi, and Rio got shot or caught. Participants reported that The Professor, Tokyo, Berlin, and Nairobi were the most liked characters. Conversely, the least liked characters were Arturo Román and Sierra because they threatened the success of the robbery. Finally, participants accepted the banker joining the team while they opposed detective Lisbon joining it. Future studies may examine the influence of contemporary police series on a younger audience.

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Et Tu, Atticus!: The Hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Cold War

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Abstract

Against the background of the Cold War, this article rethinks the novel (1960) and film (1962) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, more specifically Atticus Finch's characterization as the courageous, unblemished defender of an unjustly accused black man in the American South. Because of Atticus's unrelenting efforts to exonerate Tom Robinson, he has been proclaimed the 20th century's greatest American movie hero. At a closer look, however, it turns out that, while Atticus fights hard for Tom, he nevertheless, and as a matter of course, abandons the investigation into the stabbing death of Bob Ewell, a poor white man and Tom's accuser. *The New Yorker* magazine noted this conflict in the movie. So, it begs the question: from what social attitudes does this broad-spectrum admiration for Atticus emerge? This article proposes an answer: it originates in identity-centrism, an attitude that underlies United States ideology during the Cold War era and results, specifically, in a total disregard for the poor. In other words, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a closed-ended novel of good versus evil, but an open-ended work that raises a troubling question about diversity.

Keywords: poverty, Cold War, justice, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960; film version 1962) recounts the deeds of Atticus Finch, a lawyer whose courageous defense of the falsely accused and unjustly convicted African American Tom Robinson has enjoyed worldwide popularity for more than 60 years. Because of a courtroom behavior based on the belief that "all men are created equal" (Lee, 2015, pp. 273ff), Atticus is celebrated as the 20th century's greatest American movie hero. At the novel's end, however, Atticus's behavior is incongruent with his expressed belief and with the law. While he braves much disapproval to defend Tom, a poor black man, he casually abandons the investigation of poor, white Bob Ewell's death and is indifferent in the face of the incident's evidential facts. From a diagnostic standpoint, it will be proposed here that Atticus (and by extension the film's audience) have little compassion for the poor, despite the novel's early portrayal of poverty (which somehow disappears from the film adaptation). Against the Cold War's tense background, reading and adapting the novel while indifferent to the plight of poverty-stricken individuals like Bob Ewell seems normal and expected. Cold War ideology, especially identity-centrism, makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem like a closed-ended novel of good versus evil, but it should be studied as open-ended, as such a deliberation would raise questions about diversity and indifference to poverty. For this conclusion, I historicize *To Kill a Mockingbird* within the context of the Cold War.

A Question about Atticus's Justice

It is general knowledge that, in American fiction, Atticus Finch is a hero among heroes. Since its publication, the novel has been read by generations as a morality tale set within the alienating environment of Southern U.S. racism. Released in 1962, the film version starring Gregory Peck as Atticus has been so popular, that in 2003 the American Film Institute announced Atticus Finch as the greatest hero in 20th-century American film. Indiana Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981) was second, and Rocky Balboa (*Rocky*, 1976) third.

Atticus is so generally popular because audiences perceive him as a man of justice. In the plot, Bob Ewell reports that Tom has raped his daughter Mayella, but Mayella has lied to her father about the incident. Firmly believing "all men are created equal," Atticus, an attorney, fights for Tom's exoneration, despite knowing an innocent verdict is a long-shot in the intensely racist Southern town. When Tom's trial ends – as expected – in a guilty verdict, Atticus's courage in the face of the townspeople's condemnation moves the audience. Atticus's behavior is regarded as educational as well: thousands of U.S. middle and high school students have read the novel as part of their curriculum. Against a background of deep racial discrimination, the heroic image of Atticus fighting a losing battle for justice is amplified for Southerners because he embodies the Southern ideology of honor associated with the Civil War. Thus, the text presents his courtroom struggle as a parallel to the Lost Cause of the Civil War: "You sound like Cousin Ike Finch, [...] Maycomb County's sole surviving Confederate veteran" (Lee, 2015, p. 101).

To Kill a Mockingbird, novel and film, emerged amid severe racial discrimination and the social upheaval of the 1950s and 60s Civil Rights Movement. Just around the corner lurked the struggle against suppression of identity and for respect of diversity. Indeed, Atticus's battle for an innocent African American served up an idealized image of a just man, and the novel is certainly a portrayal of virtuous humanity, incarnate in Atticus. Yet Atticus's behavior at the novel's end is incongruent with his earlier behavior and with his statements. When a person is found fatally stabbed and the cause is unclear, a thorough investigation should be conducted no matter the victim. So, when Bob Ewell is found fatally stabbed in the chest, Atticus begins

to investigate. But his apathy causes the investigation to fizzle out, which shows that he was not very interested in applying the law and obtaining justice in *this* case.

Ewell, angry at his family's courtroom humiliation, attempts revenge by attacking Atticus's children Jem and Scout as they walk home on Halloween night. Boo Radley, whose reason for marginalization is unclear and who has formed a distant but warm relationship with the children, "intervenes" and then carries the injured Jem home. Ewell is stabbed to death with a kitchen knife. For once showing empathy toward Boo (and the Radley family), Atticus decides to go along with Sheriff Heck Tate's "guess" that the stabbing happened accidentally during the scuffle for the children. Thus, the sheriff and Atticus decide that Ewell got what he deserved during commission of a heinous crime and let the matter fade away. Consequently Boo – not to mention Jem and Scout – does not have to endure the ordeals of an investigation and a trial.

This decision demonstrates that Atticus can change his attitude depending on the victim and on the attacker's background; hence, Atticus does not truly believe that "all men are created equal." Furthermore, Atticus's conflicting attitudes are reinforced by the novel's title because "To Kill a Mockingbird," the bird representing innocence, is to annihilate the innocent. Here, the innocents – besides Jem and Scout – are Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Tom loses his life because of the workings of an unjust system, but Boo is not subjected to the same process because Atticus hinders it. By way of contrast, Bob Ewell, poor, angry, abusive, and brutal is unworthy of the life and justice that innocents deserve. In other words, not everyone's life is equal, whether outside or inside the courtroom.

Just as *To Kill a Mockingbird* was becoming a film classic, *The New Yorker*, a national weekly magazine, noted:

> …the story's conflict [is] between Atticus's high-minded appeals to the rule of law and his complicity in Heck Tate's ruse that saved Boo Radley from being tried for the murder of Bob Ewell: "The moral of this can only be that while ignorant rednecks mustn't take the law into their own hands, it's all right for nice people to do so." (Crespino, 2018, p. 156)

But in chorus with the novel's characters, especially Atticus, some readers and viewers might still insist that "[The Ewells] were people, but they lived like animals" and "They can go to school any time they want to, when they show the faintest symptom of wanting an education" (Lee, p. 40). In other words, the Ewells are regarded as willfully ignorant, lazy, and less than human; hence, they deserve punishment.

This judgment might seem overly harsh when one considers that most whites in Alabama "were desperately poor" (Crespino, p. 145) during the years spanned by the novel (1933-1935), that is to say, the depths of the Great Depression. Few, if any jobs were to be had. Circumstances stemmed not from character – effort, diligence, and earnestness – but from a capitalist system over which an individual had no control. Thus, many surrendered to despair, if not suicide, gave in to the ruin of their moral fiber and to a desperation that can spawn outrage and violence. In the light of it, the savvy reader might question the novel's soapbox ethics, since, as human beings, don't the Bob Ewells of the world need saving too? Interestingly, S. McIIwaine (1970) demonstrates that from the 18th century to the 1930s poor whites were most often represented as lazy, abusive, and lecherous. In other words, the novel's discourse about Bob Ewell reflects a long-standing stereotype.

Considered in this light, Atticus's statement "all men are created equal" makes him a liar, not a man of justice. Nonetheless, millions have obviously perceived his behavior as just. But what exactly is justice? Why is Atticus regarded as a just man? Why do audiences ignore *The New Yorker*'s spot-on observation about the cover-up of Bob Ewell's death?

The Problem of Poverty and *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an Open-ended Story

For many centuries, philosophers have discussed what constitutes justice, from ancient Greeks like Thrasymachus, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, to moderns like John Rawls and Michael Sandel. But while the many views of justice exceed this article's scope, it needs to be mentioned that Atticus espouses utilitarianism and/or communitarianism. Utilitarianism seeks the greatest happiness of the greatest number, so a "just" person might tolerate the killing of a human being if doing so can save others' lives. Similarly, communitarianism emphasizes the common good even when it might victimize some. From other perspectives, liberalism, for instance, utilitarianism and communitarianism might not be a true representation of justice. But utilitarians and communitarians, who maintain that people's happiness *can* be founded on another's sacrifice, may see Atticus as a man of justice.

Significantly, the Ewells are considered "white trash" and thus, as mentioned above, have been historically maligned by both white and black townspeople, their poverty blamed on lack of moral integrity. Certainly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* directs attention to poverty as well as to racism. In fact, the novel begins by particularizing the town's poverty, and the story continues focusing on poverty until at least the beginning of chapter four (of thirty). For instance, in Maycomb, there was "nothing to buy and no money to buy it with" (Lee, 2015, p. 6). Indeed, Mr Cunningham pays not with money but with "a load of stovewood," "a sack of hickory nuts," "a crate of smilax and holly," and "a crokersack full of turnip greens" (Lee, 2015, p. 27). Dr Reynolds "charges some folks a bushel of potatoes" (Lee, 2015, p. 28). According to Atticus, "professional people were poor because the farmers were poor" (Lee, 2015, p. 27). And the Ewell family lives in abject misery:

> Maycomb's Ewells lived behind the town garbage dump in what was once a Negro cabin. The cabin's plank walls were supplemented with sheets of corrugated iron, its roof shingled with tin cans hammered flat, so only its general shape suggested its original design: square, with four tiny rooms opening onto a shotgun hall, the cabin rested uneasily upon four irregular lumps of limestone. Its windows were merely open spaces in the walls, which in the summertime were covered with greasy strips of cheesecloth to keep out the varmints that feasted on Maycomb' s refuse. (Lee, 2015, p. 227)

The Ewells' residence in "what was once a Negro cabin" "behind the town garbage dump" instantly identifies them as the lowest of the low. Additionally, the novel's first four chapters demonstrate that the (white) middle-class has little or no understanding of such grinding poverty. Caroline, for example, the elementary schoolteacher, has just graduated from college, indicating her relatively moneyed, middle-class status. She begins teaching enthusiastically, but her attitude gradually deteriorates as she faces the reality of her pupils' poverty. She is angered that some do not bring a lunch, that some are infested with lice and that, not surprisingly, some do not concentrate on their studies, thus severely wounding her enthusiasm. Despite her education, dedication, and enthusiasm, Caroline cannot even perceive, never mind actually comprehend, her students' poverty and subsequent mindset.

Indeed, Caroline's failure to comprehend raises the issue of identity-centrism. As Walter Benn Michaels (2004) notes, "The problem of the poor is not the problem of a minority." As such, the poverty-stricken "are victimized by capitalism" rather than by "oppressive definitions" reserved for ethnic groups, so people committed to identity-centrism "have tended more or less to ignore them. [Those with money] have begun to treat poverty as if it were an identity, or, more precisely, as if it were identity itself" (2004, pp. 180–181).[1] But again, not being an ethnic minority within which to compose a set of idiosyncratic identitary virtues and symbology, the poor's identity is characterized by an indelible set of negative traits. Certainly, it seems like there is an oppressive norm that has been formed about poor whites and then applied as a stereotype. That is why Michaels states that the problems of a minority and the poor have always been (but should never be) confused. Respect for diversity could benefit an ethnic minority. But it does not work for the poor (and certainly not for poor whites) because they are saved only when they make money and climb out of poverty. And this, during the Great Depression, was fundamentally impossible. If, as Charles J. Shields (2007) points out, *To Kill a Mockingbird* fully reflects white paternalistic values, schoolteacher Caroline articulates them vis-à-vis the poor quite memorably.

Southern novels written during the Cold War frequently include not only the problem of poverty but also that of racial discrimination. As Jordan J. Dominy states (2020, p. 123), "Cold War authors and intellectuals presented Southern identity and values as congruent with American democracy in an effort to package racism and poverty as moral problems that would not affect the United States' foreign policy ambitions." In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, attention to poverty and racism is supported by the background of the Scottsboro case, in which nine African American boys were accused of raping a white female. However, organizations addressing racism (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and poverty (the Communist Party of the United States of America), claimed false accusation and took action to exonerate the wrongfully convicted. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, however, racism and poverty are not amalgamated. Poverty resulting from capitalism stands apart from racism, as the author pays special attention to the plight of the white poor.

Therefore, when readers applaud only Atticus's heroic behavior on Tom's behalf, they are blind to the victimization of poor Bob Ewell, his discrimination practiced in the service of the status quo. In a sense, then, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a moral story. Instead, the novel remains open, asking readers "What are justice and morality?" by presenting Atticus's situational ethics regarding Tom and Bob. Nonetheless, the novel's readers focus on identity. Dominy states that

> Another important historical context for understanding the emergence of a formalized, academic literary study of Southern literature at the dawn of the Cold War is racism and poverty, the great challenges of the U.S. South that threatened the proliferation of American democracy and capitalism abroad. (2020, p. xiv)

I would challenge this by saying that the novel has more to do with Cold War ideology. That is why Julia L. Mickenberg (2006) found that radicals and progressives managed to disseminate, through children's books, or to children who read and watch *To Kill a Mockingbird* in school and in private, ideas that McCarthyism labeled as subversive.

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[1] Also, see Michaels, 2006, pp. 85–86 and p. 89.

The Cold War and Reading to Cloak the Poverty Problem

As mentioned, both the *Mockingbird* novel and the film entered the world in the early 1960s during the Cold War. In "The Cold War Literature of Freedom and Re-conception of Race," Reiichi Miura (2010) sheds light on identity-based ideology during and after the Cold War. When Lionel Trilling and others supported the universal values of liberalism and freedom during the Cold War's ideological battles, novels of individualism and personal freedom (*On the Road* (1951), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), etc.) triumphed over collectivism (Dickstein, 2002, p. 90). On the other hand, novels expressing Marxist beliefs, like *Native Son*, for instance, explained the American domestic problem of oppressed identity.

Emphasis on individualism and liberalism did not tend to lead intellectuals to oppose capitalism, but rather to oppose totalitarianism, including domestic technocratic bureaucracy and conformism.[2] In the 1960s and 70s, the disastrous Vietnam war against communism, diplomatic failure, and civil rights violations revealed that individuals are formed not in a social, bureaucratic mold but by their own will, through which identity can be freely changed. The value of identity was supported by postmodern theories, or, as T. Siebers (p. 126) called them, "Cold War theories," influenced by modern French thinkers. As R. Wolin (2010) explains in detail, French thinkers sympathized with Maoism, but after the disastrous Cultural Revolution, they transformed Maoism into a fundamental belief in the analysis of politics in daily life and of oppressed identities while preserving Maoist populism.[3] Supported by Susan Sontag's proposition of sensibility in reading literature and by scholars' desire to lift the scientific veil on literary study, modern French thought became popular in the study of literature and accelerated the focus on identity and diversity.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, American literary works have basically been cautious about obsession with identity. However, especially during the Cold War, American novels cautious about identity-centrism and American working-class stories tended to be misread, criticized, or ignored by middle-class readers. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a novel of tragedy that results when money is equated with class identity, was read as a story of men's objectification of women. The novel, however, clearly describes both men and women's obsession with identity through maintenance of a good appearance and mutual objectification. This is true of Daisy, who even discriminates against the lower class.[4] Thus, Gatsby betrays his low origin but later attempts to win Daisy from Tom through an upper-class identity of appearance and status symbols. Still, his life ends tragically. Another tragedy resulting from money equated with class identity is true of Clyde Griffith, an inhabitant of the East, in *An American Tragedy* (1925). Like Gatsby, Griffith is attracted to an upper-class woman and ruined because of his ambition to achieve the American dream. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Thomas Sutpen also lives a tragic life. A white man from a background of poverty now earning money, he is criticized for his low origins, thus driving him to adopt an upper-class life: owning a dynasty and slaves, marrying, and having a son and heir. Still, his obsession with identity defeats him.

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[2] With regard to the material in this section, see A. Suzuki (2017).

[3] Regarding the history, see P. Buhle (2013).

[4] As for Daisy's discrimination against the poor, see F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (Penguin, 1978), pp. 24, 114.

As these examples demonstrate, identity-centrism has long been under serious consideration in American literature.[5]

Nonetheless, middle-class readers, including Kate Millet, who are careful about oppressed identity also criticized Henry Miller's novels in the post-World War II era. Miller's poor protagonists do not care about wealth or class, however. They oppose fetishized capitalism; they hate to identify themselves with anything because they think identity is essential to capitalism and to commodity fetishism. Instead, they feel happy in a life of "non-identity."[6] The novels of some African American women writers like Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry, who focus on the poor, have been less popular than those of authors who, like Toni Morrison, emphasize on community, affiliation, and norms. In other words, the voice of the poor is rarely heard.

This focus on identity and diversity, instead of on poverty, was advantageous both externally and internally to the United States government during the Cold War. By turning attention to problems of identity and diversity, the government could propagandize democracy and capitalism's excellence, ignoring poverty while showing potential solutions for racism, a problem the Eastern bloc criticized. This was done by disseminating cultural images in which white folks take racism seriously and firmly believe that "all men are created equal." Therefore, United States cultural policy, particularly following World War II, is crucial to this discussion: A book and a film are strong cultural tools. In fact, except for a few like that of Cunningham's son, the film adaptation excluded scenes of impoverishment and references to the poor so that consciousness of poverty was weakened.

The Cold War as a Cultural War

Indeed, the United States used literary works, music, films, and other cultural products and cultural figures as tools to dissipate hostile feelings toward America while also spreading its political ideals throughout the world.[7] For instance, just after World War II, the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ) designated 620 books to spread American democratic ideals in Japan, presenting them as a "Gift of Books" (Suzuki, 2013, p. 261). Moreover, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs persuaded American author William Faulkner (1897-1962) to visit Japan and speak with the Japanese. Indeed, authorities expected that a compassionate speech by this American Southerner, one who lived in a culture that felt the Civil War defeat for a long time, would dissolve Japanese hostility toward the United States (Suzuki, 2013, 263–265). The U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs also dispatched popular cultural figures to Japan such as Pearl S. Buck, author of *The Big Wave* (1948), a work inspired by the Nagasaki tragedy.[8]

These efforts were intended to exalt capitalism and democracy while disparaging communist ideology. An important byproduct of the United States cultural policy of distributing the

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[5] Many scholars have also been cautious about an identity-centric ethos in the U.S. About 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville acknowledged that under the name of democracy, competitive spirit reinforced anxiety to outdo others. Unlike European aristocratic society, according to Jack Solomon, American democratic society has no innate feature signifying status, and this lack reinforces American use of material goods as status symbols representing achievement of social success. See J. Solomon, 1988, 62–63.

[6] Non-identity" is the term used by Adorno. See A. Suzuki, 2010, 1–22.

[7] With regard to the American political strategy of using cultural products, see, N. Suzuki, 2013, 258–276.

[8] For details, see Suzuki, 2018.

country's ideal image abroad was, interestingly, the more defined conceptualization of its own national identity. But for the United States, which required the national self-image of an exemplary, tolerant, peace-loving democracy, racial problems, especially in its South, contradicted the idealized international projection of its society, a fact that was not lost on communist regimes.

To Kill a Mockingbird was adapted into film shortly after the publication of the book. Clearly, Harper Lee depicted racial discrimination *and* poverty, but Atticus, popularly celebrated as the heroic man of justice whose attitude toward Bob Ewell is not deemed problematic, insures that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is ultimately read as an anti-racism novel. Such a reading is glaringly apparent in the film adaptation. As mentioned, the novel begins by describing the town's conditions of poverty, and, indeed, highlights poverty throughout. And it actually addresses *two* important issues: discrimination against African Americans *and* poverty among the white population. However, the film adaptation seldom refers to poverty – a sole instance is the white teacher Caroline who discriminates against poor students – ocusing almost exclusively on racial discrimination and Atticus Finch's heroism (Figures 1, 2, and 3). During an era when the United States was constructing its national identity, this film sent out to the world the image of an ideal, democratic nation, with a white character who courageously opposes racial injustice. But it ignores impoverished victims of capitalism, both black and white.[9]

Figure 1
This film scene does not depict the town's dingy and bedraggled appearance that is so much a part of the novel (Mulligan, 1998, 0:03:38).

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[9] Regarding the relation among the self-image of a nation, political benefit for a nation, and film production, Graeme Turner's argument is suggestive. See Turner, 2006, Chapter. 6.

Figure 2
In the film, none of the elementary pupils look undernourished, dirty, or ragged (Mulligan, 1998, 0:34:57).

Figure 3
The film's neat, well-paved road that contradicts descriptions in the novel (Mulligan, 1998, 1:00:57).

Conclusion

If Atticus were undeviatingly impartial, he would follow the law by bringing the case of poor, white, Bob Ewell to *justice*. Yet Atticus's justice sacrifices one person in the interests of others. According to U.S. philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2004), the law is not fair, neutral, and inorganic but designed to mitigate society's negative emotions, such as disgust, in their entirety. If so, then Atticus's actions may embody the nature of law, not of justice.

But law and justice could coincide only if the law were impartial: Injustice is wrong, no matter the skin color. The image sought is that of a society where even if discrimination against African Americans is rife, some whites do justice without regard to race. But that image is blurred by the evident injustice suffered by a poor, white man who was stabbed to death, with no consequences for the perpetrator. His death, possibly at the hand of a mysteriously marginalized person, is portrayed as justified homicide, poetic justice, and a kind of divine punishment against a false accuser. This is how the United States shows the world that Americans recognize racism as an evil that must be punished at any cost. Atticus remains a hero, despite the cover-up about the exact circumstances of Bob Ewell's death.

Considering that poor whites have been discriminated against even by African Americans, the problem is as much capitalism as it is race. However, foregrounding race was necessary for the United States during the Cold War because it distracted the poor from expecting Marxist solutions to poverty, averted international solidarity with the poor in the United States, kept communism away from the nation, and, finally, distracted from poverty by punishing racism.

Atticus remains a hero as long as audiences of *To Kill a Mockingbird* do not question his conflicting attitudes regarding Tom and Bob, as long as the story remains a closed-ended one of good versus evil, and as long as Atticus is assumed, even while disregarding poverty, to be a hero who bravely seeks justice. But a deep dive into the story shows that Atticus is not governed by unyielding moral principles, but rather acts in the interests of U.S. policy, identity and international image. In doing so, he betrays people whose abject poverty keeps them ignorant, malnourished and exploited. In the light of such treachery, we cannot but say to him, "Et Tu, Atticus!"

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The Effectiveness of Coloring in Reducing Anxiety and Improving PWB in Adolescents

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Abstract

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stressful situations. Excessive anxiety can affect various aspects of life, especially in adolescents. Adolescents who have anxiety tend to experience sleep disorders, substance abuse, and suicide. Therefore, intervention is needed for adolescents who experience anxiety. One of the appropriate interventions for adolescents is art therapy with coloring techniques. Previous research has obtained evidence that coloring can reduce anxiety and improve psychological well-being (PWB). This study aims to determine the effectiveness of coloring activities in reducing anxiety and increasing PWB in adolescents. By using a quasi-experimental design pretest-posttest, total participants in this study were 26 students aged 15-18 years, were divided into two groups, such as mandala and other shapes coloring groups. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) is used to measure anxiety and the PWB questionnaire is used to measure psychological well-being. Using paired sample t-test showed that both coloring groups experienced a decrease in state anxiety before and after the intervention, but there was no significant increase in PWB. Further analysis found that mandala coloring activities were more effective in reducing anxiety than other forms of coloring activities, and PWB of the two groups did not increase. It can be concluded that coloring activities can reduce state anxiety but has not been able to increase PWB.

Keywords: adolescent, anxiety, coloring, mandala, psychological well-being (PWB)

Anxiety is a normal reaction experienced by everyone as a sign of danger that threatens in the future (Akbar, Fanani & Herawati, 2015; Tiller, 2012). Anxiety will interfere individual activities if the anxiety is high and persistent. The number of individuals with anxiety problems in the world is 264 million people or 3.6% of the total population in the world in 2015 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). These results show an increase of 14.9% since 2005, which at that time amounted to 232 million people, as a result of population growth and aging (Vos et al., 2016; WHO, 2017). In Indonesia, individuals who experience anxiety account for 3.3% of the total population with a total of 8,114,774 cases in 2015 (WHO, 2017). WHO (2017) explains that anxiety is ranked sixth out of the top 10 causes of YLD (Years Lived with Disability) in all WHO Regions such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, and Indonesia.

Generally, many teenagers experience anxiety. The results of previous studies suggest that anxiety problems develop from childhood or adolescence (Tiller, 2012; Wittchen, Kessler, Pfister, Höfler & Lieb, 2000). According to the National Institute of Mental Health (cited in the American Psychological Association [APA], 2016) as many as 25% of adolescents in America aged 13-18 experience anxiety that interferes with daily activities. Syokwa, Aloka, and Ndunge (2014) conducted a study on children aged 9-17 years which showed that as many as 13 out of every 100 adolescents have anxiety problems. The anxiety experienced by adolescents is caused by a transition period from childhood to adulthood that lasts from 11 to 19 or 20 years of age (Papalia & Feldman, 2012). The impact of anxiety experienced by adolescents affects various aspects of life, such as affects thought processes, perceptions and learning so that it can reduce the ability to focus attention, reduce memory, and ability in association (Pangastuti, 2014). Adolescents experiencing anxiety problems can be associated with low self-esteem, developmental difficulties at school (such as absence and poor school performance), as well as disruptive behavior disorders (Silva Júnior & Gomes, 2015; Mathyssek, 2014).

Individuals who experience anxiety tend to have lower PWB (Maddock, Hevey, D'Alton, & Kirby, 2019; Rapheal & Paul, 2014). Research conducted by Iani, Quinto, Lauriola, Crosta, & Pozzi (2019) shows that individuals who experience anxiety have a negative relationship to PWB. This means that the higher the anxiety experienced by the individual, the lower the PWB, conversely, the lower the anxiety experienced by the individual, the higher the PWB. Ryff and Keyes (1995) describe PWB based on the extent to which individuals have goals in life, realize their potential, the quality of their relationships with others, and the extent to which they feel responsible for their own lives. Considering that the impact of anxiety can affect the lives of adolescents in general, appropriate interventions are needed to overcome the anxiety experienced by adolescents and improve PWB, one of which is art therapy.

Malchiodi (2012) explains that art therapy is the application of visual arts and creative processes in a therapeutic relationship to support, maintain and improve the psychosocial, physical, cognitive and spiritual health of individuals of all ages. Art is an excellent tool for communicating thoughts and feelings that are too painful to express in words. According to Ganim (2013) art is successfully used to reduce physiological stress that causes immune system dysfunction by connecting individuals with negative, painful, or scary emotions that trigger stress. After these emotions are accessed through guided visualization, these emotions can then be released by expressing them in the form of imagination through drawing, painting, making sculptures, or collages. Art therapy can be the right way to express emotions, such as feelings of anger, fear of rejection, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Permatasari, Marat, & Suparman, 2017). One of the art therapy techniques used to reduce anxiety is coloring. Coloring is also an art activity that is used as a means of self-expression that indirectly describes a person's mood,

feelings and emotions (Jung & Freud in Stefani, 2016). There are several kinds of coloring that can be done, such as coloring blank paper, coloring certain areas such as squares, copying colors from patterns that have been provided, coloring animal and natural motifs, and coloring in circles (mandalas) (Curry & Kasser, 2005; van der Vennet & Serice, 2012; Carsley, Heath, & Fajnerova, 2015; Eaton & Tieber, 2017; Flett et al., 2017).

An example of research on coloring other forms (in general) was carried out by Flett et al. (2017) and Eaton and Tieber (2017). Research by Flett et al. (2017) involved 104 women aged 18-38 years. Participants were divided into two groups, namely the coloring group and the puzzle group as a control group. The results of research by Flett et al. (2017) showed that the participants who colored significantly experienced a decrease in the level of depression and anxiety symptoms after the intervention, while the control group did not experience a decrease. Then, research conducted by Eaton and Tieber (2017) involved 85 students aged 18-44. The results showed a positive effect of coloring that is greater reduction of anxiety and evidence of higher persistence in the free-choice group compared to the forced-choice group. The research is divided into two conditions, namely the free-choice group and the forced-choice group. In the free-choice group, participants were asked to color the picture using the markers provided, while in the forced-choice group the participants were given a colored copy of the image and instructed to color their image as closely as possible according to the examples provided. Through the research of Eaton and Tieber (2017), it can be concluded that coloring in a relatively short time can reduce anxiety, and possibly increase persistence in difficult tasks.

Coloring mandala has been shown to reduce anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Kristina, 2017; Lee, 2018; van der Vennet & Serice, 2012). Mandala coloring is defined as an artistic design created in the context of a circle, because a circle represents oneself and helps individuals to organize and center themselves in a circle (Pisarik & Larson as cited in Anderson, 2017). According to Jung (in Holbrook and Comer, 2017) the mandala is part of the collective unconscious, and its physical manifestation is a psychological expression of the self. Through drawing a mandala, it allows individuals to gain more self-awareness and understands about one's self as a whole, and shows positive mental health (Anderson, 2017). Mandala have been adopted as an art therapy intervention for a wide variety of populations and purposes (Lee, 2018). Mandala have been used to relieve stress in adults with intellectual disabilities, to manage acute pain in pediatric patients, and to help children with cancer and their healthy siblings express their feelings (Schrade, Tronsky, & Kaiser, 2011; Sourkes as cited in Lee, 2018; Stinley, Norris, & Hinds, 2015).

Research conducted by Curry and Kasser (2005) on 84 students showed that the level of anxiety decreased in the group coloring mandalas and squares. Both groups were shown to show a greater reduction in anxiety than the free-form coloring group (coloring a blank sheet of paper). This is because coloring in a geometric pattern can cause a calm condition so that it can reduce anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Then, van der Vennet and Serice (2012) did a research replication of Curry and Kasser (2005) to 50 psychology students or graduates. The results of this study indicate that coloring mandalas reduces anxiety levels much more than coloring plaid designs or coloring on blank paper. In addition, Lee (2018) conducted a study on 95 students aged 18-26 years. This study divided participants into four groups, namely coloring the mandala freely, coloring the mandala with a predetermined color, coloring the mandala freely in a predetermined circle, and coloring the rectangle with a predetermined color. The results of Lee (2018) study show that all three mandala conditions reduce anxiety compared to control conditions.

Besides from reducing anxiety, mandala exercises can also significantly improve mood and PWB in the general population (Babouchkina & Robbins, 2015; Pisarik & Larson, 2011). Savage (as cited in Rapheal & Paul, 2014) explains that adolescents who have PWB show a sense of satisfaction with their lives and experience many positive emotions. In addition, PWB is also associated with maximum academic functioning, social competence and support and physical health. Therefore, adolescents who have good PWB are adolescents who are not only physically fit but also mentally healthy. Therefore, adolescents who have good psychological well-being are adolescents who are not only physically fit but also mentally healthy. Previous research has shown that the process of making mandalas can improve psychological well-being (Harter as cited in Pisarik & Larson, 2011); and effective for reducing stress (Duong, Stargell, & Mauk, 2018).

Previous research has more measured coloring activities to reduce anxiety in the adult population (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Eaton & Tieber, 2017; Flett et al., 2017; Kristina, 2017; Lee, 2018; van der Vennet & Serice, 2012), however there have been no studies regarding the effectiveness of coloring activities in the adolescent population. In addition, research on the impact of coloring mandala on the PWB of adolescents with anxiety is still very limited. Therefore, the aims of this study is to determine the effectiveness of coloring activities in reducing anxiety and increasing PWB in adolescents. There are three assumptions in this study, such as (a) coloring activities can reduce anxiety in adolescents, (b) mandala coloring activities are more effective in reducing anxiety than other coloring activities for adolescents, and (c) mandala coloring activities can improve PWB in adolescents.

Methods

Study Design
This study used a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design by dividing the participants into two groups. The first group was asked to color the mandala pattern while the second group was asked to color rectangle pattern. The selection of participants used a purposive sampling technique by selecting participants based on specific criteria set by the researcher.

Participants
The participants in this study had the following criteria (a) adolescents aged 15-18 years, (b) experienced anxiety at a moderate level (40-59) and a severe level (60-80) based on the STAI score (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory), (c) male and female adolescents can participate in this study. Researchers did not include participants who (a) used drugs or were under the influence of drugs such as antidepressants and alcohol, (b) had physical limitations, and (c) color blindness.

Study Settings and Procedures
Participants were students 10 and 12 grades recruited from one school in Jakarta, Indonesia. Participants who meet the inclusion criteria were contacted through school for the baseline measure and the randomization process to one of the coloring mandala pattern or rectangle pattern, and also for post-test at the end of the intervention. This coloring activity was carried out for three days with each group getting one pattern each day. The duration for each session is 30 minutes. After 30 minutes the participants were asked to stop and not continue coloring. Previously, the participants had been told that the coloring activity lasted only 30 minutes and every 15 minutes the researcher wrote on the blackboard so that the participants knew the time that had passed. On the third day after completion of the intervention, participants were given two questionnaire again that are STAI and PWB. After collecting the data, the participants

were given a souvenir as a thank you. The flow diagram of the participants is presented in Figure 1.

After collecting the data, the researcher should have spread out the questionnaire to 11th grade vocational high school students and high school students. However, researchers were unable to retrieve data because of the Covid-19 problem, which requires learning activities by online.

Figure 1
Flow Diagram of the Participants
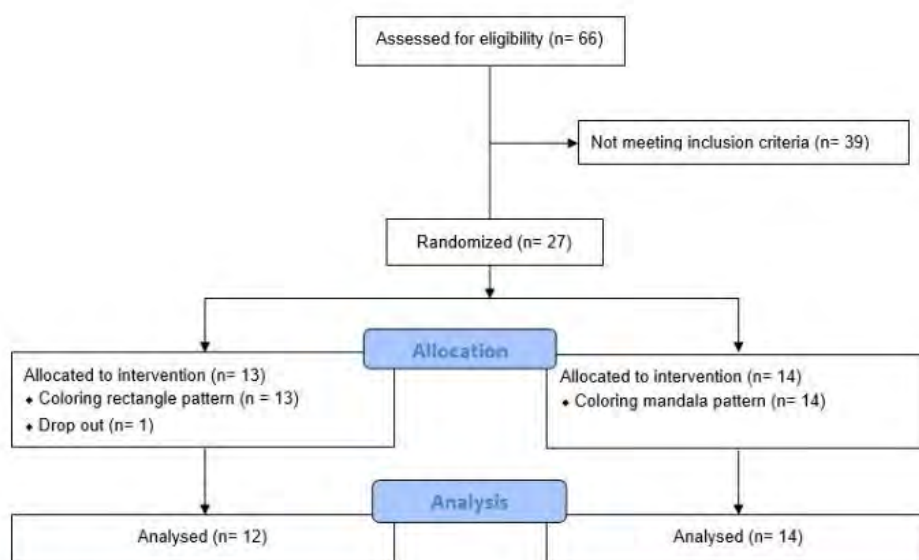
Outcome Measures

All outcome measures were collected at baseline (T_0) and after 3 days of participating in the coloring activity (T_1). Anxiety was assessed using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) developed by Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, and Vagg, Jacob (1983). This anxiety measurement tool has been adapted by the research and measurement section of the Faculty of Psychology at Tarumanagara University with an alpha cronbach value of 0.941 for state anxiety and 0.902 for trait anxiety. It contains 40 statements that is 20 statement items to measure state anxiety and the next 20 statement items to measure trait anxiety. The STAI are rated on a four-point Likert scale using response categories from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so).

PWB was assessed using PWB questionnaire developed by Carol D. Ryff (1996) which has been adapted by the research and measurement section of the Faculty of Psychology Tarumanagara University. It contains 31 statements which are rated on a five-point Likert scale using response categories from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument covers six domains, such as self-acceptance, positive relations with other, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and purpose in life.

Analysis

STAI and PWB were analyzed using paired sample t-test to see differences in pre-test and post-test scores. In addition, participant demographic data were analyzed using the chi-square test. Statistical analysis was performed using SPPS version 22.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The participants in the two groups had similarities in sociodemographic characteristics as seen from p value > .05, thus there was no significant difference. Because the two groups have similar or equal characteristics, the two groups can be compared. The average female participant in this study was 17 people with a percentage of 65.4%. Then, most of the participants had first birth order as many as 11 people with a percentage of 42.3%. The age range of participants in this study ranged from 15-18 years and the average age of participants was 17 years old, amounting to 9 people with a percentage of 34.6%. The demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Rectangle (n = 12)		Mandala (n = 14)		Total (n=26)		p
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Gender							
Male	5	41.7	4	28.6	9	34.6	.484
Female	7	58.3	10	71.4	17	65.4	
Age							
15	1	8.3	5	35.7	6	23.1	.111
16	4	33.3	1	7.1	5	19.2	
17	3	25	6	42.9	9	34.6	
18	4	33.3	2	14.3	6	23.1	
Grade							
10	5	41.7	6	42.9	11	42.3	.951
12	7	58.3	8	57.1	15	57.7	
Order of Birth							
1	3	25	8	57.1	11	42.3	.245
2	2	16.7	3	21.4	5	19.2	
3	3	25	1	7.1	4	15.4	
4	1	8.3	2	14.3	3	11.5	
5	2	16.7	-	-	2	7.7	
6	1	8.3	-	-	1	3.8	

Normality Test Data

Normality test data using Shapiro-Wilk. The results of the normality test of the STAI measuring instrument on the state anxiety dimension show a significance value of the pre-test of .074 and the post-test of .092. Meanwhile, the trait anxiety dimension shows a significance value of pre-test of .973 and post-test of .238. The results of the PWB measuring instrument normality test showed a significance value of the pre-test of .968 and of the post-test of .062. Based on the results of the normality test, all variables have a p value > .05, so the data is normal. The normality test data is presented in Table 2.

Table2
Normality Test Data

Measuring instrument	p (Shapiro-Wilk)	Distribution
STAI		
State anxiety dimention		
Pre-Test (T_0)	.074	Normal
Post-Test (T_1)	.092	Normal
Dimensi trait dimention		
Pre-Test (T_0)	.973	Normal
Post-Test (T_1)	.238	Normal
PWB		
Pre-Test (T_0)	.968	Normal
Post-Test (T_1)	.062	Normal

Findings

Table 3 shows the change scores in anxiety and PWB from T_0 to T_1 measured with the STAI and PWB questionnaire. A paired sample t-test was conducted to see differences in the pre and post-test results of STAI and PWB (T_0, T_1). The anxiety difference test is divided into two types, namely state anxiety and trait anxiety. The results of the state anxiety difference test using the paired sample t-test showed the value of t = 3.765, p = .001 <.05. This shows that there are significant differences between the two intervention groups. More specifically, there was a decrease in state anxiety before and after intervention in the other form groups and mandalas. Whereas on trait anxiety the results of the paired sample t-test showed the value of t = 1.654, p = .111 > .05, thus there was no significant difference in the two intervention groups. These results indicate that trait anxiety in both groups did not decrease. The conclusion from the STAI results states that coloring activities can reduce anxiety, but only temporarily, which is shown only in the state anxiety dimension.

In testing the group that was most effective in reducing anxiety, the researcher tested the differences between the two groups one by one using the paired sample t-test. The results of the state anxiety dimension difference test in the other form groups showed the value of t = 2.186, p = .051 > .05, thus there was no significant difference. On the trait anxiety dimension, it shows the value of t = .454, p = .659 > .05, thus there is no significant difference. The results of the STAI analysis in the other form groups indicated that there was no decrease in state and trait anxiety before and after the intervention was given.

Whereas in the Mandala group the results of the state anxiety test showed the value of t = 3.074, p = .009 <.05. This shows that there are significant differences in the mandala group. More specifically, there was a decrease in state anxiety before and after the intervention in the mandala group. On trait anxiety, it shows the value of t = 1.654, p = .122 > .05, thus there is no significant difference. These results indicate that trait anxiety in the mandala group did not decrease. However, the significance value of the trait in the mandala group was closer to .05 than the other form groups, which means that the mandala group was much better at reducing anxiety. The conclusion from the results of this effectiveness test states that the mandala group tends to be more effective at reducing anxiety than the other form groups.

Furthermore, the results of the PWB analysis using the paired sample t-test showed the value of t = -1.164, p = .265 > .05, which means that there was no significant difference in the

Mandala group. The results of this PWB show that there is no increase in the PWB before and after being given the mandala coloring activity. Therefore, the mandala coloring activity has not been proven to improve PWB for the participants.

Table 3
Scores on State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB) before (baseline, T0) and after (T1) the coloring activity

Variable	Rectangle (n=12)		Mandala (n=14)		Total (n=26)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
STAI						
State anxiety dimention						
Pre-test (T_0)	48.08	6.19	50.93	7.84	49.62	7.13
Post-test (T_1)	42.50	12.40	41.07	7.42	41.73	9.84
t	2.186		3.074		3.765	
p	.051		.009		.001	
Trait anxiety dimention						
Pre-test (T_0)	49.33	7.02	53.64	9.35	51.65	8.49
Post-test (T_1)	48.25	11.51	47.64	8.95	47.92	9.99
t	.454		1.654		1.654	
p	.659		.122		.111	
PWB						
Pre-test (T_0)	3.33	.40	3.24	.59	3.28	.50
Post-test (T_1)	3.46	.46	3.33	.51	3.39	.49
t	-1.679		-1.164		-2.006	
p	.121		.265		.056	

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of coloring activities in reducing anxiety and improving psychological well-being in adolescents. The results of the data analysis showed that the participants' anxiety experienced a temporary decrease (state anxiety) in the two groups. These results answer hypothesis 1 that coloring activities can reduce anxiety. This findings in this study are in line with research conducted by Curry and Kasser (2005) that participants who colored the plaid design and mandala for 20 minutes were effective in reducing state anxiety. In addition, research conducted by Eaton and Tieber (2017) also shows that coloring activities are effective in reducing state anxiety. Both studies explain that other form groups and mandala groups each have a structure and direction (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Eaton & Tieber, 2017). Grossman (as cited in Lee, 2018) explains that if anxiety is an inner chaos, then the existence of a structure in both groups helps participants manage the chaos. Individuals who do coloring activities have awareness and attention to the present moment, so that individuals experience lower levels of anxiety (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Conversely, the absence of patterns and directions made participants experience confusion so that participants did not color continuously for 20 minutes. Therefore, coloring activities are not optimal. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes a state like in flow that occurs during the art-making process. He found that the process of making an art work was considered more important than the final result of an art work. Flow refers to a situation in which the individual is very involved in an activity so that the individual does not focus on the anxiety they experience

(Csikszentmihalyi as cited in Ko & Donaldson, 2011). During coloring, there are tactile, visual, and repetitive muscle activities that are part of the coloring process. Research conducted by Benson (as cited in Sandmire et al., 2012), discusses the mind body relationship and the results of this study indicate a relationship between repetitive activity and a state of relaxation.

On trait anxiety scores before (pre-test) and after (post-test) showed a decrease from the mean value of 51.65 to 47.92. However, this score did not show a significant decrease in the two groups. According to Sandmire et al. (2012) the trait anxiety score is relatively stable over a long period of time, while the state anxiety score will fluctuate based on the individual's current environmental conditions. In reducing trait anxiety, additional intervention is needed besides coloring. In a study by Bergen-Cico and Cheon (2014), it is explained that mindfulness has the strongest effect in reducing trait anxiety for eight weeks. The mindfulness given can be in the form of yoga, meditation so that individuals do not judge the current event and respond to the situation reflectively (Anderson, 2017). In this study, researchers only provided coloring activity for three days while it took a longer time to reduce trait anxiety.

Hypothesis 2 is that mandala coloring activities are more effective in reducing anxiety than rectangle coloring activities in adolescents. The results of data analysis showed that the decrease in participant anxiety in the mandala group was much greater than in the rectangle groups, so that hypothesis 2 was answered. According to Jung (as cited in van der Vennet and Serice, 2012) and Buchalter (2013), the mandala shows a centering effect because of its circular shape and no angles so that individuals can easily focus on the center. Rectangle indicates a sharp angle. Bolander and Lundholm (as cited in Slegelis, 1987) describe the angular lines as giving feelings of unpleasantness, aggression, expressions of hostility, fear and control while the curved shape of the circle indicates a state of calm. This condition is due to the fact that a circle is the most symmetrical two-dimensional shape ever (Buchalter, 2013). The symmetrical shape and the presence of repetitive patterns in the mandala help draw the individual into a state of calm and relaxation. Individuals become deeply involved in an activity that removes them from the flow of negative thoughts and emotions that can sometimes dominate their lives (Curry & Kasser, 2005). When individuals are in a calm and relaxed condition, they indirectly balance their physical, mental, and spiritual states so that individuals can increase awareness and regulate negative emotions so that they can be managed adaptively (Greeson as cited in Napitupulu, 2018).

Then hypothesis 3 is that coloring mandalas can improve psychological well-being in adolescents. The results of data analysis show that coloring mandalas for three days has not been proven to improve psychological well-being in adolescents. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is not answered. This can be caused because the participants in the study experienced psychological problems such as anxiety, stress in the low and moderate categories. The higher the level of psychological problems experienced by a person, the higher the benefits obtained so that the increase in PWB is more visible. Most of the participants in this study were also in the moderate category so this could be one of the causes. In addition, Brown and Ryan (2003) explained that no increase in PWB can occur when the individual has a neurotic personality type. Neurotic personality type is closely related to negative emotions (negative affect) so that it affects a person's psychological well-being (Diener et al. cited in Brown & Ryan, 2003). Another cause is the difference in the age of the participants. The range of participants involved in the study conducted by Duong et al. (2018) are 22-56 years old. This shows that the participants in the study were in the early adult category, while in this study the participants were in the adolescent category, so there were differences in cognitive and psychosocial development.

Recommendations

The limitation of this study is the lack of time to collect data. Due to the condition of the large-scale social distancing which made students study at home, researchers were unable to continue collecting data. However, within a limited period of time and the number of participants, a small picture of the effectiveness of mandala coloring has been obtained. Meanwhile, PWB cannot be better described. Future studies need to consider the number of participants being enlarged and the provision of multiple intervention sessions because this cannot be done so that it can be considered in the future.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this study is that mandala coloring activity is more effective in reducing anxiety but has not been proven to improve psychological well-being. The decrease in anxiety that occurs in adolescents is temporary (state anxiety), namely anxiety that can change from time to time where in response to situations that threaten adolescents, it is not influenced by personality.

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Contours of Resistance: The Postcolonial Female Subject and the Diaspora in the Punjabi Short Story

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Abstract

Diaspora literature and theory offer significant critiques of traditional ideas regarding nation-states, identities and dominant cultures. While it is true that the literature of the diaspora has been receiving increasing attention as of late, it is worth noting that works written in the diasporans' native languages are generally not included in wider discussions about the more complex issues related to the diaspora. As an initial corrective for this deficiency, this article explores selected stories in Punjabi, paying special attention to issues relevant to the lives and experiences of women in diaspora. Diasporic conditions, as most of these stories seem to assert, can be painful for women, but even while negotiating within a diverse system of values, many of them eventually discover possibilities for independence and growth. Such personal improvements are attainable due to their newfound economic liberation, but hard-won economic independence comes with a price. The inclusivity implied by identitary hyphens (i.e. Chinese-American; Mexican-American, etc.), so celebrated in diaspora writings in English, are almost as a rule missing in the fictional accounts studied here. In these accounts, an essential feature of diasporic subjectivity is the double sense of "Otherness" strongly felt by people who, having extricated themselves from the cultural demands of their original group, are not unchallenged members of the dominant culture.

Keywords: patriarchal, Punjabi diaspora; short stories; sexuality; Veena Verma

> The artist in isolation, the artist wounded, is now a diasporic body politic collectively wounded. Built into the aesthetic is the idea of the human as being worthy of consideration. – Vijay Mishra (2007, p. 149)

Mostly due to its troubled colonial past, the Indian state of Punjab[1] has been a witness to the extensive migration of its denizens, especially to Europe and North America. That exodus has complex histories and routes, and from the late nineteenth century on it has occurred in distinct waves. Starting in the 1980s,[2] a thriving body of creative literature in Punjabi, written by persons of Indian origin settled primarily in England, the United States and Canada, bears witness to the multifarious experiences of a migrant generation. Having moved predominantly from rural areas in Punjab, these writers often evince a strong attachment to the places from which they've migrated. These works, as a category of Punjabi literature, are undoubtedly a transient phenomenon, as it is unlikely that subsequent generations of diasporic Punjabis will be interested in adopting the language for their creative endeavours. Moreover, succeeding generations might not be interested in reading literature in the language of their forebears. The readership for these diaspora writings, tellingly, will be confined to the Indian Punjab.

This corpus is distinguished by a rich literary output by female writers; thus, one encounters, among other things, a strong preoccupation with issues associated with the lives, feelings, problems and hopes of Punjabi women, especially those seen as diasporic. A conspicuous detail in this creative output is that male writers seem equally concerned with the problems encountered by women in diaspora, reminding one of the assertion that "Diasporas and their creative outputs are one of the prime sites from which a new humanism might be imagined" (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 31). These writers aspire to take full stock of the complex ways in which the lives of migrants are shaped by the diasporic experience, and it is strongly tinged with a desire for a better deal for all the precariat of a world marked by inequality.

The linguistic divide of academic, and even day-to-day, life, unfortunately, has resulted in a strange separation of domains, as far as discussions about Punjabi diaspora literature are concerned. As a result, it is very rare (in spite of the growing interest in writings from and about diaspora) to come across analyses of diaspora literatures produced in Indian regional languages in departments of English. In the humanities, as a consequence, very broad areas of diasporic experience remain underrepresented. Although academic discussions revolve chiefly around diaspora literature in English, writers in Punjabi and other Indian languages fill some gaps in our knowledge of the experience of migration that literature in English does not. Translations, of course, can go a long way in making known diaspora writings to readers from other languages, though the business of translation hitherto has failed to keep pace with the fast flow of works in Punjabi.[3]

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[1] The present-day Punjab is a truncated version of the erstwhile province of Punjab in the Mogul and British eras. The partition of India in 1947 left a significant area of Punjab within Pakistan. Demarcation of the state on linguistic basis in 1966, when a new state of Haryana was carved and some hill regions were transferred to Himachal Pradesh from Punjab, further curtailed its area.

[2] Punjabis abroad had started giving vent to their feelings in the written form as early as the first decades of the twentieth century. The multi-lingual journal Gadar, beginning its publication in 1913 in United States, had articles and poems about love of the motherland and anti-colonialism in Urdu, Punjabi and some other Indian languages.

[3] Two significant translations of Punjabi short stories about diaspora came out in the initial years of the century: *From Across the Shores: Punjabi Short Stories by Asians in Britain* (2002) edited and translated by Rana Nayar, and *Between Two Worlds: Punjabi Short Stories* (2004) translated by Rita Chaudhry and Harbir Singh Manku.

Those who write creative works in English about the Indian diaspora are almost entirely city-based or are first or second-generation migrants. In contrast, diasporic writers who choose an Indian language as their creative medium are almost entirely from the migrant generation and, as observed earlier, largely from rural regions. As such, nostalgia for the places they've left behind is rather pronounced in them, as they appear to be more closely connected to the society and culture – the "soil" – of their "home" than diaspora writers in English. In fact, Indian diasporic writers in English omit many of the themes, feelings and experiences of diasporic life, a life of work in factories, economic and sexual exploitation, insecurity that comes with illegal status, forced marriages and so on.

The very choice – which is rarely a choice – of a language for creative expression is often an outcome of the socio-ideological situatedness of a person. Rana Nayar's contention, in his introduction to *From Across the Shores: Punjabi Short Stories by Asians in Britain*, that it is a conscious "decision" by diasporic authors from Punjab to write in Punjabi, because writing in English would be an "abject surrender" to "the dreaded alien culture" (2008, p. xiii) is, to say the least, debatable.

The short story remains the favoured mode of imaginative writing for diasporic authors in Punjabi, though other literary forms like the novel, poetry and plays have also been used as modes of creative expression by many of them.[4] The form of the short story seems especially suited to explore diasporic issues. None of these authors, understandably, writes full-time. So, constraints of time and suitability of the form make the short story the preferred form of expression. Some stories are quite short, clinching their issues in four or five pages; many others, as in the case of Veena Verma,[5] can be fairly long. And realism is the preferred context. What surprises about most of these stories is the way they seem to posit libratory vistas in terms of sexuality – outlooks perceptibly free from predatory and disciplinary directives. Yet, cut loose from conventional sexual norms, support structures like the traditional extended family system fade and, as a result, relationships suffer. This generally harms women and children. Many of the women characters presented in these tales, however, manage to establish subversive positions from where they challenge and, at times, manage to erode the discriminatory systems around them. This is because the diasporic space allows the development of an oppositional selfhood, though we come across a few stories where women are presented as defenceless, unfortunate victims as well.

The Male in the Stories

A majority of these stories, understandably, are about "life led outside the habitual order", as Edward Said labels it (p. 186). Beyond the pale of their habitual order lies a place where discrimination in the workplace, in the streets and even at the hands of the authorities is common. For instance, the short story "Ustare" [Razors] by Tarsem Nilgiri, a Punjabi-British writer, is about the sexual harassment and exploitation faced by Indian women in a factory.

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[4] As a genre, short story in Punjabi emerged in early twentieth century under the influence of British literature. Subsequently, owing largely to the propagandist distribution of Russian literature in Indian languages at highly economical prices in the decades of the Cold War, writers like Tolstoy, Gorky, Turgenev and Chekhov not only left their deep imprint on the tradition of fiction in Punjabi, but also continue to influence the present-day literary production in the language.

[5] A word about the moorings of the authors whose stories are under discussion: Veena Verma, Tarsem Nilgiri, Baldev Singh and Shivcharan Gill had migrated to England; Amarjit Chahal and Surjit Kalsey to Canada; and Parvez Sandhu to the United States.

The sexually coloured remarks and behaviour of Chris Smith, a foreman in the factory, are unbearable for Mrs Bhagarth who is victimized not only by Smith but also by some of her Indian female co-workers. Mrs Bhagarth feels humiliated by the taunts directed at her physical appearance and ashamed at the behaviour of her fellow-workers, who appear to be overly receptive to the advances of Smith.

The power structure at the factory comes out as naked and ominous: another worker in the factory, one later learns, had been dismissed for objecting to Smith's advances, and Mrs Bhagarth, bowing to the pressure exerted by her husband, did not testify, as she had promised, against that injustice. When it is her own turn to complain against the atmosphere of sexism and discrimination in the factory, the manager's response "This is a free country where everyone's free to make or break relations with others"[6] (Nilgiri, 2015, p. 48) comes out as inadequate and naïve. The story implies, among other things, that it is the insecurity of the coloured workers and the request for immoral favours that create a humiliating atmosphere for the female workers, often taking a toll on their dignity. The crushing, racialized power structure operates "in and through bodies" (Brah, 1996, p. 3).

References to age, complexion and bodily shape, which are scattered throughout the narrative, may also be perceived as signs of the individual's debasement in modern industrial cultures, as they bring added issues to the atmosphere of racial and colour discrimination, sexism and exploitation. The story, nevertheless, hints at the weaknesses of the traditional structures of patriarchal systems in yet another way: the reaction of the "wronged" husbands speaks volumes about male anxieties regarding female sexuality in the changing economic and employment scenarios.

Punjabi diasporic writers are acutely aware of Indian women's newly-acquired sense of economic independence, especially in Europe and North America. When writing about British South Asians, Rusi Jaspal observes that migration "allowed individuals to imagine a more positively evaluated identity position, underpinned by feelings of self-esteem, distinctiveness and self-efficacy, the very principles of identity that were susceptible to threat in the homeland" (p. 93). It is quite interesting to see the varied responses to women's increasing economic independence in the stories under consideration: while most of the women characters seem to celebrate this by interpreting it as an attainment of agency, men with patriarchal mindsets are portrayed as increasingly insecure at the prospect of changing gender equations in new socio-economic realities.

The story "Doosri Maa" [Another facet of mother] by Baldev Singh sets the tone by talking about the transformation brought about in an elderly woman by financial independence (2011, pp.156–161). The narrator's mother, who used to be docile, traditional and dependent on others, acquires agency and becomes capable of taking decisions about her life once she starts receiving a regular pension.

The easing of economic worries, in "Chudail" [Witch], another story by Baldev Singh, makes a married couple in their sixties experience a new vigour in their relationship. Pritam Singh's romantic affection is returned by his wife Bhagwanti in the form of a warm embrace. Suddenly horrified by his wife's expression of desire, the patriarch in Pritam Singh begins to insult her: "Hussy . . . Witch . . . You should be ashamed of yourself – you have grey hair now . . . God knows what pranks you might have been playing in the factory!" (Singh, 2015, p. 79). By all

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[6] Translations of titles and quotations from Punjabi are mine.

appearances, this story is about patriarchal ideology, a system of economic oppression whose waning hold on the wife produces anxiety for the husband that is trapped in it. Pritam Singh might have been liberated from economic insecurity, but he still remains confined in an orthodox mindset, expressing annoyance with any manifestation of female sexuality. Thus, the story provides sharp insight into the way patriarchy can disturb even moments of intimacy, resulting in paranoid male insecurity vis-à-vis female desire.

It is not only gender but also age that is directed as a weapon against Bhagwanti. The husband's reaction, like a flash of lightning, exposes the asymmetrical power-structure of a marital relationship and the ideological imprisonment of unsuspecting human beings condemned to lead restricted lives. Evidently, women in many of these stories seem to be fighting on multiple fronts: while negotiating life in complex diasporic environments, they must combat sundry modalities of patriarchy, some of which may operate deviously through their association with, among other things, "home and hearth."

Another story that touches upon male insecurities and altered gender roles in diaspora is "Pachhon Di Vaa" [The western airs] by Shivcharan Gill (2015). The orthodox Khushi Muhammad finds his deepest convictions threatened by and is paranoid about Western culture. His wife, whom he was reluctant to bring to England from Pakistan, insists on working while the husband is dead set against the idea. The social significance of the story lies in the manner in which it presents the dilemmas of human beings caught in the clash of disparate mores and value-systems.

An especially poignant narrative about the agony of women left behind by their husbands is "Mukhda Chann Varga" [A face as beautiful as the moon] by Amarjit Chahal, a story about the mayhem caused in marital relations by migration. The husbands, in search of livelihood and better opportunities, have to move out to countries in the West or the Gulf, leaving behind their wives and families. Back home, the feudal patriarchal mindset, not taking stock of the estrangement caused by the husband's departure, is unwavering in its disregard for the emotional-physical needs of women.

The characteristics of this story's marital relationship are revealed obliquely and astutely, using the folk patriarchal/feudal metaphor of woman as agricultural land that belongs to the person in actual possession of her as a "resource". One is reminded of the ecofeminist concept, which questions and debunks precisely this "sense of entitlement" (Rangarajan, 2014, p. 566). Reared with a patriarchal mindset, the son (Jagjit) is arrogant enough to pass judgment on and admonish his mother, never considering the fact that her husband has always remained away/abroad. The shrewd, ironic edge of the story comes from the suggestion that the very Meetu whom Jagjit detests for having an illicit relation with his mother might be Jagjit's biological father. At the same time, Jagjit the husband is totally oblivious to the emotional needs of his wife. The very first sentence of the story is a folk-humorous erotic saying which comes charged with a strong note of pathos surrounding the unavoidable feelings of estrangement: "If the husband and the wife meet each other after a month, they feel like newly-weds" (Chahal, 2011, p. 103).[7] It would be hard to find a more vehement story about the pain lurking beneath the term "grass widow" (a woman whose husband is away often or for a

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[7] The cultural context of the Punjabi language term muklaava makes this opening sentence rich in tragic irony – almost everywhere in India, people used to get married quite young. But the bride was sent to live with her husband and in-laws only after puberty: *muklaava* (or *gauna*) was the term denoting the occasion.

prolonged period). The agonies of parting are not only applicable to those who depart: more often than not, they are more acute in those left behind.

Stories by Women: Beyond Sorrow

Turning to the stories by female writers in the Punjabi diaspora, the reader will notice an increase in the number of women's issues and a difference in their treatment. From a female perspective, some of the diasporic literature in Punjabi by male authors, despite (or possibly because of) their noble intentions (reflected in their concern for women's safety and well-being), may appear somewhat paternalistic. Not discounting the significantly valuable contribution made by the male authors to this body of literature, the fact remains that a female perspective may drastically reformulate the problems, issues and experiences of people in diasporas. Female sexuality in particular (though we have seen a candid treatment of this aspect in stories by Baldev Singh and Amarjit Chahal), finds bold and convincing representation mainly in writers like Veena Verma. The same might be said about the feelings of loneliness that women who are kept confined at home often encounter.

A story by Surjit Kalsey "Dukhwa Kaase Kahun . . ." [To whom shall I tell my sorrow?] is about the anguish of diasporic women, who are often victimised by male insecurity and patriarchal hypocrisy. Raaji, a young, neglected wife, receives a call from a stranger who enquires about her well-being. This is obviously a case where someone has dialled a wrong number, but the elderly woman from the other side talks so affectionately that Raaji cannot bring herself to point out the mistake. The stranger, in fact, is trying to console some other young woman whose plight, the reader gathers, is not very different from Raaji's and many others like her: "Raaji used to get phone calls from her friends, distantly-related cousins, sisters-in-law, and other women acquainted with her, but each one of them would have some deep pain within her which they would try to share with Raaji . . ." (Kalsey, 2011, p. 102). The story also makes a brief, though piercing, reference to the mechanized existence of Raaji's husband who, like many others, makes an excuse of "overtime" at the factory while actually visiting prostitutes. The tone of this narrative, along with its gist, may seem unduly depressing, but it makes some important points about one sordid aspect of diasporic existence in certain situations. The story is notable, too, for the dual aspects of family for women, especially in diaspora: one has to concede the cogency of Avtar Brah's assertion about family being "an area of acute ambivalence for women" (1996, p. 76). Trapped in an iniquitous relationship, Raaji suffers, but she is doubly a victim because the supportive family framework is missing altogether in her case. The idea of female-bonding, what Pramod Nayar, in the context of African fiction terms "a community-building among women through the mother-tongue" (2002, p. 140), is touched upon here, but in the isolating environment of the migrant generation, such a community remains unfeasible for a woman like Raaji. There are many other stories, however, that build upon the premise of females sharing their experiences and emotions, thereby forging a resistive solidarity against patriarchal oppression.

Alternative sexuality is an area which writers in Punjabi are extremely reluctant to talk about. So, while it is refreshing, on the one hand, to see Parvez Sandhu in "Saunkan" [Rival] (2011) daring to talk about queerness, on the other the reader is struck by its ambiguously patronizing tone. Neena, the protagonist, is a young, neglected wife who is initially beguiled by fanciful notions about romance and marriage. She gets a jolt when she finds out that her husband Dalip is in a homosexual relationship with Jimmy, a man whom she had taken to be just her husband's close friend. There is a palpable irony in the title "Saunkan" as the term traditionally means "another wife of one's husband." The story loses some of its liberating power when the author

attributes the husband's queerness to social dysfunction: as a young boy he was sexually abused by his stepmother. Moreover, the way Dalip's sexuality is revealed towards the end of the story (though hints are dropped along the way) is also somewhat problematic. The story's end produces a twofold shock: first, the revelation that Neena has a rival, and second the disclosure about her husband's sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Dalip's portrayal is nuanced – he does not stand out as a caricature, a pitfall that many of the works in the traditional mould from the subcontinent seldom escape.

Veena Verma, one of the most acclaimed Punjabi diaspora writers, focuses primarily on the problems of migrant-generation women. She often talks about the forms of exploitation to which women are subjected, their struggle to have control over their lives and bodies, and the problematics of female desire in diasporic situations. One of her stories, "Ikk See Mein" [Once there used to be a me] (2012a), portrays diasporic women's lives of misery and also the fracturing of their identities. Even though her stories circulate chiefly around diasporic people from the Indian Punjab, some of her stories do attempt to talk about characters of Pakistani origin (in stories like "Taiyyaba" [2015, pp. 165-178], "Marya Chooha" ["A dead mouse", 2015, pp. 179-192] and "Bigaani Agg" ["Alien hearth", 2012b, pp. 156–174]): the fate of those characters usually turns out to be even bleaker than that of their Indian counterparts. There is the sense that the author is on slippery ground as she describes circumstances pertaining to Pakistan. Cut off from the support-structure of the family system, many of her characters, usually female, find themselves adrift, helpless and vulnerable.

These women are often exploited – financially as well as sexually – and have almost no one with whom they might share their miseries. Their plight, interestingly, is not very different from that of "black women with no institutionalized 'other' that [they] may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress" (1984, hooks, p. 67). Very often, the exploiters turn out to be men in whom they had put their trust or people who hide their designs under the façade of goodness or respectability. Verma's stories, in their fierce denunciation of the orthodox mindset, strongly remind one of Alice Walker's work regarding the exploitation of black women, primarily at the hands of their "own people". There is a subtle conditioning through which the members of one's racial or cultural group start to view their own people "as the white society views them, namely as non-productive, unreliable, weak" (Simson, 2009, p. 229).

The process of crossing over to new cultures and lands is often traumatic and leaves its scars on the souls and bodies of human beings. Jonathan Gil Harris's reflections, in a related context, about the alterations bodies may undergo as they move through the changing physical and cultural environments (2015, p. 1; pp. 232-33), may be taken as a pointer towards the strange rites of passage migrant journeys require. Verma's story "Ghalat Aurat" ["Wrong woman"] (2012aa, pp. 28-52), is about the body- and soul-wrenching experiences of illegal migrants in scenarios that seem to be the rule rather than the exception. The story concerns the horrifying reality of organized gangs in the business of human trafficking and their exploitation of defenceless human beings caught in circumstances beyond their control.

In this story, young Manjit and her child are made to take the route of illegal migration in order to join Manjit's husband in Germany. The kind of brutalization human beings, especially women, are subjected to in such crossings becomes obvious when Manjit's husband is unable to recognize her – so much has she changed through her ordeal at the hands of goons involved in human trafficking. Many others who manage to cross over successfully may not be that lucky. "Room-Mate", also by Verma, is about a relationship where the main character despairs at the unreasonable prospect of finding a soul-mate in a marital union arranged across cultural

differences. Rajni, who has married a British resident, becomes rebellious as she is profoundly uncomfortable with her dependence on another – even though that other, Aman (despite being snobbish because he is a British citizen), reveals himself as a caring person. One detects an odd intransigence on Rajni's part in her salvo at Aman:

> I am tired of acting at loving you, Aman . . . I am mentally alone. This British life has failed to fill the vacuum in my soul. I feel that we are two separate cultures who got linked owing to the mistakes made by our parents [in arranging the marriage of Rajni and Aman] . . . Neither of us is getting any justice. (Verma, 2015, p. 157)

The narrator blames the cultural gap between the two "roommates" who fail to become marital partners (though, strangely again, Aman seems willing to make the effort and accuses Rajni of not returning his love!). Through Rajni, who is frustrated at not achieving emotional fulfilment in her marital relationship, the author points towards the malaise of relations arranged like business deals in the hope of migrating to greener pastures.

"Rajai" ["The quilt"] (2012aaa, pp. 11-27), another story by Verma, is darker still. When Banso, a young mother of two kids, is sent to England to join her husband (without the latter's knowledge), she discovers to her horror that her husband is living with, and married to, another woman, a white one. Banso and the kids have nobody to turn to in an alien landscape. Given shelter by an elderly ex-service man "Fauji" (literally, "army man"), at his modest home, Banso decides to go on living with him (the generic "Fauji" serves the function of a proper name in the story) as his wife.

The relationship is Platonic, as Fauji informs Banso about his impotence caused by an injury during the war: the valorisation of a non-sexual relationship reflects a deep distrust of male sexuality (and, of physical desire in general) in this context. The construction of Fauji in the story exploits the traditional ideological associations around army men – saviours, self-sacrificing, noble beings. Fauji goes as far as attempting to find a suitable partner for Banso, and downplays his nobility by attributing his gentility to his impotence. His deficiency seems to relate him to the maternal principle, which strikes a chord with Banso, making Fauji a larger-than-life figure. One gets the feeling that this ideal figure is constructed as a revulsion against the marauding sexuality associated with males in so many diaspora writings in Punjabi. The title, with its specific cultural associations, makes for a potent symbol that has echoes in Punjabi folklore.

After Fauji's death, the quilt, which had sheltered a discarded Banso and her kids at his place, remains, with its metonymic associations, a cherished object with her. She refuses to part from it, though to her daughter-in-law it may appear soiled. Banso's assertion of the quilt's value for her – "Rabb di bukkal, the embrace of God" – has its moorings in romantic folk tales and songs of Punjab, most notably "Kulli yaar di Surag da jhoota, agg laavan mahalan nu – the humble abode of the friend is Heaven; I don't care for palaces" (This latter verse "Kulli . . ." keeps on recurring as a leitmotif in Verma's writings and is explicitly quoted in the story "Bloody Bitch" [2019, p. 332]). Verma's stories are unusually rich in sprinklings of folk sayings, proverbs, snatches of folk songs, and so on, which at times provide lighter moments in the otherwise dark narratives. The story thus gives a utopian vision of an all-transcending love that becomes the be-all and end-all of Banso's existence.

Another surprising element in the story is wife-bashing by an otherwise idealized Satbir, Banso's son, who hits out at his white wife whenever he feels that his mother is not being taken

proper care of. One gets another demonstration of the deeply ingrained nature of the patriarchal structures of domination in Verma's delineation of the male psyche (though the story's implicit approbation of violence this time is disturbing).

Towards Counter-Hegemony

One of Veena Verma's stories, in particular, focuses on the formation of new ideals, bridges and alliances while looking more towards the future than the past. In "Firangiyan Di Nuhn" [Daughter-in-law of the white people], Shanti, a middle-aged woman who has a white boyfriend, praises white culture and its values while strongly condemning what she takes to be the orthodoxies, petty jealousies and exploitative attitudes of "her own" people, that is, people of Asian origin:

> I worked for the white for twenty-five years – and I like these people. They do not discriminate against anyone on the basis of caste or religion; there is no dowry system. . . . We have a lot to learn from them. They tell the truth right to your face – they do not stab you in the back. (2012a, p. 275)

Shanti, though illiterate, is astute enough to realize the need to have a critical outlook on the values associated with the home-nation, as well as the need to broaden one's perspective in the light of a new cultural environment. While there may be no reason to disagree with Jane Beswick's view that diasporas are "no longer simply viewed as a striving for the past since they are also confronting the future to establish a new sense of place, belonging and role" (2011, p. 135), negotiating a new sense of belonging is memorably termed "homing desire" by Brah (1996, p. 189).

Gerd Baumann's useful terms "integration into" and "integration with" serve to distinguish between two different types of relationships the diasporics can have with the dominant host culture: "'integration into' means submitting to a predefined whole … 'integration with' would be a dialogic process of adjustment between hegemonics and diasporics'" (2011, p. 47). "Integration with" would, therefore, be an ideal wherein there is negotiation with the culture of the host nation, while not entirely abdicating the alterity of one's self-definition(s). At the same time, Verma's stories do not contain unalloyed or uncritical praise for the contemporary white European cultural ethos. One character in "Ikk See Mein" is quite forthright in the assessment of that culture:

> In these Western countries, our souls get wrenched through their racist and colour discrimination against us. The licentiousness here is shocking. The Whites hate us – we know that; but the doings of our own people in this advanced country make us hang our heads in shame. (2012a, p. 126)

Another of Verma's stories, "Mr. Right" (2019a, pp. 257-269), fits into the radical feminist mould, being the tale of a young woman's declaration of independence and her deep distrust of the very institution of marriage. This institution is seen here as enforcing an exploitative and mutually destructive relationship. Her "Tun Kaun Hain?" [Who are you?] is about a woman who has separated from the orthodox, stereotypical notions that describe the female as a vulnerable toy-thing whose emotional nature can be used to control and exploit her. Kiran's emotional independence and plain talk have the power to shake her suitor, a man whose liberal pretentions are unable to hide his deeply ingrained patriarchal biases. She is direct:

No, you have not misled me. I am not an infant. If you have been using me, I also have been using you. You haven't forced yourself on me. Everything happened with my consent. . . I am an adult, and am responsible for my actions. I am not blaming you. (2012b, p. 30)

In this fiercely independent protagonist, diaspora and hybridity have a significant role in constituting "a subject beyond the traditional divide of gender" (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 51). Another instance of this we find in Jello, the central character in "Mein Jeena Chahundi Han" ["I want to live"] (2019, pp. 125-144), who as a child had witnessed her widowed mother's sexual exploitation by her brothers-in-law. As a young wife, she had seen her own brother-in-law killing his wife and getting away with it. Now as a middle-aged woman, she refuses to remain silent when her son resorts to violence against his wife and reports him to the police. The women in Verma's stories often emerge stronger after their ordeals and become pillars of strength for others, evoking in the process the vision of a future where the formerly powerless, through meaningful agency, create a more egalitarian world.

Conclusion

There are intensely authentic voices in diaspora literature written in Punjabi. Admittedly, this literature is uneven in terms of literary quality, but it is difficult to agree with statements like the one from otherwise astute critic Amarjit Chandan that there is "nothing substantial in the so-called diaspora literature written in Punjabi" ("Home Verse," 2015, n.p.). Much of this literature, of course, has a sort of rawness that holds a folksy appeal, though there is an astonishing lack of discrimination in the Punjabi publication business which, to be fair, is constantly fighting battles for survival.

The entire question of literary taste and literary worth is fraught with considerations other than literary. For instance, underpinnings of race, neo-colonial attitudes, class, region, gender, ethnicity, and so on, cannot simply be wished away in literary creation, reception and evaluation. Ashcroft's probing questions about literary aesthetics, wherein he points out how "aesthetics" could be deployed as "an essential component of the discourse of exclusion" (2015, p. 412) in the context of postcoloniality (though he is talking primarily about postcolonial literature written in the English language), are extremely relevant to discussions about the place of diaspora writings in creative literature. Diaspora literature in Punjabi, in this regard, in its exploration of some crucial areas concerning human movements across societies and cultures, and especially in its treatment of issues related with women under such circumstances, makes a significant contribution to writings about migration.

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Exile and the Disabled Body in Randa Jarrar's "The Life, Loves, and Adventures of Zelwa the Halfie"

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse the notion of exile as one of paradox, of being both within and without, as a disconnect between the mind and body. Edward Said has noted that exile is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience". Said's suggestion of a mind/body split gives us room to consider the sense of self as already in-between, as the exiled 'I' attempts to find a home within a new land and a new body. Exile from one's own homeland is also exile from one's body in Arab-American author's Randa Jarrar's latest novel *Him, Me, and Muhamad Ali* (2016). The collection of stories moves away from reclamatory approaches to ethnic identity and examines the characters' trajectories of selfhood through a gendered, racialized, and embodied image. Disability features as a site of tension, a site of interrogation of Zelwa's (the protagonist) sense of self. It is a peculiar coming-of-age narrative in the sense that it is an anti-Bildungsroman, a probe into bodies that fail to be integrated, assimilated, or acclimated to American culture, while also failing to maintain their association with an Arab collective identity. Jarrar's text underscores and redefines the "I" of the Arab immigrant exploring transgenerational trauma and reclaiming her identity through celebrating the body.

Keywords: Arab women's literature, body, disability, identity

As Edward Said notes, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (2001, p. 173). This is a paradox in itself, as the head and heart need to find a place to merge. Exile can be understood in theoretical terms, but language often fails to capture the experience of exile, of existing outside of one's home, of being away from one's roots in a state of liminality. In the case of refugees, it's a case of needing to move without necessarily wanting to, while with immigrants it's a complex issue that spans generations and includes a state of limbo, a constant search for a homeland, for a sense of belonging. The resulting hybridity is a state of being that generations of immigrants carry within their bodies and is often "compelling to think about", and in Randa Jarrar's case, to write about in her narratives.

Exile has accrued sundry meanings in the fields of sociology and literary studies. In contemporary literary and sociological studies, exile is a multidimensional and bi-lateral phenomenon…in the post-structural philosophical point of view, ontologically, exile is examined as a fundamental state of being, the outcome of the essential human condition. Exile can also be examined as a self-imposed departure from one's homeland, race, and milieu, and termed self-exile. It is often described as a form of protest against the social and political circumstances which the person does not feel are suitable for their life. Self-exile is a feeling of estrangement from a society where one feels unable to adjust to new circumstances, triggering the establishment of a buffer between self and society. Gradually, such accepted alienation becomes a fact of exile, and ultimately self-imposed exile develops into a particular lifestyle (Singh, 2016, p. 3).

For the purpose of this paper, exile and self-exile will be examined as a continuity, that is to say, one leads into the other. Jarrar is an Arab-American author of the critically-acclaimed *A Map of Home* (2008), *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali: Stories* (2016), and most recently of her memoir *Love is an Ex-Country* (2021). As an Arab American her work often engages with issues of identity, ethnicity, and sexuality. Arab-American literature typically considers issues of cultural hybridity and that particular state of constant in-betweenness. Nathalie Handal describes Arab-American writers as experiencing "an ongoing negotiation of the self as they explore their many experiences, visions, and heritages, and bring wholeness to their multiplicity" (2001, p. 60). Because of this very specific state of being-in-flux, the circumstance of multiplicity and an understanding of exile is written into the body in Jarrar's work.

Bodies are vessels in which we experience the world. There are multifaceted ways in which bodies articulate themselves and find a language to voice experiences of both otherness and disability. How might attention to disability expand our understanding of hybridity and exile? Disability hardly features in narratives of exile, and if it does, it is as a tragedy, the amputation of a limb, the mutilation of the body and by extension of the self. In such cases, experiences of disability are not a focal point. In Jarrar's work, however, disability is featured through the body of Zelwa, a young Arab woman who is born a "halfie", half human and half transJordanian ibex. As the protagonist goes through her experience of exile and disability, she arrives at a politics of self-exile from an ableist community that leaves no room for her. This self-exile allows her room to find her authentic voice and embrace her body and identity, a process that ultimately puts an end to oppressive societal expectations and the exiling of her body. In many ways, the narrative echoes memoirs such as Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride* (2009). Clare's memoir deals with disability and exile through a personal chronicle that examines institutional violence against disabled and queer bodies. Similarly, Jarrar's fictional text offers an instance where exile and disability coalesce within one body.

Zelwa's Exile, Disability, and Journey

Anglophone Arab women's narratives are usually concerned with verbalizing the state of the immigrant, where the individual is caught between home and a state of diaspora. At times, this state of marginalization may also be exacerbated by a state of liminality. Liminality in its basic definition evokes a state of being limited in relation to boundaries and spaces. This marginalized zone is where minorities, disabled and queer bodies exist. Most literature by Anglophone Arab women writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Fadia Faqir, Dian Abu-Jaber and others has concerned itself with re-writing the image of the Arab woman and narrating gendered relationships. These studies are generally viewed from a postcolonial critical lens of exile, home and patriarchal relationships in both private and public domains. There is an urgency to rethink the links between exile, gendered relations, home, and the disabled/queer body. Bodies that are othered are racialized, gendered, queered, and cripped. A reading of Jarrar's work is enriched by an understanding of the body as exiled and marginalized by both the private and public domains, at home and outside the home.

According to scholar Dalal Sarnou (2014), most Arab Anglophone literature deals with immigrant narratives and exile. Works produced by Arab women living in the Diaspora are referred to as immigrant writings, but building on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature (1986), one may relocate these narratives. To refer to minor literature theory is to stress the handling of a given language by a writer who is not native to a particular language. Deleuze and Guattari's theory simply places immigrants as standing between the culture of origin and that of the adoptive country, and equipped with first-hand knowledge of both, they assume the role of mediators, interpreters, cultural translators and double-sight observers of the two cultural entities.

This "doubling" of sight is necessary when reading Zelwa's state of in-betweenness. If we consider that immigrants are standing in-between cultures, then disability itself may be a place of in-betweenness, at least in the case of the protagonist in Jarrar's lone story that deals with disability. In every story presented in her work, Jarrar places her female protagonists at the centre and brings their bodies into conversation with their social roles, their identities, and their particular articulation of self. The text of "The Life, Loves, and Adventures of Zelwa the Halfie" explores the state of being an immigrant as perpetual exile from one's body. The story is narrated through Zelwa's contemplative voice, beginning with "All I have ever wanted is to feel whole" (2016, p. 189). Sensing the limitations of her halfness, Zelwa struggles with finding acceptance with herself. She strives to feel complete despite her obvious dividedness, in both her physical and mental states. Her body is half "Transjordanian Ibex and half human", which initially labels her as a marginalized member of society. Whatever she does, she continues to feel as though she does not belong. There are others who live in the same type of body that she occupies: "There are about five thousand of us halfies in the country, mostly residing in Wyoming, Montana, Texas, the Bay Area, and New York" (2016, p.190).

The use of the word halfies and not "disabled" is significant. Many Disability Studies scholars have considered a character's disability as a way to add complexity to the narrative. It is a "narrative prosthesis" as Mitchell and Snyder argue, "a crutch upon which…narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (2000, p. 49). If we apply such analyses to Jarrar's story, we find that Zelwa's half-formed body functions as a "narrative crutch" that allows one to consider the complexity of embodiment in the case of immigrants. The material and lived body (in the text) becomes a site of exile that is attended

by a constant feeling of estrangement. This is reflected in Zelwa's "general feeling of difference" (2016, p. 192).

While Jarrar's employment of disability as a metaphor might be problematic for many Disability Studies scholars, another way to consider Zelwa's half-body is to question what sort of potential spaces does the disabled body open up? For instance, Michael Bérubé considers how "narrative deployments of disability do not confine themselves to representation" (2016, p. 2) but can "also be narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action" (2016, p. 2). As such, Zelwa's half-body places her in a position of exile but also, and very importantly, allows her room to explore her identity and sexuality. She goes on many dates and drives her "disability-equipped van, which allows me to accelerate with my hands and provide my lower body lots of room" (2016, p. 191).

Zelwa's disability van is an analogy that relates to her ability to move between spaces as an immigrant. The circumstances of hybridity and disability relate to a third space, one in which the establishment can use the hybrid, disabled individual in order to establish its boundaries of normalcy: "the disabled body multiplies the possible terms of disavowal for both the colonizer and the colonized; because disability can be a more evident signifier even than the colour of one's skin, it becomes a visual means by which to define normalcy and, by extension, nation (Lacom, 2002, p. 140).

Zelwa's body is clearly a halfie, half-formed, half-abled, and half-allowed to fit in. She is in a constant state of non-belonging, of homelessness, unable to fit adequately in her home or her body. The body itself becomes a site of anxiety and an inability to feel whole. As the narrative progresses, Zelwa's understanding of the body shifts to accommodate new definitions of a body that can house her. She has to make a home out of her body.

Chris Jenks's *Transgression* provides a solid approach to the general subject of transgression, incorporating an overview of the term itself and its multiple definitions and understandings. He proposes a straightforward definition, "Transgression is that which exceeds boundaries or exceeds limits" (2003, p. 7). Given that definition, Jarrar's characters are transgressive in their positionality and their rejection of boundaries and limits. While choosing not to define her sexuality at first, Zelwa soon identifies herself as a bisexual woman. Being a disabled, queer female places her at the very bottom of the normative hierarchy; to others, there was nothing normal about her. Soon after she reclaimed her body in its disability, she scared away suitors with what they would consider confusing confidence in spite of her Otherness. Being a family attorney and financially independent, she was successful and stable in all aspects of her work life. Even with all her accomplishments and sense of autonomy, the fact that she is a halfie will always restrain her societal acceptance and belonging. Casted off as Other, Zelwa attempts to find her place within the community as a disabled, queer Ibex.

Interestingly, her father refuses to accept her bottom half, which is quite ironic, considering Zelwa eventually finds out that he is also a "halfie". The denial of his truth creates an identity crisis which he then conveys onto his relationship with his daughter. Fearful of the possible discrimination and maltreatment by others, he keeps his halfness hidden from his daughter. This silence and shame soon manifest into a turbulent relationship between the two, and a projection of the father's insecurities onto Zelwa. The father's inability to fully accept his Otherness then, gets translated into antagonistic behaviour.

The difference between Zelwa and her father is mainly in the way that they deal with disability and identity, making it clear that it takes more than one generation for an individual to accept this state of otherness and exile. It shows in Zelwa's refusal to adhere to cultural and familial norms: "I have gone to a couple of self-acceptance conferences for other half beasts, or halfies, as we prefer to call ourselves" (2016, p. 192). Zelwa's commitment to finding a path begins to flourish half-way through the narrative. This changes the course of what seems to be a coming-of-age-story to a counter-bildungsroman. Rather than adhere to the common narrative of a Bildungsroman, Zelwa's journey resists the common trope of marriage. By applying a different narrative form to the traditional Bildungsroman, this "process of revision" is necessary for "bending and stretching the form so that it reveals the multiple patterns and figures hidden under the generic 'carpet' that has served to define a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form" (Bolaki, 2011, p. 12).

To break away from the common marriage-trope, Jarrar stretches the traditional definition of happiness to interrogate compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Disability Studies scholar Robert McRuer identified a "compulsory able-bodiedness," where "being able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labour" (p. 91). What Jarrar does in her narrative is subvert and challenge the two normativity expectations as Zelwa asserts that she realizes she is "label-free" (2016, p. 193). Zelwa begins to consider that her body's capacity for sexual exploration surpasses her expectations. In spite of her feelings of inadequacy, she begins to explore "a sort of rite of passage for me" (2016, p. 195). The textual choice of the words "rite of passage" reminds one of the Bildungsroman trope.

Jarrar uses Zelwa as a modern representation of disabled and queer women who are trying to reclaim their Otherness and gain back their agency through self-discovered confidence. In the beginning of the story, Zelwa expresses her desire to feel "whole". There is a constant need to rid herself of the diverse obstacles she faces because of her disability, mostly relating to her dating life. The theme of halfness extends throughout the story to include her sexuality as a bisexual woman. Upon coming out to her father, he replies, "It's not enough you're a halfie? You want to be half gay and half straight too?" (2016, p. 194). The father's comment reflects the normative requirement to box and label identities; those individuals that do not meet normative criteria cause, in normative mindsets, a confusion that develops with their attempt to grasp the unfamiliar. This lack of understanding usually causes overwhelming feelings of mental and emotional exile of the marginalised individual within a community, as well as the sense of physical exile within oneself.

Zelwa struggles to find acceptance within the family but feels rejected and exiled from home. Her father asserts that she must have an operation that can "fix" her, but she refuses to agree to the surgery that would alter her physical (and subsequently emotional) being. Her father's wrath at her for refusing to adhere to his patriarchal choices and norms leaves her dejected: "I wanted to run after him and scream…I wanted to tell him that I was beautiful, and of all the people in the world who've pointed and laughed at me, he had been the first" (2016, p. 199). Her father's rejection is not just the rejection of one individual by another, but is reminiscent of the Law of the Father in Lacanian psychoanalysis. What Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father refers to the influence of cultural and social law within the family, something which has traditionally - especially within patriarchal societies - been associated with the actual figure of the father. The father's rejection, then, is a metaphor for society's rejection of Zelwa (Hook, 2016, p. 113).

Thus, the father attempts to enforce society's normalcy and its patriarchal values. Only when Zelwa manages to leave her father's expectations and judgement behind is she able to grow into her full self, allowing her identity as a woman to emerge. Zelwa's progression into self-acceptance is an ongoing process, "I wish I could tell you that all wounds were healed after that, wish I could say that I accepted myself unconditionally from that moment on, but it remains a daily effort" (p. 200). Living without her father's approval, she is in a state of exile, constantly looking for fragments of her self that will allow her to live a life that she feels proud of.

Thus, her success is important to her as an attorney, and she eventually begins to feel a sense of freedom previously unexperienced. With the father-figure gone from the narrative, the symbol of patriarchy and discrimination begins to depart her psyche. Having finally found her voice and her ability to refuse a surgical intervention, Zelwa begins her growth as a well-rounded character. She chooses self-exile and to remain outside the margins of normativity. Knowing full-well that the surgery her father suggests could "cure" her body from its deformity, she still refuses to adhere to the surgical fixing of her body. This choice is not arbitrary. The narrative seems to suggest that the alteration of her body will coincide with the self-betrayal of her identity.

Bodies that are different in the text are not just ibexes, but also mermaids. The text references mermaids being perceived as attractive and exotic, while ibexes are not. This selective bias digs its roots deep within society. Tying mystical creatures to seductiveness is choosing to disregard their apparent Otherness because they are interpreted as part of a sexual fantasy. Ibexes are considered disabled bodies in Jarrar's text, while mermaids are not. Zelwa questions the reasoning behind people's sexual attraction towards mermaids in her attempt to find common ground between them and halfies—who are more likely to be viewed as undesired. The difference lies in the mythological versus lived realities of bodies that are marked as other and deviant. Zelwa's intimate and fated meeting with a mermaid changes her self-understanding and allows her room to accept her otherness and difference by loving another's "different" body: "I stared at her tail's scales" (2016, p. 200). It is in this recognition of the other that Zelwa realizes she has found love and self-love, both feeding into each other. It is her first act of self-love, choosing to love the mermaid, and they end up living together, creating a home, exiled from others:

> On Sundays we do yoga in our back yard. I put my arms over my hooves and she puts her arms over her scale and we chant…she remining me: 'There is oneness in duality. Nothing is one and nothing is double. You are both'. Then, we do our salutations, our bodies like mirrors facing the whole, brilliant sun. (2016, p. 201)

A home is created after a long sense of loss and exile. This new home is where she finds her sense of belonging, and in the simple, daily routines of "mornings, she brews coffee and nags me to buy toilet paper" (2016, p. 200). Zelwa's long desire for normalcy culminates in a disabled and queer relationship, where the two women enjoy each other's "lack" and find wholeness in the other.

This relationship in its queerness is also subversive and reminds us of French Feminist Luce Irigaray's wholeness – "I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed…There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists…you/I, we are always several at once…we haven't been taught, nor allowed, to express multiplicity" (1985, pp. 206, 209). Irigaray's dichotomy of you/I and self/other is broken when

the two women meet and there is no more room for boundaries that separate. The ending allows room for multiplicity of bodies and an unconventional relationship that exists outside the law of the Father. It is, therefore, a counter-bildungsroman. Effectively, the image that Jarrar offers is one of "oneness in duality. Nothing is one and nothing is double" (1985, p. 201). This narrative strategy of subverting the patriarchal and narrative expectations of a bildungsroman works by focusing on Zelwa's discomfort with her difference. Lacom (2002, n.p.) suggests that "the disabled body […] almost universally perceived in terms of lack, comes to symbolize the impossibility of totality" but what Jarrar's ending attempts to do is reiterate the possibility of wholeness in lack, and a doubling of bodies as oneness (2016, p. 140). These different and "freaky" bodies employed in the narrative, whether Zelwa's ibex-body or the mermaid's body, both push against social constructions of normativity:

> Being "freaky" is a direct mode of resistance to systems of neoliberal valuation. It works to revalue the "freaky body" itself, not as a commodity implicate in the neoliberal exploitation of bodies, but as a potential site of resistance made possible by the very anti-normativity that places it outside mainstream desirability. (Bryan, 2018, p. 377)

Zelwa's body becomes a site of resistance and allows room for multiple expressions of identity as she embraces her new-found love for herself and her unnamed mermaid lover. The split between her mind and body becomes one that she is able to move freely within and without, harnessing the power of in-betweenness and hybridity.

Conclusion

Although Zelwa initially feels limited in her dating choices, recognising the immediate limitations of her body, she grows into her own skin (her halfness), embraces multiplicity and, by extension, wholeness. Throughout her journey, readers pick up on a certain undertone of growing confidence as Zelwa's narrative progresses. Zelwa eventually finds peace in her difference, noticing the discrepancies and duality in everything around her. Only when her father leaves and she is left to face her inner voice is she able to confront her demons and push against societal discrimination. Having rejected the medicalization of her body and the surgical manipulation of her body-parts, she reclaims her body and her sense of agency. By refusing to assimilate, Zelwa finds her own identity and formulates a new and untainted understanding of her body and other bodies. She no longer sees "full" humans as the normalized sanctioned idea of "whole", but rather finds that wholeness comes from within.

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Deep Ecological Reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'The Book of The Hunter': An Eco-Conscious Approach

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Abstract

Deep Ecology is one of the newly emerging areas in ecocritical studies. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess has coined the word in order to promote ecological consciousness and encourage a feeling of shared identity between humans and the biosphere. Studies in Deep Ecology propose that the human being is just one more among the many species in nature, and not *the* supreme one; the belief that humanity is somehow exceptional is swiftly leading us towards the anthropogenic depletion of the environment. Mahasweta Devi, a well-respected author and social activist, shows great concern for the health of the ecosystem and its importance for the continuity of the human species, to the extent that a significant amount of her work can be used as apposite study material for eco-critical analysis. The novel considered here, *The Book of The Hunter*, incorporates salient features of the concept of Deep Ecology. Consequently, the present study reviews the novel with an ecological perspective, all the while discussing the author's efforts to create eco-consciousness among the readers. The story follows the lives of two couples, the medieval poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti and his wife, and the youngsters Kalya and Phuli. While the novelist aims to capture the different socio-cultural conventions of XVI century rural society (in this Devi acknowledges her debt to Mukundaram's 1544 epic poem "Abhayamangal"), she nonetheless offers a significant commentary on the deep-seated, beneficent attitude of the forest-dwelling Shabar community of Odisha and West Bengal towards ecological management. At the same time, the author illustrates the effects of the growing number of settlements encroaching upon the forest.

Keywords: deep ecology, ecocide, Ecocritical Theory, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Mahasweta Devi

Ecocritical Theory, which focuses on the relationship between the natural environment and literature, is presently receiving attention from an increasing number of researchers. Ecocriticism, first explained by Cheryll Glotfelty, is interdisciplinary and interprets the works of novelists and poets in the context of Nature and of issues related to the environment. This theory posits that Nature plays an important role in literature, as Nature provides much of the context where language can produce fictional representation. Consequently, the literary work can and should be analysed from this theoretical standpoint as well. Also known as Environmental Literary Criticism, Green Studies and Ecopoetics, it is a broad concept that is becoming popular among critics. One of its main objectives is to create consciousness about the irreplaceable place of a healthy biosphere in the future of humankind.

There are various strands and sub-fields in ecocritical studies, with disciplines such as Ecofeminism, Ecocide, Deep Ecology, etc. Ecofeminism, the word coined by French feminist Francoise d'Eaunne in 1974, studies the connection between women and Nature and is built on the analysis of how patriarchal domination affects both. Arthur Galstonin introduced the term Ecocide in 1950, referring to the destruction of the natural environment by human activity. Nuclear war, the dumping of harmful chemicals and the excessive exploitation of natural resources lead to ecocide. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the phrase "Deep Ecology" in his work "The shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary". It has an ecological, philosophical and spiritual approach and considers humans, plants, animals and the Earth as a rational whole.

Deep ecology is conceived on the idea that the environmental movement must develop a biocentric perspective instead of an anthropocentric one. Anthropocentrism considers human beings as the centre, the most important element in nature, superior to all other living creatures. All other entities in nature like animals, plants and minerals are considered resources, meant for exploitation by human beings. In many religious scriptures man is presented as the ultimate handiwork of the God, a Supreme Being whose Creation is intended for exploitation by man. On the other hand, biocentrism strongly proposes that all the elements in Creation have equal value. Instead of an excessive focus on the human being and his never satisfied needs, it gives equal importance to all other living beings and natural objects around him. It opposes the anthropocentrism that asserts that the human being should preserve the environment not for its own sake, but for its exploitable value.

Literature Review

Arne Naess in his epoch-making work "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary" (1973), introduced the term deep ecology and established the difference between ecology and deep ecology. The former focuses on the problems related to the environment and the latter promotes ecological consciousness. He criticizes man's disregard for his dependence on nature and his exploitation of the environment as one would a slave. Warwick Fox, in his "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy for Our Time?" (1984), has called attention to the fact that the world is a single entity, and that human activity that disregards this fact and greedily destroys the environment will eventually contribute to the demise of human beings.

In their famous work "Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered "(1985), Bill Devall and George Sessions give an insight into the concept of deep ecology by focusing on its two fundamental tenets: Self-Realization and Biocentric Egalitarianism. Self-Realization implies that the human being is interconnected with the rest of nature; it is self-identification through

our shared identity with the total ecosphere around us. Biocentric egalitarianism suggests that all living things are equal members of an interconnected whole whose elements have equal intrinsic worth. John O'Neill in 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value' (1992) describes three varieties of intrinsic value in non-human beings and non-beings in the natural world. First, non-instrumental value; second, intrinsic properties; and finally, "objective value". The concepts discussed in these analyses about the relationship between nature and human beings provide a relevant framework for the deep ecological reading of the select fictional work of Mahasweta Devi.

Discussion and Analysis

Deep Ecology is a radical movement that challenges the belief that human beings are the measure of all things. Moreover, it proposes that our endeavours to alter the global ecosystem are pointless, as they are self-harming activities. Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions are the main exponents of the Deep Ecological Movement. It focuses on creating an ecological consciousness that demands the unity of humans, plants, animals and the Earth. Deep Ecology plays an important role as a philosophical thesis and as a movement in the field of environmental ethics. As philosophical advocacy, its goal is the improvement of human relations with Nature.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific writer, social activist and recipient of many notable accolades like the Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi award, shows constant concern for Nature and its intimate relationship with human life. Most of her work has an ecological dimension and Nature is always a background and protagonist. Her major works like *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights Over the Forest, 1977), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1980) and many others show her enduring concern for the ecosystem and proposes tribal guardianship of it as an exemplar for ethical thinking and honourable behaviour towards it.

Accordingly, many of the issues that we associate with the real-world problem of environmental depletion are manifest in Devi's work. Yet given the fact that Devi's novels are works of artistic imagination, in what sense can they be interpreted as faithful representations of reality? To what extent does the information they offer influence readers' judgments about real-world ecological issues and stage a call for action? I'd answer these questions by saying that the fictional world constructed by Devi, its characters and events, reflect the overall inventory of what is known about the changing environment, so that statements about context, characters and incidents can be appraised with respect to truth and falsehood. Thus, such statements as appear in her work have truth value.

The novelist's standpoint with regard to the ecosystem is apparent in her celebrated 1994 novel *The Book of the Hunter*, originally written in Bengali as Byadhkhanda and subsequently translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta. Outwardly, the main concern is to make the reader aware of the history of a tribal community, the Shabars, who are famous hunters and great lovers of nature. It features a simple way of life that is totally dependent on the forest in which they live. More importantly, it depicts the relationship of the Shabar community with Nature and their great respect for their environment.

The Shabar is a forest-dwelling tribal community living on the outskirts of the jungle. They hunt, sell meat and skins as well as wood, fruits, roots and whatever they can easily obtain from the forest. They buy the minimum basics that they require to live. Though they hunt, they don't consider it a violence against fellow living creatures. Expository comments regarding the

possible duplicity of the Shabar mindset (the hunt is not violence) are made when the character Mukunda articulates his conviction that the hunt, by its very nature, is violence. Kalya opposes Mukunda's arguments using religion. He believes that the hunt is the work assigned to them by the forest goddess Abhayachandi: the Shabars are the children of jungle and their livelihood depends on hunting in their environment. But here is the environmentally-conscious angle: they do it as benevolently as possible by following all the rules set for them by the goddess and never consciously harm the jungle nor the animals therein. The environment, thus, is never depleted.

This point is brought to the fore in various episodes. For example, while Kalya and his companions are hunting the King Elephant, Danko, an old and respected member of the community, tells them that if the elephant goes near the fortress of Abhayachandi they must not kill him: they must consider his survival as the goddess's desire. Danko's admonition reflects the religious precepts that keep the Shabars from hurting the ecosystem, with the prime directive being that they should only hunt for their livelihood. Thus, they believe in and follow the principle of "Live and let live".

Old Danko is an ecological hero/gamekeeper of sorts. He knows and reports on the religious tenets that keep the environment healthy. He himself follows those rules to the letter, living deep in the forest in a wooden hut with neighbours such as the aged python that dwells in the hollow of a tree. He cares for the old python and has dug many reservoirs to capture water from forest streams for creatures to drink. The character Mukunda also reinforces the idea that other beings are as important as humans. During one of his many his journeys, Mukunda meets a young Brahmin crying for Kamli, his dead cow. He has raised her as his own child and cannot bear her sudden death, finding it very difficult to live without her. "I raised Kamli from the time that she was a tiny little thing.... How can I live without her?" (Devi, 2002, p. 49).

At every step the novel promotes the ecocentric ideas fostered by Deep Ecology. As we can observe in the examples above, Devi's insertion of Deep Ecology principles into her story is conceptually simple, as it offers gently persuasive episodes to the reader. Another example is the Shabars' use of a resource that is being depleted at present: water. The water of the Shilai River flows through Abhayachandi's forest and is divided into five streams. The Shabars use only one stream and the other four are reserved for *the other* animals in the forest. They will exploit only their part and keep the environment wholesome. This reflects the fact that every action by the Shabars is offered in the novel as being in concert with Nature, as in the episode where Kalya and Phuli skin a hunted leopard and collect the body parts that they need. When they are finished, Kalya places the remaining carcass in the bushes for dogs and jackals to eat.

At every turn the story gently advocates for a limit to human exploitation of the environment. As Arne Naess has stated,

> Diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms. And the so-called struggle of life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. "Live and let live" is a more powerful ecological principle than either you or me. (1973, p. 96)

The Shabars, as they are portrayed by Devi, undoubtedly follow this same principle. Though the Shabars do experience many difficulties, they live happily within the limits of their

environment. They have accepted their lack of superfluous affluence as a fate destined by the goddess. To this point, Kalya describes the Shabars as a pre-modern people:

> Look Thakur, you pass time with books and manuscripts and you know a different community. The Shabars are residents of the forest; they live at the edge of town! They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it. How else do you think Kalketu could have lost his kingdom? We don't understand money. A cowrie or a dhebua or damri - copper or iron coin is as far as we go. (Devi, 2002, p. 117)

The Shabars eat very simple food like rice, seasoning it with salt and pepper. When the town dwellers don't buy meat from Shabars in the hot summer and rainy season, Shabars have to survive on what they obtain from the forest, like wild fruits, leaves, vines, snakes and snails. They don't have proper houses, but live in small huts, while in winter they don't have the quilts to protect them from the cold. They make due by wrapping their bodies with burlap. But still, for the Shabars the forest is like a mother that meets all their needs. The character Tejota articulates this belief:

> Some call her Abhayachandi and others call her a desolate forest. The forest itself is our mother, what do you say? She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, medicine herbs, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive, doesn't that make her our mother? (Devi, 2002, p. 73)

Here Tejota articulates a standard Deep Ecology tenet: All life forms have a fundamental interconnectedness. Through this character, Devi gently persuades readers that we need to stop human exploitation of the biosphere and generate a symbiotic relationship with it. There is also an indirect endorsement of the need to protect non-industrial cultures (who are exemplars of the beneficial stewardship of the biosphere) from the invasion of industrial greed. This is observed as the city walls, made of furnace-burnt bricks, keep encroaching upon pristine forest lands. Bemo Shabar, the community's chief, suggests the king stop the manufacture of bricks using the furnace, as its fire causes pain to the mud and, therefore, torments Mother Earth. He should instead order the construction of a packed mud wall without the use of the furnace.

Bemo Shabar's disagreement with the king shows that the Shabars have no affiliation with the political machine that has been created by urban, consumer economies, but rather, as the children of goddess Abhayachandi, they follow religious directives that serve the needs of Nature. Through his profound empathy for Mother Earth, Bemo Shabar is basically asserting that there are no boundaries between human beings and the rest of creation, as the world is fundamentally one. He essentially argues that the destruction of the natural world must be opposed not because of its monetary value, but because it is part of our wider self. Its diminishment is our own diminishment. As Fox puts it,

> "... there are no ontological divides in the field of existence. In other words, the world is simply not divided up into independent subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and non-human realms. Rather, all realities are constituted by their relationships. To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness." (1984, p. 194)

Throughout the novel, the Shabars display what might be called bio-empathy, and many more examples can be brought to prove the point. When a trader requests a hundred skins of male deer for the king of the Dhalbhum for a religious ceremony, offering silver coins for them,

Kalya refuses the offer because it is the deers' mating period and killing them at this point will bring Abhaya's curse upon them. In another instance, Megha Shabar, who is Kalya's father, unintentionally (or was it intentionally?) killed a pregnant deer, an act that was considered a great sin for which he was denied great knowledge and the leadership of the community by his own father-in-law. Furthermore, Danko Shabar, the previous head of the community, ruled that during a wedding only five deer skins and one or two wild boars could be taken as dowry by the bride's father. Danko lessened an earlier, heftier quantity because such hunts would have ultimately exhausted the forest. Thus, he promoted the limited killing of animals in order to maintain an apposite balance in the ecosystem. To convince the family to accept the smaller quantity, he tells them: "You have got a daughter's wedding and she is under Abhaya's protection – what is the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars?" (Devi, 2002, p.78).

As the story suggests, self-regulation by the Shabars is much more effective than public protocols set in penal codes. Self-regulation means that a shared mindset and a consensus exists among the Shabars that favours the maintenance of the ecosystem. For them, substance in non-human form enjoys an existence that is analogous to human existence and is worthy of rights. The Sal tree, for example, marries the Mohul tree in the month of Phalgun. To celebrate the event, Shabars dance and sing around the trees all night long. Trees are even personified: One day Mukunda sees Kalya and Phuli walking together with her arm around his waist. He finds it a shameless act that reminds him of the immoral actions of a wild vine that wrapped itself around a Sal tree in the forest. "These people didn't even know the meaning of the word 'shame'. They were the forest's progeny! Mukunda had once seen a wild vine wrapped around a Sal tree. Neither the tree nor the vine knew shame, and nor did these two." (Devi, 2002, p. 116).

Moreover, on the eve of the wedding every boy marries a mango tree, as the tree is a symbol of life, shelter and nourishment. Like trees they are also supposed to create new lives and be victorious over death.

> On the eve of the wedding, all the girls walked around a mahua tree seven times and every boy 'married' a mango tree. Why this 'tree wedding'? So you could become givers of life, shelter and nourishment like the trees. So you could be victorious over death, like a tree. A tree creates new trees through its seeds, and lives on through them. The same way, you lived on through your progeny. (Devi, 2002, p. 131)

Like *other* animals in nature, they also have equal rights for males and females. They can marry whomever they want, during quarrel a husband may thrash his wife, while in return she can do the same to him. Men and women can divorce and remarry. They follow nature and set their rules by it. Tejota, as head of the community, uses her knowledge of forest herbs and plants for preparing medicines. She comments different animals that are satisfied with the limited resources of the environment: "Look at the kingdom of animals and birds! When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and the banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence or destruction" (Devi, 2002, p. 100). The Shabars don't farm and they are not allowed to till the soil, so to obtain rice they have to sell meat, skins, bird feathers, resin and honey to the town dwellers. Shabar men are not permitted to sell these items, only the women. They are prohibited from using metal jewellery, and can use only natural things as ornaments.

As growing urban civilizations flourish, they impel human beings to exploit nature beyond any reasonable limit. Increasing industrialization, pollution and deforestation blind the human being to the rights of non-human entities, turning them into a thing that is intended for use. Only humans have rights. Unfortunately, regular contact with the town people began to change Shabar lifestyle. They turned their huts into houses with smooth mud walls with painted pictures and a hay roof. They began to earn more money and use it for luxuries like rice, oil, ointments and metal jewellery which were heretofore prohibited to the Shabars. Tejota realizes that this encroachment of the town culture in the simple, natural life of the Shabars will threaten their way of life. (Devi, 2002, p. 122). As the town of Ararha encroaches upon the forest, the Shabars begin to leave the forest and move elsewhere. Tejota explains: "... a Shabar is corrupted by living near a town. What will I do? A Shabar is where the jungle is. If the town of Ararha advances further, we'll take down our houses and pick up and leave." (Devi, 2002, p. 100). She then shares her concern with her father: "But the town keeps advancing! New neighbourhoods everywhere! The city's influencing our community and it frightens me, Baba!" (Devi, 2002, p.105) As many species begin to die off, Tejota is afraid that in due course of time the Shabars also will meet the same fate. Some of them, attracted by the luxurious life of the town, decide to settle there.

Conclusion

Many Deep Ecology principles and ideas are skilfully interwoven into this novel. By describing the life of Shabars at length, Mahasweta Devi has intended to foster ecological consciousness among the readers. The story creates an awareness of the serious threats posed by unrelenting urbanization. The author explains her concerns in the novel's preface: "The encroachment of towns and non-adivasis upon their territory, adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about adivasi society- these are all truths about our time." (Devi, xi).

The Book of the Hunter suggests that generous Nature can fulfil all the primary needs of human beings, and lacking urban greed, they may just be able to live happily. But this new conception of human existence can only proper if non-human entities are given the rights and the respect that humans have reserved for themselves.

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The Luit in Bhupen Hazarika's Songs: A Metaphor for Exploring Assam's Linguistic and Ethnic Politics

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Abstract

The river Brahmaputra, also known as Luit, has always occupied an important place in the cultural mindscape of the people of Assam, a state in the northeast of India. A source of great pride because of its sheer size and the myths and lore associated with it, it has nevertheless brought untold misery to people over the years because of annual flooding. Authors and musicians of the land have found in the Luit an apt metaphor to tell stories of love, loss, belonging and pain. In the songs of Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), a renowned music composer from Assam, the Brahmaputra becomes a character through which the poet expresses both his anguish at the sufferings of the masses and his joy at the all- embracing nature of the valley. In songs like "Mahabahu Brahmaputra", Hazarika tries to appeal to the people of Assam to maintain harmony and promote the land as one of plurality and hospitality. This song becomes significant when seen in the context of the Assam movement (a six-year long agitation to halt the illegal migration of people from neighbouring Bangladesh) and Hazarika's own conflicted attitude towards it. This article is an attempt to examine how the Luit has been represented in a selection of Hazarika's songs – the ways the river becomes a potent presence of deeply political and social overtones and a metaphor to underscore the turbulent history of Assam.

Keywords: Assam, Brahmaputra, metaphor, migration, plurality
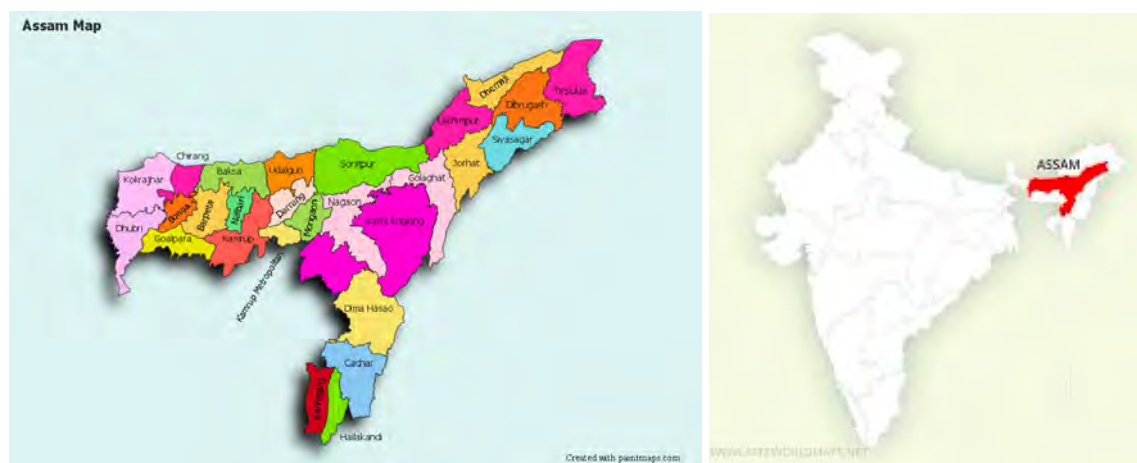
A river is not just a geographical entity that criss-crosses a terrain. It also flows down the mind and memory of the people who live by it, who live off it. Great rivers like the Ganga, the Nile, the Mississippi, the Rhine and the Volga have had emotive significance for generations of people that have witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations on their banks. The mighty Brahmaputra, or the Luit, too, evokes sentiments at times of ecstasy and at times of agony as it continues its ageless journey.

The Luit, often called Bar Luit, or the Great Luit because of its sheer size and beauty – is spoken of or sung with reverence, awe and pride; but its propensity to wreak havoc on people's lives, causing floods every year and destroying crops and houses, also evokes fear and anger. Poets and writers have found in the Luit an effective metaphor for courage, boundlessness, inclusiveness or indifference, love or rage. People residing in the region nurture a relationship of affection as well as anger with the river, and it is this capacity of the Brahmaputra to simultaneously evoke so many emotions that is exploited by poets, musicians and writers to weave tales of not just personal love and longing, but also works of political and social significance. This essay is an exploration of how the Luit becomes an apt metaphor in music. In music, it is Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), called the "Bard of the Brahmaputra", who most cogently engages the image of the river in his songs. This essay will analyse some of the songs where Hazarika uses the river imagery to highlight his social and political concerns.

What makes Bhupen Hazarika's work interesting is the manifestation of a lingering tension between his espousal of a distinct Assamese identity and ethnicity, and his humanist philosophy. While he subscribed to a leftist and socialist ideology, at the same time he lent his support to Assamese nationalist movements (labelled chauvinistic by some) and in the later stages of his life strayed into right wing politics.[1]

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[1] Bhupen Hazarika contested and lost the Lok Sabha election on a BJP ticket in 2004. Right wing politicians tried to read the narrative of nationalism in his older compositions. In an interview in 2007, he had said, "My only reason for joining active politics is to work towards the betterment of the North East…And, only if I am in Parliament, can I open up the treasury and ensure that the money allotted to the state is properly disseminated…I've never served any political party, only humanity at large". He claims to have been inspired by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's liberal views and democratic vision. During his stay in America (1949 to 1953), he was inspired by the socialist ideologies and even went to jail for it. But later, he realised that a socialist society would not work in a rich country like America. Having met Paul Robeson (American singer who was an advocate for the Civil Rights Movement in the early twentieth century in the United States), he recognised the similarity between racism there and other kinds of biases in Indian society. On returning to India and seeing the debasement in free India, he sang songs that called for the upliftment of the poor.

Assam's Troubled History: A Brief Overview

Hazarika's work has to be seen in the context of the fraught geo-political scenario of northeast India, particularly Assam. India's northeast is home to diverse communities and ethnic tribes. Sanjib Baruah in his book, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999) writes on the causes and developments of the ethnic unrest in this region. In it, Baruah gives details on the conflicts among the various communities, each struggling to assert their linguistic and ethnic identities, as well as the struggle by various groups to carve out independent homelands. These conflicts have claimed thousands of lives since India's Independence in 1947. The north-eastern region comprising eight states is connected to the rest of India only by the 22 kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor and is surrounded by China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The fragile geographical link and racial differences between the rest of India and the northeast has not only resulted in the latter's cultural and political distance from the Indian heartland but also contributed to a feeling of alienation and "otherness" that subsequently gave rise to violent separatist movements (Baruah, 1999, p. 99).

The region can be divided into the Brahmaputra valley, where most of the communities speak Assamese, and the Barak valley, which is dominated by Bengali-speaking populations. Bhupen Hazarika, popular among both the Assamese and the Bengalis, can be situated at the Assamese-Bengali fault lines in the pre- and post-Independence undivided Assam. Discriminatory colonial policies triggered the desire for a separate Assamese identity. It was felt that Bengali dominance would diminish employment opportunities for the Assamese and would be detrimental to Assamese language and culture (Baruah, 1999, p. 59). Post-Independence Assamese youth and the major literary and cultural organisation, Assam Sahitya Sabha, started demanding that Assamese be made compulsory in schools and offices in all regions, including the Barak valley. This led to a series of conflicts between the two communities in the 1960s and 70s (Gogoi, 2016, p. 9).

The Election Commission of India's report in 1978 on the rapid transformation of the demographic pattern of Assam due to the alleged influx of Bengali speaking immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh augmented Assamese anxiety. This led to a six-year-long (1979-1985) agitation led by students and middle-class Assamese who demanded that the immigrants be identified and further influx be stopped forthwith in order to preserve the political independence and cultural identity of Assam (Gogoi, 2016, p. 9). The seeds of the militant organisation, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), were sown in this anxiety as well as in the narratives and perception of step-motherly treatment of Assam by the central government even after Independence. The ULFA launched an armed movement demanding a sovereign status for the state which claimed thousands of lives in the 80s and 90s (Gogoi, 2016, pp. 191–194).

Bhupen Hazarika and the Language Movements in Assam

The concern for Assamese culture and values has been very effectively expressed by Bhupen Hazarika in his compositions, but he has also written and sung many songs in Bangla. Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, was a second home for him and he was widely popular with the Bengali audience. According to Dilip Kumar Dutta (1982), one of the first to compile and critically evaluate the songs of Hazarika, the language movements placed the singer in a peculiar dilemma. It was through the medium of music and the *words* in his songs that he conveyed his feelings and attitude towards this linguistic and cultural conflict. In the early

phases of it, Hazarika tried to promote Assamese-Bengali unity. In 1960, he composed "Maramar bhashare aakhar naikiya" (The language of love has no script), where he writes,

> On the banks of the Ganga[2] too
> You will see the silt of the Luit[3]
> When yours and my mother cry
> They wipe the same tears

Here, by referring to the confluence of the two rivers, the Ganga and the Luit, Hazarika tries to portray the fact that there is no essential difference between men. He expresses his distress at the conflict over language; language, as he states in this song, is not a barrier to human understanding or compassion. This composition, along with his more popular song "Maanuhe maanuhar babe" (Man for Man, 1960-61), reflects this humanist philosophy. Another song, "Ganga mur ma" (The Ganga is my mother, 1971) says,

> This side or that, I don't know
> I am everywhere
> I compose Bhatiali[4] on the Padma[5] after sailing through Luit
> I dance in both the rivers spreading my wings
> The same love, the same hope, the same smile, the same language
> The same pain in the heart that carries joy and sorrow,
> O' the two streams of my tears, Meghna[6] and Jamuna[7].

It is through the rivers that run through contentious spaces, recognising no boundaries, that the poet chooses to critique man-made barriers and differences. Hazarika comments that his art traverses both the Padma and the Luit, finding inspiration in both. Like the river, art does not respect limitations or physical borders but finds emotional connections in heterogeneous spaces.

And yet, while in the above song the Luit is seen in association with the Padma or it is emphasised that its tributaries flow through Bangladesh, in "Jui loi nekhelibi" ("Don't play with fire", 1972), the river is perceived as an entity belonging exclusively to Assam. He expresses his surprise at the inability of people of some communities, despite being inhabitants here for several generations, to "call Assam their own mother". The composer gives examples of friendship and unity and speaks of a shared heritage, trying to make art a pacifier. Hazarika seems to endorse not diversity but cultural assimilation, claiming it to be a true harbinger of harmony. He writes, in "Jui loi nekhelibi",

> So many Bengali brothers
> Have become friends of Assamese
> On reaching the banks of the Luit,
> Bearing its heart, Assam

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[2] Ganga – a river in India, considered sacred.

[3] Luit – another name for river Brahmaputra

[4] Bhatiali – a boatman's song.

[5] Padma – a major river in Bangladesh, a distributary of the Ganga.

[6] Meghna – a major river in Bangladesh, a distributary of the Brahmaputra.

[7] Jamuna – the third major river in Bangladesh, main distributary channel of the Brahmaputra.

> Poured the honey of love.
> Even the new bride longs
> To make her husband's home her own.

Most of these songs advocate for *integration* between the two communities, but it is important to deconstruct the singer's idea of integration: in these same songs there is a strong sense of Assamese pride and of the necessity to keep it intact. So, the main thrust of his ideas point to a perceived requisite that all who live in Assam must be, or must become, Assamese. It is not just through songs that he promotes this unity, but also as member of Gana Natya Sangha (People's Theatre Movement).[8] With this movement, Hazarika toured the length and breadth of Assam in the 60s and 70s to dispel communal tension and remind people of the age-old tradition of Assamese hospitality. Similarly, in the early 80s, as president of the Assam Janasanskritik Parishad, a socio-cultural organisation, he took part in mass rallies and appealed to people to maintain peace and harmony.

Some of his songs written during the language movement of 1972 record his frustration and anger at the bloodshed and discord that ultimately scarred the movement. In "Aaji Aai Asami" (Mother Assam today, 1972), the killings of both Assamese and Bengali people give him pain. He ends the song with the claim that the Assamese nation is a peaceful one. However, it is possible to read the narrative of nationalism in the very songs where he speaks for cross cultural harmony. In "Asamiya jatituwe asamiya kabalai kaknu karise balatkar!" (Who has the Assamese nation raped to speak Assamese!, 1972), he writes,

> If anyone with a superiority complex
> Provokes mother Assam
> Millions of young men and women
> Will shed their heart's blood.
> Our goal is not to
> Harbour ill-will against anyone, deride anyone's language
> If you cannot understand this song, I will compose a hundred more
> To awaken the banks of the Luit

Hazarika and the Assam Agitation

Hazarika wrote several songs during the Assam Agitation where the imagery of the Brahmaputra reflects not only his emotions, but also changing attitudes towards this popular uprising. In this regard, his work shows support for the Assam Agitation, at least in its initial stages. It has been documented that the migrant Muslim peasantry of East Bengal origin, unlike the "tribal" communities, or the Bengali Hindus, had chosen integration with the host society to secure their economic and political future in an adopted homeland. The Assamese community also had embraced the East Bengali Muslims as *Na-Asamiya* or neo- Assamese. However, the movement against "foreigners" and "infiltrators" had alienated the East Bengali Muslims (Baruah, pp. 55–58). As is seen in his earlier compositions during the language movement, Bhupen Hazarika had sung about integration, but during this phase, he speaks for a more exclusivist society. A song which he had composed in 1968, "Aami Asamiya nahau

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[8] People's Theatre Movement – IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) established at the national level in 1943, progressive theatre groups and creative artists came together to create awareness for socio-political change. The Assam branch was established in 1948 and Hazarika was an active member of it.

dukhiya" (We Assamese are not poor) has one of its stanzas changed in the wake of the agitation in 1980. Earlier, he had written,

> There is no Jyoti Prasad[9]
> To make a man of a coward
> 'We shall die if Assam dies'
> There will be no Tarun[10] to say this.

He changes this to,

> There is a Jyoti Prasad
> To make a man of a coward
> 'We shall die if Assam dies'
> There are martyrs to say this.

Thus, Hazarika here registers his empathy with the mass movement that gripped Assamese society and expresses hope in the youth that was trying to protect the indigenous culture and language, though in earlier songs he passionately sang about marginalised sections across the ethnic, caste and religious divide. M.S. Prabhakara in "Of State and Nationalism" says that the Assam agitation posed grave challenges to

> …the self-perception of the Assamese as a distinct and internally coherent people, a nationality within the broader framework of a pan-Indian civilisation and the Indian nation-state, a jati, and to use Baruah's (Sanjib) expression, a "sub-nation". (1999, n.p)

Sanjib Baruah, in his book *India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999), analyses the points of tension between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indian nationalism. Bhupen Hazarika's songs have espoused the cause of the Assamese identity but at the same time have tried to convey that the two identities, Assamese and Indian, can co-exist.[11] In "Aami asamiya nahau dukhiya",

> Hazarika has further claimed,
> Every Assamese is a good Indian
> And every Indian coming from far
> Who calls the soil of the Luit his mother
> Is a new incarnation of the Assamese.

This song was a clarion call to all Assamese people to recognise their place in the world so that Assam does not become "a dysfunctional organ in the body of the world". Assam has its own identity but it is an integral part of India and the world. Separation would have an effect on the world's "body"; the song thus promotes a rejection of isolationism and self-determination. This can also be Hazarika's rendering of the notion of the Assamese "imagined community", to use

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[9] Jyoti Prasad – (1903-1951) noted Assamese music composer, playwright, filmmaker, writer and poet.

[10] Tarun – Tarun Ram Phukan, 1877-1939. Congress leader of Assam.

[11] Subir Bhaumik has observed in his book, Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East (2009) that the agitators also discovered, after initial hostility, that the Indian federal government was their only safeguard against illegal migration from Bangladesh.

Benedict Anderson's terminology. In the "imagined community", Assamese society experiences a feeling of fraternity with other communities within the Indian nation. The myriad ethnic groups that have migrated to Assam also identify as Assamese. The historical reality of the northeast, however, is one of rift and distrust among the diverse ethnic communities, both indigenous and migrants.

Hazarika was traumatised by the violence committed by state agencies during the agitation. His anguish is voiced in "Juye pura tirasir nirbasani basar" (The fire burnt election year of '83) and "Shahid pranamu tumak" (Martyr, my salute to you). In the former, the singer cries out for his lost younger brother, pointing out how the "devils" have killed many on the banks of the Luit. The latter song praises the martyrs who laid down their lives while trying to preserve the identity of the "jati" (nation) and rescue the daughter of India- Assam, through a non-violent war. Examining the relation between nationalism and death, Benedict Anderson describes how nationalism "makes it possible for… millions of people, not so much to kill as willingly to die" (1983, p. 7). Dying for one's country gives one a sense of agency and a kind of control over death. Hazarika's song, which eulogises sacrifice for the nation, can be criticised for its glorification of nationalism and fusion of individual identity with the nation.

The increasing violence of the Assam movement that ultimately led to the tragedy of the Nellie massacre[12] of February 18, 1983, deeply disturbed many intellectuals in Assam. Bhupen Hazarika, who always sang for the downtrodden, was completely silenced by the atrocities on poor Bengali Muslims. Many opponents of the movement spoke up in the press, "Where is Bhupen Hazarika now? Why is he silent now?" Loknath Goswami in *Dr Bhupen Hazarikar Janasanskritik Parikrama* says, "The same Bhupen Hazarika who, inspired by Assamese nationalist emotions, added fuel to the fire of the movement through his thundering voice and stirring music, is now being burnt by the flames of that same fire" (2005, p. 20).

It is at this time that he composed a song, according to Goswami, not of nationalist fervour, but one redolent of rain-soaked earth. "Meghe gir gir kare" (the clouds are thundering/ a shower of rain is about to fall) (1983) is a song of the revolutionary struggle of the farmer, with the rain signifying promise and abundance, and perhaps peace, after the fire imagery of "Juye pura tirasir". Hazarika was at this time president of the Assam Janasanskritik Parishad (founded in 1982), which had the goal of initiating a National Mass Democratic Cultural Movement, carrying forward the legacy of Sankardev, Azaan Pir, Jyoti Prasad, Bishnu Rabha, Parbati Prasad Barua and Lakshminath Bezbaruah[13].

Despite the accusation in media that the National Mass Democratic Cultural Movement was simply the face of CPI(ML), an ultra-left movement, people from different communities and classes worked for the organisation. In a speech made on June 27, 1982 at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati, Hazarika pointed out that different communities should forsake their differences, arrogance and sense of superiority if they were to resolve the present cultural crisis (Goswami, 2005, p. 23). Ultimately, the violence of this movement turned Hazarika away from the nationalist songs to a more universalised song of a farmer.

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[12] Nellie massacre – took place in Nellie and other villages of the Nagaon district in Assam. It claimed the lives of 2,191 people (unofficial figures run to more than 5000). The victims were poor Bengali Muslims.

[13] Sankardev, Azaan Pir, Jyoti Prasad, Bishnu Rabha, Parbati Prasad Barua and Lakhminath Bezbaruah are Assamese cultural icons.

Sanjib Kumar Baruah, in "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment" (1981), says that Hazarika's dilemma is that there exists a schism between his concern for broader, humanitarian ideals and his support for the preservation of Assamese identity. These overlapped, and the universalist in the artist prevailed: Even at the height of the agitation, Hazarika wrote songs about brotherhood and humanity, finding the seed of this spirit in the Brahmaputra itself. The song "Mahabahu Brahmaputra" (The Mighty Brahmaputra, 1980) expresses his view of Assam as a land of harmony and hospitality.

> The mighty Brahmaputra
> A pilgrimage of many confluences
> Has expressed for so many ages
> The meaning of harmony….
> Hundreds came suffering the storms of the Padma
> The banks of the Luit too embraced so many guests.

Instead of voicing his protest against the "influx", Hazarika here depicts migration and cross-cultural contact as a positive trend that has enriched the land of the Brahmaputra. The song also shows that even in the early stages of the movement, Hazarika was not comfortable with the disruptive forces and underground cells that lent secessionist overtones to it.

Hence, the Brahmaputra of Hazarika's songs has the connotation of a vast, all-inclusive entity that can accommodate diverse peoples. It thereby attains a symbolic meaning of harmony and plurality and is effectively used by Hazarika to express his political views during this tumultuous phase in Assam's history.

Phil Wood and Charles Landry, in their book *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (2008), point to different kinds of responses when varied cultures meet. One of them is assimilation to the host culture and rejection of one's origins. Another response, apart from others, can be to synthesize elements of one's culture of origin and that of the host. Reflecting Hazarika's dilemma, his songs seem to favour assimilation while also voicing a strong regard for cultures of other communities.

The same person who has so powerfully advocated for the cause of Assamese ethnicity and identity is often called a "world citizen". Wood and Landry speak of the associations between the terms "cosmopolitanism" and "interculturalism". The term "cosmopolitan" refers to a capacity to recognise and engage with cultures other than one's own and to describe a universal love for humankind as a whole, regardless of nation. This cosmopolitan character is noticeable in many of Hazarika's songs. The sense of universalism, a sense of belongingness to the entire world is expressed in "Mai eti jajabar" ("I am a wanderer", 1968), where he claims to be a wanderer who has visited and embraced the many cities of the world, but who has also seen the homeless in the shadow of towering mansions. He has realised that suffering also is universal.

> From the Luit through the Mississippi I admired Volga's beauty
> From Ottawa through Austria, I embraced Paris.

Hazarika sings that he may be a wanderer, but he is not aimless ("many wanderers are directionless, but I have an aim").

Conclusion

Partha Chatterjee, in "Whose Imagined Community?" observes how nationalism's contest for political power led it to challenge "the rule of colonial difference" – which is the chauvinistic distinction between coloniser and colonised – in the domain of the state, but it insisted on distinction - "the marks of difference" (essential marks of cultural identity), in the spiritual domain. Chatterjee places art, literature, language and culture in this latter domain, which should remain untouched by colonial influence (2007, p. 75). Hazarika's songs seem to reflect what Chatterjee says about nationalism's project in this spiritual domain**.** His songs are nationalist in that they focus on retaining the essential markers of Assamese cultural difference. But he also drives home the need to embrace other communities in one's own home and, at the same time, be at home in the larger world. Despite the tensions, many of Hazarika's songs reflect this need for plural identities, tolerance and interculturalism.

Sudipta Sen, in his book, *Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River*, says, "The river as a clearly defined object—with a beginning, a middle, and an end—is, after all, a human fabrication. As a natural phenomenon it is part of the earth's water cycle, the endless succession of clouds, rain, snow, and glacial melt that merges into other rivers, lakes, or the ocean" (2019, p. 6). He further says how "At the same time, the Ganga is also a river incarnate, indispensable to thinking about the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent. In this sense it is not only a natural entity outside the frame of ordinary human experience, but also a reflexive extension of something akin to a uniquely Indian consciousness" (2019, p. 6).

Because of the inherent fluidity of the river with its borders and boundaries merging with other bodies of water, it has lent itself as an effective signifier of pluralism and heterogeneity. In Hazarika's songs, one can see this idea of the river along with a more exclusive notion of the Luit as symbolic of a unique Assamese consciousness. The river is seen as a carrier of history and memory. Sen writes of the notion of the river "as a living presence in the history and culture of a people" (2019, p. 8). The river's significance, therefore, goes beyond that of a spatial entity; rather the poet, musician or filmmaker can employ it as a trope to voice his/her opinions on issues of belongingness, identity and memory.

All translations of songs are by the author.

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Caged Bodies, Raging Minds, Dissident Voices: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Taslima Nasreen

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the mental state of Taslima Nasreen and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, writers that are primarily celebrated for their rich casket of fictional narratives, through poems written at a juncture in their lives when they were dealing with the pain of separation and displacement from home and country. As a consequence of defying their respective governments through their revolutionary writings, such a separation is accompanied by the loss of a stable identity. Although they do not share the socio-political context that resulted in exile, the commonly felt strains and fissures of exile have guided their perspectives through particularly intimate landscapes, so that it is possible to describe their poems' meaning in a wholly decontextualised manner. They both are, in a way, separated from conventional contexts: exile is an alienating experience, and home, no longer homelike, is perhaps an even more estranging place.

"For a country to have a great writer…is like having another government. That's why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones."

(Solzhenitsyn, 1968, ch. 57)

Bathed in unapologetic sarcasm, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's poems express his disgust for being imprisoned and subsequently sent into internal exile by the Soviet regime. His exile was punishment for giving a voice to and telling the truth about the million victims who had spent their lives in unimaginable torment at the forced labour camps. These camps, collectively known as "Gulags"[1], were set up by Lenin and reached their peak under Stalin, from the 1930s to the 1950s. According to a newspaper report published in The New York Times, the Soviet Union stripped Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship and deported him to West Germany for "performing, systematically, actions that are incompatible with being a citizen."[2] After Leon Trotsky's deportment and subsequent exile to Turkey on the orders of Stalin, Solzhenitsyn was the only major Soviet intellectual that kept the Soviet government under constant evaluative scrutiny.

Exile has often been used by various administrative, political, religious and social powers to threaten and still the voices of dissent rising against them. To safeguard the privileges of power, the powers of the state need to detach from the social fabric those writers who rebel, as was the case with Taslima Nasreen, one of the most controversial South-Asian woman writers of the postcolonial era. In her review of Nasreen's collection "Jailhouse Poems", translated by Susmita Bhattacharya (2008), Debjani Chatterjee gives an apt introduction to the poet in exile: "Love her or hate her, literary heroine or *bête noire*, Taslima Nasreen is a major personality and an important voice in contemporary feminist literature" (2009, p. 244). Though Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Taslima Nasreen do not share the same socio-political context that resulted in their exile, they both speak in their verses about the politics that made their real home seem less homelike. In the Preface to *Exile: A Memoir*, Taslima vents out her frustration, disappointment and helplessness at not being allowed to live in India:

> Without a single political party, social organization or renowned personality by my side, I had been a lone, exiled, dissenting voice up against the entire state machinery with only my wits and determination at my disposal. […] Why wouldn't I, a citizen of the world, be allowed to live in a country I love? Why would a nation that prides itself on being a secular democracy bow down to the diktats of a section of dishonest, misogynist, intolerant zealots, and banish an honest, secular writer? […] It is a moment of crisis for democracy when a citizen is robbed of their right to speak and express their opinions. (2016, n.p.)

Solzhenitsyn also derides the immoral apparatus that commits violence in order to uphold a lie: the communist system. Under the veil of being the "Ultimate Truth", the system has been established by those in power to keep the "power-less" citizenry in check. In his 1973 Nobel Prize Lecture, he states:

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[1] The term "Gulag" is an acronym for Glavnoe Upravlanie Lagerei (English transl.: Main Camp Administration). The number of these labour camps grew exponentially after Stalin came to power in 1924 after Lenin's death, though they were first established in 1919.

[2] Smith, H. (February 14, 1974). Solzhenitsyn Exiled to West Germany and Stripped of His Soviet Citizenship. Accessed from https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/14/archives/solzhenitsyn-exiled-to-west-germany-and-stripped-of-his-soviet.html

> Violence can only be concealed by a lie, and the lie can only be maintained by a violence. Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle.[3]

Keeping in mind the critical mental landscapes Solzhenitsyn and Nasreen share in terms of their imposed exile, and in order to arrive at a critical significance that extends beyond presuppositions fostered by superficial commonalities, it is important to analyse their poetical work with regard to links between form and content and how they relate to subjectivity and identity.

Though Nasreen did not face formal, rigorous imprisonment like Solzhenitsyn, the reaction of both the poets to the changes in their native land is comparable and speaks volumes. Moreover, the manner in which they deal with the trauma and disillusionment resulting from this unprecedented change in their life (exile) is empirical material that is essential to a critical analysis of their work. Were the respective state machineries completely successful in silencing these rebels' voices by sending them into exile? Did the physically imposed exile affect their creative faculties and put their minds to "exile" as well? Finding answers to these questions will guide the course of this study.

Musings of An Exiled Woman: Taslima Nasreen

Though born to a Muslim family, Taslima Nasreen's upbringing took place in a moderately liberal environment. One of the most renowned women writers of South-East Asia, she has repeatedly voiced her protest and struck at the roots of patriarchal hegemony through her writings. She has also brought Indian women's narratives into the limelight, works hitherto unknown amongst the dominant circles of feminist literature.

The major reason behind the controversy surrounding her work *Dwikhandito* (*"Split: A Life"*), is that it deals with the notion of sexual independence from the perspective of a woman. The misogynist mindset, a by-product of patriarchy, has always considered women as procurers of sex and objects of desire, and hence it became quite difficult for Bengali intelligentsia to accept that women, too, have physical desires. Along with the allegation of contributing to the fracturing of the sacrosanct image of a woman, Nasreen also came under the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists for her criticism of the Islamic oppression of women. That got blown up to such an extent that the Government of Bangladesh immediately issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against Taslima for "outrageous" writings that offended religious sentiments.

In spite of being recognized internationally on repeated occasions for her body of work, Taslima's compositions were banned in Bangladesh and India several times, and in order to appease the Islamic fundamentalists, she was ordered to leave her native homeland without any guarantee of return. Like a pendulum, she was tossed around by the governments of various states in India, including West Bengal, Rajasthan, Kerala and Delhi. Moreover, her repeated requests to be allowed to stay in Kolkata were disregarded. While Taslima was completely isolated in a secret location in Delhi (22nd November, 2007 to 19th March, 2008) before permanently leaving India, she wrote to convey her angst at the separation from Kolkata, where

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[3] Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Lecture. Accessed from
https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/

she had left behind her entire world - her books, her memories, her casket of priceless memories along with her rescued stray cat, Minu:

When I die, take my corpse to the mortuary of the medical college in Kolkata where I have donated my body. The city will not accept me alive. Hopefully, my beloved Kolkata, you will welcome me in death! […] Minu is not just a cat, she is my daughter. I have had to leave her behind in Kolkata. She has been waiting for a long time, still sits listlessly by the window, counting days. She had to spend the winter alone this year without my blanket and my warmth. Hopefully, the summer would be different. (Nasreen, 2016, p. 123)

These experiences have been shared by Nasreen in her memoir, in the chapter titled "Poems from a Safe House", with a prose-like structure bolstered by short, numbered paragraphs. There are forty-six poems in the chapter, and they deal with the various facets of her psyche as she discusses and writes randomly about her thoughts regarding the rotting democracy and fading secularism in India. Furthermore, she expresses her extreme loneliness and repeats the plea to return to Kolkata, the City of Joy. She even wonders at the sea change that both Bangladesh and India have undergone:

> Neither West Bengal nor Bangladesh is any longer what it used to be. Its golden sheen is now dim, rusty and hapless. Fundamentalists dictate terms and the scared populace walks by with their heads bent - a land of ghouls. Bravery and honesty have been banished, […] I will cry my last tears for Bengal with the hope that one day the land will again be fertile enough to grow people." (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 122–123)

Herein the poet makes Kolkata the subject of anthropomorphic treatment, dedicating a few poems as well as another collection of her poems (*Aye Kosto Jhenpe, Jibon Debo Mepe*) to the city, addressing it as one would a long-lost friend with whom she desperately wants to meet as soon as possible:

> […] I have not killed anyone in any way, never pelted anyone with stones - you detest me simply because I have spoken a few uncomfortable truths in favour of humanity. And for that you have taken from me my language, my country, my people, you have taken my history, and my home, my last refuge in this world. So what if I am not well! I wish you well, Kolkata […] Be happy, Kolkata. Dance and make merry. Laugh and let the world witness your greatness." (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 129-130)

> When shall I meet you again Kolkata? In the ensuing winter or the following spring?" (Nasreen, 2012, p. 78, translation mine)

Taslima's frustration at not being able to return to her homeland reaches its peak in one of the poems titled *Can't I Have a Homeland to Call My Own?*, translated by Samik Bandhopadhyay. She wrote it during that period of seven months in the so-called "safe house" in Delhi, where her movements were restricted and public and private interactions prohibited:

> Am I so dangerous a criminal, so vicious an enemy of humanity,
> Such a traitor to my country that I can't have a homeland to call my own?
> […]
> Blindly from the northern to the southern hemisphere,
> Through mountains and oceans and rows and rows of trees,
>   Blindly in the heavens, in the moon, in the mists and in sunshine,

> Blindly groping through grass and creepers and shrubs, earth and   mankind,
> I have gone searching for my homeland.
> […]
> You have gouged my eyes,
> You have lashed and bloodied my body, broken both my legs,
> You have pulverized my toes, prized open my skull to squash my brain,
> You have arrested me, so that I die,
> Yet I call you my homeland, call you with infinite love."[4]

When she finally left India on 19th March 2008 due to failing health, she acknowledged her regret at having to leave in spite of the many battles endured, wishing to return at the earliest: "I am leaving because I don't wish to die. My darling India, if I am alive, we will meet again for sure. We will meet no matter how much you try to suppress or silence me. No matter what you do to end me, I will always love you" (Nasreen 2016: pp. 304–305).

Her exile gives us multiple instances of her ever-increasing longing for India, as is evident in several poems from the collection *Nirbashito Narir Kabita.* In one of these, *Bhumaddhasagorer Sea-gull* (*The Seagull of the Mediterranean*), Nasreen asks the bird to create an opportunity for her, so that she could unite with her long-lost homeland without letting the world know of her secret desire: "Seagull, I shall fly with your wings in the wee hours of dawn, in hush, / Will you take me to the Bay of Bengal, beyond the realm of the Mediterranean, someday?" (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 55, translation mine).

In *Rong Bodol* (*Changing Colours*), she echoes the same motif of longing with reference to her stay in Scandinavia, and declares that even the unbearable cold of the place cannot inflict more pain on her body than the pain of imposed exile in a foreign land: "How much the biting cold of Scandinavia can pierce the tender skin of a tropical girl, / When the angst of my solitary soul digs its teeth deeper into my mind like a wildfire?" (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 59, translation mine)

The Voice of Justice and Conscience in Russia: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was a soldier in the Russian army when the Soviet Union was invaded by the Germans in the initial phase of World War II. He was very much aware of the problems presented by the Stalin regime and the dangers that a strongman dictatorship posed to his native Russia. Thus, when Hitler broke the Non-Aggression Pact with Stalin and waged war against Russia, it led to the deaths of millions of his countrymen.

Solzhenitsyn first raised his voice to challenge power when he corresponded with a school friend named Vitkevich, under a pseudonym, and criticised Stalin's lack of preparation in facing Hitler's attack on Russia. As a result, he was arrested and sent to a work camp. He continued writing critically of the Soviet regime and consequently spent considerable time as a political prisoner in the "corrective" labour camps, or "Gulag". Besides writing multiple novels that had been inspired by his experiences as a captive, he wrote poetry. His verses are collected in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, a text that chronicled his efforts to keep his sanity without succumbing to the unimaginable torture and hardship of the prison, a suffering that was aggravated by the profound distress caused by the separation from his home and his loved ones.

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[4] Can't I Have a Homeland to Call My Own. Accessed from https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/cant-i-have-homeland-call-my-own#:~:text=I'm%20a%20traitor%20because,my%20life%20my%20own%20homeland

Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1970 "for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature."[5] Brought up in an intellectual Cossack family in Russia, as a child Solzhenitsyn had a passion for writing, though he did not consider his early writings to be of much literary merit. Spending eight years of his life in the work camps, his education at times gave him an edge over the other prisoners in that at times he was sent to "privileged" camps, although he was always returned to the worst ones. After his stay in the work camps, he was placed on internal exile for nearly three years, from 1953 to 1956. Quite similar to Nasreen's predicament, Solzhenitsyn was forcefully re-settled within Russia, in Siberia, without control over his physical movements and forbidden to have interactions with the outside world and with his family. He was still a prisoner, but without bars or the deplorable condition of the work camps.

Primarily remembered as a novelist, he started his literary career with *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, placing him in the international spotlight. This was not just a beginning, but a continuation of a series of "secretive literary activity that had begun in prison, camp, and exile and that intensified after Solzhenitsyn's return to "freedom" in 1956."[6] His break with communism and his return to youthful patriotic convictions began at the time of his arrest in 1945. The poems written after this year are collected in *Poems: Prison, Camp and Exile*, and they are autobiographical, chronicling his terrible experiences and diminishing will to live. This reflects the mindset of prisoners, and evokes Taslima Nasreen's perspective on exile as the foundation for building highly resilient and strong minds: "If only for the sake of experience, everyone should live in exile at some point of time in their life. It is only in enforced captivity that one can truly learn to appreciate freedom" (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 136).

A relevant poem comes from *Poems: Prison, Camp and Exile* and is titled "Prisoner's Right", translated by Ignat Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn raises a very pertinent point in this poem by saying that in spite of living in these prisons for such a long time, prisoners are not entitled to make claims against their inhumane conditions. The prisoners are entitled "Not to pulpits. Nor lecterns. Nor glory./ Nor power. Nor halos of saints./ nor in memoirs to mix with fatigue/ our ashen complaints."[7] The illumination and enlightenment, Solzhenitsyn adds, that the souls of these prisoners have experienced during their imprisonment, are unparalleled – he compares this experience to the "loftiest gem of all earthly gemstones".

As the poem approaches its denouement, the poet doesn't want prisoners to harbour any feeling of malice or hatred in their hearts for their country, Russia, as they possess only one "right" and that is to be the "rancorless sons of our luckless and sad Russian land". Even if the hearts are filled with overflowing grievances, we would still look to "Russia's fatigued countryside", which has been awaiting a fulfilling sunrise for so long. What Solzhenitsyn wants the readers to understand is that Russia, as a country, had suffered no less as compared to the trials and tribulations faced by the prisoners in the work camps, and their native homeland is sharing in the disastrous aftermath of World War II.

The second poem, "Acathistus", was written in February 1952 and first appeared as part of *The Gulag Archipelago*, part IV, chapter 1, "The Ascent". Solzhenitsyn wrote it while recovering from surgery in the camp clinic at Ekibastuz. He was happy to get a new lease on life post-treatment, although he was not yet aware of his imminent bouts with seminoma. This poem

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[5] Retrieved from https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/summary/

[6] Retrieved from https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/

[7] Retrieved from https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile

brings to our attention a very significant transition in Solzhenitsyn's faith: he had rejected lifelong religious convictions after being introduced to the world of "bookish wisdom", predominantly Marxist-Feminist ideologies. But after undergoing much disillusionment with these ideologies, he returned to the faith of his fathers after realizing the futility of the life he had chosen:

> Then I passed betwixt being and dying,
> I fell off and now cling to the edge,
> And I gaze back with gratitude, trembling,
> On the meaningless life I have led.[8]

After realising his mistake, he began to proclaim his faith, once again, in the Providence of the living God. The mental strength with which he was fighting back all the difficulties in his life, is referred to as a gift of the benevolent God, who had not left him in his hour of need, even though he had withdrawn from his faith:

> Now regaining the measure that's true,
> Having drawn with it water of being,
> Oh great God! I believe now anew!
> Though denied, You were always with me….

The third poem to reference is "Death - not as Chasm", as it is the last poem that he wrote. He was keenly aware that he had only two more weeks to live at the time of writing, according to the doctors at the regional centre in southern Kazakhstan. Writing from the perspective of a dying man, Solzhenitsyn was not as much saddened by his own approaching death as he was by the death and decay that Russia was experiencing. He looks at Russia for the very last time in her "lows" as well as her "glory" and acknowledges her "daily life's fight". As mentioned by Solzhenitsyn in "Prisoner's Right" as well, he holds "no rancour or spite" against Russia as he places a much higher value to Russia's struggle as compared to his own life struggles. He regrets dying without seeing a "resurrected" Russia: "No more shall I see you thus: crucified; / No more shall call Resurrection t'your side…"[9]

Interrogating the experience of Exile: Taslima Nasreen and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Nasreen and Solzhenitsyn faced exile for two different reasons: the former victimised by religious intolerance and the latter due to his protest against the ideologies of the State. Though both of them experienced their exile in different places, their concern and undying love for their homeland provides them with comparable ideological systems of reference. As we have discussed earlier, the hostility faced by Nasreen in India and Solzhenitsyn in Russia does not eradicate their longing for the well-being of India and Russia. Their paths, characterised by supporting what is right and condemning what is wrong, are evidently parallel. The works of both the writers, quite coincidentally, got international acclaim from foreign publishers – this small ray of encouragement helped them energise their pens to write more boldly than ever before, but the psychological trauma of being away from home never left them.

Menon (2000), while discussing how women's silences are structured through censorship that is indirectly sponsored by the state apparatus, argues that state-censorship "rarely occurs in the

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[8] Retrieved from https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile

[9] Retrieved from https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile

absence of political compulsions", irrespective of the gender of the concerned individual, but she also agrees that some "added implications" are a given when it concerns women (p. 3). Menon specifically points out the core reasons behind the ban on Nasreen's work, *Lajja* and the subsequent forced exile from her motherland: "Taslima's fault was that she defied the boundaries set by society by breaking the socially structured silences that women are supposed to observe. What is more, she overstepped her limits by discussing religion and sexuality, placing women at the centre of both discussions" (2000, p. 4).

On the other hand, Ansari adds another dimension to the case of Taslima Nasreen's exile by criticising her for celebrating "bold defiance of traditional Islam" at a time when Islamophobia was being implanted into people's minds "under the influence of far-right Jewish-Christian anti-Islamic crusaders who could have supplied non-contextual even distorted texts of the Book [The Quran] and the Traditions whose traces are discernible in *Dwikhandita*" (2008, p. 17). Ansari cites adjectives like "scoundrel", "rapist", "ruthless murderer", and so on, from her autobiography, *Dwikhandita* (Split in Two) used to refer to the Prophet Mohammed, that have further hurt and enraged the "billions of innocent Muslims worldwide who have done no harm to her, whom she characterises as potential terrorists" (2008, p. 18). Keeping aside all the contradicting viewpoints of various secondary critics working on Taslima's life and works, it is difficult to justify the Bangladeshi government's refusal to let Taslima enter her homeland after her mother passed away. Even Ansari, in spite of criticising Nasreen for her Islamophobic views, called it a "distressing experience" when her mother couldn't get a final ritual prayer before her burial only because she was Taslima Nasreen's mother (2008, p. 17).

In the final analysis, even though both writers experienced internal exile, Taslima did not face the trauma of being at real prison in a work camp, but Solzhenitsyn was spared the pain of leaving his homeland without any hope for a return in the future. Although Taslima was ignored by her contemporaries in her homeland, she enjoyed the support of many Indian writers and intellectuals, including Mahasweta Devi.[10] Quite unlike Nasreen's predicament, Solzhenitsyn's struggle was even more difficult as a poet in forced exile because of the lack of support from "high-level writers" in Russia who wanted to see him exiled. According to a newspaper report published by The New York Times on February 14th, 1974, written by Hedrick Smith, important names from the Russian literary circle like Sergei V. Mikhelkov and Rasul G. Gamzatov supported the government's decision regarding Solzhenitsyn and said that he should not be a part of the system, and he was vehemently criticized for his "treasonous writings" (n.p). In the final years of his life, Solzhenitsyn had politically distanced himself from a Russia that valued state power and self-preservation far more than individual rights.

The similarity in the exile experiences of Nasreen and Solzhenitsyn becomes evident in their writing style – there is no particular rhythm or metrical form in their poems and they are written mostly in prose. Solzhenitsyn's poems have been referred to as "prose poems". Nasreen's poems, which highlight her harrowing experiences of being deported from one place to another continuously without any valid justification, also lacked the typical "rhythmic" quality of poems. The lack of metre and rhyme in their poems indicates the lack of coherence and stability in their lives as a result of the physical and psychological separation from the literary, cultural and social practices of their homeland, ultimately hampering their innate sense of self and identity.

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[10] In her review of Taslima Nasreen's "Jailhouse Poems" (translated into English by Susmita Bhattacharya), Chatterjee (2009) quotes Mahasweta Devi, where she voices her support for Nasreen: "Taslima deserves our support and refuge and she should be given citizenship" (p. 245).

Conclusion

The agents of power and authority, in their zeal to crush the mental strength and sanity of these two writers, could not hinder their imagination or their productivity. They do not adhere to any literary convention to give form to their poems; their life experiences are inspiring enough to elevate the status of their work. Their bodies could be made captive, but neither their souls nor their feisty pens could be paralyzed by the edicts of state-sponsored censorship, whether directly or indirectly. Menon (2000) had rightly pointed out that censorship is not for "keeping people away from reading a particular work, it is to keep them from writing it" (WS-3). Without bending in the face of the state apparatus, they boldly penned the story of the bloody and shameful reality they experienced, thus giving their readers a plethora of new directions to ponder upon with respect to narratives and narrators of exile across various geopolitical spaces.

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The Qipao: The Carrier of Chinese Cultural and Philosophical Symbols

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Abstract

The qipao has become the symbol of identity for Chinese women. It is a tight-fitting dress with a standing collar, an asymmetric left-over-right opening and two-side slits. Chinese knot buttons are also an essential part of the qipao. While the garment serves to express Chinese values and has philosophical connotations, its colour, fabric pattern and Chinese knot buttons express wishes for happiness, luck, fortune, longevity as well as a yearning for peaceful interpersonal relationships and harmony with nature. The qipao was developed not only from a traditional gown used by the Han (the majority Chinese ethnic group), but also integrated minority cultural elements and has recently added Western sartorial patterns. This has resulted in a national dress that is more harmonious with contemporary aesthetics, manifesting the adaptability, versatility and inclusiveness of Chinese culture.

Keywords: aesthetics, Chinese knot button, material culture, traditional costume, yin-yang principle

Apparel not only acts as a visible cue to represent an individual or a specific group of people, but also as non-verbal communication (Lennon & Davis, 1989a) between self, insiders and outsiders. It has personal and social significance, playing a distinct role in material culture (Rabolt & Forney, 1989).

Clothing is an integral part of the self (Arvanitidou &Gasouka, 2013) and a tool for self-expression, be it in a form that hides the self or otherwise displays it (Winterhalter, 2011), conceals weaknesses or shows off strengths. As a means of image modification, it indicates how much a person is willing to display their true self (what one truly perceives, feels and responds to) (Sloan, 2007), their desired self (a more attractive self) (Augustinova et al., 2011) or their social self (for better integration into the surrounding community) (Mead, 1913). It also exhibits self-aesthetics, including creativity, a sense of beauty, taste, appropriate use of colour, body image and clothing style. This self disclosure reflects part of a person's material self world (Watson, 2004) and reinforces the concept of self related to personality, preferences, values, identity and social class (Lennon & Davis, 1989b), which is to say that clothing reflects psychological needs (Barthes, 2013) and intrinsic attributes (Presley &Campassi, 2013).

In particular, apparel is very important for women, giving them physical and emotional satisfaction (Kwon, 1987) and aiding them in building self-confidence. It performs practical, sexual and social functions (Perrot, 1981); hence, it provides distinctive perspectives through which women can identify themselves and be observed. Additionally, seeing their ideal self (Ridgway et al., 2017) through clothing allows them to construct life-meaning and highlights the dynamic between subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Winterhalter, 2011).

Clothing and Culture

Equally significant, in creating "a visible manifestation of the civilised state of being, of cultural superiority" (Baizerman et al., 2008, p. 124), and as a second skin, clothing expresses a collective second self (Basile, 2011). Reflecting social identity (Batten, 2010), it distinguishes between *us* and *others*, as is evident in the case of a school uniform (Johnson et al., 2014). It is also a sign of social class (F.Ma et al., 2012), used to announce social status, authority, and wealth. Dress can even have political implications (Carroll, 2003), as in the case of military and royal clothing. People also develop traditional folk clothing to showcase nationalism, cultural identity and pride (vanOrman, 2013). Moreover, a process of evolution is involved, fuelled by the interaction with the costumes of other countries (Hansen, 2004).

Chinese traditional apparel has undergone a long period of development; as a consequence, it has established strong connections with the nation's values and its cultural heritage. The garments' symbolic presentation of these values and heritage (Lin &Khuen, 2012), is prominently influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, as can be seen in their aesthetics and styles (J. Y. Yuan, 2002). The qipao has been deemed a national dress that conveys Chinese culture.

The Qipao: Traditional Chinese Cultural and Philosophical Representation

The qipao, also called *cheongsam* or *changshan*, is recognised as a formal dress and an icon of ethnicity, as well as an identity symbol for Chinese women all over the world (Ling, 2009). Supported by the Clothing Regulations of 1929 (Ling, 2013), it not only represents Chinese values (Lin & Khuen, 2012), but also symbolises the unity of the country (Finnane, 2008). Its continuing development lasted centuries until the 1920s, when stipulations for the prototype of

the modern qipao were introduced in an effort to provide guided continuity to both the Han people and ethnic minorities. In addition to being a one-piece long garment, the qipao has a standing collar, an asymmetrical left-over-right opening, and two side slits, and it buttons (always using Chinese knot buttons) from the bottom of the collar downward to the right-hand seam and along the right contour line to the slit. This aesthetics has cultural and philosophical connotations.

The long gown is one of the traditional Chinese forms of apparel, which catered to the conservative norm of covering body from neck to feet to prevent erotic flights of the imagination as well as any type of body contact between different sexes. It can be traced back to the Yangshao culture (5000-3000 BC) (Wang, 1975) and to the period of Emperor Shun (2287-2067 BC) (J. Y. 袁杰英 Yuan, 2003). Additionally, archaeological evidence reveals the use of long gowns in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).

Wearing long gowns had been prevalent in the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han (202 BC-220 AD) dynasties (Sheng, 2010); it was worn as an interior garment in the former and on the outside in the latter (Gao, 2005). In the early East Han dynasty (25-220 AD), the long gown was a ceremonial dress (Wang, 1975). Indeed, wearing a long gown among noble ladies was popular from the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC) to the West Han dynasty (202 BC-9 AD) (Wang, 1975). Until the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), it was fashionable for ladies to wear long gowns (G. 楊桂梅 Yang & Zhang, 2002). In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the long gown was common for both men's and women's clothing (Shen &Wang, 2004).

The qipao inherits features from the long gown and reflects aesthetic tastes and styles from diverse periods. For instance, its length keeps changing. A floor-length hemline was the form for long gowns in the Qing dynasty. In the 1920s, a qipao was usually straight and loose-fitting in an A-shaped cut, with wide sleeves and down to the lower calf in length, whereas it varied from mid-calf to ankle in the 1930s and 1940s. The length then trended towards below-the-knee and on-the-knee afterwards. In the 1960s, an above-the-knee qipao length was popular, and the body-hugging mini-qipao attracted Western designers (Clark, 2000). This length implies female liberation through the acceptance of a drastic shift from a garment that covers the whole body to one that has sex appeal (Hua, 2004).

The Standing Collar

Standing collars have been discovered among archaeological relics. The right-angle standing collar was developed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), and continually evolved into various forms of standing collar during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD) (Zhang, 2016). This type of collar was subsequently used in the qipao. An unfolded, non-overlapping, round edged collar on a qipao is always attached with knot buttons to ensure a neat presentation. A well-tailored standing collar is not only comfortable for people even with shorter necks, but also enables the neck to look longer. This is a skilful implementation of Chinese aesthetics.

The Right-Hand Opening

The right-hand opening was adopted beginning in the Warring States period (475-221 BC) (Shen, 2002). It hints at the yin-yang principle, where right represents yin and left yang (Smith, 1978). The yin-yang is a dualistic concept: the moon and water are yin, and in contrast the sun and fire are yang. Likewise, right and death are yin while left and life are yang; therefore, left-over-right in Chinese apparel implies life over death (S. 馬舒舒 Ma, 2015), meaning that life

is stronger than death, referencing longevity. This asymmetrical opening connotes a bright and lively spirit, which also applies to many other traditional Asian costumes such as the kimono (Japanese), hanbok (Korean) and ao dai (Vietnamese).

Wearing trousers underneath a long robe was a traditional style of female costume. This conservative form lasted centuries, until the modern qipao gave up the accompanying long trousers and began to allow for two-side slits in the 1930s. The slits are from mid-thigh (even up to 11 inches above the knee) to two inches above the knee. The silhouette between partial thigh and calf is veiled and unveiled when walking with a long qipao and provides a way of peeping at the legs through slits. Such ambiguity satisfies the desire for body concealment (Ling, 2013) and disclosure simultaneously. It ascertains autonomy for women to express themselves.

The Chinese Knot-Button

Chinese knotting is a traditional art that has been used in daily life for decoration and blessing since the Tang and Song dynasties; it was rapidly popularised in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Y. Yang, 2015). In fact, the Chinese knot button has been widely utilised in apparel from the prehistoric era. It is made of cords of cloth, with or without a metal wire to fix the shape. It consists of a knot and a loop, which form a straight line across both sides of the garment. This is the basic type, and a pearl or a ball made of various materials can replace the knot. Furthermore, it appears in a wide variety of designs such as flowers, geometrical patterns and symbols. Popular knots include the cloverleaf knot (dragonfly knot) symbolising fortune and good luck; the round brocade knot (six-flower knot) representing good fortune, wholesomeness, completeness and balance; the double coin knot picturing the cycle of life; the sauvastika (swastika) knot displaying a Buddhist blessing; the square knot (good luck knot) and mystic knot (chrysanthemum knot), both of which bring good fortune; and the good luck knot. These knot buttons illustrate Chinese philosophy regarding a harmonious relationship with nature (Ling, 2009), and have what are accepted Buddhist symbols in daily life. Usually, Chinese female apparel has an odd number of buttons because of the yin-yang principle: the female belongs to the yin category, and odd numbers are yang, so the woman and the garment form a yin-yang harmony (Huang, 2018).

The Fabric Patterns

The fabric patterns used involve an extensive scope of flowers, plants, insects, birds, animals, geometrical patterns or auspicious designs representing fortune, happiness and longevity. In short, the pattern chosen expresses good wishes that integrate internal and external harmony (Ip, 2011).

Colour

Colour in Chinese culture likewise sends a message, with red being luck, joy and happiness, yellow is power, dignity and prosperity, green is growth, wealth and harmony, purple stands for divinity and elegance, blue indicates immortality and black denotes power (Kim & DeLong, 1992). These colours are popularly used in qipao construction, with each particular combination showing what Chinese expect or hope for in their daily lives.

Hybrid Features

Chinese apparel has been developed through mixing Han clothing styles with those of ethnic minorities. This fusion has occurred in five specific periods since the 6th century (Lingley, 2014), as a function of the integration of Chinese taste for the exotic. The qipao has attained a hybrid feature set (Ling, 2007), which has not only absorbed Manchurian and Mongolian styles (Liu, 2011), but also integrates tradition with modern aesthetics. In fact, it has subsumed Western influences (N. Y. 司徒嫣然 Szeto, 1992) and today displays a Chinese-Western fusion (Lu, 2003) that includes Western sartorial practises (Ng, 2015; Xu, 2010) (such as darts, cut-and-sewn sleeves) and accessories (Clark, 2000; Delong et al., 2005; Ling, 2011). It is now commonly worn with silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, hats, gloves and purses. Since the 1940s and in many cases a zipper replaces Chinese knot buttons from the right armpit to the slit (Siu, 2013), offering a convenient way to wear a qipao. Such amalgamation manifests the inclusiveness and the multi-cultural attributes of Chinese culture.

Scholars mostly agree that the qipao originated in the Manchu robe (旗袍) (Brasó-Broggi, 2015) which was a long and loose-fitting gown. However, some scholars are convinced that the modern qipao evolved from ancient Chinese apparel, as articulated earlier. The syllable *qi* in the name means happiness, that is, a robe of well-being or good luck (祺袍) (Wang, 1975; Zhao, 2017). Wellness is a common expectation in Chinese society.

Recently, ladies have complained that the qipao is difficult and inconvenient to wear on a daily basis (Xie, 2017), which may reflect a limited regard for cultural heritage in sectors of the population. Perhaps as a response to these grievances, a zipper at the back plus a pseudo-opening in the front now replace the Chinese knot buttons for the right-hand opening in some qipaos. This kind of para-qipao ignores the yin-yang culture, and it also loses the vividness of the dress in its traditional asymmetric opening; these changes extinguish the wholeness and aesthetics of the qipao. Moreover, a tight-fitting qipao is mistakenly considered to be suitable only for slim figures. In reality, the qipao is not only able to mask defects, but can also showcase appealing features (Ling, 2009), as it is neutral to different body types, as most figures can be catered to through skilful tailoring. Furthermore, this complaisance makes it suitable for all phases of life (N. Y. Szeto, 1997). These properties reveal the adaptability, versatility and popular acceptability of the qipao (Ling, 2009).

Conclusion

The long gown is one of the most widespread Chinese apparel forms, originating in and worn by both Han Chinese and domestic ethnic minorities. The qipao comprises a standing collar, an asymmetric left-over-right opening (usually with Chinese knot buttons), and two-side slits. Its elements symbolise Chinese cultural and philosophical principles. Its colour, fabric pattern and Chinese knot buttons manifest wishes for luck, fortune, happiness and longevity, coupled with intrinsic and external harmony. Its current form has become a mixture of traditional and modern ideas and Chinese and Western sartorial techniques, illustrating versatility, adaptability and inclusiveness.

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A TREE CROSSES THE CITY

The Unconventional Artistry of Miguel-Ángel Zapata

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Peruvian poet Miguel-Ángel Zapata's latest book of poems, *Un árbol cruza la ciudad* (A Tree Crossing the City, Nueva York Poetry Press, 2020, originally translated by Gwen Osterwald), immediately confronts the reader with an array of soothing, dreamlike images. The serene tranquillity that permeates most poems makes it clear that Zapata (Piura, 1955) aims to escape convention and memorialise without the impassioned intensity and ontological unrest so common in Latin American poets of previous generations.[1] In short, the poet's trademark is quietude.

Along these lines, Zapata's verses signal a commitment, not to a movement, a style or an ideology, but to the quiescent substances that give context to a life's journey. Accordingly, the unaffected aesthetic rendition of life's ambient incidentals is a dominant objective for the poet, as he proposes the immediacy of windows, chairs and glasses of wine as a transcendental and constitutive feature of life. As a result, objects are enriched with the poet's awareness of their dignity; they are celebrated by a poet whose sincerity is ample enough to discard tired routines aligned with genre, convention, ideology and tradition in order to view ambient reality in its truly human dimension.

Quietude

In consequence, Zapata's creative pulsion populates his poetry with physical substance in the form of unremarkable, accessible, passive everyday objects that surround him. Hence, his verses transmute into language the gestation of a benevolently nurturing cosmos, one divested of the sense of distress, futility, passion and heroic resistance that has long been a standard mode of setting the human condition to verse. In conceiving of such a space, the poet aims to capture those moments when the soul experiences quietude, when everything in the universe is coterminous with the self and, loosed from their triviality, the small things that surround him can be mythologised as discreet harbingers of eternal truths.

To explain how Zapata gives expression to his aesthetic ideal of quietude, it would be useful to remind the reader of that Walt Whitman of *Leaves of Grass*, the one that crafts static, haiku-like pictorial vignettes devoid of dynamic verbs:

> A Farm Picture.
>
> Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
> A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses feeding,
> And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away.
> (Whitman, 1872, p. 208)

In *this* Whitman (there is another that eulogises smoke-belching machines), the harmony of substance with spirit can be manifested more lucidly in the quietude of a peaceful, delicate moment that is suspended in time.

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[1] Edwin Murillo provides an extensive list of Latin American poets that exhibit such preoccupations, included in which are the region's essential poets: Darío (Lo fatal), Amado Nervo (Yo no nací para reír; Al cruzar los caminos), Gutiérrez Nájera (To be; Monólogo del incrédulo; Pax animae), dos Anjos (Eu), del Casal (Pax animae; La mayor tristeza; Desolación), Asunción Silva (Filosofía), Vallejo (LXXV), Neruda (Walking Around) and García Bárcena (Estética; Indagación; Ser).

As in Whitman, where peace and quietude suggest social discord and historical conflict as their unacceptable opposites, Zapata's verses gently project a utopian desire for a new sociocultural environment where the people and objects that surround us are not there to be exploited or antagonised, but to be dignified as benign companions in our life's journey. In Zapata, peace and quietude articulate an implicit appeal to sanity, as the reader intuitively infers that our riotous society, with its ruthless competition and brutal antagonisms, is a natural opposite to reason. In order to generate a relevant ambiance of quietude, Zapata overrides convention by altering the emotional register and toning down the commonplace, fatigued pathos with a prose-like verse, one that has the feel of familiar environs and comfortable colloquies:

> This is the day of the sun and the pines
> that dawn in my window,
> they who proclaim, with the birds,
> the sublime advent of a new day. (2020, p. 74)

There is no suggestion of the pervasive "poet as iconoclast" sensibility here: these are verses that assimilate and metamorphose the mundane, orchestrating it into a poetry that eschews templates and seems to consciously dismiss that aforementioned tradition of rage and anguished perplexity. In Zapata's hands, trees, windows, streets, tables, books, wine, red sauce, bicycles and pillows become components of a profoundly spiritual symphony that emanates an easy musicality through the unassuming intimacy of a sensual memory. "The Art of Solitude" is a case in point:

> You are happily at home with yourself, joyful, with no one
> at your side: the long wooden table, a painting
> by Eielson, several by Quintanilla, old books, red wine,
> noodles in red sauce and garlic bread are delightful.
>
> Here lingers the scent of wrinkled pillows, the
> hollow moment of embrace, and the phantoms that
> return like lavenders to distract your pleasant company
> each night. (2020, p. 40)

In the first four verses, the poet captures both the quiescence of the objects and the moment of their amalgamation with his self. In the first verse, the poet makes it a point to stress that there is no other living being with him. The second, third and fourth verses contain the images of separate objects, deposited one next to the other without any syntactic expedient to connect them. They seem to live a life of their own, without any sign of intrusion or superintendence from the poet. Thus, they exist in a flawless state that is peaceful, independent and timeless, with only the intervention of the copular verb "to be" in the fourth verse to announce the moment of unification with the poet's self. In the ensuing ideal state, the poet and ambient reality become one and the same.

Likewise, the everyday objects that surround the poet are presented with apparent objectivity, so that the poem's emotional charge seems to emanate directly from the observed scene, autonomously and untamed by the author's manipulations. It is in the fifth verse, "Here lingers the scent of wrinkled pillows", that an extended syntactic unit begins wherein objects (the pillows) enable the self's reverent unification with

ambient reality by providing a nurturing environment for cherished memories ("hollow moment of embrace; phantoms").

It is important to note that there is no rare imagery here, and that nothing actually *happens* in this timeless realm. But the reader can't help but notice the exceptional poignancy of Zapata's experience as he unobtrusively observes these taciturn substances. Causing a deep sense of melancholy to develop from a truly commonplace situation — while using the humblest language to describe it — is one of the poet's greatest accomplishments.

Thus, the calculated domesticity of the scene resists high diction, gently implying a refusal to venerate gallant intrepidity and flamboyant disobedience. Although Zapata overtly identifies with his Latin American heritage, in his verses he rejects the hindrance to creativity that the worship of that heritage and its heroic substance requires. Consequently, there are in his poetry the gentle, quotidian fundamentals of the human condition: friends, house, food, drink, and emotions and feelings of longing and loneliness that everyone experiences at one time or another. Accordingly, Zapata's is the voice of a universal individual, not of a specific collective; it is the voice of a man involved in the most transcendent task of all, that of living:

> I write poetry as I walk
>
> trees like stars in the
> patio full of geraniums.
>
> > […]
>
> There, towers and the Seven Seas
> those kings crowned by their own hand
> at the poetry festival. (2020, p. 18)

Again, the objects (trees, patio, geraniums) present a scene of taciturn timelessness. The verb is the most energetic element of syntax, but in this poem discourse conditions disallow verbs (trees like stars/in the patio full of geraniums; There, towers and the Seven Seas/those kings crowned by their own hand/at the poetry festival [here "crowned" merely functions as part of the reduced adjective clause in the passive voice]), at points where they would only serve to disrupt the sempiternal quietude and sense of immutability that buttress its semantic value. In fact, the present indicative of the first verse (I write poetry as I walk) simply serves to indicate the subjective perception of contextual matter and inlays the poet's self in the timeless present of the object.

The importance assigned to the unalloyed circumstance of being alive makes the reader think that Zapata is conversant with Lin Yutang's prescriptions in *The Importance of Living* (1937), as his verses materialise into a sort of break not only to the bewildering rush that is modern existence, but also to the semantic acrobatics that are all too common in modern poetry.

Reclaiming the Word

Zapata has advised that "[a]rrogance with poetry leads to destruction. Innocence is stronger than wisdom, just as imagination is more important than knowledge…" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). This idea of decontaminating poetry from self-admiration and neutralising contemporary extravagance also distinguishes other poets: There is in Zapata a hint of Jorge Teillier's attitude towards the pompous and selfish exploitation of words so ingrained in iconoclastic convention. Teillier articulates this attitude in his "Secret Autumn":

> When beloved everyday words
> lose their meaning
> and not even bread may be named
> nor water, nor the window
>
> […]
>
> It is good to greet the dishes and the tablecloth placed on the table
> and see that in the old cupboard
> the cherry liqueur prepared by the grandmother
> and the stored apples
> retain their joy. (1956, n.p.)

Teillier worries that the word is forfeiting its function of conveying the primordial beauty of truth and reality; he exploits the massive physical reality of trees to express that loss:

> When the shape of trees
> is no longer but the feeble reminiscence of their contour,
> a lie, made up
> by the murky memory of autumn… (1956, n.p.)

While never acting like what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call "an umpire of taste" ("The Poet", in *Essays: Second Series*, 1844), Zapata has often expressed these same concerns during conversations and interviews:

> [T]here is a poetry I still do not understand, one that tries to play with language and nonsense without having carefully studied Góngora. There are certain poets who are writing impressionist poetry, exaggerated games that only lead to confusion and emptiness. They mistakenly look for the appearance of language, the surprise of the external, and they say absolutely nothing. (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

Also in line with Teillier's diagnoses, Zapata states: "I feel a kinship with contemporary poets who work with the relationship of spirit, nature and language. Those poets who care only about language are not my present or my future" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). Thus, some of the most distinct features of Miguel-Ángel Zapata's poetry, especially in this volume, reflect his concern with the word as it describes Nature (the perceptible substance that surrounds his everyday life) in relationship with his soul. In his verses one perceives a certain respect for the word as a vehicle that, in its most sincere

utilisation, conveys not the stunts of ingenuity, but the very substance of the human being. Accordingly, human tragedy is not conveyed as the abstract calamity inherent to the human condition, but instead is interiorised as the angst (black air) that affects one *real* human being walking on the solid, tangible asphalt that he senses under his feet:

> Your feet feel the streets and the black air of some days, and you don't ask unavailing questions about the dead or the pestilence that roams cities without a name. (2020, p. 113)

The grounding in the mundane that is evident throughout much of this poetry is symptomatic of the poet's commitment to a comprehensive understanding of the nature of poetry. In essence, his is an aesthetic cosmos in which the poet can discern beauty in the everyday truth of ordinary things and, at the same time, be awed by the sublime character of the unexceptional objects and events that contextualise the life of human beings. As Zapata states: "I think that was the beginning of my first observations of the world and everything in it: even the smallest things are important" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). Through them, a deeper, more honest expression of the human condition is attainable.

The Self and Ambient Reality

Underlying this aesthetics is a belief that the honest image of the human condition necessitates a more intuitive portrayal of and articulation with its ambient reality. Critically, it must be an expression forged with an accessible vocabulary that is not mediated by self-admiration. As a result of this pursuit, Zapata almost instinctively projects an element of gentle intimacy onto the ambient substance in a manner that not only makes it vibrate to the rhythms of his inner moral cosmos, but also makes that substance perform in his own very personal drama.

As an example, Zapata's account of skiing, falling and getting back up again is described in terms of the way in which the experience of contact with an external substance becomes a constitutive part of his consciousness and, subsequently, develops into poetic matter. The event is depicted as an act of unsullied collaboration between reality and his thought process. Consequently, as long as the snow exists outside, not experienced, it is clandestine, not consciously perceived by the poet; once he tumbles and its icy apathy is experienced directly, it is assimilated as a "frozen sea". Only when the snow's objective attributes are sensibly experienced may its substance be poeticised: this snow is not an ideational abstraction only referenced to serve the poet's interests: there is a genuine deference to its cold, white, real substance:

> Again you stand after several tumbles and slide once more with the snow from the top. The snow touches you and everything changes: a frozen sea asks you for fire in order to survive the ice. (2020, p. 106)

The insight that enables him to poeticise his humanness arises as the product of his awareness of ambient reality. Thus, the expression of his awareness of self is stimulated by the immersion into the sea of contextual matter that surrounds him, that is to say, he is nothing without a cognizance of outside objects with which he can establish a subjective relationship.

Physical contexts drive the poet's consciousness and are an essential part of it; this seems to point to the idea that, as conscious beings, ambient reality is the most solid footing upon which we can formulate universal judgments about the truth, including spiritual truth. It is the venue where the poet's subjectivity can be activated and enriched by tangible substances and enhanced through experience. It is, likewise, our most pristine link with one another: without the physical substance of reality, consensual truth would be inconceivable and, in an environment of absolute relativism, poetry would degenerate into subjective abstraction and cease to communicate meaning.

So ambient reality, with its material substances, is important not just as a passive background for the poet's experience, but as an active participant in his spiritual and cognitive life, as he has manifestly embraced it: "The aspiration of poetry is for everything to speak: the animals, the trees, the rivers and lakes, and the sky that watches us every day, while we continue our little lives, running on the grass of time" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.).

Beauty and Reality

The acceptance of that basal connection between conscience and external objects is everywhere evident in this poet. That may be because not only is Zapata a poet, but also a critic, a teacher and an authority on modern poetry. So it is likely that he is mindful of the fact that the link between consciousness and objective reality ("truth") has often been severed in the quest for beauty. He must be aware that, from Plato to Byron, many cognoscenti have argued that poets have an ingrained disregard for "truth," as their art forces them to contrive an alternate, fabricated "truth" that owes its qualities to the aesthetic demands of poetry.

In effect, Plato, who had an inconsistent opinion of poets, proposed (Republic, bk. 10; 607b) to banish poetry from the commonwealth because poets deceive, and they do so because they live in a world of appearance, not reality. The philosopher seems to be saying that, by committing to the laboured contrivances of the creative imagination, the poet renounces knowledge of reality and truth. On his part, Byron evidently censures such contrivances when, in his "Dedication" to Don Juan, he paraphrases Hobhouse's droll anecdote regarding an exchange between Ben Jonson and someone named Sylvester. Agreeing to produce witty rhymes, the latter said "I John Sylvester slept with your sister." Jonson replied, "I Ben Jonson slept with your wife." "Why, that's no rhyme!" said Sylvester; "No, but it's *true*" retorted Jonson.

Likewise, in Sonnet 138 Shakespeare suggests that the lack of truth (false subtleties) is the propellant that drives our contemptible civilisation:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth,
> I do believe her, though I know she lies,
> That she might think me some untutored youth,
> Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
>   […]
> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

The light-hearted nature of these verses, written by the man that gave us "No legacy is so rich as honesty" (All's Well That Ends Well, act 3, sc.5), "This above all; to thine own self be true" (Hamlet, act 1, sc. 3), and "O truant Muse what shall be thy amends/For thy neglect of truth in beauty dyed?" (Sonnet 101) speaks to the bard's reverence for truth in its uncontaminated manifestations. Truth, obviously, can be expressed beautifully, but it is a challenging task to keep beauty's imperatives from whitewashing truth, as Shakespeare suggests.

Baudelaire was also very clear on this point: the quest for beauty must not eclipse what is real and what is true:

> The excessive appetite for form [beauty] induces monstrous and unknown disorders. Absorbed by the ferocious passion for the beautiful, the notions of the just and the true disappear. The feverish passion for art is an ulcer which devours what remains; and, as the clear absence of the just and the true in art amounts to the absence of art, the entire person vanishes; excessive specialisation of one faculty produces nothingness. (1976, vol. 2, pp 48–49)

By this I am not proposing that Zapata is in a quixotic quest to redeem that truth, the one whose lack exasperated so many great minds, for poetry. But in the light of the work of Teillier, of Baudelaire (q.v.), and of Zapata himself, one could ask if the experience of reality, of the mundane, of the everyday objects that surround us can be subsumed into poetry in a sort of symbiosis, one in which verses and the objective truth of material reality engage in a relationship of mutual benefit? Is *this* Zapata's quest?

Consciousness in Communion with the Environment

Perhaps not a quest, but there are additional reasons for the poet's interest in the unexceptional objects and events that contextualise and permeate his consciousness: one of them has to be associated with his uncanny capacity to commune with them, as we can see when he catches sight of a butterfly during a paddleball game:

> Along the beach an errant butterfly searches for its seagull, that solemn, cryptic sky and the strange candour of its fluttering wings. I watch it while I play paddleball on the beach; the ball soars like a comet towards the heavens and she strikes it back towards my flank.
>
> […]
>
> Butterfly, star, the heavens are distorted by your wings: There is no greater quietude than your smile; your abdomen is the kingdom of the hopeless, and your gaze, which knows no sorrow, lives in the brevity of the sea and in the embroidery of your faded chemise. (2020, p. 158)

It is no coincidence that the poet is engaged in a very commonplace activity, just enjoying a beautiful day at the beach playing paddleball. It is here that the intrusion of a simple external object, a butterfly, not only generates feelings of tranquillity and peace, but also brings on the awareness of finitude, making his voice quiver at the thought of the transience that is heralded by the fading of the butterfly's colour and the

celebrated brevity of its life (gaze). The poet's subjective core engages in a symbiotic relationship with the fluttering external object, allowing the truth of the poet's mortality to develop as poetry, while the insect's silent disregard for human concerns is internalised as serenity and dispassion. As a result, the butterfly is memorialised as a quintessential source of quietude.

Clearly, a profound *truth* emerges from that seaside experience, and yet, because of the placid surroundings, no struggle, no perplexity, no anguish is evident in these verses: finitude *is* the salient truth in the human condition, and it is communicated by the poet not in paroxysms of fanciful verses, not as a black hole of grief, but as a colourful butterfly that, ignoring sorrow, interrupts his game. This particular poem is an example of how the quotidian nature of the context is critical: poetry is a spiritual environment that the poet regularly colonises with wistful and evocative entities (trees, butterflies, birds…) and events (lunch in the kitchen, paddleball games, a waitress serving in a cafeteria) through which the asymmetrical image of elementary humanity, with its moods, desires, joys and sorrows can be carefully crafted into art.

Lest anyone interpret this treatment of everyday substances as frivolous, it must be remembered that there is at work here an elaborate alchemy that produces the poems' meaningful substance, one that is enabled by the intense semiotisation of the everyday objects that enter into the poetic domain. While not entirely stripped of their practical function, objects do acquire important symbolic and signifying attributes. Substances usually found in ambient reality, in effect, become *dramatis personae* in the intimate, familiar, hospitable environs of the poet's internal opus.

This practise of semiotising everyday objects is evident throughout the many pages of a book where trees cross the street and God is a bird. The window that opens onto the poet's past, for example, "I open the same windows of another house, that slow fire of mother's burners, now that her figure reappears gracefully among the crystal goblets" (2020, p. 80) is not much different in any substantial way from the opening in the wall where we might look out into the street, but it is transformed, becoming a symbol not for another window in another place, but for the act of looking back, with nostalgia, at an irretrievable childhood.

So it would not do to characterise this poetry, full of mobile trees, bird-gods and yes, flying women ("She'd fly with her hair along the plazas/each strand a syllable for the tree of bliss") (2020, p. 148) as a tranquil repository of elegiac, pastoral stoicism, as it would not do justice to the complexity of Zapata's creative imagination.

The Poesy of the Everyday

To flesh out my meaning, I would bring *Le Spleen de Paris* into the discussion and say that, like Zapata's, Baudelaire's prose poems also probe the manner in which the everyday and the commonplace can serve to dramatise the profound depths of elementary humanity; this is reflected in the intrusion of everyday life and ordinary events into the domain of abstraction that is poetry:

> A shrivelled little old woman was happy to see the pretty child over whom everyone was celebrating and everyone tried to please. […] So she approached, wanting to offer childish giggles and suitable grimaces.

> But the horrified child cringed under the decrepit old woman's caresses and filled the house with screams. (2014, p. 1)

Baudelaire's old woman then goes on to discourse on how in old age we come to disgust even the ones whom we most love. The readers can easily recognise unembellished life experience ("truth") intruding felicitously into the poetic realm. In Zapata, likewise, everyday life invades the poetic realm with the overwhelming power of the recognisable. Case in point is the poet's ride in the city subway:

> When you sit in the last car you open the book of sweet life, and you forget the signs that stalk you at each station. People board and disembark and chat through cryptic texts on their mobile phones, perhaps evading the anxiety of contact, of looking fixedly into another's eyes, of vibrating with the life that soars with the black hair of that woman whom I expect to greet at the station. (2020, p. 90)

In this poem Zapata weds an everyday, commonplace scene to a concern for our basal humanity: modern people have isolated themselves from one another through the agency of a small screen that feeds them all sorts of information. All of it without looking their interlocutor in the eyes, without physical contact, all while immersed in a digital world that is not real. He contrasts their delusions with his expectation of an encounter with an all-too-real woman whom he anticipates meeting at the station. The subway car, the station, are places where real life unfolds. Acting upon Teillier's lament over the loss of the human dimensions in poetry, Zapata proclaims that "Whatever poetry that relinquishes the ambient reality where human life unfolds, from this moment on ceases to be poetry" (Ildefonso n.p.). In this sense, Zapata's poetry is in practice an insubordination, a rebellion against the fashionable poetry that renounces ambient reality and where a tree is a poor two-dimensional shadow of a tree (as proposed by Teillier).

Accordingly, the attribution of a personal nature to a tree ("A tree laments its solitude and I search for my refuge in a bottomless glacier") (2020, p. 30), a tree where a supreme being may be nesting ("God is a blue bird that knows well how to fly") (2020, p. 122), is an extended metaphor. It is a metaphor for the multidimensional spirit of a real life, truly lived, that flows into his verses (as in the poem below) as a defiant promenade of trees "over the houses", over the abodes of poetry, "in defiance of every evil", that is to say, rebelling against the aesthetic judgment that has disengaged poetry from everyday life and reality. Thus, it is the tree that, as advocate and champion of ordinary objects, has the task of describing their evident, transcendental power: "the tempest that is a flower":

> A tree crosses the city with
> dark birds.
>
> From the window the light drizzle
> deceives like black snow.
>
> Rooted in the soil, the tree rises
> slowly over the houses,
> climbing beyond its whirlwind

> and rises over the anguish of
> every evil.
>
> In the name of the tree, in the name
> of heaven, the rings of its heart. (2020, p. 20)

And again:

> I named this tree
> leaning with open branches
> like an altar to heaven.
> Without clouds, it descends each morning,
> and very cunningly describes
> the tempest that is a flower. (2020, p. 24)

The prominence and significance of commonplace objects, of the ambient substance that has been eviscerated and invalidated at the hands of poets, is vigorously recovered here in the ordinary flower, described in these verses as a "tempest". And there is a well-reasoned strategy involved in equating the ordinary with the amazing, like portraying the flower as a tempest. It is the uncanny, almost surreal imagery and verbal handling of the mundane that generate a peculiar aesthetic realm where irrational associations beget beauty by harmonising inharmonious elements in a beguiling, sensual lyricism reminiscent of César Vallejo: "love ascends to the heart and the blood quickens/like a cherry tree bled dry in the street amid the snow… (2020, p. 96)

Additionally, in the prologue to this collection he states that "This is poetry: an unknown tree/that crosses the city" (2020, p. 18). The trees that cross the city, large, ponderous and somatic are, as I have proposed, suggestive of the host with which ambient reality – our consciousness' contextual matter – invades the domain of poetry in a liberating assault. This gentle onslaught replaces the abstractions of intellectual detachment with the solid monumentality of a tree and with the experiential language of human existence.

In a like manner, as Zapata observes a waitress at work, we intuit that her movements are meant to be regarded as the wordless verses of a reality that is more sublime and contains more truth than any fanciful, stirring, deceitful set of words: those movements carry with them the unadulterated substance of life. Because the poet's verses are assembled with words, the motions of her corporeal reality need to be translated faithfully into a tone and a rhythm that cohere with her movements; to this end, his words enter into an erotically charged dance wherein the poet is gradually seducing her movements into his verses, transferring everyday life into poetry in seamless, unadorned harmony:

> She brings the red wine, smiles and flaunts her black hair,
> knowing full well that the world watches her, in her legs
> abide centuries of tenderness.
>
> […]
>
> Life begins in the curvature of her

> spine and in the arc of her perspiring neck.
>
> […]
>
> Her graceful bearing is an affirmation of life, and when she
> approaches, deceitful as poetry, I fall silent. (2020, p. 89)

But seducing the reality of another human being into poetry is more complex than doing so with a tree, wine or red sauce; here the poet enters a quagmire where words are more apt to disappoint: her movements' translation into words are necessarily filtered through the poet's subjective enthusiasm, and efforts to capture her fail the poet as the waitress, perhaps feigning unfelt affection in search of a tip, approaches him. Thus, intimidated by the prospect of generating a self-serving abstraction that fails honestly to convey her humanity, he falls silent.

In this mundane environment, even God is not the object of idealised imagery or solemn worship: Zapata's God is a happy bird that sings in a tree and dissipates the darkness, a companion—perhaps He has a nest in the poet's back yard—that brings joy and with whom an intimate familiarity has developed: "God is a joyful bird that walks against the gloom […] God is a blue bird that knows well how to fly" (2020, p. 122).

The image that Zapata deems necessary to bring God to life in his poetry is not that of a codified God, assembled to hover over every human thought and action. The poet's God is *his* God, the one *he* experiences, one that is not codified or consensual. To speak of God in consensual terms requires a conventional idiom that is devoid of dynamic vitality, using language that is corrupted and altogether unequal to the task of accommodating the poet's earthy, cathartic, heterodox vision. More facile and elemental imagery and language are necessary to convey the subjective, idiosyncratic reality of the poet, and, by extension, of the divine being that flies out of the deepest spaces of his consciousness and lands in a tree in his back yard in the form of a bird.

In this regard, and in an effort to bring our quotidian, everyday reality into his poetry, the poet seems to be particularly mindful of the socially constructed essence of all our "truths," so with an abstract concept like God, he endeavours to contrive an unadulterated, independent image, unaffected by the assumptions of social or aesthetic covenants. Effectively, Zapata's intention seems to be to remove poetic language from its approved social function, infusing it with an unsullied human dimension that lies beyond dogmas and collective mythologies.

Ancillary to this intention, the poet detaches his persona from that abstract collective "we" created by the language of social convention, intensifying his individuality ("You are happily at home with yourself, joyful, with no one / at your side", [2020, p. 40]) by tapping into sources that have remained latent in the human psyche and predate collective epiphanies. As such, the reader is confronted with a poetic practice that gives voice to the individual psyche's pushback against collective encroachments, crafted in poems that always move towards the uncorrupted expression of personal truths (the essence of *my* life is not properly explained by dogma: it is more befittingly diagrammed in the curvature of the waitress' neck; *my* God is not correctly described in books: He is a bird in a tree).

As a consequence of these practices, Zapata's poetry comes across as the product of an aesthetic process that searches for an ideal expression not through the glorious conquests of obscurity, but through a well-adjusted strategy that imbues the cosmos with his authentic, unfeigned self. Unlike Matthew Arnold or T. S. Eliot, who believed that the true self (that is to say, its expression through poetry) was hindered by the "bewildering series of distractions and fancies which makes up the conscious mind of an ordinary man" (Hillis Miller, 1965, p. 152), Zapata assumes that profound emotional and spiritual material can be brought to the surface precisely through those everyday events that were deemed "distractions" by the two English poets.

Such an assumption is based on the idea that a mind detached from the objective world of events, objects and relations that we all share would lack the power to connect wholeheartedly with other minds, its voice delivering meaning that is overly self-centred, its emotive charge reduced to the status of an introspective abstraction. In consequence, his poems enact the personal drama of an authentic "I" that is often presented as "you" in an act of ecumenical inclusion (an "I" offered as the Spanish informal tú [you] in a demiurgic brand of metonymy). In these verses, a familiar subject pronoun hovers over a familiar landscape, covering it with the poet's rich, personal mythology.

The poet has remarked that "The act of writing is in all the daily acts of our existence: the crow writes, the sky writes to you without meaning to, and the window, which is the threshold between happiness and pain, is also the space where the word enters and stays with you" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). In Zapata's poetic cosmos, inasmuch as the poet is honest (unambiguously rejects ornate, fabricated language), and only insofar as he is unfettered (discards the artificial buttresses offered by tradition, dogma and aesthetic convention), can he give objective reality a charge of truth and poetic expression. Judging by his work, it would seem that, for Zapata, a true poet is one that is able to see poetry in the activity around a kitchen table:

> I place the white tablecloth then, the bread, the fresh fish and wine to celebrate the music that enters through every door, and I open the same windows of another house, that simmering on mom's stove burners, now that her silhouette reappears gracefully among the wine goblets. (2020, p. 80)

The humble objects that populate this passage allow the poet to reach into the past and retrieve, like an antiquarian performing platonic anamnesis, youthful memories of down-to-earth happiness. The reader becomes conscious of an eloquent prosopopoeia where absence speaks in silence about that "other" house and that "other" time: youth, the mother, innocence, that simple joy that always is and is no longer speak through the quietude of the objects that contextualised them. In short, absence gains an eloquent voice through the silent bygone objects that, notwithstanding their stillness, contribute to the emotional charge and provide a stage for the intimate scenes of a life lived. The dialectic of moments that exist no longer and yet persist in the poet, the unremitting presence of their absence and the eloquence of their silence all drive the poet's voice forward.

Zapata has suggested that objects and substances whose reality was experienced in the past can support the subsequent act of writing poetry, stating that "[F]rom the time I

was a small child I could play with the memory of the pleasant objects and things of the countryside where I had lived before" (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.). As the previous scene suggests, the truest aspects of the human condition can be revealed poetically by articulating the lyric plenitude of its common surroundings: simple everyday objects, permeated by the nostalgia for things past that is a common human trait, become poetic substances that are unconstrained by time or space. Windows are a case in point. The poet explains:

> I have seen many windows, and I believe that the window has been an indispensable object since ancient times. It is a look toward otherness, toward nowhere, toward the infinite to find another air and another sky. (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

Windows are unconstrained poetical substances that are opened simultaneously in his present home on Long Island as well during his childhood in Perú. Such commonplace objects owe their ubiquity to the poet's use of them as catalysts for retrieving the irretrievable past and articulating absence, that domain of "another air and another sky". The eccentric images, metaphors and language one would almost expect in such an endeavour are absent: To make this binary lyrical introspection possible, he merely opens the windows.

The Demise of Antithesis

This poet shows us that perhaps poetry's greatest potential resides in its elucidative character. By this I don't mean to suggest that it has the power to reveal the mysteries of the universe, but it does have the virtue of so expressing the character of the objects in Nature as to rouse in us a profound and intimate sense of their intrinsic worth and of the value of our connections with them. Zapata understands the indispensable role played by those objects in our experience of the universe, not only by those that physically surround us, but also by those whose essence has been captured in art, so that in his work we no longer perceive them as alien elements, extrinsic to our sense of self:

> I walk through the city and every tree is a miracle of the morning. They all form a queue to meet each other. With this happiness, I will again enter a museum and calmly observe a painting by Bacon, search for Klee's fish and swim with them, or clamber up Francisco Toledo's leafy Tree of Oaxaca, to end up in a hole next to Goya's dog. (2020, p. 92)

The trees, miracles of the morning that fill the poet with happiness, have a moral contour that reminds the reader of Thoreau's "nothing stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree" (1906, p. 145) and possess the transcendent immediacy of Plumly's "White Oaks Ascending": "The body/piecemeal falls away;/the spirit, in the privacy/of dark, sheds all its leaves./I died, I climbed a tree, I sang" (Thomas, 2019, p. 40). The poet does not just observe these objects -real or painted- but communes with them, quietly dismantling their absolute otherness.

In "A Tree Crosses the City", a collection of poems where quietude is critical, the antithetical binary that is generally defined as "substance/spirit" is disactivated, in the sense that substance now feeds the spirit, and the spirit immerses the substance around

it in transcendent essentiality. This results in a profound harmony where the self is in unimpeded communion with its context. As can be seen in the lines below, when the poet conflates the tree's forthcoming experience of winter with his own mortality (that other life that awaits us), we recognise that the poet's intimacy with the objects that surround him is a source of insight into his own inner being:

> The naked tree begs for your embrace, for a word that will give it patience for when the winter arrives, that other life that awaits us. Today you write while watching pines, yellow flowers and dozens of birds that alight to feed on the birdseed and the bit of water that you leave for them each day. (2020, p. 130)

The elimination of antithetical binaries brings a sense of harmony, a feeling of calm and quietude that one also detects in Wordsworth's solitary wilderness, where Nature's substance, conventionally extraneous to the self (a bird, the seas, a remote northern Atlantic archipelago), now gives a voice to the quietude in the poet's soul:

> A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
> In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
> Breaking the silence of the seas
> Among the farthest Hebrides. (Matthews Manley, 1916, p. 389)

One might characterise Keats's environment of soft-fallen snow upon the mountains and the moors, where waters have the priestlike task of cleansing the earth's *human* shores, in the same manner:

> Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
>   Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
> And watching, with eternal lids apart,
>   Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
> The moving waters at their priestlike task
>   Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
> Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
>   Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
> No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
>   Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
> To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
>   Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
> Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
> And so live ever—or else swoon to death. (2010, p. 305)

And Chateaubriand, in whose *Atala* the erstwhile antithesis European/Native American is abolished in the body of a young woman of mixed Spanish and Indian parentage. The context surrounding her story is one where quiet objects of Nature not only captivate the two main protagonists/lovers, but also fully integrate with the writer's spirit and allow it lyrical expression:

> The moon shone in the midst of a spotless blue sky, and its pearl-grey light fell on the indeterminate summits of the forest. Not a sound was heard, except some distant unknown harmony that reigned in the depth

of the trees: it seemed that the soul of solitude sighed throughout the whole extent of wilderness. (Chateaubriand, 2011, n.p.)

As with these writers, for Zapata poetry provides a vehicle with which to interpret the quiet language of the objects that surround him and, through them, give voice to his inner world. But Zapata's communion is more thorough: through those objects he is able to epitomise his moral cosmos. Through them he comes to detect the true essence of life and realise that he thinks, feels and understands only insofar as he is part of that universal system that we call Nature.

This is why, at times, it seems that the objects in his poetry have written their own stories, even though it is the poet's struggle with the idea of the fundamental unknowability of the essence of God (Aquinas's *Deus absconditus* concept) that is being epitomised by their plight:

> A tree waited with abiding faith
> for rain that failed to arrive.
> This was the tree that each morning
> surveyed the grey skies while leaning
> on a wooden bridge,
> and with so much thirst spread its branches
> to trap the moisture of the morning dew
> just at the moment
> when the musicians arrived
> and cowled cypresses
> vanished into the night. (2020, p. 144)

Doubtlessly the integrity of his communion with those objects is sustained by the sincerity and candour with which he treats them; that conduct is reflected in the unembellished serenity of his verses, where he combines truth of subject with accuracy of composition.

Timelessness and Serenity: Conclusion

In Zapata's verses, past and future intermingle in a timeless embrace. Memory can turn absence into presence and make the present look into the future with the innocent dreams of childhood (the past). He describes memory as a journey to the past that is always fostered by the everyday objects that have surrounded his life:

> To return to childhood is a wonderful thing. One should always be a child, and there are thousands of ways to be one. Poetry is precisely a way to dream that good times are coming and that the sky and bread will arrive at the window and at the table". (Ildefonso, 2005, n.p.)

In the end, perhaps, when opening his windows, the poet can again feel the presence of the mother in front of the stove burners, can once more become the person that intuits the names of every bird that crosses his sky and can speak the language of butterflies; perhaps looking through those windows he is reminded of the untroubled bliss of childhood and can again experience the joy of defying gravity while in a woman's embrace. What is undeniable is that it is in the quietude of those everyday objects and

events that Zapata's verses ring with the sound of truth and achieve the tenor of truly authentic poesy.

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