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From the Editor

In this volume of the *IAFOR Journal of Arts and Humanities*, we explore a diverse range of topics within the humanities, engaging with issues of trauma, identity, power dynamics, and resistance through a variety of critical lenses. The articles herein reflect the breadth and depth of contemporary scholarship, offering insightful readings of literature, film, visual arts, and political discourse. Each contribution brings forth new perspectives on how cultural artifacts – whether narratives, rituals, or performances – serve as sites of negotiation, healing, and transformation. The collection invites readers to reconsider familiar texts and media, offering nuanced interpretations that challenge dominant paradigms and open up new avenues of thought.

In “Representation of Traumatic Memory in the Film *Drishyam*: A Barthesian Reading”, Srilekha B. P. and V. Bharathi Harishankar draw on Roland Barthes’ semiotic theories to explore how trauma unfolds in the Malayalam film *Drishyam*. By analyzing the emotional and psychological impact of a single traumatic event, Srilekha examines the complex interplay between individual, familial, and communal responses to loss, offering a thoughtful meditation on the multifaceted nature of memory and trauma.

Rekha Rani and Saru Sachdeva in “Witchery as Tribal Primary Ethos: Negotiations and Resistance in Select Literary Representations”, delve into the role of witchcraft within tribal societies, using it as a lens through which to explore gendered power relations. Rani argues that the concept of witchery, deeply embedded in indigenous traditions and folklore, not only reflects but also reinforces patriarchal structures, positioning tribal women as particularly vulnerable within both tribal and non-tribal contexts.

Mitali Mishra’s “Recovering the Loss: Infanticide, Ambivalence and Trauma in Shobha Rao’s ‘The Lost Ribbon’” explores the intersection of motherhood and trauma in Rao’s short story. Through a feminist reading of the act of infanticide in the context of India’s Partition, Mishra reveals the ways in which patriarchal ideologies and social inequalities shape the emotional and psychological landscapes of women, highlighting the ambivalence and trauma that linger long after the physical act.

In “Narrative Environment of Malgudi: Space, Autonomy, and Belonging”, Gouthaman K J and Nandini Pradeep J offer a spatial analysis of R. K. Narayan’s “Malgudi stories”, investigating how space and social structures interact to shape the lives of its inhabitants. By examining the social production of space within the narrative, the authors underscore the contested nature of belonging and autonomy in the fictional world of Malgudi, revealing the layers of meaning embedded in seemingly simple landscapes.

Himangshu Sarma and Smaranika Chakraborty, in “Interpreting the Erotic as Agency: A Study of Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*”, revisits Murakami’s portrayal of sexuality and female agency. Drawing from feminist theory, particularly Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic as empowering, the authors challenge traditional understandings of sexuality as defined by male dominance, arguing instead for a more nuanced conception of the erotic as a site of female empowerment.

In “Adivasi Marginality and the Vicissitudes of Violence in Rejina Marandi’s *Becoming Me*”, Sayan Chatterjee examines the systemic violence and marginalization faced by Adivasi communities in Assam, India, through the lens of Marandi’s novel. Chatterjee illuminates the

intersection of identity, violence, and displacement, exploring how narratives like Marandi's reflect the complex realities of Adivasi life and the persistence of socio-political oppression.

Samarth Singhal's "From Painting to Picturebook: Bhajju Shyam's Insider Indigenous Art" offers a close reading of Bhajju Shyam's *Creation*, an exploration of Pardhan Gond origin stories. Singhal highlights Shyam's role in shaping an insider's history of Gond art, positioning his work as both a reclamation of cultural narrative and a critique of the outsider gaze that has historically marginalized Indigenous communities.

Sumita and Mayur Chhikara's "Liberation via Reliving the Suffering: A Study of August Wilson's Monologues" presents a deconstructive analysis of August Wilson's plays, focusing on the therapeutic potential of the monologue. By applying Freud's theory of repression, Sumita explores how African American characters use the act of storytelling to relive trauma and, in doing so, open up pathways for both individual and collective liberation.

Sanghamitra Ghatak, in "Apocalypse, Gothic and Rupturing of Societal Hierarchy: An Interpretation of Marxian Tendencies in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*", examines the 2009 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, interpreting its zombie apocalypse as a Marxist critique of capitalist society. Ghatak contends that the zombification of Austen's world exposes the class struggles at the heart of the social order, symbolizing the dehumanizing effects of capitalist exploitation.

In "Affects of Resistance: Candomblé Rituals in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction", Parvathi M. S. analyses the role of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé rituals in the novel *Crooked Plow*. Drawing on affect theory, Parvathi explores how the rituals become a form of political resistance, enabling characters to mobilize against historical and contemporary forms of oppression.

Finally, in "Rock Music and The Political Scripting of Vietnam War: Reading *Dispatches* by Michael Herr", Lalit Kumar investigates the interplay between music and narrative in Herr's *Dispatches*, a seminal account of the Vietnam War. Kumar explores how Herr's use of musical references contributes to a broader cultural understanding of the war, framing it as a media montage that both reflects and shapes public perceptions of the conflict.

This volume is a testament to the vitality and diversity of contemporary humanities scholarship. Each article offers a fresh perspective, engaging with cultural artifacts in ways that enrich our understanding of power, identity, and resistance in both historical and contemporary contexts. Together, these contributions highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and critical engagement with cultural texts, encouraging readers to reconsider the forces that shape our understanding of the world.

Alfonso J. García-Osuna, Editor
Hofstra University, December 20, 2024

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Article 1

Representation of Traumatic Memory in the Film Drishyam: A Barthesian Reading

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Article 2

Witchery as Tribal Primary Ethos: Negotiations and Resistance in Select Literary Representations

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Recovering the Loss: Infanticide, Ambivalence and Trauma in Shobha Rao's *The Lost Ribbon*

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Article 4

Narrative Environment of Malgudi: Space, Autonomy, and Belonging

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Article 5

Interpreting the Erotic as Agency: A Study of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Adivasi Marginality and the Vicissitudes of Violence in Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me*

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Article 7

From Painting to Picturebook: Bhajju Shyam's Insider Indigenous Art**Samarth Singhal**

Samarth Singhal holds a PhD from the Department of English, University of California, Riverside (2019–24). He has been Assistant Professor of English at Maitreyi College (2015–16) and Kamala Nehru College (2016–19), University of Delhi, as well as a TA at University of California, Riverside. His dissertation project discusses the collaboration between Pardhan Gond Adivasi artists and Tara Books via the medium of the contemporary Anglophone picturebook. The dissertation argues that the contemporary Pardhan artist turns a boutique object like the Tara-published Anglophone picturebook into a site for Adivasi assertion. Samarth has published on Indian detective and speculative fiction, Indian political cartooning, and painting. He has co-edited an anthology on South Asian visual studies, *South Asian Ways of Seeing*, published by Primus in 2022.

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Article 8

Liberation via Reliving the Suffering: A Study of August Wilson's Monologues**Sumita**

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Apocalypse, Gothic and Rupturing of Societal Hierarchy: An Interpretation of Marxian Tendencies in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies***Sanghamitra Ghatak**

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Affects of Resistance: Candomblé Rituals in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction**Dr Parvathi M. S.**

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Article 11

Rock Music and The Political Scripting of Vietnam War: Reading *Dispatches* by Michael Herr**Lalit Kumar**

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Representation of Traumatic Memory in the Film *Drishyam*: A Barthesian Reading

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Abstract

Cinema has long served as a vital medium for disseminating information and knowledge in modern society. Its portrayal of diverse emotions and themes often mirrors societal events in a realistic and compelling manner. Enhanced by various cinematographic techniques, the depiction of trauma is magnified within the visual narrative. This article employs “Drishyam”, a Malayalam film presented in two parts, to analyze the impact of trauma stemming from a singular event. It explores the process of trauma across different phases and examines its repercussions on the individual, family, and local community. The theoretical frameworks of *Camera Lucida* and *Camera Obscura*, as proposed by Roland Barthes, provide a basis for interpretation, allowing for the cinematic narrative to be examined from multiple perspectives, as well as highlighting the directorial intent. In particular, this study utilizes Barthes’ concepts of “studium” and “punctum” to evaluate the emotional response elicited from the audience.

Keywords: *Camera Lucida*, *Camera Obscura*, healing, memory, operator, spectator, trauma cinema

Cinema serves as a multifaceted medium for portraying various aspects of societal life. It has historically played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and information on a broad spectrum of topics. Throughout its evolution, cinema has explored myriad themes that resonate with audiences at multiple levels, possessing the inherent capacity to reshape perceptions regarding specific issues (Cinemas, 2023). Employing diverse cinematographic techniques, cinema can influence audience ideas and perceptions, capturing a wide array of emotions.

However, the representation of trauma within film has often been subject to significant variability, sometimes overstated or understated. Trauma emerges as a complex concept in cinematic narratives, providing audiences with insights into traumatic memory, healing processes, and associated issues. It is important to recognize that trauma cannot be reductively defined; its understanding and representation differ across various fields of study. For instance, perspectives on trauma can vary considerably among literary writers, medical practitioners, psychologists, psychiatrists, laypersons, and trauma survivors, shaped by their unique experiences and contexts.

Trauma fundamentally alters individual perspectives concerning self-identity, worldviews, and existential considerations. The sub-genre of trauma cinema specifically addresses incidents of trauma and their profound impact on characters. The representation of trauma can evoke disparate responses among audiences, influenced by their personal life experiences. As noted by Walker (2005), trauma cinema seeks to contextualize and theorize films that engage with catastrophe as a subject and trauma as an aesthetic. This approach illustrates how amnesias, fantasies, and errors in memory contribute to public culture and the construction of historical meaning.

Traumatic events are remarkable not due to their rarity, but because they profoundly disrupt ordinary human responses to life's challenges. Unlike typical misfortunes, traumatic occurrences often entail direct threats to life or bodily integrity, or intimate encounters with violence and mortality. Such experiences force individuals into states of extreme helplessness and terror, heightening their awareness of potential dangers in their environment (Herman, 2015).

Trauma can arise from natural disasters or be induced by human actions, each impacting individuals in distinct ways contingent upon the nature of the event. Human-induced trauma, in particular, permeates society through socio-economic and political frameworks, shaping experiences in multifaceted manners (Vickroy, 2002). This study examines human-induced trauma and its ramifications on individuals and families as portrayed in the Malayalam film "Drishyam".

Traumatic events, regardless of their nature, exert a profound impact on individuals and groups, shaped significantly by their prior life experiences. Such events often catalyze a healing process, prompting individuals and groups to gain deeper insights into themselves and their societal contexts. However, they also contribute to a persistent cycle of memory, leaving lasting scars that can hinder complete recovery. This article examines an event that imprints indelibly

on the memories of individuals and families, influencing their ability to move forward – either driving them to escape their trials or causing stagnation. Additionally, this article explores the effects of trauma memory, investigating its varied impacts across different genders and their unique experiences.

The narrative crafted by a director or writer possesses a distinctive essence, as the author exercises complete control over the storyline. These operator-driven narratives engage audiences through the writer's lens, determining the visibility or invisibility of various events. In "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography", Roland Barthes discusses the interplay between the operator's emotions and the spectrum of representation that ultimately shapes the spectator's response. This article examines the interplay of clear and obscure imagery employed by Jeethu Joseph in "Drishyam", analyzing how these choices influence the portrayal of characters and events, as well as the audience's reactions.

Drishyam (parts 1 and 2) features several pivotal characters, including George Kutty (the father and protagonist), Rani (the mother and heroine), Anju (the elder daughter), Anu (the younger daughter), and Varun Prabhakar (the deceased son whose actions catalyze the entire plot). The narrative revolves around Anju, a schoolgirl who develops a romantic relationship with her classmate Varun. However, Varun subsequently harasses Anju by threatening to expose a compromising video of her. One fateful rainy night, Varun arrives at Anju's home, where he is killed by both Anju and her mother, Rani. In the aftermath, Varun dies at the scene, and George Kutty meticulously destroys evidence and fabricates a narrative to protect his family.

Geetha Prabhakar, the Inspector General and Varun's mother, is devastated by her son's disappearance and later learns of his death, which is attributed to George Kutty's family. During the ensuing investigation, Geetha struggles to substantiate her case, ultimately resigning from her position and relocating to America. Throughout the inquiry, she subjects Anju and her family to intense scrutiny, instilling a profound sense of terror and fear in them.

In the second part of the film, George Kutty and his family grapple with the repercussions of the case, leading to significant disruptions in their social lives and relationships within the community. Geetha employs various strategies to uncover the truth, yet her efforts are thwarted by George Kutty's countermeasures. Despite his desire to disclose the truth to Geetha, George is paralyzed by the fear of losing his family, which ultimately prevents him from revealing the reality of the situation.

Individual and Collective Trauma

Individual trauma refers to the distinct personal experience of an event or persistent condition that threatens one's life or psychic and physical integrity, often accompanied by profound feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. A crucial element in defining an experience as traumatic is the individual's capacity to cope and their ability to integrate overwhelming emotional responses. Trauma typically affects individuals across various domains – physical, social, emotional, and spiritual (Giller, 1999). The impact of trauma is influenced by the

individual's social context and environmental factors, while resilience factors play a significant role in shaping the healing process.

The position and circumstances of an individual within a familial or communal context further determine the effects of trauma and the subsequent healing journey. In the film, each character assumes a distinct role in the incident, resulting in varied experiences of trauma. Anju, the central character involved in the act of violence while attempting to protect herself, grapples with trauma that engenders feelings of guilt, silence, fear, and dissociation from both herself and her family. According to Herman (2015), trauma deprives the victim of a sense of power and control over their own life. Anju becomes trapped in a realm of fear and guilt, which fractures her perception of life and reality. This indicates that she has lost a sense of agency at multiple levels, leading to her dissociation from herself and her surroundings, as she internalizes blame for the unfolding tragedy.

As Caruth articulates in *Unclaimed Experiences*, trauma serves to fragment consciousness, obstructing direct linguistic representation. Anju's memory is profoundly impacted by the traumatic event, rendering her unable to communicate the details to her father due to the overwhelming shock she endures. This traumatic experience inhibits her ability to articulate her narrative effectively. Furthermore, Anju grapples with a deep sense of responsibility for the trauma experienced by her family, which exacerbates her psychological distress and manifests in psychosomatic issues, including depression and epilepsy. The intensity of Anju's trauma and her responses are markedly more pronounced than those exhibited by other characters in the film.

Rani's trauma distinctly differs from Anju's, largely due to her complex roles as both mother and perpetrator. In an effort to protect her daughter, she kills Varun, an act that engenders profound fear and guilt. This guilt presents two dimensions: first, the weight of having taken a life that she never intended to end, and second, an empathetic awareness of the suffering endured by Varun's mother. Unlike Anju, Rani grapples with a heightened sense of responsibility – balancing her obligation to safeguard her daughter against the moral ramifications of her actions, which fundamentally challenges her identity as a mother.

Statements such as, "She is a mother too, and I can feel for her," highlight her recognition of guilt and forge an inevitable connection between her motherhood and that of Geetha. In contrast to Anju, Rani remains vigilant, conscious, and discerning in her conversations, openly discussing her fears and distress even within her close relationships – a typical response to trauma. She refrains from confiding in anyone except her husband, choosing not to disclose her inner turmoil to her children or others, thereby illustrating her internal conflict.

The younger daughter, Anu, is not directly implicated in the events of the narrative, yet she endures vicarious trauma as a result of witnessing the aftermath of the primary incident. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, explores the impact of witnessing trauma, emphasizing that such experiences can alter the perception of trauma itself, presenting it differently from the original event. Anu experiences this phenomenon when she becomes aware of aspects of the

incident and subsequently faces trauma during her time in police custody, despite her lack of direct involvement.

Moreover, she is entangled in the family trauma, haunted by specific memories linked to the traumatic event. While Anu ultimately manages to move forward from the incident, certain memories resurface in response to triggering stimuli, causing her distress. Nevertheless, she demonstrates resilience, coping with these challenges and maintaining a joyful existence as a schoolchild.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition), trauma can evoke responses beyond mere fear, manifesting as heightened alertness, emotional numbness, stubbornness, and hyper-vigilance. George Kutty, as the family patriarch, exhibits a distinct reaction compared to other family members. He assumes the responsibility of safeguarding the family from legal repercussions and other complications, becoming increasingly alert and hyper-vigilant, which leads him into a state of anticipatory trauma. He contemplates the future implications of the case and meticulously prepares strategies to evade punishment, exemplified by his systematic reconstruction of an alibi during the time of the crime. While his efforts to conceal the offense and protect his family may appear responsible, they fundamentally illustrate behaviors associated with anticipatory trauma.

In contrast, Inspector General Geetha initially responds to the overwhelming loss of her son with a sense of hope, remaining in denial about the gravity of her situation. Over time, she comes to terms with her son's death, but this realization leads to a loss of hope and an increase in aggression, which are characteristic responses to trauma. Despite wielding her authority to uncover the truth, her repeated failures further exacerbate her trauma. Ultimately, she relocates to another country to escape the distress and psychosomatic issues stemming from her grief and memories of her son. However, her attempts to leave those memories behind prove unsuccessful.

Collective trauma is defined as the impact of traumatic events on the functioning and cultural dynamics of a group or community. In this study, collective trauma is conceptualized as family trauma, encompassing the effects of a distressing event on the family unit as a whole. Individual and collective traumas exhibit notable differences; for instance, the emotions and experiences associated with an individual's trauma may remain incomprehensible to family members. Conversely, in the context of collective or family trauma, the repercussions can be understood and empathized with by other family members or group participants.

Moreover, while collective trauma stems from a shared traumatic experience, it does not affect each individual uniformly (Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). Collective trauma fosters a sense of solidarity among group members, as they endure similar experiences and emotions that facilitate mutual understanding. However, the intensity of trauma and its effects can vary among individuals, influenced by their level of exposure to the traumatic incident and their respective coping mechanisms. In the case of George Kutty's family, they collectively grapple with the consequences of Varun's death.

At the legal level, the police investigation, combined with the anger of a mother and her authority as a police officer, poses significant threats to the family. On a personal level, each family member experiences psychosomatic complaints that manifest as symptoms of trauma response. Socially, the family faces ostracism from the community, fueled by suspicions surrounding the killing and a pervasive fear of law enforcement. Anju's parents strive to support her in processing her trauma, encouraging her to engage freely in activities of her choosing; however, Anju is paralyzed by fear and haunting memories, rendering her unable to exercise this freedom. Consequently, she feels incapacitated in managing her daily life.

Rani's trauma diverges from that of Anju and George Kutty, as her role as a mother amplifies her concerns for her daughter's well-being and the societal perceptions of their family. In her attempts to find a suitable groom for Anju, Rani encounters failure, as her community's views cast doubt on the morality and chastity of both her daughter and the family. Unlike other family members, Rani's awareness of societal judgment serves as a significant traumatic stressor, compelling her to navigate the pressures of public opinion as the matriarch.

Meanwhile, George Kutty assumes the role of protector, constantly seeking an escape route for the family. His trauma is characterized by anticipatory anxiety, as he remains vigilant regarding the ongoing police investigation for years after the incident. Even six years later, he exhibits hyper-vigilance in safeguarding his family, adopting investigative behaviors in response to his concerns. In contrast, Anu, while she retains memories of the incident, adapts and continues to lead a happy life.

At the parental level, the family's trauma encompasses four members – George Kutty, Rani, Geetha, and Prabhakar – who collectively endure their distress yet respond in markedly different ways. Both George Kutty and Rani experience the grief of losing a young boy, yet they struggle to acknowledge this pain due to the external threats they face. The dynamics of power politics inhibit George Kutty from revealing the truth, despite his ability to empathize with Varun's parents. Throughout the film, the emotional burden of losing a child resonates with both Rani and George, yet they remain unable to articulate this sorrow. The nuances of trauma sharing among the parents are vividly depicted through both expressed and unexpressed emotions. Despite the actions of their children, the emotional bonds inherent in their roles as parents facilitate a shared experience of trauma.

Pre-Trauma to Post-Trauma

According to trauma theorists Caruth and Herman, traumatic incidents fundamentally alter an individual's perception of life. In the context of trauma, the experience can be delineated into three distinct phases: the pre-traumatic phase, the trauma incident, and the post-trauma phase. Pre-trauma is characterized by prolonged and significant anxiety concerning a potentially devastating event, as noted by the American Psychological Association (2023). During this phase, individuals remain in a perpetual state of worry and heightened stress, feeling helpless to avert the anticipated trauma, and often reliving the feared event mentally.

A study by Bernsten and Rubin (2015) on combat soldiers indicates that pre-traumatic stress engenders negative beliefs and persistent anxiety, often leading individuals to engage in avoidance strategies to prevent the traumatic incident, which can subsequently exacerbate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to regrets over their inability to intervene. In the context of this film, Anju, the primary character, experiences pre-traumatic stress as she continuously grapples with the perceived threat posed by Varun. Her constant state of stress, fear, and anxiety, coupled with her unsuccessful attempts to thwart the impending danger, culminates in a more intense PTSD reaction, as she feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the ensuing situation. In the post-traumatic phase, she reflects on and regrets both the pre-trauma and trauma incidents. Notably, other characters in the film do not appear to engage in this pre-traumatic phase.

As individuals navigate different phases and levels of trauma influenced by various factors, the post-trauma experience similarly exhibits variability. Traumatic memory plays a crucial role in the aftermath of trauma, with each character in the film harboring distinct traumatic memories, despite their shared familial experience. Anju notably displays behaviors consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including nightmares, trauma triggers, self-silencing, emotional detachment, anxiety, and physical manifestations such as epilepsy and psychosomatic complaints. She remains in a state of continuous remorse regarding the incident and its associated events, which profoundly impacts her memory and contributes to her emotional disintegration.

Her associative memory is triggered by encounters with police vehicles or officers, as well as rainy nights, leading to episodes of emotional and physical anxiety that culminate in seizures. Sleeplessness becomes a persistent aspect of her life due to rumination over the incident, resulting in recurring nightmares about its ramifications. The healing process is often slow and arduous; she seeks solace through reading, socializing, and engaging in professional therapy. Anju's worldview and sense of self shift from that of a happy child to a melancholic adult struggling to process her trauma.

Rani's traumatic memories, while related to those of her daughter, are shaped by her maternal instinct to protect her children. Her demeanor shifts from a lenient mother to a more authoritarian figure, particularly with her younger daughter, influenced by her past experiences with Anju. Rani becomes increasingly anxious about her daughter's interactions with boys and attempts to exert control over her behavior. Overwhelmed by fear and anxiety regarding potential repercussions from law enforcement, she loses her sense of self-control whenever she perceives a threat to her family. Rani's trauma healing involves engaging in daily routines and confiding in a select group of trusted neighbors. However, she refrains from disclosing the truth to anyone, except her husband. To cope, she turns to spirituality and religion as means of navigating her trauma.

George Kutty's anticipatory trauma precludes him from attending to any concerns beyond the imperative of protecting his family. He exhibits behaviors indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), remaining perpetually alert, taking calculated actions, and seeking assistance

when challenges arise related to the case. Although he grapples with the desire to confess the truth to Varun's parents, he ultimately refrains due to the associated dangers. Crucially, he finds no outlet for self-expression, maintaining an exterior facade of courage, determination, and obstinacy in withholding the truth – even from his family. His conception of masculinity compels him to embody the protector role, intensifying in the presence of perceived threats.

George Kutty assumes a chivalrous attitude, strategically anticipating a protracted future and planning accordingly throughout the narrative. As he foresees potential consequences, he refrains from employing certain strategies, determined not to fail in his mission. In the first part of the film, he constructs an embedded narrative within the overarching meta-narrative crafted by Jeethu Joseph, while in the sequel, he engages in anticipatory actions aimed at evading legal repercussions. By envisioning the broader scenario, he even writes a script and approaches filmmakers to direct a film based on his experiences. This creation of a sub-narrative, where George predicts future events from multiple perspectives, exemplifies his proactive approach.

In contrast, the other characters appear weak and passive, suffering in silence from their trauma, which manifests in a predominantly negative light. George's PTSD, however, is intertwined with positive attributes, ultimately serving as an enabling force that allows him to navigate and manage the complexities of his circumstances.

The traumatic memories of Geetha and Prabhakar remain persistent, unaffected by the passage of time or changing circumstances. Geetha has been unable to relinquish thoughts of her son, preoccupied with the loss even as she acknowledges his wrongdoing. She harbors an unrelenting desire to identify and punish the perpetrator, believing that such an act might alleviate the profound pain she has endured over the years. Her anger, frustration, and haunting memories serve as barriers to her healing, continuously triggering her emotional distress.

Similar to George, Geetha employs various strategies in her quest to confront him and his family, yet this trajectory oscillates between hope and disappointment, as George consistently anticipates her moves and eludes accountability. Prabhakar shares a comparable anguish but responds to his grief with numbness and overt emotionality, even pleading with George for his son's remains. Initially presented as a seemingly happy family, by the film's conclusion, all characters emerge burdened by pain, anxiety, distress, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from a singular traumatic incident. This transition cultivates a melancholic atmosphere among the characters, each striving to escape the cyclical nature of their memories, yet finding little success.

Analysis of Emotional Response through Barthesian Framework

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes underscores the importance of examining a photograph from multiple perspectives. He asserts that photography captures moments and preserves them indefinitely, while also analyzing images through both insider and outsider lenses, highlighting their socio-cultural implications. Barthes's theoretical framework, particularly his concepts of *Camera Lucida* and *Camera Obscura*, alongside

Studium and *Punctum*, serves as a foundation for this article to explore the nuances of visible and concealed events that blur the lines between right and wrong.

In the fourth section of his work, Barthes posits that a photograph can evoke three distinct emotions or intentions: “To Do”, “To Undergo”, and “To Look”, corresponding to the roles of the operator, spectrum, and spectator. Jeethu Joseph, as the film’s director, occupies the role of the operator, determining how characters and events are portrayed while crafting the screenplay to elicit specific responses from the audience. Through his perspective, he frames and limits the narrative, strategically introducing elements of surprise. The film’s scenes are filtered through the operator’s vision, infused with his emotional engagement. By creating an embedded narrative, Joseph highlights the protagonist’s intelligence, effectively transforming the actual events into a portrayal of heroism.

The protagonist elicits sympathy and empathy, inviting the audience to identify with his plight and support him, irrespective of the underlying justice or injustice. This effect is skillfully orchestrated by the operator, who delineates the spectrum of good and bad characters, thereby intensifying the narrative impact on both the characters and the viewers. Jeethu Joseph aligns the narrative with George Kutty and his family, rendering the morally ambiguous as justifiable, a sentiment echoed by Mangattu (2014) in his exploration of familial protection. In doing so, Joseph subtly encourages the audience to adopt a similar perspective.

Conversely, he portrays Geetha as a formidable adversary intent on dismantling George’s family, further persuading viewers to align with George’s plight. Joseph illuminates specific events using *Camera Lucida*, offering the audience clear insights, while simultaneously employing obscured moments to facilitate the protagonist’s evasion of consequences. This strategic use of embedded narrative within the primary storyline serves to reinforce these thematic elements in the film’s first installment.

The dynamic of Anju’s family shifts their status from perpetrators to victims, while Geetha’s authoritative position positions her as the perpetrator. This inversion aligns with the notion that the foul becomes fair and the fair becomes foul, as noted by Mangattu (2014). By alternating between *Camera Lucida* and *Camera Obscura*, Jeethu Joseph juxtaposes individual perspectives with broader social contexts. Roland Barthes characterizes this juxtaposition through the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, where *studium* encompasses social and cultural interpretations, and *punctum* refers to specific details that elicit profound personal responses to an image.

The narrative is crafted from Jeethu Joseph’s perspective, leading to a diminished impact of *studium* due to the audience’s reliance on *punctum* for interpretation. Viewers are inclined to perceive the hero in a favorable light, overlooking the crimes committed by him and his family, which fosters a prevailing sense of empathy throughout the film. This close connection between the audience and the protagonist diminishes the significance of *studium*. By obscuring Geetha’s victimhood, the director frames her as the antagonist. Consequently, *punctum*

facilitates a transformation in the audience's understanding, underscoring the fluid interchangeability of victim and perpetrator roles.

To the viewers, George Kutty's family may appear as the victims; however, Geetha perceives them as perpetrators. Initially, Varun's actions suggest that Anju and her family are indeed the victims. The film persistently reinforces this narrative by emphasizing Anju's family's remorse regarding the incident. A critical element often overlooked by the audience is Geetha's profound trauma as a mother who has lost her son and has been unable to recover his remains. The dynamics shift when Geetha wields her authority to further victimize Anju's family for the transgressions committed.

Conclusion

Utilizing the Barthesian framework, this study elucidates the intricate blurring of the roles of victims and perpetrators within a trauma narrative. The concepts of *studium* and *punctum* facilitate a vicarious sense of satisfaction for the audience, particularly in their identification with the underdog. The portrayal of various stages of traumatic memory illustrates a dynamic process in which individual reactions both converge and diverge. The interstices between these convergences and divergences offer not only a focused glimpse into a specific traumatic incident but also a kaleidoscopic perspective on the diverse responses elicited by the trauma.

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Witchery as Tribal Primary Ethos: Negotiations and Resistance in Select Literary Representations

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Abstract

The belief in the existence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits among tribal communities in India has led to the emergence of numerous narratives surrounding witchcraft. Central to these beliefs is the notion of a spiritual realm that sustains the witch cult, where witches are typically portrayed as women. Deeply embedded in religious practices, traditions, folklore, and myths, the concept of witchcraft serves to reinforce gendered power dynamics within tribal societies. This, in turn, contributes to the heightened vulnerability of tribal women within the broader, non-tribal social structure. The present study seeks to explore the concept of witchcraft as it is understood, experienced, and deconstructed by tribal women themselves, as represented in the Indian fictional works *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and *The Witch* by Mahasweta Devi. Employing a deconstructive approach, this paper critically examines witchcraft as a core aspect of tribal cultural identity. It argues that Indian tribal women no longer view witchcraft merely as a negative gender stereotype but rather as a means to assert their rights, celebrate their autonomy, and navigate the complexities of a mystical belief system. By resisting the oppressive use of witchcraft as a tool of manipulation, tribal women, through their strategic engagement with witchcraft, challenge both tribal and non-tribal systems of oppression, thereby forging their own identities and redefining the boundaries of power.

Keywords: evil spirit, patriarchy, Santhal tribals, tribal woman, witch-woman

A community can be understood as a collective formed around shared beliefs, cultural practices, customs, traditions, and festivals, all of which are deeply ingrained in the consciousness of its members. Superstitions often have their origins in these deeply rooted traditions and communal beliefs. Carl Jung posits that a fundamental aspect of humanity is the presence of an “unconscious” mind, shaped by shared memories, desires, impulses, images, and ideas (Frye, 2018, p. 1249). This “collective unconscious” enables individuals to interpret and assign meaning to the physical world through myths, archetypal symbols, images, and cultural conventions. The figure of the witch, as an archetype or myth, has existed across diverse cultures globally, from Europe and Africa to Asia. Classic narratives, such as the story of *Hansel and Gretel* and Shakespeare’s portrayal of the “weird sisters,” have permeated the moral fabric of numerous cultural legends worldwide. In India, tribal communities also maintain strong beliefs in both benevolent spirits – such as Ram Salgi or Jaher Era – and malevolent forces, including witches – known as *dayan*, *dakan*, or *chudail*. These spirits occupy a significant place in the oral histories, traditions, and rituals of these communities. As Mahasweta Devi’s work with Eastern Indian tribal groups reveals, she describes the witch and *Sokha* as “intractable truths” (Devi, 2010, p. 234) within the tribal worldview, signifying their undeniable presence and importance in shaping tribal narratives and identity.

Verrier Elwin, through his extensive engagement with tribal communities in India, affirms that belief in black magic and witchcraft is prevalent among these groups. Elwin recounts a myth from central India that illustrates this belief, in which a childless couple seeks the blessings of their *Kawal* guru to conceive. In response, the guru blesses the couple with a son and a daughter, and foretells their futures: “This boy will become a great *Gunia* and will possess twelve cartloads of *Vidya*. The girl will be a witch and will carry thirteen cartloads of *Pap-Vidya*” (Elwin, 2009, pp. 256–257). This narrative reinforces the association of virtue with the male figure and evil with the female, establishing a connection between women and witchcraft. In this context, the woman is not only seen as a bearer of evil but also as intrinsically linked to witchery. Among various tribal groups in India, such as the *Mundas*, *Santhals*, *Oraons*, *Bodos*, *Rabhas*, and *Mishings*, there exists not only a pervasive belief in spirits, but also a pronounced association of women with malevolent forces, thereby reinforcing gendered perceptions of evil.

Witchcraft has long been understood as a mechanism for controlling and regulating women within the dominant patriarchal discourse. The body of the witch, as a “culturally constructed body” (Butler, 2006, p. 127), is emblematic of this system of control. In this framework, a woman’s subordination is often reinforced when she deviates from established social norms and expectations. When a woman fails to conform, her autonomy and womanhood are violently stripped away. The objective of the present study is to explore, through selected literary representations, the concept of the witch as it is perceived, experienced, and deconstructed by tribal women themselves. This paper also examines how witchcraft is employed by tribal women as a strategic tool to assert their rights, independence, and identity. In this context, the body of the witch becomes not only a symbol of resistance but also an embodiment of defiance, both for the individual woman and for her community.

The fictional narratives undertaken for the study – *The Witch* by Mahasweta Devi and *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar – talk about how witch narratives are constructed in a society and how a tribal woman once marked as a witch may subvert the system of gender oppression. Every society controls, selects, organises and redistributes the production of discourse (Foucault, 1981, pp. 52–53). The stories that are created, narrated time and again through generations reinforce the patriarchal discourse of a woman's enslavement.

The Witch by Mahasweta Devi tells the story of Somri, a mute tribal woman who is exploited by dominant non-tribal men. After subjecting her to physical exploitation, these men fabricate a false accusation, claiming the presence of a *daini* (witch) in the area. Devi's narrative explores the dual forms of exploitation: the abuse of Somri's body and the subsequent branding of her as a witch, as well as the manipulation of tribal belief systems. The belief in witchcraft among tribal communities is co-opted by the powerful non-tribal outsiders as a tool of exploitation, reinforcing their control over the marginalized groups.

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the story features three Santhal tribal women – Naikay's widow, Gurubari, and Dulari – who are all labeled as witches. Naikay's widow is accused of witchcraft by the community, Gurubari is socially perceived as a witch, and Dulari is a self-declared witch. Despite their stigmatization, all three women subvert their oppression. By adopting the identity of the witch as a socio-cultural strategy, they assert agency over their lives, challenging the patriarchal forces that seek to control them.

Literature Review

Circumscribed within the *lakshamrekhas* (socio-cultural limitations), a woman may attempt to negotiate her entity and identity as a human being. Whenever she tries to transcend these boundaries, violence is an option used by the power center to suppress her being and crush her resistance/rebellion (Nathan et al., 2013, p. 11). Witch-hunting is one such shade of violence appropriated upon a woman “used for continuation of patriarchal control over the ordinary women to obstruct their rise” (Baruah & Thakur, 2019, p. 208).

A tribal woman holds a status lower to a man socially in all socio-politico-religious matters, which makes her position and identity highly vulnerable in a patriarchal society. She becomes an easy scapegoat if her body is labelled/differentiated as a witchified body from the rest (Chaudhari, 2012, pp. 1213–1226). Das (2018), during her research, finds that in the *Rabha* community, witches are generally called *tikkars*, where witch-hunting is used as a surveillance tool to keep the power relationships intact (pp. 88–97). Usually, powerful women such as healers or midwives are seen as a threat and need to be controlled (Das, p. 95). Joshi sees the property of a widowed woman too as the fundamental reason for marking a woman as a witch (Joshi et al., 2006, p. 149). Sundar (2017), during her take on witchcraft, charts out the systematic demonology by the patriarchal structure in marking a woman as a witch; like in Europe, this process was orchestrated by the Church against women (p. 427).

Witch branding has emerged as a social stereotype, serving as a mechanism to control deviance and reinforce the patriarchal structure (Sundar, 2017, p. 428). Mullick (2017) argues that witchcraft is intrinsically linked to gender inequality, functioning as a tool for the dominant Hindu society to legitimize and conceal its exploitative control over tribal forests (pp. 335–342). Sinha (2007) identifies two primary factors driving witch-hunting in tribal regions: first, the perception of women as mysterious beings endowed with extraordinary powers, and second, the use of witch-hunts as mobilization strategies within anti-colonial Adivasi (tribal) movements, where abandoning the practice would be tantamount to abandoning one's cultural beliefs (pp. 1674-1675). Skaria (1997) expands this understanding, noting that the belief in witchcraft is not confined to tribal societies but has also permeated caste-based social structures (p. 112).

The existing literature on witchcraft in India predominantly centers on the ways in which women are branded, ostracized, and even killed as witches. This body of work typically portrays women as mere victims, ensnared in a web of witchcraft constructed by patriarchal forces or the state to perpetuate their subjugation. In contrast, this paper aims to reconceptualize witchcraft as a fundamental cultural ethos within tribal societies, as represented in Indian literary texts. By deconstructing this discourse, the study examines witchcraft not only from the perspective of tribal communities but also from external viewpoints. The primary focus of this research is to explore how a woman, or a woman branded as a witch, subverts both the tribal and outsider cultural frameworks, transcends her oppression, and redefines herself as a strong, independent individual.

Critical Framework

Utilizing a deconstructive approach, this paper critically examines witchcraft as a central cultural ethos within tribal communities. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study analyzes how the body of a tribal woman is marked as a witch within both tribal and non-tribal contexts. Through the application of these critical frameworks, the paper investigates how witchcraft functions as a site of marginalization and subjugation, exploring the ways in which a tribal woman transcends the oppressive constraints imposed on her body and her identity by patriarchal hegemony.

Discussion

The Making of a Witch

Santhal tribals from central India are animist in their belief system. In the eventuality of any natural calamity or epidemic disease, they see evil spirits responsible for it activated through some black magic or witchcraft. Being animists, Santhals worship the sites of *Marang Buru*¹

¹ *Marang Buru* is the holiest spot and it is believed by the Santhals that *Marang Buru* protects them. It is also a sacred site.

and *Jaher-Ayo*². The Santhal belief system holds that gods take human forms at sacred sites, thereby making the human body a conduit for divine presence. However, this belief is gendered, as it is exclusively the male human body, not the female body, that is considered capable of being visited by a god. This distinction reveals a patriarchal worldview, where “women’s bodies are not considered appropriate vessels to receive gods,” and “it is taboo for women to become mediums” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 25). According to this belief, the vilified female body is not seen as a vessel for the divine, and even the highest female deity, *Jaher-Ayo*, is believed to require a male body to manifest herself (Shekhar, 2013, p. 172). In this context, it is only through the agency of black magic or malevolent spirits that a woman’s body can be possessed, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s body is inherently impure. Such beliefs underscore the discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes towards women within the Santhal community, mirroring the broader patriarchal structures found in many societies.

As *Marang Buru* and *Jaher-Ayo* are sacred places for Santhals, they believe that the holy spirits keep on visiting these two places. Apart from these sacred places, the shrines of five major gods are also a part of Santhal belief system. Out of the five major gods, there is one god – *Sima-Bonga*³ that is believed to possess negative/evil energies. While the shrine of *Sima-Bonga* remains devoid of any sort of offerings or decorations, the rest of the four shrines, on the contrary, are worshipped on a regular basis. No one but witches and black magic practitioners worship *Sima-Bonga*. This framework categorically establishes the Santhal worldview as one that employs a binary lens to categorize energy, distinguishing between positive and negative forces. Based on this dichotomy of energy, the Santhals hold a firm belief that women are the primary practitioners of evil or black magic: “Santhal men drink haandi, Santhal women practice dahni-bidya, and no one speaks about it. It is as natural as the wind blowing through the trees in a sarjom grove, as water flowing in the Kadamdihi stream” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 37). This belief system positions women as inherently linked to witchcraft, amplifying their association with malevolent forces in contrast to men. In this context, women become “the Other” within the patriarchal structure, where their bodies are viewed as vessels of witchery. The stereotype of women as witches is thus deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Santhal community. Moreover, it is not uncommon for Santhal women to accuse other women of witchcraft, reinforcing this cultural norm. Jennifer M. Yoo argues that such a binary, associating women with negativity, functions as a political tool to marginalize women, not only in relation to men but also within their own gender. She notes, “the feminine is often portrayed as having an affinity with the supernatural, even the monstrous or evil, by the sheer fact of being female” (Yoo, 2023, p. 4).

² *Jaher-Ayo* is the highest female deity of the Sarna pantheon (Shekhar, 2013, p. 172). Using bamboo sticks, Santhals create a shrine of *Jaher-Ayo* near *Marang Buru* as they regard her to be his companion/wife. Santhals believe that *Jaher-Ayo* is the abode of spirits.

³ *Sima-Bonga* is the other name of spirits in Santhal tribe. Since Santhals believe that the world inhabits a number of spirits, they divide the spirits into two categories - good spirits and evil spirits. *Sima-Bonga* is the spirit associated with secrecy, fear and mystery.

In addition to religious beliefs, mythical tales and legends play a significant role in shaping collective memory, transforming memory into a site of power. Stories that depict women as witches – flying, hypnotizing men, and causing deaths in the community – are prevalent in these narratives, with witches invariably portrayed as women. Such mythical stories, like those of *Jugni* and the *Saat Bohoni* (Seven Sisters), as discussed in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Shekhar, are common among the Santhal community. These myths exert a profound influence on the collective psyche of the people.

The spirit of *Jugni* is described as an alluring, disheveled beauty who roams naked with untamed hair. It is believed that *Jugni* causes illnesses, with symptoms such as dehydration, vomiting, and diarrhea, particularly afflicting men. Similarly, the *Saat Bohoni*, or Seven Sisters, are thought to inhabit the depths of ponds and lakes, where they serve as the deities of these water bodies. According to Santhal belief, the Seven Sisters prey upon young men who come to bathe in these waters: “It is said that their feet are turned backwards and they keep an eye out for all the young men who come to bathe. If they happen to find one attractive, they drag him to the depths of the pond” (Shekhar, 2013, pp. 68–69). Once submerged, the Seven Sisters seduce the man, and after he is forced to engage with all seven, his lifeless body emerges from the water, devoid of soul. These myths, while deeply embedded in cultural lore, serve to reinforce the association of women with supernatural and malevolent forces in the collective imagination of the community.

Witch stories not only contribute to the construction of the witch figure, but they also serve to confine and circumscribe a woman’s identity, limiting her agency and reinforcing societal boundaries. Once a woman is labeled as a witch, she becomes directly accountable for various calamities, such as famines, droughts, deaths, and even the flight of people from the village. In *The Witch*, Mahasweta Devi illustrates how tribal communities, such as the Ganju, Dushad, Munda, and Oraon, perceive natural and social events as manifestations of spirit activity, a belief system further entrenched by the circulation of witch stories. Within this narrative framework, the escape of Parsad and Mani from the village to assert their own autonomy becomes an affirmation of the villagers’ belief in witchcraft.

Parsad and Mani, who are in love and meet secretly in the jungle, encounter a naked woman one day who is eating a bird. In their belief system, the mere sight of a naked woman in the wilderness is enough to convince them that she is a witch, as a “respectable” woman is not expected to wander uncovered. Upon returning to the village, they both proclaim to have witnessed the witch: “They had both seen it [witch]” (Devi, 1984, p. 74) – a naked woman sitting near the river Karuda. This declaration prompts the villagers to initiate a process of witch-hunting, beginning with the public beating of a *nagara*⁴. The incident underscores the power of witch stories to shape perceptions and validate actions that reinforce gendered control

⁴ *Nagara*, is an instrument used for its rhythmic sounds or beats. In tribal world, it has been traditionally used as a device for public communication. The different beats symbolise different activities, such as the deep, gruff voice of the beats signify the approach of danger.

and violence against women in tribal society. The use of *nagara* highlights a critical event i.e. witch hunting that will take place in the village.

Witch-hunting metamorphoses into a war where the *pahaan*, the tribal priest, leads all the men to the jungle to capture the witch. At first, it is a woman's body which becomes the soft target of witchery, and then violence is sanctioned upon her body in order to contain her within the patriarchal domains. Though conventionally the witch after sighting, is to be assaulted, hunted down but this witch, on the diktats of Hanuman Mishra, has to be driven away. Hanuman Mishra, a Brahmin, is an influential person living in Tahar; he is called a *deota*⁵ in the area. Assaulting a woman's body is the corrective measure used by the patriarchy to control a woman and to keep the status quo of power dynamics in man woman relationships. Hannah Arendt in *On Violence* talks about how a community exercises control on a woman's body through power. She says, "Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (Arendt, 1970, p. 44).

Unable to capture the witch despite their toil all through the night, the men return to the village considering the stones thrown towards her as an assault upon a woman's body and they celebrate this as a show of their masculinity. During the celebration, Prasad and Mani's eyes meet again and they immediately decide to elope from the village. The *pahaan*'s wife who had seen them fleeing, narrates the story to the villagers the next day and this is how "the story of Parsad and Mani's elopement was woven into the *daini* legend" (Devi, 1984, p. 83). The story of their elopement is narrated in such a manner that their elopement is believed to be a direct effect of Witch sighting. Such protean stories and rumours are rehearsed so often in a community that a woman and her body are demonised enough to be killed.

Body and Witch

The construction of the witchified body serves as a tool for patriarchy to control a woman – her desires, sexuality, and behavior – ensuring that she remains subservient and fearful. The body of the deviant woman, once marked as a witch, is expelled from the socio-cultural domains and relegated to a status of otherness. This process of witchification transforms the woman's body into a site of exclusion, granting the patriarchal system the sovereign power to exercise control over her life and death (Foucault, 2003, p. 240).

In *The Witch*, Mahasweta Devi underscores the victimization of women who fail to conform to the expectations set by the dominant social group. Rekha, in "The Poetics and Politics of Space: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Subaltern Stories," explores how a woman's identity and her spatial existence are "enmeshed and interlocked" within the "patriarchal/dominant/colonial inter-configuration between the public and the private" (Rekha, 2010, p. 156). This dominant framework constructs and categorizes a woman's identity, often subjecting her to

⁵ *Deota* is an outsider/non-tribal Hindu Brahmin priest but an intruder in the tribal space. With his power and money, the Brahminical outsider, Deota tries to intrude into the tribal's and manipulate their belief system in their interests. Here Deota stands synonymous with god.

marginalization or demonization. Judith Butler (2006) highlights the role of culture in the formation of the body, stating, “The body often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source” (p. 175). This cultural inscription, shaped by hegemonic norms, sanctions and reinforces the vulnerability of the woman’s body, particularly that of the tribal woman. Subject to judgment and categorization both within and outside her tribal community, a tribal woman’s body is often reduced to either the status of a “woman” or a “witch,” with little room for complexity or agency.

In *The Witch*, the story of Somri provides a profound examination of witchcraft as a discourse. Branded as a witch, Somri subverts this label by transforming her witchified body into a body of resistance. By appropriating the label of witchery as a tool of empowerment, Somri challenges the victimization imposed upon her body and her community. Through this process, she transcends the patriarchal control over her body, asserting her agency and autonomy within a society that seeks to confine her.

The construction of Somri as a witch is rooted in the socio-cultural context of the village of Kuruda. Within the Oraon community, the occurrence of famine is believed to be the work of a witch, reflecting a broader tribal belief system that links natural disasters, death, and misfortune to the influence of evil spirits. As Mahasweta Devi notes, “If there is a daini in the vicinity, astonishing things happen, which no one has ever seen, though everyone has heard about them” (Devi, 1998, p. 58). This association of calamities with supernatural forces is exploited by Hanuman Mishra, the Hindu Deota of Tahar, who manipulates the villagers’ fears and anxieties. Mishra shares a dream in which a naked woman declares, “I am famine... she is a daini. This daini has to be found and driven away” (Devi, 1998, p. 59), thus fueling the witch hunt.

Mishra’s assault is not limited to the individual woman’s body but extends to the broader tribal culture itself, which he dismisses as “barbaric” in contrast to the dominant religious systems: “Today they worship their own barbaric gods, tomorrow Jesus in the missions, the day after, the Hindu gods! They show no discretion in the matter of worship” (Devi, 1998, p. 59). Through his manipulation of the villagers’ spiritual beliefs, he instills a pervasive fear of the “daini” (witch), which spreads throughout the communities of Tahar, Hesadi, Kuruda, and Tura. This fear ultimately undermines trust within the community, particularly toward women. For instance, in one instance, a woman’s body is physically examined by her family to determine whether she is a witch: “All husbands-fathers-brothers-sons were compelled to watch the women... with a razor they split open the skin of her [Sodan’s mother] hand in front of everyone, to check whether her blood was red or black” (Devi, 1998, p. 60). Such actions highlight how women become the primary targets of suspicion and violence. The fear of witchcraft, fueled by external influences, turns women into scapegoats, as evidenced by the brutal treatment of Mahuri, who is blamed for the death of a child. As this fear spreads, the villagers set Mahuri’s house on fire, drag her out, and ultimately cause her death: “Half-burnt, hounded out, in fear and agony, she stumbles on the stones, falls flat on her face and dies” (Devi, 1998, p. 70). This illustrates how both external forces and internal community dynamics converge to render women’s bodies vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

The village's response to a woman perceived as a witch is to treat her as a problem that must be eradicated. The traditional drum-beating system is revived to signal the impending danger, and the *pahaan* (tribal priest) organizes the witch-hunting party: "The men are to come with me. The women are to go home. Take the children and bar doors" (Devi, 1998, p. 76). Upon reaching the forest, the villagers encounter a naked woman standing on a rock, her body contorted, her mouth covered with feathers and blood: "Her body is twisted, half visible. Her mouth is covered with feathers and blood" (Devi, 1998, p. 78). The sight of her nakedness provokes violence, and the hunters begin to throw stones at her. In an act of self-defense, the woman throws a rock back, hitting the *pahaan* and drawing blood. This act of resistance terrifies the hunters, but it only intensifies their aggression. Fleeing in fear, the witch woman swims across the river to escape the barrage of stones, further symbolizing her marginalization and the violent response to her perceived threat. The scene encapsulates the dehumanizing nature of witch hunts, where the body of the woman is objectified, demonized, and ultimately subjected to violent control in the name of upholding societal norms.

Again, the villagers, together with *pahaan* of Tura, Dhai and Kuruda, try to locate the *daini* in the forest. As soon as the *daini* sees the group, she flees to a cave to seek shelter. As "the mood is vengeful, violent" (Devi, 1998, p. 117), instead of moving back to their respective villages, they plan to smoke her out of the cave. Their violent mood reflects their vengefulness towards a female body held responsible for all the evilness. This plan of choking the witch woman to death with smoke exposes the woman perpetrators. As the smoke fills the cave after fire is lighted at mouth of the cave, the same scream "anh-anh-anh" (Devi, 1998, p. 74) is heard followed by the sound of a newborn baby cry from inside. The next moment, the *pahaan* of Tura realises that the witch woman inside the cave is no one else but her own daughter Somri. His deaf and dumb daughter Somri had been missing since she was sent to Hanuman Mishra by the father himself, i.e., the *pahaan* of Tura so that she can work in the cowshed. Taking advantage of her dumbness, the *thakur*'s son rapes her, and there has been no news about her for the last five months. On enquiring about his daughter, the *pahaan* of Tura, gets "a shoe in my [father's] face" (Devi, 1998, p. 120) as response from the *thakur* who then spreads the story of a *daini*/a witch woman to cover up his evilness.

The evil design of the exploiter/s clearly shows how easy it is for a non-tribal mainstream outsider to exploit a tribal female body physically as well as socio-culturally. Branded as a witch, Somri uses tribals' belief system of witchery in her self-defence. She picks up stones to chase the village assaulters away from coming near her; her bloated stomach is her advance stage of pregnancy and her eating raw flesh shows the extremity of her hunger. Somri's body though vilified as a witch body, is still a resistant female body which inverts the hierarchical binary between the master and the slave. Men from various tribal communities join hands and assert, "We won't work as coolies for him (Hanuman Mishra). Won't let anyone work. Won't allow outside coolies, either" (Devi, 1998, p. 122). Somri's nakedness puts the men to shame. Defiled, exploited and branded as a witch, she refuses to surrender to the patriarchal power center, despite being a slow wit.

The tribal belief system, steeped in superstition, is strategically exploited to manipulate and instill fear among the indigenous population. Within this framework, tribal women are subjected to a double burden, being marginalized both for their tribal identity and for their gender. The narratives surrounding various women, witch doctors, pahaan, and sokhas (tribal priests) often target those who deviate from the culturally prescribed image of “femininity”. These women, characterized by behaviors deemed socially non-conforming – such as exhibiting unusual gestures, speaking with assertiveness, or possessing “too much” agency – are branded as witches. Such representations serve to reinforce and perpetuate the superstition that associates women’s autonomy and non-conformity with witchcraft. In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, this process is explored through the stories of women who are labelled as witches, illustrating the broader social dynamics in which women who step outside normative boundaries are not only stigmatized but also scapegoated as embodiments of evil or danger.

The narrative does not just limit itself to the construction of a witch but rather goes beyond it. Though Mahasweta Devi clearly marks a witch to be a living human being manipulated by the design of non-tribal exploiters, Hansda retains the mysteriousness of the witchery throughout. Gurubari, Naikay’s wife, Gurubari and Dulari in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* embody the archetype of the witch. Naikay’s wife being the eldest daughter-in-law is confident and respectful to everyone. But her only flaw is that she works and commands like a man. Instead of just working in the kitchen and attending to domestic chores, she, her daughter, Della and her daughter-in-law take charge of the fields as well.

“The Naikay’s wife was a tall, dark woman with strong limbs and long hair whose will reigned supreme in her household. She kept herself and her house immaculate, she could work as well and as hard as three men put together, and she hated people who loitered about or wasted time” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 30).

Naikay’s wife’s strong will makes her an unfettered woman that cannot be controlled. Therefore, she is accused as a witch. In accusing her of witchery, the patriarchal politics is to control the feminine power as she and her femininity are seen as threat by the patriarchy. Not only she is accused of practicing *dahni-bidya* (witchery), but also her daughter-in-law just because they subvert the normal gender roles. Her command both in the public and private spheres, and her rolling eyes are taken as markers of her being an evil spirit. Though the whole community accuses her of being a witch and witchery practitioner, but “her mesmerizing, maternal smile concealed the power which came over her on certain nights. This power which knew no difference of gender, caste, religion, community or village” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 32).

Stories, rumours on witchery such as that Naikay’s wife with other witches “would conjure up balls of fire the size of rice pots, host the Bhaatu – their master, their sacred tiger – comb the Bhaatu’s fur, plan sacrifices, carry them out, and dance the euphoric dance of oneness with their power. Somai-haram, had received reports of these gatherings from time to time” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 32), play a significant role in negatively affecting the psyche of villagers. Somai-haram, Naikay’s neighbour, eventually starts believing such rumours. He and his wife

start holding the witch in Naikay's wife responsible for them being childless even after many years of their marriage: "barrenness was a tremendous burden to bear ..." (Shekhar, 2013, p. 23). Thus, a woman witch has socio-cultural sanction among Santhals.

Gurubari is in extra-marital relationship with Sido, who is legally married to Rupi. Soon after the marriage of Sido and Rupi, Sido takes Rupi to Majhi's house, where he shares a room with Gurubari and Bairam, her husband. Gurubari warmly welcomes Rupi as a new bride of Sido *bahu*. To Rupi, Gurubari's eyes "were much like those of the Naikay's widow and daughter-in-law in Kadamdihi. Gurubari scanned Rupi from head to toe, from right to left, not pausing even once" (Shekhar, 2013, p. 95). The "rolling eyes" become a motif to evoke supernatural elements and are associated with women, particularly those women who practice witchery. With Rupi's arrival, Majhi's wife thinks of extra room and a separate kitchen for the new couple. Being practical, she advises Rupi to sort the matters related to Gurubari whether she requires a separate kitchen or not. As she was telling this to Rupi, Rupi notices a strange expression on her face: "It was as if she had ventured the opinion against her wish, almost as if an inner urge had forcefully pushed it out of her. Rupi felt this, though she couldn't understand what such an urge could be" (Shekhar, 2013, p. 96). This strange expression makes Rupi believe that Gurubari is a witch and that is why Majhi's wife is scared to deal with her directly. Her inner voice keeps on visiting her in the form of Jasmine oiled woman who keeps on telling her to come out, "Get your kitchen. A separate kitchen" (Shekhar, 2013, p. 98).

Gurubari persuades Rupi to share her kitchen instead of agreeing to divide it into two separate areas: "... my kitchen has two chulhas already. I will cook on one, you take the other. You understand, Rupi-mai?" (Shekhar, 2013, p. 100). This shows Gurubari as an assertive and a powerful woman. Her assertion and power are obviously palpable when she asks Rupi to share her elder son Jaipal with her. The way she wants to have a shared kitchen; similarly, she wants to have a shared Sido and shared Jaipal. Without a male sibling and male son in her life, Gurubari suffers insecurity created by the patriarchal need to have a male heir/male support in the life of a woman. Gurubari feels compelled to fill this lack through Jaipal and Sido. Gurubari, instead of falling prey to the patriarchy's gender-controlling tactics, negotiates this lack and insecurity through her strategy of sharing other woman's man and son and thus subverts the patriarchal control the patriarchal way only. Gurubari and Rupi belong to a culture where "the only things to fear were the supernatural horses, the angry boars and the bloodthirsty women" (Shekhar, 2013, p. 34), and where a woman becomes a scapegoat bearing the burden of where any evil thing happening in or around the family is attributed to a woman and she is labelled a witch.

The witch label easily fits Gurubari because of her illicit relationship with Sido. As Rupi's health worsens, Sido gets physically drawn towards Gurubari and away from Rupi. All this is more than enough to keep Rupi unhappy/unsatisfied. Sido's absence from her and his presence at Gurubari's house breaks Rupi's spirit completely. Gurubari is considered to be the cause of Rupi's condition. Soon the whole village, including Rupi perceives Gurubari to be a witch whose beauty has captured the innocent Sido's heart and mind:

“All of Kadamdihi knows who the cause of Rupi’s problem is. Gurubari, the woman who came into her life like a friend but twined around her like the *alakjari*⁶ – the golden vine which latches on to the trunk of a healthy, green tree, sends its roots deep into its heart and, robbing the host of all nutrition, leaves it an empty shell ... Just as everyone can see Rupi wasting away even as Gurubari flourishes” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 6).

Gurubari is branded a witch because of her outside marriage relationship with Sido, while Sido, on the contrary, gets the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 1995, p. 79) in the form of respect, authority, control, etc. He is neither accused of adultery nor of neglecting his wife. Gurubari is directly blamed for Rupi’s health crisis. Gurubari is even seen as *alakjari* who has, through her witchery, taken hold of Sido and Jaipal and has sucked the life of Rupi. Though Rupi tries to pretend to be all fine and pose the idealised feminine image despite her ill health but eventually, she succumbs. Rupi, the strongest woman of Kadamdihi, “who bore her child squatting in the middle of a rice paddy, shin deep in slush” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 1) now lays on the bed, completely withdrawn from everyone. The idealised feminine roles soon start to develop cracks as she completely withdraws from her duties and responsibilities and is unable to save her relationship with her husband and her son. Though Sido, on Gurubari’s persistent requests, takes ailing Rupi to several doctors, he is unable to get back the old energetic Rupi.

Rupi becomes a victim of societal pressure to conform to prescribed norms of femininity, as well as her own internalized expectations of embodying the ideal woman. She is caught in the web of imposed “goodness,” a superficial construct that forces her to suppress her authentic self. This results in a constant state of anxiety, with Rupi living in fear of being branded as a witch by her community. Her ailment remains unexplained – partly psychological, partly physical, but primarily social in nature. It is not the result of witchcraft or black magic perpetrated by Gurubari, but rather a manifestation of the social forces that marginalize and punish women who deviate from accepted roles.

Gurubari herself is ensnared by this same social mechanism, embodying the “witchery” directed at women who resist or transgress societal expectations. This dynamic effectively erases the distinction between perpetrator and victim, as both Rupi and Gurubari become instruments of patriarchal control. Rupi’s inability to confront her personal grievances – especially regarding the extramarital affair between Gurubari and Sido – intensifies her animosity towards women accused of witchcraft. Ironically, even though Rupi’s sister-in-law, Dulari, cares for her during moments of vulnerability, Rupi’s resentment extends to Dulari as well, due to her association with witchcraft accusations. This complex web of social conditioning and gendered violence reveals how women, caught in oppressive systems, often become complicit in the very structures that seek to control them.

⁶ *Alakjari*, a Santhali word in the Santhal community and a Sanskrit word in the Indian mainstream, is the golden vine that establishes a symbiotic relationship with a green tree. Parasitic in nature, *alakjari* latches on the trunk of a healthy tree, gets to its roots and sucks all the nutrition from it thus leaving it empty.

Rupi and Dulari share the common experience of losing their husbands to other women – Rupi to Gurubari and Dulari to a Sabar girl – yet both continue to endure the roles of wives and mothers, remaining physically, emotionally, and mentally available to their husbands, even in the face of abuse. Despite their loyalty and sacrifice, they are neither valued nor respected as wives or companions. Dulari, in particular, suffers physical abuse at the hands of her husband, Doso, to which she responds with defiance. In a heated confrontation with Rupi, Dulari challenges the concept of “goodness” imposed on women, asking, “Tell me, what good has your goodness done to you?” (Shekhar, 2013, p. 184). This question critiques the notion that a woman is obligated to accept whatever her husband offers – whether it be neglect, abuse, or merely a transactional role as a body to fulfill his desires.

In response to the patriarchal structures that oppress her, Dulari asserts her agency by self-identifying as a witch. She reframes the concept of witchery as a form of resistance and empowerment, claiming the identity of a witch as a symbol of her autonomy. Dulari declares that she is a witch if asserting her own agency means reclaiming her husband, and she embraces the label of witch if it signifies prioritizing her own needs over those of others. Through this act of self-empowerment, Dulari challenges the traditional boundaries of gender roles and redefines the very notion of witchery as an expression of resistance against the patriarchal forces that seek to marginalize her. She questions Rupi:

“But tell me, dai, if you are so good, what is your goodness doing? Why isn’t it saving you from being devoured? I may be a witch, but tell me, did I have a way out? What was mine was being taken away from me. I had to claim it for myself. What other way did I have? Who would’ve helped me? No one. No one, dai. I had to help myself. I had to do everything by myself. If it meant using dahni-bidya, I was ready for that. I had to reclaim what was rightfully mine. Tell me, dai, did I do anything wrong? I don’t think so. If you are so good, use your goodness to get back what you have lost” (Shekhar, 2013, pp. 184-185).

Dulari deconstructs the traditional concept of the witch by asserting her right to pursue her own happiness, regardless of societal norms or expectations. She expresses a willingness to take any action necessary to secure her well-being, while simultaneously critiquing a society that remains complicit in the oppression of women. According to Dulari, it is the collective silence of society that enables the suffering and victimization of women, highlighting the systemic nature of patriarchal violence.

Dulari, Gurubari, and Rupi, though each subjected to the same patriarchal forces, are united in their shared experiences of suffering and marginalization. These women are all confined by societal expectations that limit their identities and restrict their roles within the family and community. Despite facing repeated accusations of witchcraft throughout their lives, both Dulari and Gurubari persist in asserting their autonomy and making decisions that reflect their personal desires and needs. While these decisions come at the expense of being branded as witches, they represent acts of resistance to the patriarchal order.

After the death of Bairam, Gurubari's husband, Rupi observes the transformation in Gurubari's demeanor, noting that her face now reflects the contentment of a woman who has achieved everything she set out to do. This recognition underscores the complex relationship between suffering and empowerment, as Gurubari's decision to assert her agency – despite the costs of social ostracization – ultimately allows her to reclaim a sense of fulfillment and agency in her life.

Conclusion

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, the characters of Naikay's wife, Gurubari, and Dulari emerge as deviant, assertive women who refuse to conform to the conventional patriarchal norms that seek to define their roles. Their resistance to the patriarchal construction of the witch significantly disrupts and reconfigures the negative and sinister associations historically linked to the term "witch." In the patriarchal worldview, women who are childless, widowed, elderly, unattractive, or who do not adhere to prescribed gender roles, are frequently scapegoated as witches. Witch doctors such as Sokhas, Ojhas, and Jangurus, possessing the knowledge and authority to identify witches, often compel women to confess their supposed transgressions and pay heavy fines. When women accused of witchcraft resist, they are subjected to physical violence, dispossession, and even exile from their communities.

Throughout history, women who deviate from societal expectations have paid a heavy price, whether through social ostracism, physical abuse, or moral and spiritual condemnation. Stuart Hall's concept of hegemony as a power relation between "dominance and subordination" (Hall, 1980, p. 325) is evident in the tribal context as well, where hierarchical power structures maintain the subordination of women. In this context, patriarchy constructs the archetype of the witch to justify the suppression of women's autonomy, positioning them as objects of suspicion and blame. In this framework, women who challenge societal expectations either strive to conform to an idealized feminine image – such as Rupi, whose primary fear is being labeled a witch – or they embrace the status of a witch to resist oppression and carve out their own space within a restrictive social order.

In the novel, Naikay's wife, Gurubari, and Dulari occupy different positions within this spectrum. Naikay's wife is accused of witchcraft, Gurubari is perceived as a witch, and Dulari self-identifies as a witch, thus rejecting the gendered stereotypes and negative connotations traditionally associated with witchery. Each of these women asserts their independence by challenging the patriarchal constraints that limit their identities. Their actions signify a rejection of the oppressive forces that seek to define and confine them. Mahasweta Devi, while maintaining an element of mysteriousness, engages with the political implications of the witch figure, linking it to the dialectic between the mainstream and the margins, and ultimately undermining the mystification surrounding the notion of the witch. Through Somri's body, Devi restores the naturalness of womanhood, suggesting that a woman's ability to create life and demand resistance against oppressive structures is inherently powerful.

This paper provides a close, socio-cultural analysis of the portrayal of witchcraft in select literary works, focusing particularly on the eastern region of India. While the paper is limited in scope, it highlights the intersection of gender, power, and cultural constructs in the context of witchcraft. Future studies could expand this analysis by exploring witchcraft from psychological perspectives, or by conducting a more comprehensive study of tribal folklore, myths, and oral narratives both past and present.

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**Recovering the Loss: Infanticide, Ambivalence and Trauma in Shobha
Rao's *The Lost Ribbon***

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative *The Lost Ribbon* from Shobha Rao's 2006 collection *An Unrestored Woman* through the lens of Motherhood Studies. It argues that the act of infanticide, central to the story, must be understood as deeply rooted in the structural inequalities and patriarchal ideologies inherent in the Recovery Operation during the Partition of India. The analysis situates the phenomenon of infanticide within broader historical and cultural contexts in India, as well as within the disciplinary framework of psychiatry. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on maternal ambivalence, the paper expands on Adrienne Rich's distinction between mothering as lived experience and motherhood as a patriarchal construct. It contends that, contrary to the abstract ideal of a "natural" mother, the subjectivity of the mother in the story is shaped by patriarchal forces that produce a profound and traumatic ambivalence about her identity and belonging. The legal imposition of repatriation to a nation that rejected her children underscores the tension between patriarchal state imperatives and maternal agency. Finally, the paper interrogates the rights of children born to inter-religious parents during a period when religion was the primary determinant of citizenship, highlighting critical questions that remain relevant for contemporary discourse.

Keywords: infanticide, maternal ambivalence, motherhood studies, Partition Recovery Operation, trauma

“She is a child of Pakistan,” the old soldier said solemnly. “And you, my dear, are not.”
(The Lost Ribbon)

Shobha Rao’s 2006 collection *An Unrestored Woman* comprises a series of interconnected narratives spanning multiple generations and continents. This paper examines one of its stories, *The Lost Ribbon*, through the theoretical framework of Motherhood Studies. Coined by Andrea O’Reilly in 2006, the term "Motherhood Studies" (p. 17) defines a distinct academic discipline that synthesizes extensive scholarship on motherhood (O’Reilly, 2020). This framework builds on Adrienne Rich’s seminal demarcation in *Of Woman Born* (1976) between mothering as lived experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution, which serves as a foundational concept for analysis.

The paper situates the narrative within the historical context of the Partition Recovery Operation, exploring how the unnamed protagonist is constructed as a mother through the intersecting discourses of nation, religion, and family. Furthermore, it argues that the act of infanticide depicted in the story exemplifies deeper structural inequalities and systemic concerns requiring critical examination. The patriarchal ideology underlying the Recovery Operation is interpreted as a manifestation of what Rich describes as the "invisible violence of the institution of motherhood," which perpetuates "patriarchal violence and callousness" enacted by women upon children, as illustrated by the act of infanticide (Rich, 1976, p. 277).

The central event of *The Lost Ribbon* is a tragic instance of maternal infanticide. In the Indian context, child homicide manifests in various forms, including femicide, female infanticide, and the killing of children with disabilities (Menon, 2004). According to the India Facts Data Centre, six cases of maternal filicide were documented in India in 2023. A 2018 study conducted by NIMHANS, analyzing four cases of women who committed filicide, concluded that this act is deeply rooted in complex socio-psychological factors. The study revealed that the mothers often perceived their actions as a means of shielding their children from a harsh and unjust world (Gowda et al., 2018). These findings underscore the importance of considering the sociological dimensions of maternal infanticide/filicide.

In her research on maternal filicide in the United States, Oberman (2002) argued that infanticide can be understood as a response to societal constructions of and constraints on motherhood. Resnick (1969) categorized filicide into five motives: altruistic filicide, where the parent believes death serves the child’s best interests; psychotic filicide, stemming from severe psychosis; unwanted-child filicide, involving children perceived as obstacles, often in cases of illegitimacy; accidental filicide, resulting from neglect or abuse; and spouse-revenge filicide, wherein a child is killed as an act of retaliation against a partner. These categorizations provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of maternal filicide.

In *The Lost Ribbon*, the protagonist kills her infant Noora by strangling her. The story starts forty years after the act. The events that led up to the killing are narrated as traumatic memories of the mother. In this story, maternal infanticide cannot be neatly categorised under any one of

Resnick's categories. There are elements of both altruistic and psychotic filicide. The messiness of the overlapping categories forces one to look anew at the circumstances of this particular instance of infanticide and reevaluate the sociological structures that created the figure of the "recovered" mother. Thus, it becomes important to locate the story in its socio-historical context.

Recovery Operation

The unprecedented scale of violence and abduction of women at the time of India's partition led the governments of India and Pakistan to start the process of "recovering and rehabilitating women". Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was promulgated on January 31, 1949, and later succeeded by the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949. The need to frame such a law was never just correctional but to restore national honour that was seen as located in the woman's body (Das, 1995). The law stated that a female of any age and a male under the age of sixteen, who went missing on or after the first of March 1947, and found to be living with a person of a religion different than theirs, would be considered abducted by the respective state. Hindu women found in Pakistan and Muslim women found in India living in unions with men of different religions and who did not meet the cutoff date, were determined to be in illegal marriages, their children were termed illegitimate and were forced to relocate. While the newly formed nation-states were eager to recover 'their' women, the children posed a different problem. "The citizenship of the children born to the abducted women remained a contentious issue. What could be the citizenship of children born to Muslim mothers and Hindu fathers or those begotten by Hindu mothers and Muslim fathers? Would the citizenship devolve through the mothers or the fathers, through the nationality or religion?" (Mehra, 2012, p. 1247).

The Lost Ribbon

In this story, the reader witnesses an unnamed woman's inner monologue as she recounts the trauma of an infanticide that she committed forty years ago. She was fourteen when a Muslim man abducted her while her entire family was burnt to ashes in front of her at the time of communal riots during India's partition. She spent two years imprisoned in a small hut somewhere in Pakistan suffering relentless abuse, deprivation and rape at his hands. She became pregnant and delivered a baby girl named Noora. When her infant was six weeks old, the protagonist was found by an Indian soldier and a social worker, both of whom were part of the recovery operation launched by India and Pakistan to find women and bring them back to their "rightful" places. The soldier and social worker said, much to her utter bewilderment, that her child was a "citizen of Pakistan. She is a Muslim" (Rao, 2016, p. 118).

The social worker is described in minute detail. She is in a "white saree and glasses, with a large black mole on her chin as round as her face" (Rao, 2016, p. 117). Women were tasked to join these recovery operations to provide gendered empathy to the women. The parliament had given a lot of power to the police officers and to these women to decide on the future of the

recovered women. Their power was even more visible in the case of a woman reluctant to be removed.

In this story, we see that the social worker and the soldier Gopal Das echo each other and parrot government decrees. The social worker's face "sours" when she sees Noora in her mother's arms. The first thing she wants to know about the infant is about the father— "Is he Muslim?" (Rao, 2016, p. 117). Menon and Bhasin comment poignantly: "For those who were recovered against their wishes – and there were many – the choice was not only painful but bitter. Abducted as Hindus, converted and married as Muslims, recovered as Hindus but required to relinquish their children because they were born of Muslim fathers, and disowned as "impure" and ineligible for membership within their erstwhile family and community, their identities were in a continual state of construction and reconstruction" (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 98).

When the mother in *The Lost Ribbon* refuses to leave without her child, she is told that government treaties had decreed that she had to return and leave her child behind. Her subsequent torture by her captor and her conviction that he would do irreparable harm to both if she stayed on leads her to strangle her daughter Noora before returning to India. The infanticide is prompted by her understanding that "it is easier to look at death than at pain" (Rao 2016, p. 121).

Now forty years later, she sits counting out *masoor chana* and *toor* lentils, an obsessive-compulsive behaviour typical of trauma victims. She relives her horror not just by remembering the trauma but by reliving it. She says she can feel the throb of the burn marks from forty years earlier, just as she can feel the pulse of the daughter she strangled (Rao, 2016, p. 121). She counts "nine hundred and eighty-six lentils" with shaking hands each day to drown out the throbbing of her guilt and trauma. Her story remains unspoken even forty years later, even as her body re-enacts the trauma daily. So, she does not tell anyone anything. She says, "If I were to tell Leela what I'd done, I know what she'd say. She'd say, No mother would do that. No mother could do that" (Rao, 2016, p.105). We are looking closely in this essay at how this "mother", who never "could do that" is constructed, and at what cost.

Maternal Ambivalence

Ritu Menon (2004) in her book *No Women's Land* interviewed Ranjit Kaur, a retired headmistress from Srinagar, who in 1985 visited the 25 to 30 Sikh women of Muzaffarabad in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, who were captured, converted and married to local Muslims. Kaur talks about a woman who "killed every child that was born to her of the Muslim Khan who married her forcibly. This was her protest. Finally when there was no hope of rescue, she allowed two children to live" (Kaur, 2004, p. 148). Later Kaur emphasises that the mother "who killed all her children, as soon as they were born" – "even she's ok now" (Kaur 2004, p. 151). In Amrita Pritam's iconic novel *Pinjar*, Puroo says she wants to "take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as it were a maggot or a leech...!" (Pritam, 1987, p. 1). Even after her son is born Puroo continues to be physically repelled by him.

She felt her son's soft face nuzzling into her bare arm. A cold, clammy feeling ran through her body- as if a slimy slug was clambering over her. She clenched her teeth; she wanted to shake the slug off her arm, flick it away from her side, draw it out as one draws out a thorn by taking its head between one's nails, pluck it out of her flesh like a tick or a leech and cast it away..." (Pritam, 1987, p. 34).

Pooro's hatred stems from the fact that this is a pregnancy that her abductor has forced on her. Lalithambika Antharjanam's short story, *A Leaf in the Storm* (written in 1948, titled *Kodumkaattipetta Orila* in Malayalam) is situated within a camp where women were kept in transit during the recovery process. In this story, the lifeless body of a newborn is discarded in a toilet. Its "still warm body" is dragged away and put in a garbage bin, and "No girl shed a tear" (Antharjanam, 1948, p. 141). The pregnant protagonist Jyoti, too, hopes to be able to repeat this act and discard her baby after birth. She thinks "at midnight she could wipe herself clean of her filth and come out - into a new world of hopes" (Antharjanam, 1948, p. 141). The harshness of the act and its commonplace narration and acceptance force a reconsideration of commonly held ideas about motherhood as naturally protective, self-sacrificing, and non-violent. Kamlaben Patel and Damyanti Sehgal have placed on record that in such transit camps where women were kept, "safaya" or abortions were common. (Butalia, 1994, p. 54). This is because families of recovered women did not want to accept these children, seeing in them a living reminder of the loss of their family's honour. The nation did not know where to accommodate the children whose presence hindered the reabsorption of recovered women as "daughters of the nation" (Das, 1995, p. 82).

What stands out in these examples is that maternal ambivalence must be recognised not just as a psychological reaction of a woman, but as a response to larger structures. Andrea O'Reilly claims that matricentric feminism "understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed, and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity" (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 43). Maternal ambivalence resists dominant motherhood ideology and brings to light structural inequalities and concerns that often cause such intense ambivalence. Andrea O'Reilly argues, "Social, structural, and cultural conditions of mothering [...] affect experiences of maternal ambivalence and need to be considered along with the traditional psychological view of maternal ambivalence" (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 52).

Traditionally, mothering is identified with self-sacrificing, unconditional love and protectiveness for the child. It is associated with an a priori instinct and does not allow for any negative emotions in the mother. Feminist scholars have, however, questioned this unidimensional understanding of mothering. Maternal ambivalence is a term that encapsulates the contradictory emotions that a mother may feel toward her child. Rich wrote about her ambivalence as a mother when she says "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (Rich, 1976, p. 1).

Within the field of psychology, Sigmund Freud acknowledged the existence of ambivalent feelings in the mother-child relationship, stemming from the child's demand for care and the mother's need for self-preservation. Melanie Klein emphasised the role of unconscious aggression and envy in the mother-child relationship; Donald W. Winnicott introduced the concept of the "good enough mother," which recognised that mothers cannot be perfect and that some frustration and ambivalence are inevitable and even necessary for the child's development. Rozsika Parker's (2005) book *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* challenges the idea of an instinctive mother-child bond, suggesting instead that the maternal bond is shaped by social, cultural, and psychological factors, and is subject to ambivalence and complexity. The "divided self" of the woman experiences a split between her identity as an individual and as a mother.

Writing specifically about children born in war or conflict in *Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*, Charli Carpenter addresses maternal ambivalence as the simultaneous coexistence of positive and negative feelings that mothers have towards their children born of sexual violence. This ambivalence is deeply rooted in the traumatic circumstances of conception and the sociocultural stigmatisation that follows. "The psychological scars left by sexual violence profoundly affect maternal feelings, creating a painful dichotomy where the child is both a victim and a reminder of the trauma" (Carpenter, 2010, p. 12).

Recovered Not Restored: Trauma Of The 'Lost' Mother

During India's Partition, it was not only individual mothers who struggled to make sense of this painful dichotomy. There were multiple debates around the legitimacy and citizenship of children born of what Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin term as "wrong" unions (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 110). Social workers who were at the forefront of the recovery process like Kamlaben Patel and Anis Kidwai, in their respective memoirs, *Torn from the Roots* and *In Freedom's Shade*, record the impossibility of dragging women away from their children when they were forcibly recovered. The well-meaning but limited social worker seen in *The Lost Ribbon* is likely modelled after them.

While Rameshwari Nehru argued for mothers not to be separated from their children, Mridula Sarabhai insisted on recovery at all costs (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 101). Many discussions in the Constituent Assembly were centred discussions around the motherhood of recovered women and where their children should be accommodated. People in parliamentary debates also argued from both sides (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Gopaldaswami Ayyangar and Durgabhai insisted that women were not able to exercise choice as they were traumatised and that their expressed wishes could not be taken at face value while recovering them. Purnima Banerji and Mahavir Tyagi spoke against forced recoveries. Thakur Das Bhargava, and Brajeshwar Prasad debated on who the natural guardian of the child was, and the legitimacy of children born to parents of different religions and who now had different nationalities. (Menon & Bhasin, 1993, p. WS 10). Neither India nor Pakistan wanted to acknowledge the children socially or legally as they were embodiments of the rape and loss of "honour". "The extent of each state's anxiety

regarding the recovery of women and concomitant renunciation of their children was limited to concern over the legitimacy of citizenship of a child born of violence and the intrinsic link of the identity of those children to the nation's notions of purity and honour" (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 276).

Shobha Rao writes in her introductory "Author's Note" to *An Unrestored Woman* that "women and children during the Partition of India and Pakistan were often the most vulnerable" as it tends to be in most conflicts. As per official statistics, 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan were abducted, Rao explains. Feminist historiographers have placed this number much higher. (Butalia, 1998, Menon & Bhasin, 1998). While the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 legislated the "recovery" of these abducted women, Rao's view is that they were not "restored": "I believe that while the recovery of a person is possible, the restoration of a human being to her original state is not" (Rao, 2016, p. xii).

Shobha Rao focuses on trauma to highlight the impossibility of restoring women to their original state after recovering them so callously and the tragic fallout of such actions by the governments. The unnamed protagonist stands in for the many others whom she represents. Rao emphasises her traumatic experience in explicitly psychoanalytical terms. Her memories haunt the narrator like "pebbles skipping across a pond" (Rao, 2016, p.107). Her traumatic reliving is not just of her act of infanticide, but of her victimhood in the communal riots, seeing her family burnt to ashes, her abduction, rape, abuse and helplessness. She describes the burn mark on her arm as a sizzle, a crater- "common and unconfusing" and says that "Wound seemed too magnificent a word for it (Rao, 2016, p. 120). The etymological origin of the word "trauma" is the Greek "wound" or an injury inflicted on a body. However, in Freudian terms, it refers to a wound inflicted upon the mind (Caruth, 1996, p. 3).

This trauma is not only "unnarratable" as Gyanendra Pandey (Pandey, 2001) described partition violence but also "not witnessed" as Cathy Caruth writes about the Holocaust (Caruth, 1996). There is no one to hear of the trauma and no one to talk about it. In this story, the woman has repressed her story for forty years. Even now, the reader enters her interior monologue. The opening line of the story is – "If I were to tell Leela what I had done" (Rao, 2016, p. 105). But she never does tell a soul. Cathy Caruth states that trauma manifests itself paradoxically both as loss of language and the need for the "self" to "construct" the narrative, to be simultaneously "reconstituted" through the process of "remembering and representing" (Caruth, 1996, p. 7).

Conclusion

Fassin and Rechtman argue that trauma is "an unfortunate encounter between an ordinary person and an extraordinary event" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 87). Cathy Caruth's book is titled *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative and History*. The trauma is unclaimed because it is unlocatable, as trauma does not belong just to an individual but to the collective unconscious of people. This paper has argued that the "extraordinary event" causing the trauma

for the protagonist was not an isolated individual phenomenon. “Thousands upon thousands were dying that summer” (Rao 2019, p. 106). The recovery operation left many women and children traumatised physically mentally and emotionally. Writing about rape in war, Mackinnon argues that rape “has been used as a ritual of degradation of the other side, a way of instilling terror, a tactic of demoralization, a plundering of booty, and a humiliation rite for the men on the other side who cannot (in masculinity’s terms) protect ““their’ women” (Mackinnon, 2005, p. 328). She says that rape makes the woman’s body a medium for men to communicate with men and serves as “specific psychological warfare” (Mackinnon, 2005, p. 328). In this story, it is not just men who are writing on women’s bodies, but nations too by denying the women any agency in choosing where they want to go. Maternal infanticide in this context can be read as symptomatic of the failure of the community and state to treat its women as equal citizens.

Recently in the context of a young mother in Bengaluru accused of allegedly killing her four-year-old son, a recent newspaper article on maternal filicide stated that “it is easy to monsterise and pathologise mothers who kill their children, as this helps retain the impossible but shared ideals of the maternal role in society” (Johri & Menon, 2024). As feminists, we don’t condone the acts of violence committed by mothers towards their children, but we argue that motherhood itself is socially determined and, in this case, historically determined by religious and national discourses.

This paper argues that contrary to an abstract ideal of an eternally self-sacrificing “natural” mother, the subject of the woman was determined by patriarchal forces that created traumatic ambivalence in her regarding where she belonged while the law insisted that she return to a nation that refused to accommodate her children. “I no longer knew whether I belonged inside or outside that hut” (Rao, 2016, p. 113). She was a lost mother– lost by her family, community, nation and child.

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Narrative Environment of Malgudi: Space, Autonomy, and Belonging

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Abstract

A world, real or fictional, the entities that compose the world, and their relations with each other exist and undergo changes in space and time. The paper explores the interactions between space and social structures that affect the lives of the inhabitants of a narrative world; the effects of a narrative environment on the subjectivities and social lives of characters. R. K. Narayan's short stories reveal multifarious relations within space; socially produced, politically re-shaped, and inherently contested. Autonomy and belonging of the characters are either facilitated or threatened by the existence of varied spaces, the inherent contemporaneous heterogeneity, scrutinized at distinct levels in different narratives. The short stories highlight how the life of an individual in Narayan's fictional town Malgudi is transformed due to the changes in the narrative environment, when space is reshaped by personal, societal, or, political motives. The narratives critically explore the sacralization (a reversal of profanation) of spaces that suddenly excludes the ordinary, representing the transformation of public spaces freely used by people into exclusionary, or sacred, spaces. The paper investigates how the transformation of spatial relations and its dynamic impact in the narrative environment reveals the complex interplay between space, power, identity, and autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, belonging, Malgudi, R. K. Narayan, sacralization, space

“Malgudi is on that wonderful map of places in the literary universe, either real or imaginary, that not only provide a setting but possess a soul” (Lahiri, 2006: 3).

R. K. Narayan is an author whose name is inextricably linked to the imaginary town that serves as the setting for many of his literary works. In Narayan’s novels and short stories, Malgudi, the fictional town, is as significant as the protagonists, actively interacting with the plot rather than simply situating it. The geography of this fictional place, a small town that is neither metropolitan nor agrarian, is the binding commonality in Narayan’s prolific literary oeuvre. Hence, despite being fictional, Malgudi occupies a significant space on the literary map along with places such as Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County or Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Macondo. Critics have frequently held the opinion that Malgudi is more than an imaginary smalltown in South India; it is a metonym for India. It has been claimed to be a “fictional microcosm of India that embraces the organic wholeness of the Hindu tradition” (Atkinson, 1987, p. 8). This perception, of Malgudi having a metonymic relationship with India and Narayan’s literary works being modern “fables” of Indianness, has been shared by various writers and critics. It was Graham Greene who most famously expressed it, “Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian” (Greene, 1996, p. ii).

The view of equating Malgudi with a quintessential Indianness has been challenged. Malgudi has been reinvented or re-understood as a “multifaceted and transitional site” (Thieme, 2007, p. 1) where the multitudinous traditional Indian imaginings interplay with those brought in by modernity, contesting the idea of a unitary fixedness with assertions of plurality. This paper adopts a similar view, analysing the narrative space of Malgudi as one that accommodates multiplicity, dynamicity, and heterotopias. While Malgudi is representative of a space of local community, a regional South Indian flavour, and belonging, it is also a space where Narayan’s protagonists often fail to belong. The short stories of R. K. Narayan are especially piquant in this regard, exhibiting distinctly different and sometimes contradictory worldviews in different narratives; “what one narrative confidently extolls, another subtly contests” (Almond, 2001, p. 108). The paper focuses on the spatial manifestations of these contradictions.

Space, mutable by societal forces, can be seen as a crucial participant in the expression of these differing worldviews which is often laced with a characteristic irony. Narayan's humour and irony gently expresses poignant criticisms about the colonial/postcolonial state and its interference in the narrative environment through the juxtaposition of exaggerated events and “... the light-hearted and subversive irony allows Narayan to offer a more profound insight into the human nature as such” (Volná, 2023, p. 5). The multiplicity that a geography accommodates becomes a source of irony and reflection and a force that has narrative consequences. For instance, in *The Guide*, Narayan portrays how a place of pilgrimage and religious faith with transformative spiritual potential is also a marketplace where local hawkers compete with government officials to exhibit and sell their products, even ideas (Maji, 2017, p. 90).

This paper attempts to elucidate recurring themes, motifs, worldviews and their relationship with narrative space in Narayan's short stories. To attain that objective, the paper examines various short stories by the author, including *Lawley Road* and *The Martyr's Corner*, which belong to the collection entitled *Lawley Road* published in 1956, and *Iswaran* and *The Blind Dog* from the collection *An Astrologer's Day*. It furthermore aims to explore the narrative environment of Malgudi through the spatial and societal dynamics of the events in these short stories.

Space of Malgudi: Modern and Mythical

In postcolonial nations like India, *space* is a battleground where pasts and the present collide, shaping the narratives that emerge from within. A central feature of postcolonial literature is the exploration of the effects of colonization on the space – geological, political, mnemonic, and cerebral – , often delving into the legacy of colonialism, elucidating the ways in which it has shaped and continues to influence the narrative environment, including both social structures and individual lives.

R. K. Narayan is an Indian author who began writing in the colonial era and for five decades continued his literary career in an Independent India. Narayan is also one of the earliest Indian writers to write fiction in English, at once the language brought by the coloniser and the language that became a “*marga* language” (Devy, 1993), replacing Sanskrit as the medium of negotiating the tensions between regional or linguistic sub-nationalisms and the pan-Indian patriotic fervour. In R. K. Narayan's novels, we often encounter English characters whom the protagonists dislike and disapprove of, subtly communicating the anger of the colonised which also unites them despite their differences. Beneath the surface of charming simplicity, Narayan's language also reveals the geospatial tensions of a colonial/postcolonial place – Malgudi. An early instance where this is apparent is in his first novel *Swami and Friends* when Swaminathan studies the political map of Europe.

“Staring at the ‘political map,’ Swaminathan, for whom Europe is both a distant abstraction and an imperial reality, homogenizes it into ‘a crooked country.’ An inhabitant of a world where a border has become a kind of barrier, the boy wonders how people ‘escape being strangled by the contour of their land.’ Tempted to see India as it looks to mapmakers, from that unfiltered perspective, he is nonetheless afraid that it might lead to his ‘torture.’ Crookedness, strangulation, torture: these words draw their own map, one that describes how it might feel to live in a country ruled by another” (Mason, 2006, para.8).

In his short stories, however, R. K. Narayan nearly elides English characters and any encounter between Indian and British characters¹ is avoided. Nevertheless, this omission does not result in an erasure or denial of Malgudi's colonial history. The postcolonial nature of Malgudi is communicated through the space itself; the vividly depicted false geography of Malgudi

¹ A noted exception is the story titled *God and the Cobbler* where a cobbler meets a foreigner, a Western hippie.

includes Lawley statue, named after a colonial administrator who is apparently the person who “built the town of Malgudi” (Narayan, 2006, p. 87), Albert Mission School and Albert Mission College, centres of colonial education, and a railway station that is a symbol and a product of colonial modernity. The geography also reveals the presence of vehicles of modern administration such as the municipal office, the taluk office, the police station, and the court house. In addition to that, there are other modern institutions like medical centres, bus terminals, cinema theatres, and even film studios in Malgudi. While all these geographical markers depict the small town as modern and postcolonial, there are also centres of tradition and religion, which might be construed as symbols of a quintessential Indianness.

Places of worship mentioned in Narayan’s literary works include Hindu temples such as the Mangala temple, Hanuman shrine, Krishna shrine, Iswara temple, and Ganesha shrine. There are also mentions of a primal cave temple in Mempi Hills and the remains of a Buddhist shrine near New Extension. In this manner, the space of Malgudi is able to envisage and represent two of the longstanding religious traditions in India; Hinduism and Buddhism, one continuing into the present and the other with its glorious years in the past – in history and memory. There is a notable absence of churches, mosques, or other minority religions’ places of worship.

The most significant mythological presence in Malgudi is the river Sarayu, which passes through the town. India has a long tradition of deifying and worshipping rivers as goddesses. The most prominent example is Ganga, the river Ganges, worshipped as a purifying and forgiving goddess, where devotees bathe to absolve themselves of their sins. The actual Sarayu River, a tributary of Ganges, flows through Uttarakhand in northern India. By incorporating or reimagining this river in an imaginary South Indian town, Narayan infuses the mythological Indianness into Malgudi. Sarayu has an additional mythological significance of being the river in Rama’s kingdom of Ayodhya, in the premiere Indian epic Ramayana. Rama (or Ram) is an avatar of Lord Vishnu and, arguably, the most popular deity in modern India. In the epic *Ramayana*, Ram is said to have attained salvation by drowning himself in the Sarayu. In several short stories of R. K. Narayan and the novel *The Dark Room* (1938), we see characters drowning themselves or attempting to do so in the Sarayu in Malgudi. Each of these acts is inspired or shaped to some extent by the mythological identity of the river, its potential to purify, and provide salvation.

In the short story *Iswaran*, there is an intriguing juxtaposition of the modern and the mythical spaces in Malgudi. Belonging to a ‘Misfit’ genre, the story revolves around a student who is unable to pass his intermediate examination after repeated attempts, which makes him an outcast in society. On the day of the results, Iswaran goes to the cinema hall “Palace Talkies” while the rest of the students wait outside the Senate house in anticipation of their results. The protagonist recedes from the social space of visibility into the darkness of the cinema theatre, much like Savitri in *The Dark Room* who recedes to the dark room beside the kitchen after quarrels with her dominant and unfaithful husband. Although the cinema is a space produced by modernity as much as the institutions of modern education and examinations, Iswaran finds refuge in the mythological story he watches on screen. He is briefly lost in “the politics and struggles of gods and goddesses” (Narayan, 2006, p. 50) in the Tamil film and craves to “belong

to that world” (Narayan, 2006, p. 51), seeing young boys of his age playing in heavenly waters without a care about any examinations. He longs for the autonomy over space which the divine characters enjoy in the movie and decides to drown his own modern miseries in the Sarayu. With his feet in the water of Sarayu, he looks behind at the cluster of university buildings and wonders whether he should check his results. The spatial proximity of the Senate house draws him towards it, he goes, checks his results, and to his surprise, realizes that he has passed the examination with a second class.

The moment of victory does not help the character to belong in his modern environment. His success becomes an ecstatic moment of delusion in which he imagines himself as a king on his royal horse. He returns to Sarayu in this imagined pre-modern avatar of a king. Eliding the details, R. K. Narayan ends the story with Iswaran’s body being found half a mile down the river the next afternoon. It was the alienation and the social isolation more than the examination’s results, or surprisingly, despite the positive results, that led to Iswaran’s “salvation.” The literary landscape poignantly portrays the inability of spaces, especially the social and societal ones, to cater to the optimal desire of the sundry population; in fact, Malgudi is a carefully curated environment made of atypical cross-sections representative of the world outside.

Iswaran is only one of the many characters in Malgudi who are unable to belong to their narrative environment. Many of Narayan’s protagonists are solitary figures of modernity, “who are no heroic figures toiling, in the midst of rural ignorance, to educate the masses, but rather misfits and misanthropes whom Narayan does not refrain from colouring as slightly odd” (Almond, 2001, p. 113). Swaminathan in *Swamy and Friends*, Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*, and Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, are all protagonists who flee Malgudi due to some reason, only to return later. Similarly, Savitri in *The Dark Room* abandons her home, attempts to drown in Sarayu, is saved and taken to the other side of the river, only to return home. In the short stories, too, Narayan’s protagonists often contemplate leaving, sometimes Malgudi, sometimes their non-autonomous existence, and sometimes the world, but are unable to leave, with the exception of Iswaran. However, even in his case, it can be argued that he never really leaves Malgudi; death is often a marker of permanence – it becomes, in fact, a final and unchangeable abode for Iswaran. The twofold inability to belong and to leave is connected to the spatial juxtaposition of the modern and the mythical in Malgudi.

Sociopolitical Space: Control, Access, and Naming

Space, as Doreen Massey defines it, is a cut across various dimensions – a dimension of multiplicity; a product of various interrelations, that is, always in the process of making, under construction (Massey, 2005, p. 9). Whereas time is commonly associated with change, space is considered as a residual dimension. However, Massey has pointed out that ways of conceptualising space can affect the sociopolitical imaginations and understanding about a place (Featherstone & Painter, 2013). All narratives potentially rely on spatial conceptualisations. Space as a modality of the sociopolitical and the intuitive-intellectual dimensions, then, defines the geography of the narrative within the intersectional boundaries

of human thought and existence. In R. K. Narayan's stories, the conflicts in the narrative are not merely psychological or ideological; they manifest in the everyday lived space of the characters as actions and events, which is one of the reasons why a detailed fictional geography is central to his work. The diverse relationships between individuals, or between an individual vis-à-vis their respective societies, are fundamentally reliant upon space and "being" in space, and this complex intersectional network is reflected throughout Narayan's short stories. It is also significant that the narrative environment is constantly shifting in these stories, undergoing changes, for instance, the naming and renaming of roads in *Lawley Road*, reflecting how space is always under construction, always in transformation.

"Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 404). The space, in turn, is a dynamic, ever-changing product of both society and history. Extending this to the narrative expression of space in literature and including the environmental imaginings in addition to the societal and historical contextualization, Marta Puxan-Oliva proposes the concept of a "narrative environment" (Puxan-Oliva, 2024, p. 79). In this paper, we extend this concept to R. K. Narayan's Malgudi and this proposal is befitting because of the narrative centrality of space and its ability to permeate the distinct realms of the rational, the metaphysical and the phenomenal in his short stories and novels. In the following discussion of Narayan's short stories, it will be illustrated how the characters' autonomy is curtailed in space, their access to space denied, their living spaces controlled, named, and renamed, often leading to their inability to belong to their narrative environment any more. In this manner, the discussion demonstrates how the sense of belonging is connected to the access to autonomous spaces in Malgudi.

Space, in an Indian context, is inherently connected to the rules of purity and pollution that operate along the axes of both caste and gender. In the subcontinent, for centuries, caste hierarchy dictated how spaces were distributed, perceived, and experienced, and any transformation of social relations was manifested through the changes in spaces and spatial relations. The geography of Malgudi is socially contextualised with respect to this Indian reality. The control (or lack of it) over socially produced spaces mediated by caste is subtly expressed in many stories and the river Sarayu operates as a boundary in this regard. The river even acts as a purgative frontier as previously expatiated using the narrative of Iswaran. The area on the other side of the Sarayu, such as Lawley Extension and the sweepers' colony, are treated as a liminal space or a heterotopia.

"Narayan frequently constructs oppositions between supposedly familiar and safe Malgudi space – the part of the town centred around its business hub, Market Road, and its most established and conservative street, Kabir Street, and newer parts of the town, such as Lawley Extension and the sweepers' colony on the other side of the Sarayu river" (Thieme, 2007: 4).

Different social worlds and identities manifest themselves in space, sometimes in an opposing manner, and it is pivotal to take an intersectional approach to identities within geographic contexts. The experience of pollution in *The English Teacher*, which leads to the death of a

central character signifies the heterotopia beyond Sarayu as polluted, unhealthy, and dangerous. On the other hand, stories like *Out of Business* depict the Extension as an area of economic prosperity. In this story, when Rama Rao goes out of business, he is forced to move out of his “small bungalow in the Extension” (Narayan, 2006, p. 73) to a small house behind the Market. The Market which is portrayed as safe and central in one narrative becomes proximal to poverty in another. The spaces, therefore, are in a state of perpetual permutations; the location does not change, but its essential composition and the narratorial disposition with regards to it as an entity shifts constantly such as in the case of a time warp.

Narayan discusses access to space in connection with freedom and autonomy in several narratives. The short story *The Blind Dog* narrates the story of a dog which develops a friendship with a blind beggar only to be turned into a servile and starved creature. The moment of the street mongrel’s loss of freedom is depicted by Narayan in a spatial dimension: “His world came to be circumscribed by the limits of the white cord which the ribbon-vendor had spared” (Narayan, 2006, p. 39). Tied to a white ribbon initially and a steel chain eventually, the dog’s mobility is curtailed and its own orbit of movement regulated. It is unable to run round the fountain in Market square or hang around the butcher’s stall or bakery like it used to do.

This control over the space the dog can access, changes its instinctual behaviour and forces it to forget its old, autonomous existence. On the other hand, its blind master gains access to space. Led by the dog, he becomes able to move about and beg in different places, which increases his income as well. The dog provides passage to a visual space which was hitherto restricted for him. He moves out of his “home—a corner in a *choultry* veranda a few yards off the market” (Narayan, 2006, p. 39) and becomes economically prosperous. Despite getting an opportunity to leave its master forever when the white ribbon is cut, the dog returns to him after spending a few days of freedom. The return of the dog to its servitude resembles the return of the human protagonists who leave or attempt to leave Malgudi. Unable to belong elsewhere, all of them inevitably return.

Modernity itself can be perceived as an attempt to access spaces freely; to make all spaces universally accessible – physical, social, political and intellectual. In depicting characters struggling to access spaces or struggling to create or retain autonomous spaces, Narayan portrays Malgudi as a place in a transitional stage between modern and pre-modern, where spatial access continues to be contested and threatened. The constant struggle between the reinforcement of hierarchical structures vis-à-vis the establishment of unrestricted spaces is what Malgudi is representative of – it is perpetually engaged in a process of knowledge-making and deconstruction of conventional epistemes.

There are several mentions of a state or government in R. K. Narayan’s stories; characters symbolising a state and its formal institutions, like a municipal chairman or a postman or a station master, are encountered by the readers in these stories. Political intervention in the narrative environment is a recurring motif in some of the stories. In the story *Engine Trouble*, *the Talkative Man*, a frequently used narrator in R. K. Narayan’s stories, recounts his

experience of winning a road engine in a gambling show at the Gymkhana Grounds. Unable to transport the engine, the narrator gets into trouble when the municipality sends him a notice. A public space, Gymkhana Grounds, becomes unavailable for the narrator to keep his engine because of the political intervention by the municipality. This is an instance where the state control over space alters the lived spaces of characters.

Another instance can be seen in the short story *Lawley Road*. In *Lawley Road*, Narayan depicts the politically motivated renaming drive that alters both representations of spaces and the lived spaces. The municipality in Malgudi becomes inspired to make some changes when India gains independence in 1947. The story begins at this point when the Municipal Council cleans the drains, sweeps the streets, and hoists the national flag. This action of transmuting the physical space is, however, considered inadequate by the political leadership. They decide to “nationalize the names of all the streets and parks” (Narayan, 2006, p. 85) and to alter the perceived space and represented space as well. Coronation Park is renamed as Hamara Hindustan Park and roads such as Market Road, North Road, Chitra Road, and Vinayak Mudali Street are renamed after Indian nationalist leaders. This can be seen as a postcolonial resistance that transforms spaces. However, in the story, this creates a rift between the represented space and the lived space, making the town seem as a wilderness to its own inhabitants, due to the loss of familiar landmarks.

The state control over spaces is further established by the removal of the statue of a colonial administrator Sir Frederick Lawley, notoriously understood as a nefarious colonizer. The developments in the story turn anticlimactic, with an irony characteristic to Narayan’s writing, when the municipality realizes that Lawley was an administrator who was genuinely sympathetic towards India’s independence and not in the least a villain. This realization results in the reinstatement of the Lawley statue and renaming of Kabir Lane as Lawley Road. The project of renaming places has continued in independent India and Narayan’s observations regarding the transformation of represented spaces remain relevant not only with respect to Malgudi, but universally, intersecting various timelines and locations.

Sacralization of Spaces

Spaces, especially public spaces, are repeatedly contested in R. K. Narayan’s Malgudi. At times, this happens due to state control, as in *Engine Trouble* and sometimes, due to other sociopolitical factors. In the short story *The Martyr’s Corner*, there are several compelling contestations over spaces which transform the life of its protagonist Rama. In the beginning of the story, Rama is a successful roadside vendor of food items including *dosais*, *bondas*, *chappathis*, and duck eggs. The success of his establishment was due to the peculiar combination of space and time in which his business operated. It was located at “the turning between Market Road and the lane leading to the chemist’s shop” (Narayan, 2006, p. 92) which was also ideally close to the movie theatre. He also “arrived in time to catch the cinema crowd coming out after the evening show” (Narayan, 2006, p. 92) and the other vendor who occupied the space till he arrived moved off before his arrival.

Rama's regular customers were a wide variety of people including *jutka* drivers, boot-polish boys, grass-selling women, a wrestler, and a beggar. All the men and women of "this part of the universe" (Narayan, 2006, p. 93) were his customers which contributed to Rama's success. Although he dreamt about being harassed by traffic constables and health inspectors in sleep, as a matter of fact, he escaped these forms of state control by bribing the officials occasionally. In this manner, Rama is initially able to access the public spaces of his choice and conduct his business.

The transformation begins with a violent riotous incident, likely triggered by a political reason as vaguely stated in the story. The violence results in the death and injury of several people and Rama's spot is taken over by the police on the next day. He is asked to "set up his shop on a farther spot indicated by a police officer" (Narayan, 2006, p. 95). After a few days, Rama tries to return to his spot but he is stopped by young men wearing badges, who tell him that it is now "a holy spot on which our leader fell that day" (Narayan, 2006, p. 95). The political intervention removes the space from public use and the location is eventually transformed into a sacred space with a memorial stone, ornamental fencing, and flower pots. The physical alteration transforms the perceived space as well and it is frequented by "austere, serious-looking persons." Rama loses his customers, ends up having to quit his business and gets employed as a waiter at a restaurant. On one hand, certain events and actions transform the lived spaces and the perceived spaces of Rama. On the other hand, it is the spatial transformation that triggers the changes in his social life and economic status.

A change in the ownership of an erstwhile public space, resulting in the exclusion and displacement of individuals, is generally understood as motivated by several reasons, of which the religious motives are central, or in the Indian context, caste. The religion-driven removal of objects or spaces from free public use is often mediated by the notion of sacrifice. "Sacrifice always sanctions the passage of something from the profane to the sacred, from the human sphere to the divine" (Agamben, 2007, p. 23). In *The Martyr's Corner*, however, the space becomes unavailable for Rama's free use owing to political grounds. This transformation is also sanctioned by a death and it is equated to a sacrifice, as denoted by the term "martyr," the manner in which the death happened, and the transformation afterwards. The space acquires a holy status or sacredness and it is, in fact, the opposite of the phenomenon that Agamben calls profanation; it can be termed as *sacralization*. While profanation is the process that makes accessible that which was previously considered divine readily available for the use of the common public, sacralization removes a commonplace object or notion from the midst of the common and labels it as sacred and holy.

The portrayal of the politically motivated process of sacralization in the story critiques the secular operation of the political parties in Malgudi. It is demonstrated how the modern and the secular often adopts several forces of the pre-modern, leaving them intact, and only moving them to a different realm. In Malgudi, the sacralization alters identities and autonomies of characters, exemplified by Rama's transformation from a small-scale entrepreneur to an employee with a lower social status. The disappointment of the protagonist in having fallen from the throne of "the prince among the caterers" (Narayan, 2006, p. 92) is expressed at the

end of the story: “When some customer ordered him about too rudely, he said, ‘Gently, brother. I was once a hotel-owner myself.’ And with that piece of reminiscence, he attained great satisfaction” (Narayan, 2006, p. 95).

Conclusion

Malgudi is a narrative environment that accommodates both modern and mythical environmental imaginings, making it a site produced by colonial history, modernity, and a memory of traditions that makes its appeal quintessentially Indian. At the same time, Malgudi contains heterotopias and subversive spaces of dark rooms, movie theatres, heavenly spaces of gods and goddesses, and the marginal lived spaces beyond the river Sarayu; representing the spatial possibility of a contemporaneous plurality. Formation and transformation of identities manifest spatially; a free street mongrel becomes a pet and then a slave, an entrepreneur operating autonomously in public space becomes an employee with a weakened social status. Although the environment in Malgudi affords autonomous spaces, there is always a sense that a possibility of complete reversal exists invariably. This narrative uncertainty, the continuous contestation of space, reflects the turmoil of the characters who are concurrently unable to belong and unable to leave. Hence, the spaces in these narratives serve as a rich terrain for exploring complex issues of identity, belonging, autonomy, and resistance. Weaving together threads of memory, myths, imagination, history, and contemporary reality, R. K. Narayan deftly concatenates vivid portrayals of life that are not only Indian or South Indian, but also capable of evoking reflections on our shared humanity and its sociality that is fundamentally spatial.

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**Interpreting the Erotic as An Agency: A Study of Haruki Murakami's
*Norwegian Wood***

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Abstract

The primary aim of our study is to challenge the traditional phallogocentric conception of the erotic that casts women as passive objects, whose sexuality is defined solely in relation to the phallus. Drawing on the feminist critique of Audre Lorde, who contends that the power of the erotic is an empowering force that is latent in women, we argue that when women take agency over their body and reclaim their sexuality, they emerge as empowered beings in all aspects of their lives. The erotic, thus, turns into a life force or a creative agency to address the multifariousness of sexuality. This paper seeks to establish the trope of erotic as a constructive force and further aims to explicate how women wield sexuality to subvert gendered power dynamics and counter the historical use of sexuality as a tool for female subjugation. By integrating Lorde's idea of the erotic as an agency along with the theories of sexuality propounded by Herbert Marcuse, Luce Irigaray, and Georges Bataille, we attempt to arrive at an alternative conceptualization of the erotic through a feminist reading of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2003) and perceive the sexual encounters in question, as an empowering and reconciling force for both the sexes, rather than perpetuating power dynamics.

Keywords: erotic, Haruki Murakami, life-force, phallogocentrism, sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality studies within feminist discourse have long sought to interrogate patriarchal narratives and the gaze that fail to acknowledge the intricacies and diversities of women's sexual experiences and reduce women to passive objects shaped by male desires. In this context, the concept of the erotic plays a radical role in the understanding of sexuality from a feminist standpoint. Joseph Bristow (2007) in his book, *Sexuality*, observes that the first deployment of the term, "sexuality" appeared in one of the poems of William Cowper in the 18th century, *The Lives of Plants*, where the term was primarily used in a botanical context, to refer exclusively to plant sexuality. It was not until the 1890s, as Bristow further notes, that the term, "sexuality" came to be associated with types of sexuality in humans and encompassed the multiplicity of sexual impulses, desires and fantasies in people of varied sexual expressions that stimulate their innate libidinal instincts, incorporated under the rubric of the erotic (Bristow, 2007, p. 4).

Nonetheless, although sexuality and the erotic are interconnected concepts, they are distinct from each other. While sexuality is a broader term, encompassing a spectrum of sexual experiences and orientation, which also includes the notion of erotic, not all consensual sexual activities are erotic in nature. The erotic tends to be more nuanced as a concept. It projects a confluence of both the consent of the partners involved, as well as an elevated sense of arousal and desire culminating from an intermingling of genuine psychological and emotional stimulation, where procreation may or may not play a vital role. According to Georges Bataille (2001), "Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction" (Bataille, 2001, p. 11). In his book *The Double Flame* (1995), Octavio Paz contends that eroticism is a result of human imagination and will that transforms the raw biological impulses of sexuality into a realm of infinite possibilities and variations (p. 8). Audre Lorde (1984), in her famous essay *The Uses of the Erotic*, claims that the erotic is a perennial source of power, creativity and agency for women. She further defines the erotic as an "assertion of the life force of women" (Lorde, 1984, p. 55). Thus, it is evident that the erotic is a dynamic force that transcends the physical or the carnal, to serve as a source of empowerment, imagination and creative harmony, as well as a tool for dismantling gendered power dynamics. It is precisely this empowering potential of the erotic that we seek to explore in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*¹ (2003), challenging longstanding critiques that label the author's work as misogynist.

Haruki Murakami has often been accused of alleged sexual objectification of his female characters and the purported reinforcement of oppressive gender norms within his works. This paper however, argues against such readings, contending that such oversimplified readings overlook the nuanced and constructive dimensions of sexuality. This paper seeks to carry out a critical study of Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2003) to arguably present the sexual encounters in the novel, as reflections of mutual vulnerability and shared emotional depth. The

¹ Originally published in Japanese in 1987 by Kodansha; first translated into English by Alfred Birnbaum and published in 1989 by Kodansha and again translated by Jay Rubin and published in 2000 by Vintage. The edition cited here was published in 2003 by Vintage.

erotic, in *Norwegian Wood* (2003), becomes a site where both men and women explore their desires, emotions, and identities in ways that resist hierarchical structures.

Perception of Sexuality Through Phallic Lens and Feminist Interventions

The prevailing discourse on sexuality has its primeval entrenchment rooted within the confines of the phallic economy, which places the phallus at the centre while relegating female sexuality and desire to the periphery.² This linear paradigm of perceiving sexuality has been further reasserted by psychoanalysts, especially the claims made by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, which undermine the nuances and diverseness of human sexualities and the complexities of female desires.³ Such linear discourse awakens the dire need to reanalyze sexuality and sets the stage for a broader exploration into the layered intricacies of sexuality and erotic desires.

Although, the turn of the twentieth century, witnessed psychoanalysis paving novel ways of perceiving sexuality by acknowledging its complexities and fluidities, it also ostensibly reasserted the historically flawed notion of gendered sexuality reducing women to passive objects which sparked severe debates critiquing its theoretical underpinnings and methodological structures. In this regard, Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (2018) writes in her essay, *The Politics of Gendered Resistance*: “Prior to the seventeenth century the dominant view of the body was homological; male body was described as perfect and complete and female body was interpreted as lack” (Bhattacharjee, 2018, p. 347). The Lacanian thesis reaffirms this notion of the female “lack” by discerning the phallus as a “privileged signifier” (Lacan, 2006, p. 581) which both sexes desire for, but can never possess. This emphasis on the phallus undermines female desires outright and renders them “not whole” in the phallic economy. Thus, in due course, feminist discourse acknowledged the need to reevaluate sexuality and redefine the multiplicity of erotic desires latent in every human, by liberating the idea of erotic from phallic economy. Luce Irigaray (1985), in her phenomenal work, *This Sex Which Is Not One*,⁴ expounds on the omnipotence of the phallus in the psychoanalytic discourse vehemently arguing that it disregards the complexities of the female erogenous zones and diminishes the independent significance of female pleasure. She writes in this regard that women are “only an obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in the role by proxy, is possible, and even certain, but such pleasure is above all, a masochist prostitution of her body, to a desire that is not her own”. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 25). Similarly, Freud’s concept of “penis envy” or “Oedipus complex” has also been criticized by feminists and feminist-

²See the second chapter of Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, “Theory of Sexual Politics”, (published in 2000 by University of Illinois Press), p. 23–58. See also, the second chapter of Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, “This Sex Which Is Not One”, (published in 1985 by Cornell University Press), p. 23–33.

³See Freud’s concept of “penis envy” in the second essay titled, “Infantile Sexuality” in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (translated by James Strachey and published in 1962 by Basic Books Inc., Publishers), p.39-72. See also Jacques Lacan’s “The Signification of the Phallus” in *Ecrits* (translated by Bruce Fink and published in 2006 by W.W. Norton & Company), p. 277–278.

⁴Originally published in French under the title, *Ce Sexe qui n’enes pas un* in 1977 by Editions de Minuit. The edition cited here is the English translation by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke under the title, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, published in 1985 by Cornell University Press.

psychoanalysts alike to have ruled out the intricacies of female desires. Kate Millett (2000), in *Sexual Politics* observes in this regard:

“The theory of penis envy has so effectively obfuscated understanding that all psychology has done since, has not yet unraveled this matter of social causation. If as seems unlikely, penis envy can mean anything at all, it is productive only within the total cultural context of sex. And here it would seem that girls are fully cognizant of male supremacy long before they see their brother’s penis...Confronted with so much evidence of male’s superior status, sending on all sides the depreciation in which they are held, girls’ envy not the penis, but only what the penis gives one social pretensions to” (Millett, 2000, p. 103).

Millett’s critique of Freud’s concept of “penis envy” projects the failure of psychoanalysis to address the broader social influences in the understanding of sexuality. She argues that what Freud calls “penis envy” is in fact, an envy of the social privileges rendered on men by the society.

Within the discourse on sexuality, Michel Foucault (1990) establishes how sexuality is shaped and regulated by the existing societal power structures that societal norms and institutions shape and in turn, is shaped by the discourses surrounding sexual practices. He writes in this regard,

“Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power...It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power...Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality” (Foucault, 1990, p. 103).

Foucault (1990) underlines the role of sexuality in the process of normalization and deviance, wherein societal norms define and redefine acceptable behaviors. Thus, surveillance, both external and internalized, becomes a key mechanism through which sexuality is regulated, with individuals actively participating in self-discipline. This clearly indicates how and why sexuality and eroticism are bound by unequal power structures. Foucault also acknowledges the potential for resistance and subversion, as individuals and groups contest normative discourses to disrupt established power structures. In this regard, when the erotic is used as means of resistance, especially by women to subvert the patriarchal societal power, it emerges as a life-affirming force. Black Feminist critic, Audre Lorde argues in this regard that the erotic has been suppressed and vilified in western society, leading women to distrust the innate power of the erotic, which further perpetuates traditional male power dynamics.

Thus, within the landscape of sexuality, the varied contestations, connotations and feminist intervention offer a unique vantage point to explore the idea of erotic as a life-affirming force rather than a mere sexual signifier that perpetuates and maintains the dynamics of power.

The Erotic as an Agency in *Norwegian Wood*

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2003) first published in 1987, is considered his sole realist coming-of-age novel. The novel centers on the lives of Toru Watanabe and Naoko, the central protagonists, where death is an all-pervasive theme. The novel commences with the central protagonist, Toru Watanabe arriving at Hamburg airport which coincides with the playing of the famous Beatles' song, "Norwegian Wood" on the plane's speakers. This takes Toru back to a poignant memory of eighteen years ago in Kobe, where he fostered a close-knit friendship since childhood with Kizuki and his beloved, Naoko. The reader are then acquainted with the fact that Kizuki inexplicably dies by suicide at the age of seventeen, which leaves an irreparable void in the lives of both the characters bringing the readers to the realization of their existential angst. In the novel, Toru says: "I tried hard to forget, but there remained inside me a vague knot of air. And as time went by, the knot began to take on a clear and simple form... Death exists, not as the opposite, but as a part of life. When it took the 17-year-old Kizuki that night in May, death took me as well" (Murakami, 2003, pp. 30–31).

Following the demise of Kizuki, both Naoko and Toru found themselves grappling with the inescapable grief of death. Despite their vain attempts to move away from Kobe and its people which had tangible memories of Kizuki, the shadow of death loomed omnipresent over their lives – "in the midst of life, everything revolved around death" (Murakami, 2003, p. 31). Furthermore, although Naoko made earnest efforts to strengthen her bond with Toru and was readily embraced by the latter, the ever-looming shadow of death always crept in like a notorious thief to embezzle their lives. Despite such turbulent emotional and psychological turmoil, erotic encounters pervade the narrative not as sensational market-driven ploys, but as a trope that transcends mere corporeal desire and carnal quest ascending to the subconscious domain where the existential dilemmas of the characters manifest tangibly. Toru and Naoko are surreally bound by and thrive on the shared memories of their dead friend, Kizuki, whose symbolic presence through both their lives represents an "un-dead" force that exerts an inescapable influence.

On the night of Naoko's twentieth birthday, Toru and Naoko indulge in their first sexual encounter when the presence of the "un-dead" becomes more poignant. The void left by Kizuki's death becomes more palpable when Toru and Naoko are in each other's company. In such a situation, the erotic trope employed by Murakami transcends mere carnal desire to symbolically signify the internal conflicts that torment them. The slow and gentle act of undressing each other on the rainy April night reflects the need for renewal and catharsis in both their lives which have come to stagnancy since Kizuki's death: "Her arms tightened around me at the end...her cry was the saddest sound of orgasm I had ever heard" (Murakami, 2003, p. 51). The sad cry of orgasm is a paradoxical expression suggesting the herculean emotional baggage that Naoko shall carry till the end of her life, before she finally succumbs to it, fused with corporeal desire that provides temporary relief from her existential dilemma, to enable her to come to terms with and accept the truth of her existence.

In this interplay of life and death, death does not exist as a distant opposite of life but as an inextricable part of the lives of the characters birthing existential dilemmas. Sigmund Freud (1961) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* establishes a study of the antagonistic drives of life and death that mobilizes sexual behaviour. He uses the term “*Eros*” to represent the drive for life and the libidinal desire leading to creativity while “*Thanatos*” to describe the drive towards aggression, destruction and death. Joseph Bristow (2007), states that Freud’s inquiry aimed at discovering the mechanism that makes the subject avoid pleasure (*Eros*) and choose “unpleasure” (*Thanatos*) (Bristow, 2007, p.119). According to Bristow (2007), one of the mechanisms that Freud (1961) discovers is “the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle... that is to say, the ego... must at times face up to the realities that threaten the subject’s immediate demand for pleasure” (Bristow, 2007, p. 119). Thus, Freud associates the pleasure principle (*Eros*) primarily with sexual instincts, a principle that is in constant conflict with the death instinct. He further explores and reasserts this idea in *The Ego and the Id* (2018) where he argues that the ego remains on a continuous descent towards death and to combat this potentially entropic state, the *id* must keep fighting back. This Freudian view has been criticized by post psychoanalyst critics by expounding more holistic and optimistic views of human nature, where *Eros* plays a vital role in fostering integration, resilience, and the pursuit of well-being and meaning such that in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse contends Freud’s view of *Eros* and *Thanatos* being in constant conflict. Marcuse (1955) proposes that *Eros* can serve as a reconciling force that bridges the gap between the individual and society. He argues that *Eros*, when expressed freely and fully, can lead to a sense of liberation and promote social integration, thus countering the alienation and isolation that Freud attributes to the death instinct. In *Norwegian Wood* (2003), Murakami employs the trope of erotic as a nuanced tool to bridge the divide between life and death by transcending beyond its sexual connotation to heal emotional wounds, surpass mortality, and foster self-discovery. In one of the instances of half awareness, when Toru sees or perhaps imagines to have seen Naoko in her naked glory, he imagines holding Naoko in his arms and explaining to her, “I am having sex with you now. I am inside you. But really this is nothing. It doesn’t matter. It is nothing but the joining of two bodies...By doing this we are sharing our imperfections” (Murakami, 2003, pp. 173–174).

Georges Bataille’s (2012) exploration of the crucial relationship between the knowledge of death and the notion of eroticism in his works are intriguing in this respect, which he asserts with the example of prehistoric humans who were aware of death and as a result aware of the power of the erotic. He defines eroticism as an immensely stimulating emotion that distinguishes the sexuality of humans from that of animals. Human beings according to Bataille are discontinuous beings susceptible to mortality. By engaging in erotic activity, they experience a temporary loss of self which in turn enables them to transcend into the realm of continuity. He argues that eroticism attempts to overcome the constraints of mortality to seek continuity beyond the individual self. In one of his famous works, *Literature and Evil* (2012), he states, “I believe eroticism is the affirmation of life even in death” (Bataille, 2012, p. 12). Bataille’s (2012) perception of death as the ultimate expression of eroticism also vivifies the reason of the climax of a sexual act being called the “little death” when an individual

momentarily experiences a dissolution of the self which in turn enables them to reach the realm of continuity thereby blurring the gulf between the dichotomies of existence.

In *Norwegian Wood* (2003), Murakami projects the character of Midori as a unique individual who is profoundly cognizant to life's "discontinuity" and yet embraces its uncertainties with fervor, a quality which stands in stark contrast to Naoko's existence, which becomes paralyzed by the looming presence of death. Midori fearlessly expresses her unbridled sexual desires, in direct contrast to Naoko, who gradually loses her capacity for active engagement in sexual experiences, culminating in a loss of self. This keen awareness of mortality propels human beings towards an exploration of continuity (which is often sought in the climax of sexual action) leading to a state of liberated existence, thereby also challenging Freud's concept of an eternal conflict between the opposing drives of life and death. Bataille subverts this notion by proposing that the opposing forces of life and death can be reconciled through eroticism leading to a holy alliance. With Kizuki's death, both Toru and Naoko find themselves stripped of the very essence of their lives. However, their attempts to reconcile with the loss of essence through sexual unions in their case, enable them to find meaning and purpose even in the face of inevitable mortality, especially for Naoko who all along lived with "death inside her... Death was but one of the many elements comprising (her) life" (Murakami, 2003, p. 360).

Murakami's female characters subvert and transcend established binaries of gender and sexuality, which conventionally perpetuates power dynamics. Although Murakami himself does not perceive his works from any particular critical lens, he inadvertently deconstructs the phallic supremacy in his narratives, as his female characters navigate their desires and relationships without confining themselves to social expectations. In an interview with one of the most popular contemporary feminist writers of Japan, Mieko Kawakami, Murakami states:

"Women aren't just novelistic instruments for me. Each individual work calls for its own circumstances. I'm not making excuses. I'm speaking from feeling and experience...I do feel that women have rather different functions from men. Maybe it's cliché, but this is how men and women survive—helping each other, making up for what the other lacks. Sometimes that means swapping gender roles or functions. I think it depends on the person, and on their circumstances, whether they see this as natural or artificial, as just or unjust" (Kawakami, 2020, para. 25 and 28).

In order to substantiate Murakami's nuanced projection of sexuality, Georges Bataille's rendering of a crucial role to nakedness in the exploration of eroticism is imperative. Bataille (2001), in his introduction to *Eroticism*, posits that, by stripping oneself bare and standing exposed in front of others, an individual relinquishes the position of the self through their nudity. Such an act represents a rejection of the established societal role of the self to embrace an alternate form of existence by engaging in subsequent erotic acts (Bataille, 2003, p. 17). When Toru sees Naoko stark naked in the play of light and shadow in the moonlit night in the sanatorium, his desires are far from mere sexual arousal. He begins to contemplate: "So perfect was Naoko's physical beauty now that it aroused nothing sexual in me. I could only stay astounded, at the lovely curve from her waist to hips" (Murakami, 2003, p. 174).

In this moment of outright vulnerability, Naoko's nudity is not the object of conventional male gaze. Murakami rather desexualizes the naked image of Naoko making it assume a higher plane of aesthetic perfection and allure which not only enables Naoko to touch an alternate realm of the self but also vehemently challenges the scopophilic gaze in the phallogocentric idea of sexuality by rendering the female with an agency of her own. Naoko's emotional and psychological struggle to come to terms with the death of Kizuki could easily make her a vulnerable character diminishing her control over her body and desire. However, Murakami's alignment with Bataille's (2001) philosophy reframes nudity to celebrate its beauty and vulnerability exemplifying Naoko's agency over her body and her desire making her a complex character while at the same time depicting the trope of erotic as a negotiating agency between the various constructed ideas of the self.

Luce Irigaray (1985) writes in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, "Women (in the psychoanalytical framework) has been cast as object, not subject, with the position of the speaking, thinking subject exclusively male" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 133). However, Murakami becomes an ally of Irigaray (1985) in critiquing and challenging the psychoanalytical concept of the female "object", in his projection of the relationship between Naoko and Kizuki, when Kizuki was alive. Naoko in describing to Toru about her relationship with Kizuki says:

"Our boy-girl relationship was really unusual. It was as if we were physically joined somewhere. If we happened to be apart, some special gravitational force would put us back together again. It was the most natural thing in the world... We had always shown each other every part of our bodies. It was almost as if we owned each other's bodies jointly... We had almost no sense of the oppressiveness of sex or the anguish that comes with the sudden swelling of the ego" (Murakami, 2003, pp.168–169).

Naoko's description of her relationship with Kizuki implies a lack of traditional hierarchy between the sexes reiterated by psychoanalysis and vehemently contended by Irigaray (1985), where the woman is positioned as a passive object. In this situation, both the partners, irrespective of their biological sex, shared a mutual desire for each other by exploring their physical selves together, without any repressed sense of guilt, thus, rendering this mere sexual act into an erotic encounter, transcending all biases and hierarchies. Naoko mentions that she and Kizuki "had almost no sense of the oppressiveness of sex or the anguish that comes with the sudden swelling of the ego" (Murakami, 2003, p. 169). This may arguably be interpreted as the absence of power dynamics that places the female in an inferior position, subject to the male's desires that Irigaray strongly critiques. Murakami's portrayal of the sexual relationship between Naoko and Kizuki rejects the traditional oppressive structure that enforces gendered power dynamics and elevates the sexual encounter into an empowering act that retains the agency of both the sexes.

Midori is yet another crucial character, who firmly challenges established notions of female sexuality. When readers first encounter Midori she is already projected as a rebellious character who does not succumb to gender rigidities. When Toru positively comments on Midori's short hair, she thanks him and responds with a slight disgust: "What's this thing that guys have for

girls with long hair? Fascists! The whole bunch of them! Why do guys all think girls with long hair are the classiest, the sweetest, the most feminine?” (Murakami, 2003, p. 66). She clearly does not conform to societal strictures of gender conduct. Her outspoken manner of expressing her sexual fantasies to Toru and her active pursuance of a sexual and romantic connection with him dismantles the stereotypes of women as silent and passive recipients of male desire. She provides the readers with a scope to look at the trope of erotic as a means of liberation from the drudgeries of life as well as challenge sexual conventions. Her unconventional sexual yearnings represent a desire for emancipation from her stifling life, thereby refuting the Lacanian idea of the female as “lack” (Lacan, 2006, p. 581). Murakami, by his construction of the character of Midori, aligns with Irigaray in subverting the phallogocentric notion that female sexuality and identity are defined solely in relation to the masculine, while feminine desires remain passive. Although Midori does not indulge in a conventional sexual act with Toru all throughout the novel, her desires and sexual fantasies construe the erotic in the novel as a vehicle of liberation challenging established norms of gender and sexuality and enabling her to escape from a trying life to which she had resigned herself so much so that even a funeral is like a “piece of cake” for her (Murakami, 2003, p. 290).

Midori’s openness about her sexual fantasies also clearly echoes Audre Lorde’s notion of the erotic that lies within a woman for the purpose of self-discovery and empowerment. Lorde (1984) writes in *The Uses of the Erotic*,

“When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense... our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (Lorde, 1984, p. 58).

For Midori, her sexual desires form a part of her identity which she acknowledges blatantly and for which she takes responsibility, thus using the power of the erotic to “inform and illuminate” her actions. The erotic self within her empowers her to embrace her sexual needs and lead a non-conformist life which in turn, renders her with agency instead of making her vulnerable in a phallic world.

In the projection of Reiko’s character too, Murakami reiterates both Judith Butler (1999) and Lorde’s (1984) notion of the erotic as a catalyst initiating the process of self-discovery. As Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) proposes that sex, gender and sexuality are the very “core” of self-identity because self-identity is constructed through the mode of power, it is evident that Reiko’s self-exploration is tied to these aspects. Reiko, who suffers in the novel from psychological trauma in the past, encounters a thirteen-year-old girl who enables her to embark on her journey of self-discovery and moral realization through the trope of erotic. When the young teenage girl touches Reiko’s body for the first time, she immediately becomes aware of the power dynamics at work and her arousal makes her discover herself newly.

“I have always thought of myself as sort of indifferent to sex, so I was astounded to be getting so worked up... I mean it was totally different from when a man puts his clumsy hand on you there... However in my fogged- over brain, the thought occurred to me that I had to put a stop to this. If I let it happen once, I'd never stop” (Murakami, 2003, p. 204).

Although Hatsume does not play a vital role in the narrative's main plot but is projected as an individual grappling with the precarity of her existence and through the trope of the erotic, she embarks on an odyssey of self-discovery and self-realization to traverse beyond the realm of existence. Although Hatsume eventually ends her life, Toru acknowledges that he had always seen a special quality in her “that could send a tremor through your heart” (Murakami, 2003, p. 278). “The power she exerted was a subtle thing but it called forth deep resonance... It finally hit me some dozens of years later... and in that moment I (Toru) understood what that tremor of the heart had been. It was a kind of childhood longing that has always remained... unfulfilled” (Murakami, 2003, p. 278). The power of the erotic in the case of Hatsume represents the ability to forge a spiritual connection that leaves a lasting impact on the soul, even long after the body has succumbed to mortality.

Conclusion

Thus, it becomes evident that the phallogocentric notion of sexuality ostensibly fails to recognize the potential of the erotic as a constructive and an empowering force and hence, there arises the dire need to reimagine the erotic beyond the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the discourse on sexuality within the phallic realm. Since psychoanalysis failed to shed light on the intricacies of sexuality and inadequately expressed the multifaceted spectrum of human desires, feminists had to intervene to highlight the historical as well as the psychoanalytical misrepresentation of sexuality and liberate it from the confines of patriarchal norms and repressed gender roles. The paper highlights the use of erotic in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2003) beyond mere sexual signifier, where the erotic sexual encounters help to navigate into the innermost fears and vulnerabilities of the characters, thus, transcending into a metaphysical realm, which in turn render an alternative definition of the erotic as a trope or a tool to explore the complexities of human desires and the existential anxieties that permeate the human society, while also challenging the historically patriarchal idea of sexuality. As a female reader, recognizing the nuanced use of the erotic in Murakami is political in nature as it challenges the established idea of the erotic as a singular marker of sex, enabling women to discern the erotic in all other aspects of life, other than sex and ultimately challenge the status quo.

By redefining the idea of the erotic, Murakami's idea of sexuality aligns with the feminist reconsideration of sexuality which subverts gender rigidity and societal expectations pertaining to sexuality. Murakami's empowered female characters vehemently challenge gender stereotypes and speak back against male gaze by taking active agency over their body and their sexual desires. Thus, Haruki Murakami's artistic employment of the erotic in his narratives enhances his magic realist world by contributing novel and insightful perspectives to reimagine sexuality in the contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality. The erotic in Murakami

serves as a window to look into the subtle intricacies and complexities of human desires, identity and transformatively moulds the ambit of existential question which is an all-pervasive theme in his literary corpus, thus, establishing him as a significant writer of the contemporary times.

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**Adivasi Marginality and the Vicissitudes of Violence in Rejina Marandi's
*Becoming Me***

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Abstract

Considered the earliest known inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent region, the Adivasis have been marginalized at the fringes of society for centuries. Their secluded and unique lifestyle has been primarily characterized by geospatial isolation and religious-linguistic divisions. Moreover, the withdrawal of these indigenous people from modern paradigms and values made them stand out as the perennial “other” for both the colonial rulers and mainstream Indian society. The issues regarding Adivasi identity and existence are even more complicated and nuanced in Northeast India since the politics of identity and belonging are more intense and layered in this region because of its multi-ethnic structure. The politicization of ethnicity as a means of “resistance” by the ethnic communities has reinforced the “indigenous/outsider” binary in the region, often resulting in widespread and multifaceted violence. However, it is important to note that this violence extends beyond the physical or subjective forms, and includes more subtle and inconspicuous forms of coercion that perpetuate relations of domination and exploitation. In this context, Rejina Marandi’s *Becoming Me* becomes a significant literary endeavor. As the inaugural fictional work in English by an Adivasi from the Northeast, the novel attempts to ventriloquize the collective Adivasi concerns and experiences specifically in Assam, and Northeast in general. Drawing on various theoretical frameworks, this paper, therefore, intends to analyze the portrayal of Adivasi marginality in Marandi’s novel, and how it produces a continuum of violence, leading to the loss of their identity and dignity.

Keywords: Adivasi, dignity, identity, Northeast, violence

The term Adivasi, in the context of the Indian sub-continent, signifies the “aboriginals” – the earliest known inhabitants, a large number of ethnic groups, mainly tribal, in the sub-continent (Nayar, 2015, p. 3). Tribes in central India, parts of the Northeast, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are commonly referred to as Adivasis. Politically, they are classified under the “Scheduled Tribes” category in some parts of the country as outlined in the Constitution of India. Considered the original inhabitants of the land, Adivasis have been dwelling on the periphery of social strata since time immemorial. Geographical segregation, religious-linguistic division, and lack of access to modern academic, healthcare, and legal affairs are some of the fundamental reasons that have shaped the Adivasi existence in India to date, thus inviting a quintessential marginal status for them. The reasons for the marginality of the Adivasis are manifold and, to a great extent, interrelated. Since the colonial period, the problematic Adivasi identity has been an important factor that contributes to their marginal status. These indigenous groups have never been a core part of a mainstream Indian society dominated mostly by the Hindu and Muslim populations. The “outsider” discourse came to encapsulate Adivasis more pervasively during the colonial regime because within the colonial paradigm, “any people from the hills, forests and frontiers who...did not follow ‘mainstream’ religions such as Hinduism and Islam and did not fit into pervasive class and caste permutations were automatically classified as Tribes...they were caricatured as primordial, pre-political and pre-modern in need of ‘civilizing’, which only colonial rule could guarantee” (Bhuria & Bhuria, 2021, para. 3). Moreover, the reluctance of these Indigenous people to embrace and accept modern paradigms and values further entrenched their status as the perennial “other” for both the colonizers and the Indian populace. The situation did not change much in the post-independent nation-state. Their marginalization persisted with geographical segregation, along with differences in language, culture and traditions, paving the way for their internal exclusion within the country. With the introduction of the free-market economy, the exclusion became more intense and violent, driving the Adivasi to the extreme margins.

Unlike the urban and rural Indian population, the Adivasis have typically been represented in Indian epics and folklore as forest-dwellers, living outside the pale of common law, customs, and social orders across different phases of India’s historical timeline. The notion of “indigeneity”, therefore, is a crucial marker of the Adivasis and the Adivasi way of life. In this respect, the idea of assigning “tribal” status to the Adivasi has been a politically contested issue over a significant period. Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011) argue that “whilst ‘tribal’ identity does have a bearing on “being Adivasi,” it does not chart an accurate or particularly credible trajectory. The concept of Adivasi, in contrast, implies a range of historically defined, contested and mediated indigeneities, which cannot be apprehended through the reified notion of “tribe” (p. 1). The concept of “tribe” is regarded by scholars primarily as a colonial coinage, used for administrative convenience to differentiate the hill and forest-dwellers from the people living in the plains: “the tribe for the colonial state, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become a definable ‘object’ with clearly demarcated characteristics, ... It was now distinguished from the institution of ‘caste’, and from organized religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity” (p. 3–4). In the colonial administrative parlance, ‘tribe’ has been essentially projected as groups of people who share the same lineage and are known for their kinship and organized living patterns. The colonial practice of grouping the Adivasis under the problematic category of

“tribals” – a universal category that is structurally distinct from typical caste-based Indian society, which continued even after the independence, highlights a major issue regarding the threat posed to the articulation of the Adivasi identity, overlooking the “aboriginal” angle associated with the Adivasi identity politics. Therefore, despite gaining widespread recognition and relevance in contemporary India, the Adivasi concept is yet to surpass the concept of “tribe” in the national discourse.

Since the inception of the category of Scheduled Tribes in the post-independence period, the question of Adivasi identity has become more complicated. Devy (2021), in this regard, opines, “given this uncertainty related to the exact genesis of Adivasis, their ethnic characteristics and their social standing, the use of terms such as ‘Adivasis’ or ‘Tribes’ has to be understood entirely with reference to the context in which these terms get used” (para. 3). In the context of the Indian Constitution, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules ensure the promotion and protection of tribal populations, their cultural identity, and customary laws. However, as Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011) argue, the official instruments purportedly ignore or deny the issue of Adivasi autochthony, making Adivasi subjectivity legible only through the idea of “tribe”: “this is a crucial concern for contemporary exponents of Adivasi identity, a significant disavowal occurs in such processes: of folding the narratives of Adivasi dislocation and Indigenous translocation into a more singular narrative of ‘tribal’ belonging” (p. 8). The representatives and advocates of Adivasi cause and rights, thus highlight the point that the privileging of the “tribal” over the “Indigenous” in the administrative and public domains persistently marginalizes the question of Adivasi indigeneity.

The contentious indigenous-tribal binary is a crucial aspect of Adivasi identity politics. This is especially important for understanding the socio-political struggles that define Adivasi life in Northeast India, particularly Assam, which serves as the premise for Marandi’s debut novel being discussed here. The Adivasi emigration to Assam from the states of present Jharkhand, Orissa, and Chhattisgarh happened early in the 1860s following the colonial establishment of tea estates in Assam. Since the Bodo, Ahom, and Koch landowners refused to work in the plantations, the Adivasis became the first choice of the British to work as indentured labourers in the tea estates in Assam. In this regard, the Permanent Settlement Act, introduced in the Calcutta Presidency in 1793 by the British, along with the Forest Laws, helps to contextualize the Adivasi migration better. These laws, designed to establish landlordism and align the upper classes with colonial interests, deprived the “tribals” of the region of the community rights to their land and forest. Fernandes (2003), in this context, asserts:

“After the land laws the British enacted forest laws that denied them the tribals their customary rights to their sustenance. Besides, they lacked a concept of land tax, so they could be exploited easily by the *zamindars*... These laws are based on the colonial principle of eminent domain according to which all natural resources are State property, so is all land that does not have an individual *patta*. They thus turned them into encroachers on their own land and deprived them of their traditional rights” (paras. 3–4).

Therefore, the Adivasis are “compelled to emigrate mainly to Assam tea gardens when they could not obtain justice from the government and could not bear to stay on in their newly transformed status as tenants” (Chatterjee, 1990, p. 159). However, despite living in Assam for more than a century, the Adivasis’ identity remains extremely fluid and complicated. While a group of Adivasis in the Upper Assam tend to identify themselves as Assamese, Adivasis in the Lower Assam region emphasize their Jharkhand origin, and this is reflected in their language preferences. Moreover, despite having lived in the state for a considerable time, they are still considered “outsiders” by those who claim to be the indigenous people of Assam, and postulate the Adivasis’ existence as a threat to their land and jobs, further contributing to Adivasi marginalization. Discussing the “otherization” of the Adivasis and their perpetual distance from their immediate Assamese neighbours, Misra (2007) opines, “interaction between the two communities was quite marginal, with the management actively preventing tea workers from mixing with the local population. This is true with many gardens even today. Thus, for the average Assamese the community of tea garden workers has remained very much the ‘other’” (p. 11). Moreover, unlike the Adivasis in Jharkhand and other parts of India, those in the Northeast are not included in the category of Scheduled Tribes, complicating the identity issue further along with denying them many opportunities provided by the State.

The issue of including Adivasis in the Scheduled Tribes category has been a contentious topic in Assam’s political landscape, driving both Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities into the cauldron of extreme violence. Marandi’s novel, in this regard, highlights the episodic violence that has been occurring since the 1990s between the Bodos and the Adivasis at regular intervals in the Lower Assam region, presently classified as the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) under the jurisdiction of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). Bhan’s (1999) research on the Bodo-Adivasi conflict in the BTAD traces the roots of the issue to the colonial policy of settling the indentured Adivasi labourers, after the completion of their contract in the plantations, in the forest areas which were the traditional source of livelihood of the Bodo and other “tribal” communities in Assam. This offended the Bodos who feel threatened since it invariably makes them compete with the “outsiders” for scarce resources (p. 9–10).

The Adivasi demand for the status of Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the Lower Assam region has, therefore, been vehemently opposed by the Bodos and other communities which have been enjoying the ST status there because “such a move would open up constituencies presently reserved for the STs to the adivasis, apart from encroaching upon the employment and education sector...The Bodo leadership has been maintaining that the adivasis are migrants and cannot claim to be indigenous to the region” (Misra, 2007, p. 13). For the Adivasis in Assam, the struggle for the ST status also makes up the wider struggle of identity assertion – a search for their cultural roots and heritage. This problematic coexistence of communities has time and again culminated into ethnic cleansing and genocides along with creating a continuum of violence for the extremely marginalized Adivasi population, exposing them to multifaceted violence on various fronts.

Caught in the Cauldron of Violence: A Testimony to the Collective Adivasi Experience

Writings by Adivasis, Trivedi and Burke (2018) argue, “constitute the “alternative canon” and it is by recognising the fact that these writings are given the significance that is due to them” (para. 1). In one of the interviews, Narayan, the author of the Malayali novel *Kocharethi* and often considered Kerala’s first Adivasi novelist, opines that the representation of the Adivasis in creative writings has been persistently done by the elite upper classes whose writings portray monochromatic figures of the Adivasis; “like the *rakshasan* or *nishacharan* of mythological stories. It was always a negative picture, he was depicted as apathetic, unable to resist injustice or worse, inhuman or sub-human, vicious” (Trivedi & Burke, 2018, para. 2). Moreover, the representations of Adivasis in Indian English literature, mostly written by urban intellectuals, have often faced criticism for either romanticizing the Adivasi condition or depicting them as extremist figures.

Mukherjee (2014), in this regard, observes that the writers strive to situate the Adivasis “as an antithesis to their own troubled modernity... really innocent and pure... closer to the pure state of mankind... less corrupted, more noble or depicting them as antisocial elements associated with Naxalite movements or Maoism” (p. 407). In light of these conditions, writings by Adivasis become a creative and intellectual instrument to assert their voice in the socio-cultural discourses that also intend to transcend the barriers of marginality and socio-cultural oppression. It is in this context that Marandi’s coming-of-age novel, *Becoming Me*, which is the inaugural novel in English by an Adivasi (belonging to the Santhal community) writer in the Northeast, becomes such a significant literary endeavour that reflects the collective Adivasi condition in Assam in particular, and Northeast in general.

The Novel begins by referring to the 1993-1994 Bodo-Adivasi ethnic clashes in the BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area District) region of Lower Assam. Recurring over time, these ethnic clashes resulted in the deaths of thousands of Santhals and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of both Santhal and Bodo individuals from their homes. Marandi weaves the novel’s plot around these recurrent clashes, testifying to the atrocities, and the multiple forms of violence Santhals are exposed to. The novel’s portrayal of the violence perpetrated against the Santhals in the four districts of the Bodoland and other tribal-dominated areas is brutal and horrific. In the novel's second and third chapters, titled *Crossing Over* and *Barrenness*, Marandi recounts incidents of entire Adivasi villages being torched, people being openly shot and killed in broad daylight, and girls and women being raped and murdered. These events illustrate the dire state of Adivasi existence and their extreme vulnerability, exacerbated by the breakdown of the legal framework entrusted with safeguarding their fundamental rights to life and property. The hatred nurtured against the Santhals is so intense that the rioters did not even spare a four-year-old child of an Adivasi leader and killed him too after killing his father and his two supporters:

“They were shot and then hit with stones on their heads and dragged off the bridge... Mr. Kisku also tried to run but they shot him and crushed his head with a stone... The little boy was not spared. After killing four, they put them in a sack and dragged them

along...Four days later their bodies were discovered in a paddy field” (Marandi, 2014, pp. 44–45).

The inter-community conflicts, it may be argued, essentially resulted from the “identity insecurity” of the Bodos and other communities enjoying the “tribal” status, characterized by a persistent fear of being minoritized in their own land where the Adivasis are a majority. According to McDuaie-Ra (2009), the dominance of the “outsiders’ discourse” (p. 78) ensures that all causes of insecurity are blamed on outsiders, without critically addressing the pressing issues that exist within a particular community. Therefore, the existence of Adivasis in traditionally Bodo-dominated areas has gradually sparked the fear of losing land and livelihoods to the “outsiders,” which was further propelled by their demand to establish their ST status in Assam. The ‘outsider’ marker associated with the Adivasi identity, along with the widespread propagation of the “outsiders’ discourse,” are the byproducts of this insecurity which percolate down to all aspects of social and political life, thereby making a clear division between people as either “friend” or “enemy”.

Liya, the protagonist and narrator of the novel who is a fictional extension of the author herself, thus finds it extremely difficult to befriend and trust her *diku* (usually refers to people outside the Santhal community, and traditionally denotes outsiders or oppressors) classmates as they appear to belong to “enemy” communities: “I tried my best to talk to my friends but deep inside I felt a border of trust which I could not cross to mingle freely with them. I wondered if Sinu, a classmate from the perpetrator’s side, felt the same dilemma” (Marandi, 2014, pp. 47–48). She hesitates to accept the food offered to her by the *diku* friend, Sinu, and waits till Sinu takes the first bite to be sure that the food is safe to eat. This anxiety and suspicion reflect how the Santhals are pushed into a persistent state of uncertainty and fear about their safety and well-being, thereby proliferating a permanent condition of crisis.

The persistent condition of uncertainty and fear of being exposed to violence, it may be contended, reflects the “unmaking” of the everyday world – the destruction of the familiar surroundings that strips away the “protective casing that comes with our body being at ease with the familiar world around us” (Dutta, 2021, p. 214). Drawing on Husserl’s phenomenological approach, Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) concept of embodiment may be considered an important theoretical framework in this context that emphasizes the human body as “our anchor in the world” (Dutta, 2021, p. 206) and the central point from which our perception and experience of the world unfold. According to Prus (1996), this phenomenological approach also focuses on the interpretation of social behaviour as “the study of human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people’s meanings, interpretations, activities and interactions” (p. 9).

The lived and embodied experience of violence for Liya, in the novel’s context, shapes her social behaviour and interaction with the people around her and influences her social relationships as well. The dehumanizing experiences, like taking refuge in a cow shed, spending nights alongside the animals, having food amid the unbearable stench of cow urine, and the animal-like treatment received in the refugee camp, are embodied experiences that

leave serious imprints on her psyche. These miserable events remain etched in her core memory and become an integral part of her existence as an Adivasi girl. The memories and plight of the refugees continue to resurface, haunting Liya long after the initial phase of the conflict has passed: “‘the sea of gloomy faces’ became a hard-core imprint in my mind. This picture stayed with me always” (Marandi, 2014, p. 56). Liya’s character, therefore, bears witness to the collective experience of extreme vulnerability and crisis that wrench apart the “human” status from a large chunk of the Adivasi population, transforming them into a “subhuman” category, stripped of the fundamental conditions, dignity, and rights essential for shaping the notion of the “human”.

The repeated use of animal imagery in the novel’s initial chapters highlights how the Adivasis, the key victims of the genocidal clashes, are reduced to dehumanized individuals where their subjectivities are corrosively destroyed. Liya’s observation of the refugees (including her own family) in the relief camps, and the accounts of violence shared by fellow Adivasis, underscore the “animalized ways of being and existing in a world” (Baishya, 2019, p. 35) that strips them of their humanity:

“...initially there was no security, the offenders chased us like animals, they were firing from behind. We all kept on running all through the paddy fields and bushes...Then two police vans escorted us to the nearest relief camp in town...It was just like animals being brought to the relief camp. There was no proper food for us for two days. By the time our turn to get something came, the rice got over” (Marandi, 2014, pp. 30–31).

The reference to the “unmaking” of the everyday familiar world for the protagonist in particular and the Adivasis in general, furthermore, reflects the breach in “trust” between communities. Their persistent exposure to violence and the inhuman state of existence essentially ruptures the trust-building process that, under normal circumstances, ties people together. For Bernstein (2015), “trust is the routine, ideally omnipresent yet mostly invisible ethical substance of everyday life. Trust is the ethical foundation of everyday living. Trust is trust in others before whom we are unconditionally vulnerable not to take advantage of our vulnerability” (p. 222). The condition of mutual trust thus denotes the anticipation and presumption of an individual that the other person will treat them as a “person” – a subject having legal recognition. Moreover, the notion of “trust” essentially holds the very mundane and ordinary nature of everyday life – what happens every day. However, as Bernstein (2015) argues, beneath the ordinariness of the everyday and the ever-shifting surface of routine and variation, “everyday life is full of terrible risks” (p. 226). So as long as the notion of “trust” exists, it ensures that the ordinariness of the familiar everyday world – grounded in individuals’ confidence that the legal and societal constructs are in place – will protect them from any type of threat.

According to Amery (1980), the notion of “trust in the world is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me...that he respects my physical, and with it also my metaphysical being” (p. 28). For Amery, what we usually call “normal life” alludes to an “anticipatory imagination” (p. 26), reflecting a predictive sense of trust that empowers us to navigate our social worlds with confidence. Within this framework,

the routinized form of violence that eventually becomes the everyday reality for the Adivasis visibly amplifies the pre-existing “trust gap” between the Adivasis and non-Adivasis, eroding the fundamental conditions of a familiar world that, in normal circumstances, would serve as a safety net for individuals. Therefore, Liya finds it extremely difficult to even approach her teachers in the school after the riots and prefers to stay away from them since a majority of the teachers belong to the community that attacked them during the riots. This crippling sense of insecurity and lack of trust become an integral part of her character. Therefore, even in the later phases of her life, she finds it difficult to get rid of this fear, and readers can notice Lia’s inherent inclination to be around the people belonging to her community, as it offers her a sense of safety and security.

Bearing this context in mind, it is interesting to note how despite her exposure to a ethnically diverse environment at a new school in a different state, where her father enrolls her in class nine, and later in college, all the people she gets close with are from the Adivasi community – whether it is Kunal, the boy she feels attracted to in her new school; Jayasree, her college senior-cum-roommate; or Bikas, with whom she eventually develops a romantic relationship. Throughout the novel, Marandi brings to the fore the hopes and aspirations, the challenges and uncertainties of Adivasi life in Assam and the Northeast, typically defined by their marginalized status. The perpetual fear of being exposed to unjust treatment, therefore, not only haunts the protagonist, Liya Kisku, but becomes a defining feature of the small Adivasi world. Living under the shadow of looming threats and violence, one may argue, they are always in a state of alertness that pushes them to adopt a secluded way of life. Marandi conjoins some significant events in her narrative that further highlight the collective Adivasi experience in the Northeast. In the chapter *Dead End*, she refers to the infamous incident in Assam’s Guwahati, where an Adivasi girl was stripped naked in public, and the Adivasis gathered to demand Scheduled Tribe status were mercilessly beaten. Marandi describes this notorious incident through the protagonist Liya’s conversation with a boy who belongs to her (Liya’s) district:

“We were in a rally demanding Scheduled Tribe status for the Adivasis in Assam. Some people grouped up together and started beating us for no reason and many of our people were killed. It seemed to have been a pre-planned attack. One of the most shameful and heinous crimes which took place was they tore the clothes of a girl, stripped and beat her up in the streets of Guwahati” (Marandi, 2014, p. 127).

The physical violence perpetrated on the Adivasis in broad daylight, and that too in a place like Guwahati – considered the gateway to the Northeast and the largest city of the region – depicts the extent of their marginality and vulnerable state. It is plausible to argue that the physical assault on their bodies, first and foremost, withholds the fundamental sense of “dignity” they are inherently entitled to. In the discourse of human rights, the notion of corporeal self-possession emphasizes the right to possess physical integrity and personal agency, which is closely knitted with wider paradigms of rights like the right to life, liberty, and security of individuals. For Bernstein (2014), possessing dignity is an acknowledgment of an individual’s social standing, and though dignity is wholly regarded as a civil status, it provides its bearer with a certain “legal inviolability” (p. 259). He contends that the generalization or

universalization of dignity gradually shifts it from a narrow civic-legal status into a moral status: “each citizen is possessed of *moral inviolability*, with bodily autonomy and bodily integrity as immediate ingredients in the human being of each citizen, bodily violation thus becoming a denial of the victim’s status as *human*” (p. 259).

Bernstein’s notion of dignity closely aligns with the concept of an individual’s “intrinsic self-worth” and respect. In this context, self-respect refers to an internal acknowledgment of one’s value and moral integrity, along with the expectation of being treated appropriately by others. The recurring violation of Adivasis’ bodily integrity, therefore, undermines their autonomy, ultimately leading to the erosion of their status as “person”. The portrayal of traumatic violence in Marandi’s novel emphasizes this destruction of Adivasis’ humanity, tearing apart their subjectivities and stripping away the fundamental conditions necessary for the realization of their rights.

The Curious Configurations of Identities and the Subtle Modes of Violence

In the context of the novel, it is engaging to note how the author underscores the intriguing and multifaceted nature of Adivasi identity as it unfolds in the Northeast. Through the protagonist’s observation and interactions with people belonging to the same community from various parts of the region, Marandi accentuates the essential nature of insecurity and inferiority that very often characterize the marginalized communities’ understanding of their identity, along with illustrating how the majoritarian discourse regarding the marginalized communities is typically prejudiced and culturally violent. According to Jetten and colleagues (2002),

“Peripheral group members experience different group-related emotions compared to prototypical group members...it is expected that peripheral group members will experience identity conflict when they identify with a group (in particular when the group is high status or attractive), but they are not fully accepted” (p.107).

Jetten and his fellow scholars argue that an individual’s position within a group defines their perception of their self along with having consequences for self-evaluation and self-esteem. At the collective level, identity insecurity can also erode group-based self-esteem. Perceiving one’s group or community as devalued or marginalized within a broader social context can lead to the internalization of these negative views, ultimately reducing collective pride and eroding community ties. The dimension of self-esteem – personal or collective, therefore, is “affected by being peripheral within a group, and might depend on expectations for one’s future position...collective self-esteem would be higher when group members anticipate becoming more prototypical over time than when group members anticipate becoming more peripheral” (p. 107).

Marandi introduces her readers to this intriguing aspect of Adivasi identity through Liya’s exposure to a diverse and heterogeneous social environment when she is sent to study at a school in a different region of the Northeast. Marandi meticulously titles the chapter *Layers of Identity* where her protagonist analyses the fact that the Adivasis there are less concerned or

possessive about their identity; instead, they are keener to act and behave like the *dikus* – the mainstream majority – and express an innate desire to be assimilated with them. Liya has been informed about this unique cultural shift occurring at her new school campus by her friend Jumi:

“...this is a Santal group from Jharkhand, they usually speak in Hindi and never speak Santali except while communicating something secretive among themselves... You will find a majority of Adivasi faculty members living on the campus, but their behaviour betrays their Santal, Adivasi last name and identity” (Marandi, 2014, pp. 62–63).

Furthermore, Liya, who expected her teachers to be more frank and friendly since a majority of them belong to her community, surprisingly discovers that they are more interested in their *diku* students, and even the Santhal classmates seem strangers to her as they too are always eager to be around their *diku* friends and their *diku* classmates are not bothered by their presence: “I could sense the gap between the Adivasi students. All the boys were interested in the *dikus*. They behaved more like *dikus* themselves and as if their surnames were attached to their names by force... my Santal friends acted as if they were always obligated to them” (p. 68). What Liya observes at her new school can be interpreted as a typical trait of minority or marginalized communities, struggling with a persistent sense of inferiority regarding their social status and identity, and consequently caught in a cycle of trying to prove their worth to the ones enjoying the majority status. In this context, it may also be argued that the awareness of their predicament and the unending experience of marginalization do not let them rely on their own identity and community anymore, therefore, making it insignificant in their sense of selfhood and recognition strategies.

However, drawing insights from numerous sociologists and their own research on intergroup dynamics, Jetten and colleagues (2002) also propose that the inability to belong to the dominant social group very often may lead the minority group members to emphasize their own uniqueness or personal distinctiveness which, in turn, may be reframed as a positive attribute, rather than negative, thereby contributing to personal self-esteem (p. 108). In light of these arguments, it becomes interesting to interpret the perspectives of Liya, her father, and the people belonging to the Adivasi community from Assam. These characters, throughout the novel, exhibit a strong sense of pride in their Adivasi lineage and identity. The Adivasis' indifference toward their cultural identity and their casual approach to traditional practices, thus appears surprisingly unusual and insulting to Liya, and her father describes it as “the total loss of cultural identity” (Marandi, 2014, p. 75).

The marginalization of the Adivasis is so extreme as well as nuanced that it exposes them to a plethora of violence that doesn't often get registered, escaping the critical gaze. Their continuous exposure to the subtle, objective modes of violence not only exacerbates their peripheral status but makes them more susceptible to subjective and physical acts of violence as well. The prejudices and stereotypes associated with the Adivasis weave a complicated and intriguing web of violence for them, with people very often turning hostile toward them and considering them the “other” – a label that makes their lives miserable and considerably more

difficult. In the novel, Marandi vividly portrays this continuum of soft violence – that takes the forms of “objective”, “symbolic”, and “cultural” violence – in which the Adivasis are consistently trapped.

The sixth chapter of the novel, titled *New City, Old Aspirations*, specifically depicts the protagonist being subjected to cultural violence, rendering her vulnerable to racial slurs and humiliation. She has repeatedly been called *bagania*, a derogatory term used to refer to people from the teagarden tribes, and has been mocked and ridiculed by both her teachers and batchmates for her inability to speak Assamese at her college:

- “...The first class was for introductions.
- I’m Liya Kisku, from Srirampur, Kokrajhar district. I introduced myself.
 - Oh! *Bagania*, from the teagarden tribe.
 - Don’t you know Assamese? Mam asked me.
 - No, Mam. I replied...
 - Staying in Assam and you don’t know Assamese! She mocked me.
 - She speaks *Bagania*. Some boys from behind said” (p. 84).

The novel thus meticulously brings to the fore the deep-rooted prejudice against the Adivasis, essentially propelled by hegemonic identity politics in the region, leading to an exclusionary politics that prefers to segregate the “outsiders” – the ones not conforming to the majoritarian socio-cultural discourse. Therefore, Liya and other Adivasis like her are persistently reminded of their status and constantly made aware of the existing socio-cultural differences. Liya being mocked for being an Adivasi at her college, or her landlady’s suspicion about her food habits and family profession, underscores how they are constantly judged and scrutinized which reinforces their social exclusion, depriving them of social recognition and respect. The persistent treatment of the Adivasis as the perennial “other”, and their deliberate exclusion from the mainstream socio-cultural spheres may be interpreted as a phenomenon generated from the existence of a continuum of violence that is “cultural” in nature.

Cultural violence, Johan Galtung (1990) argues, refers to “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (p. 291). Galtung identifies the casual flow of violence from cultural to structural and then to direct or physical violence since the culture, he opines, “preaches, teaches, admonishes... and dulls us into seeing repression as normal and natural” (p. 295). Therefore, cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right or at least not wrong.

Galtung (1990), elaborating on the notion of “cultural violence”, focuses on the ideological and linguistic aspects within a culture that contribute to the creation of a violent structure. In this context, the recurring use of derogatory terms like *bagania* to address the Adivasis, or the instances of differential treatment received by them from non-Adivasis belonging to the mainstream majority, as evident in the novel, specifically highlight how the insider/outsider

divide is intensified, rendering an alienated position to the “other” that further contributes to their estrangement and dehumanization. The systemic “otherization” of the Adivasis by consistently keeping them outside the pale of mainstream socio-cultural domains, and looking down upon them as primitive outsiders, significantly contributes to their dehumanization. This, as Galtung suggests, normalizes and to an extent downplays the violence inflicted on them, since they have been persistently projected as an existential threat to the sovereignty and political interests of the dominant groups – an internal enemy – whose elimination and alienation, thereby seem justified and necessary. Moreover, it is significant to note how the author points out the intensity of this fear of alienation and estrangement, as mentioned earlier as well, that makes the Adivasis even change their surnames and cultural practices to erase the signs of their Adivasi identity. When asked about their strategy for living among non-Adivasis, Jayasree, Liya’s roommate and senior in college, thus says, “our family has changed our surname to a *diku* one...And moreover, I don’t know Adivasi language. My parents didn’t teach me. We speak Bengali and Assamese at home – She was so cool about it” (Marandi, 2014, p. 89). In this frame of reference, the author’s portrayal of the Adivasi characters discarding their own identity and heritage, along with their desire to present themselves as non-Adivasis, accentuates the presence of a social structure that produces a continuum of violence for the Adivasis, since it has failed to create a safe and accommodating environment for their survival. For them, mimicking different identities and cultural practices, one may argue, becomes a survival strategy as it protects them from being susceptible to objective as well as subjective modes of violence to a significant extent.

Conclusion

Schaffer and Smith (2004), expatiating on the importance of life narratives in the field of human rights, maintain that the acts of remembering help individuals and communities. These “narrative acts of critical self-locating” (p. 4), for Schaffer and Smith, serve as a means to produce counter-histories, affirming their cultural difference, and envision an empowered collective subjectivity. Drawing on real-life events that have shaped collective Adivasi experience in Assam and Northeast India, Rejina Marandi’s *Becoming Me* can be read as a testimonial narrative that offers a panoptic view of Adivasi life, drawing attention to the precarious realities they endure. Although not explicitly mentioned, it is not difficult to infer that the protagonist, Liya Kisku’s character mirrors the author’s personal experiences, defined by her Adivasi identity and the community’s marginalized status. It, therefore, becomes a ‘narrative of personal remembering’, where the “personal witnessing” occupies the center stage. Being the inaugural fictional work in English by an Adivasi from the Northeast, Marandi’s novel skillfully stitches the elements of both personal and collective storytelling which, it may be contended, ventriloquizes the collective Adivasi voice of the Northeast. In this regard, the work can also be construed as an attempt to bring forth the Adivasi counter-narrative, offering alternative viewpoints regarding common Adivasi experiences that do not always find adequate representation in mainstream literary or cultural discourses.

Narratives of shared suffering, born out of the reality and observations of social phenomena, have the potential to transcend the boundaries of the “self”, thereby situating the narratives in

a broader spectrum where the narrating “I” – the individual voice – represents a collective self. In this respect, it is plausible to argue that Marandi’s novel performs a specific kind of storytelling that embodies a mode of collective testimony. For Peters (2012), storytelling can bind the community, and thus serve as a force for healing, moving us past atrocity. “Narrative truth” contributes to the process of reconciliation by giving voice to individual subjective experiences” (p. 19). Within this framework, the novel becomes instrumental in asserting the marginalized Adivasis’ participation in the literary discourse where they have been largely absent, enabling the author to engage in the reconstitution of their lost subjectivities.

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From Painting to Picturebook: Bhajju Shyam's Insider Indigenous Art

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Abstract

An outsider's perspective has historically dominated representation of Indian Indigenous communities. Adivasi individuals have borne the brunt of primitivism encouraged by anthropologists, artists, writers, and administrators. An insider's perspective is missing. Bhajju Shyam, a traditional Pardhan singer-storyteller, from the larger Gond tribe, negotiates with primitivism via "Gond painting" in the contemporary Anglophone picturebook. An insider, bearer of a ritual bardic cultural function, narrates the story of his work and his community using the medium at hand. This is a powerful reversal that potentially battles the harm visited upon Indigenous Indian communities for centuries. My research uses literary and visual analysis of the picturebooks, as well ethnographic interviews with the Adivasi artists, to explore artistic agency exercised in the illustration of picturebooks. In this essay, I focus my analysis on the 2014 *Creation*, a collection of origin stories found in the Pardhan Gond repertoire. I argue that a close reading of *Creation* reveals Bhajju Shyam's strategic intent in composing a self-aware insider's history of the artform, and by extension, reveals a history of a marginalized group that has been portrayed as a community of noble savages.

Keywords: Adivasi, art, contemporary, India, Indigenous, picturebook

Bhajju Shyam (1971–) is a Pardhan Gond artist from the village of Patangarh in Madhya Pradesh, central India. He is a Pardhan, a member of the bardic sub-clan of the Gonds, who sing stories of the Gond Adivasi¹ community. He rose to international recognition with his *The London Jungle Book*, published by the alternative publisher Tara Books in 2004. Bhajju Shyam's endeavor has been to use available media to self-consciously narrate his community's plight from an insider's perspective, and at the same time push mediated representation. *Creation*, one such example, is a 2014 picturebook illustrated by Bhajju Shyam and published by Tara Books. It is an amalgamation of a few origin stories found in the lore sung by the Pardhan Gond bards. Each doublespread provides text and image to one myth of creation. The chapters titles that constitute *Creation* are- The Unborn Fish, Air, The Potter of the Underworld i.e. the earthworm, Seven Types of Earth, Time, Seasons, The Sacred Seed, The Egg of Origins, The Birth of Art, Death and Rebirth. The blurb at the back of *Creation* proclaims that Bhajju Shyam “gathers together these tales for the first time” and that “by linking the cosmic with the everyday, he expresses the essence of each myth in ten sequential images” (Blurb). Each of these doublespreads brings to thick hand-crafted paper one myth of origin that the Gonds hold dear.

Creation is an example of a self-representation that pushes back against earlier notions of Adivasi depiction. It is an insider's view of the world, as opposed to the outsider's view of the community. This is crucial because Gond tribes have been represented in limiting ways hitherto, whether in ethnography or literature. A belittling characterization exists in disciplines that delineate and describe the Adivasi from an outsider's perspective. But an articulate voice by the Adivasi is missing. The picturebook is an amplification of such a voice. This paper asks how a picturebook illustrated by an Adivasi artist challenges older primitivist presumptions about Adivasi representation. I argue that an Adivasi artist like Bhajju Shyam contests outsiders' primitivist narratives of Indian tribes by crafting a strategic and self-conscious narrative. Shyam's art complicates hasty binary apprehensions of the community by providing an insider's point of view that is cognizant of identity pressures, thus insisting that Adivasi art (and the community, by extension) cannot be understood as lagging in primitive time. By adding his own pivot in the story of Pardhan Gond art, Bhajju Shyam reworks binary anthropological studies using nuance.

Adivasi Representation

Primitivism, whether racist or nationalist, has plagued Adivasi representation in India. Curator Vikas Harish clarifies the problem of rendering Adivasi bodies as both exotic and erotic (2018, p. 16). Harish argues that tribal bodies are seen as subjects or “created” versus

¹ This paper uses the terms “tribal”, “Adivasi”, and “Indigenous” interchangeably. All three terms are embedded in specific contexts. The term “tribal” as anthropologist Pinky Hota (Money, value) attests is informed by colonial primitivism and savagery. Nevertheless, it is the official term used by the Indian government. The term “Adivasi” was first used in the early 20th century as a marker of pride and self-rule and is now used commonly in India. The term “Indigenous”, as sociologist Virginius Xaxa (Tribes as Indigenous people) avers, avoids some of the concerns inherent in “tribal” and “Adivasi” and connects Adivasi struggles of sovereignty to contemporary struggles around global indigeneity. It is in keeping with these mixed trajectories that I use all three terms interchangeably.

“creators”. In fact, primitivism is evident in 20th century paintings featuring Bengali Santhals, another Adivasi community, as well. The Adivasi is indispensable to the imagined *swadeshi*² nation in the 20th century. Many Bengal School artists painted the Santhals around the Shantiniketan area in Bengal, including Nandalal Bose (1882–1966) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980). It is their subjects – sometimes the tribal Santhals – their muted colors, and techniques like Haren Das’s woodcuts, that the tribal Adivasi body appeared before the gaze. As the Santhal becomes a subject in painting, they are subjected to a rural lassitude that becomes a bulwark against which to imagine the newly emerging nation. They are tied incontrovertibly to the landscape. Partha Mitter in *The Triumph of Modernism* clarifies that the Indian “modernists idolized rural India as the true site of the nation, evolving artistic primitivism as an antithesis to colonial urban values” (p. 10). Mitter reads these artists in a two-fold manner; as tending toward “swadeshi” nationalism with reference to the Swadeshi movement and as a movement toward a nuanced primitivism. According to Mitter, this may be a nationalist modernist primitivism that plays with form, medium, composition as it represents the Santhal, but it is also a disruption of colonial culture (*The Triumph*, p. 12). Mitter argues that for painters like Sunayani Devi and Jamini Roy, the folk Kalighat *pat* (scrolls) acted as sources. This does not automatically make their works an insensitive appropriation of folk culture. But the triumph of a particular Indian modernism lies in the treatment of the folk in the hands of these painters. A discrepancy emerges in Mitter’s perception of “the invention of the Indian peasant”; on the one hand the Adivasi is painted to subvert unidirectional modernist flows, but on the other the Adivasi is “captured” to make way for an elite community to define nation building. As if to cement the notion that nation building is premised on the visually solidified objectification of the Adivasi.

The elite artist naturalizes a primitivist lens to view the Adivasi. For example, Mukul Dey’s 1916 *Santhal Maiden*, two versions of which are displayed at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi, stages a dark female body against an economical background composed of plain terrain peppered by three shrub bushes and one flowering plant (Fig. 1). The body lacks facial features but is costumed in a white bordered garment, complete with “traditional” anklets and wristbands. What leaps to the eye is the posture given to the body – a pose, perhaps from a tribal dance – as if the body has moved itself willingly to be painted. Note the crooked arm, the hands on the hips, and the feet arrested in a delicate movement; all gesture toward a stylized, perhaps intentional, representation of a tribal Adivasi body somehow captured by the painter. The tribal woman’s partly pirouetting stride resonates with the flower, which undulates in the breeze. Key elements that are repeated in narratives about the Santhal are brought to visual attention in this work. Moreover, by making the connection between human faceless body and plants, shrubs, terrain both obvious and momentary, the artist naturalizes the Santhal as unequivocally part of the landscape.

² *Swadeshi* refers to the self-reliant/self-rule/self-countried and was inspired from the early 20th century demand to boycott foreign produced goods Mitter translates “swadeshi” as indigenesness in a similar vein as Nandini Chandra calls ACK India’s first indigenous comics series- their use of the term indigenous does not denote 21st century indigeneity (*Art and Nationalism* 235). Mitter writes of “indigenous manufacturers” to mean art and goods created by Indians (*Art and Nationalism* 235).

Figure 1

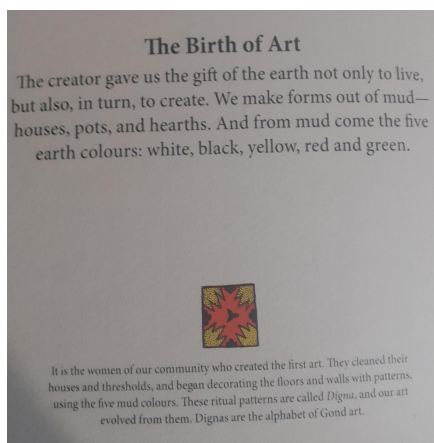
Santhal Maiden (Mukul Dey, Etching and Aquatint on Paper, National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi. Personal Photograph)

**Figure 2**

“The Birth of Art” Creation (Illustrated by Bhajju Shyam)

**Figure 3**

“The Birth of Art” Creation, (Illustrated by Bhajju Shyam)



The Insider Picturebook

However, if the outsider has materialized dominance in representation, it is imperative to ask how the 21st century Adivasi artist views such an essentialized representation. It is imperative to shift perspective from Adivasi as created to Adivasi as creator. How does the Adivasi artist *do* art and diverge from primitivism? Further, with the popularization of folk forms like Pat and Mithila, and Adivasi artforms like Gond and Warli, how does the artist respond to the demand to create more essentialized Adivasi art? In other words, what does the artist do with the ready recognition of any work as “tribal”? In this section, I offer a method that juxtaposes individual artistic practice with the artist’s sense of Adivasi community. My aim is to read the artist’s practice as an agential intervention in the matrix of iniquitous meaning making.

Artists are acutely cognizant of how their work will be interpreted. My conversations with contemporary Pardhan Gond artists have convinced me of a highly self-aware individualist artistic strategy that charts art demand and responds to it. Bhajju Shyam, for example, easily notes that many Pardhan Gond artists (including himself) give in to market pressures and end up creating more art that features “ped, paudhe, pakshi” (B Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). “Ped” as in trees, “paudhe” as in plants/shrubs, and “pakshi” as in birds in Hindi. Jangarh Singh Shyam inaugurated this impulse to create trees, plants, and shrubs in the 1980s. A cursory viewing of the oeuvres of Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bhajju Shyam would relegate it to a capitalist compromise with the market. As in because buyers demand trees, plants, birds as neat heralds of tribal art, Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bhajju Shyam bow to demand. They create what is requested of them. Bhajju Shyam said to me “karna padta hai”, translated loosely as “one *must* do it” (B Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022, Italics mine), referring how he must illustrate the now canonical elements of Pardhan Gond art. Adivasi art, as well as the Adivasi creator, is bound by market forces to essentialize themselves. Such a self-aware strategy has indeed been evinced in more than one Pardhan gond artist. Curator John Bowles describes Suresh Singh Dhurvey, a senior Pardhan Gond artist, as having developed two visual styles. The first is “tribal”, meant for clients, and the second is “accultured” for “personal satisfaction” (*Painted Songs and Stories*, p. 41). The artist devises the picturebook in the knowledge that s/he must produce a particular version of their art. In other words, the artist discerns what is required and arranges their art.

Keeping the above tactic in mind, I propose that Bhajju Shyam illustrates a discerning picturebook via his art. Keenly conscious of the meaning and trajectory of his work, he coerces the medium to tell his story on his own terms. “The Birth of Art”, part of *Creation*, is a doublespread about the birth of Pardhan Gond art (Figs. 2 & 3). As I show presently, Shyam abbreviates a composite chronicle of the formal and significant shifts of Pardhan Gond art. Two moments in the tale of Pardhan Gond art leap to the eye; two moments in the story of Pardhan art, one moment leading to the other. Bhajju Shyam imagines the art of the community as held up by a deer. The deer has udders and is flanked by a fawn. It would seem it is a doe. But this doe has horns! How can a doe have horns? In the doe’s androgynous horns lie the world of storytelling and art-making that the Pardhan Gonds cherish. Decorated walls, music and song, musical instruments (including the prestigious divinely ordained instrument

“bana” and drums), jewellery, farming, baskets, pots and plants dominate the scenario that the doe re-creates in her mind. The doe is illustrated as bearing in her imagination all art in the community. But why a doe, and not a barasingha as in Jangarh Singh Shyam’s 1980s *Barasingha*? Gita Wolf’s transcription of Bhajju Shyam’s words read, “It is the women of our community who created the first art. They cleaned their houses and thresholds, and began decorating the floors and walls with patterns, using the five mud colors. These ritual patterns are called *Digna*, and our art evolved from them. Dignas are the alphabet of Gond art” (“The Birth of Art”, n.p.). In Bhajju Shyam’s words, the origin of Pardhan Gond art lie in the articulation of material practiced by Gond and Pardhan women. I will address the gendered origin of the art in another chapter. But this explains the doe in the image. The doe represents the women whose hands have created the basis of Pardhan Gond art: which then inspired Jangarh Singh Shyam.

A total world of creation is illustrated in the space made possible by the doe. Indeed, the title of the picturebook *Creation* resonates powerfully with this chapter. There is a similarity in imagining the creation of life and the creation of artform. But the illustration also engages in a formal nod to the process of shifts in the artform. In *The Birth of Art*, we see lines dominating Bhajju Shyam’s illustration. The doe, the house, the musical percussion instruments, and even the tortoise have been carefully lined. In Pardhan Gond art, lines are a marker of unique individuality. Jangarh Singh Shyam is famously remembered as having instructed his family into crafting their own line patterns to differentiate their work from his. In so far as Bhajju Shyam uses lines to sign his art, he accedes to the canon as initiated and practiced by his uncle Jangarh Singh Shyam. In fact, in my interview with him, Shyam clarified that the lines on the doe are meant to imitate Singh Shyam’s line work (B. Shyam, Personal Interview, 2022). This means the doe is lined in Singh Shyam’s distinctive individual pattern by Bhajju Shyam. All current Pardhan Gond artists have distinctive linework practices of their own. The nephew mimics his uncle’s creation. His mimicry is an acknowledgement of the history of the artform; after all, Jangarh Singh Shyam, one must note, initiated the art form in the 1980s. Jangarh Singh Shyam is remembered for visualizing Adivasi gods using distinctive lines. The doe in *The Birth of Art* also contains the entirety of creation in her horns. As the doe is stylized in Singh Shyam’s manner- it is inevitable that the doe is compared to Singh Shyam. The doe *imagines* all Pardhan Gond art and Singh Shyam *realized* all contemporary Pardhan Gond art. In other words, the female art of *Digna* (as the doe) and Singh Shyam are both textually and formally credited in this illustration. This is an acknowledgement of the of the transformations in Pardhan Gond art itself- from women’s art to Jangarh Singh Shyam’s art. Bhajju Shyam accomplishes an insider’s history of the bard’s community.

But his art is strategic. It accedes to identifiable elements of Pardhan Gond art. It even accedes to anthropology to make a point. Trees and plants are visualized to be surface upon which an apparently alternative history is stylized. *The Birth of Art* describes the artform utilizing recognizable tribal tropes of “ped, paidhe, pakshi”. One could even argue that this illustration does little to depart from Mukul Dey’s 1916 *Santhal Maiden*. One is prompted if nothing indeed has changed in the last hundred years. After all, like Mukul Dey, Bhajju Shyam imagines creation taking place in a lush romantic landscape, teeming with the forest. Has

primitivism not triumphed again? Primitivism demands a lag in time, a persistent sense that an Adivasi community remain authentic and nobly sylvan, that must never change their traditions to make way for “modernity” – that the performance must ever be skewed and scripted. Further, the totality of creation seen in *The Birth of Art* has only been possible in Shamrao Hivale’s ethnography of the Pardhans, *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*. Hivale’s text, however romantic, creates a complete sociological picture of the Pardhan bards. Bhajju Shyam’s illustration is comparable to Hivale’s anthropological commentary. Like Hivale, Shyam pictures Pardhan Gond creation in a single text. In so far as Shyam follows Hivale in the romantic vision of forest and poetry, Shyam’s text cedes to anthropology’s primitivist terms.

Yet, something has shifted in Bhajju Shyam’s deft hands. His work submits to a readily recognizable mainstream appearance of Pardhan Adivasi art but appends material. However, Shyam deftly jumps over the anthropologist Hivale. *Creation* is intended to be a collection of origin myths of the Gonds and Pardhans. Instead, Bhajju Shyam creates a new origin story in *The Birth of Art*. He affixes an origin story of the art itself (as opposed to an origin story of how the community came to be) into his narrative. Pardhan Gond storytelling usually narrates stories of mythical origins or local and religious heroes. But Bhajju Shyam’s tale of the birth of art marks a departure from extant practice. This could easily have been titled *The Birth of Pardhan Gond Art*. Bhajju Shyam goes further in his attempt to refashion form by referring to another fount of Pardhan Gond art, i.e., song. His illustration is certainly aware about the genre of what has come to be known as “Gond painting”. But it also formalizes another practice, that is, the musical performances that the Pardhans participated in for their Gond patrons, as part of their ritual tours. These performances included songs sung and the sacred instrument bana played by the Pardhans invoking the deity Bara Deo for their hosts. The bana he illustrates in “The Birth of Art” pithily symbolizes the tour. The bana is a sacred instrument, made from the Indian laurel tree, and should only be played by the Pardhan singer-storytellers as they invoke the deity.

Indeed, Shamrao Hivale’s illustrations gesture to a connection between Pardhan visual art and Pardhan performances. His illustrations in *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley* are a combination of art and ethnography³. What is most interesting however, is not that these artworks have made it to the book via Hivale’s pen, but that many of them fulfill a narrative function- the images in Hivale’s text are part of an oral story that is being sung or rehearsed or memorialized by the Pardhan. “Pardhan wall-pattern, done in mud, of Bodrahin, a fantastic character in the Gondwani songs” (Hivale, *The Pardhans*, p. 56) for example, illustrates an episode from the song of Bodrahin. Hivale calls the bodrahin⁴ a “fantastic creature” from

³ The text is replete with strategic photographs of Pardhans engaged in “typical” Pardhan activities like bana playing, water fetching, marital ritual participation etc. The illustrations are presumably by Hivale and depict more varied material. One can only assume that these illustrations were copied on paper, reproduced, and then printed with the book. The subjects of these illustrations are mostly “wall decorations” that sometimes feature human or humanoid bodies, and presumably photography was not permitted either by the resident of the house or environmental conditions.

⁴ Elwin’s *Folktales of Mahakoshal* describes the Bodrahin as having a “navel-stump twenty-four cubits long with a metal cap at the end. She used to wrap it seven times round her waist and on the tip she would tie a phundra,

“Gondwani songs” (a genre of songs part of the bard’s repertoire). The Bodrahin is both illustrated and sung about in the Pardhan Gond repertoire. Art historian Aurogeeta Das makes the connection between Pardhan wall art and contemporary Pardhan art, and has been able to discern a continuity⁵ between wall art and song art. *The Birth of Art* presents this picture of Pardhan Gond art origins in its entirety – domestic wall art, oral storytelling and musical instrument – all in one world borne by the doe. His art harks back to the songs, images, and performances that influenced his uncle.

Unsurprisingly, Bhajju Shyam adds an individual twist to this performance tradition: his own narrative function based on his position as the Pardhan storyteller-turned-illustrator. His intervention lies in the innovative presentation of the story that accompanies the world-bearing doe; it is *he*, as bearer of tradition, who crafts a narrative song to accompany the image. Pardhan Gond ritual performances involved songs and tales, as the bard played the bana. *The Birth of Art* and all other doublespreads in *Creation* involve visual art that has been inspired by a total performance and wall art from the community, accompanied by words or textual commentary. There is a pointed admixture of text and image, like there was an intentional swaddling of song and wall art in Patangarh’s mud houses. Like the wall art was juxtaposed with oral narrative, the illustrations are juxtaposed with oral narrative transmuted to textual narrative. This follows the song-and-image combination that Shamrao Hivale and Aurogeeta Das observe. Bhajju Shyam takes on the role of a Pardhan singer-storyteller-illustrator-narrator who performs for the audience-viewer. However, the content shifts. His art is creating awareness about his artform. This is not a story of Gond kings or “fantastic creatures” like the Bodrahin; or the misadventures of gods and demigods, sung in the fashion of Pardhan singer storytellers. Instead, it is a story about how stories are created. And this story about a story credits the story of the progenitor of Pardhan Gond art, i.e. Jangarh Singh Shyam. Read via Hivale, *The Birth of Art* recreates a Pardhan performance assemblage. But Shyam’s work lies in narrating the story of art versus the story of gods and heroic deeds. He expands his repertoire. In fact, he uses traditional repertoire to comment on the story of the traversing of tradition. Bhajju Shyam then repeats his tradition and simultaneously innovates. This is a stunning event of self-aware autoethnography. Shyam innovates individually and at the same formally brings in a collective tradition. While it features the recognizable tropes of “ped, paudhe, pakshi” or trees, plants, birds and deer; his work, via the picturebook, re-frames the story of his art, thus literally crafting a self-reflexive history.

Conclusion

Method and argument should be indistinguishable now. If Bhajju Shyam had not demonstrated to me his humbling tactic of apprehending his art for himself and his buyers at the same time, I would not have argued for an agential art practice that formally innovates to create a new story out of lived reality. This is why this essay began by briefly discussing early 20th century

and decorate it with vermillion” as part of the story “The History of Lohabandha Raja” (pp. 91–92).

⁵ “If one studies traditional *digna* (Gond floor-painting) forms alongside Jangarh’s paintings of Gond deities, the formal parallels cannot be denied. The unusual geometry of the deities’ heads is undoubtedly derived from *Digna* forms” (Das, *Enchanted*, pp. 72–73).

Bengal painting to establish how a primitivist lens operates in outsider storytelling. The essay then discussed how Bhajju Shyam's endeavour in *Creation* is an acknowledgement of the many sources of Pardhan Gond art: women's *digna*, Jangarh Singh Shyam's valiant efforts, and the Pardhan performance. I have argued for the value of insider storytelling, a calculated performance that shifts both the form and meaning of the art to rupture binaries and nuance the assumed authenticity of primitivism. In *The Birth of Art*, Shyam reworks extant material to fashion an origin story of the artform itself, in the process, singing a revitalized story into being. As he does so, his sharp self-awareness uncovers his performance to be strategic- he knows precisely how his art may be misunderstood but negotiates with this misunderstanding. If viewers seek "ped, paudhe, pakshi" then he will certainly provide those stereotypical elements; but as I have explained, he will also play with the form to narrate another story. The story of the artform is not part of his traditional repertoire- but he illustrates it nevertheless. He is now both performer and illustrator. An insider's creation of *Creation* then dramatizes a challenge to the presumption that a tribal artform must be frozen in space and time. As tradition demanded a confluence of song and wall art, Bhajju Shyam innovated by juxtaposing text and image.

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**Liberation via Reliving the Suffering: A Study of August Wilson's
Monologues**

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Abstract

The articulation of counter-discourse has long served as a central mechanism for expressing resistance, resilience, and the reclamation of histories centered on marginalized communities. Human history attests to the fact that speech has consistently functioned as a foundational step toward liberation. Yet, the concept of speech extends far beyond the public oratory of a select few prominent social or political figures. Instead, the everyday dialogues of ordinary individuals often carry a more substantial share of the transformative and emancipatory ideas emerging from marginalized communities. Within these dialogues, monologues emerge as a powerful medium for articulating the firsthand experiences of the oppressed. This paper undertakes a deconstructive analysis of the monologues in select plays by August Wilson, interpreting them through the lens of Freud's theory of repression. It explores how African American characters, through the act of monologue, relive their collective and individual suffering, thereby equipping themselves with greater readiness and resilience to envision and strive for a liberated future. The study positions these monologues as literary instruments of healing, examining them through the framework of speech act theory. Ultimately, the monologues are analyzed as expressions of resilience and liberation, offering both textual catharsis and a reassertion of identity within a broader sociocultural context.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, healing, liberation, monologue, rebellion

A monologue is a long uninterrupted speech by a single speaker. Initially, monologues were introduced in literature as dramatic monologues in the form of poems or speeches in drama. “Dramatic monologue form is acknowledged to have an immediate appeal to readers” (Garrett, 2003, p. 2) because in monologues the interaction between the reader and the character is direct. Even the author/poet/narrator steps back during this interaction because they, as mediators, can disfigure the first-hand expression. Still “monologue has not received as much critical attention in dramatic studies as has dialogues” (McDonough, 1996, p. 555). “The relatively small body of critical writing on the dramatic monologue is focused on the works of male poets and is largely restricted to the consideration of the ironic dramatic monologues of Browning, Eliot, and Pound” (Garrett, 2003, p. 1).

Unanticipatedly, various advanced thematic insights can be discovered by focusing on the monologues rather than the dialogues of a text. However, the renewal of dramatic monologues in contemporary literary works and critical approaches has given new insights into the socio-political function of dramatic monologues. McDonough (1996) alludes to the fact that “the postmodern American theatre focuses on the way that contemporary playwrights have used monologues to explode the boundaries of traditional theatrical narrative and to explore the question of subjectivity” (p. 555). Hence, in contemporary literature monologues are being used as a device to put forth the subjective thoughts and experiences of the marginalised to challenge the dominant discourse. Challenging dominant discourse is critical in the dismantling of prejudices disseminated by it as truths against the marginalised. The deconstruction of the dominant discourse is needed also to make a space for the construction of the counter-discourse. Similarly, Lee (2017) points out that “when dominant discourses lose the status of ‘truth’, then the way to an alternative story becomes open to people” (p. 32). Hence, the marginalised-centred literature needs to deconstruct the dominant discourses to provide space for suppressed discourses.

Wilson’s *Century Cycle* depicts the everyday experiences of common African-Americans in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Wilson himself claims that all his plays are compositions of “the content of my (Wilson’s) mother’s life —her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes-parched lips, her thoughtful repose, and pregnant laughter” (Wilson, 1996, p. XIV). This statement alludes to the fact that his plays are based on memory being transmitted from generation to generation. As with many other Afrofuturistic works, Wilson uses the depiction of the memory of the past “to explain the present and to prophesize about the future” (Nelson, 2002, p. 7). This is what makes Wilson’s plays an exceptional Afrocentric representation of the erased history of the African-American community. The analyses of Wilson’s intense monologues help us to understand his plays as a memory-based “historical recovery project” (Yaszek, 2006, p. 47). Memory-based literature functions as a crucial means to establish alternative discourse. Eshun (2003) articulates that “To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history... it has been necessary to assemble counter memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (p. 288). Similarly, Wilson’s plays serve as the

cornerstone of modern liberation, illustrating the expression of the slave lineage through the collective memory of generations.

Wilson's monologues, being descriptive as well as performative, constitute the most impassioned aspects of his plays. He crafted monologues in his plays to supersede the constraints of ego and double consciousness by presenting an authentic and cohesive identity of African American individuals. Elam (2006) characterizes Wilson's monologues as "Operatic confessions, long monologues even for Wilson, operate on a mythic level, larger than life, filled with grand motives of rage, deception, and revenge" (p. 40). For Wilson, the monologues are not only a vehicle to convey the three principal reasons of fury, deception, and retribution but also means to illustrate the journey of healing by reappropriating previous pain through its retelling. In this regard, Wilson's plays reconstruct that past while assuming the burden of healing trauma to envision a more promising future for African Americans. More specifically his monologues present a distinctive method for combating trauma. That's how Wilson's monologues appear to serve as a platform for deconstructing white-centric history in order to recreate an Afro-centric narrative. In Wilson's (1997) eminent speech *The Ground on Which I Stand*, he asserts "I believe in the American Theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition. I believe in its power to heal" (p. 503). His plays primarily demonstrate the healing power prominently through the monologues. This paper examines Wilson's monologues as a crucial element of Afrofuturism, by providing an agency for healing and enabling the quest for a more emancipated and joyful future for African Americans.

The historical narrative of the African American community is characterised by resistance and survival, thus their pursuit of a liberated future will necessitate resilience and healing. The pursuit commences with realization. The realization of self-worth, the oppressive circumstances, and the need for equity. Rebellion follows realisation. Rebellion against the unjust social and political circumstances. Subsequently, the final stage towards emancipation is healing. The healing of the African American community commences with a rebelling not only against their present but also against the trauma inherited from the historical atrocities of slavery. Before this realization, it is essential to reclaim the past and one's identity. Based on the discussion we can state that a liberated future can only be attained following the resolution of previous traumas, and the healing process must commence internally. The monologues become the most appropriate medium for articulating and reclaiming the inner self. Throughout the plays, the reader perceives the characters from a novel perspective as their contradictory yet authentic selves are illustrated through the monologues. The monologues compel the characters to confront their authentic selves, which they have concealed throughout their lives to conform to the roles dictated by a white-centric society.

Literature Review

"Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (Dery, 1994, p. 180). This question alludes to the fact stated by Dery that one cannot imagine a future without knowing one's past. Based on this fact, Dery addresses the concern

of why African Americans who provide the largest audience for science fiction offer a very small number of science fiction writers. Dery's essay infers that the journey from present to future needs to be illuminated by the journey from past to present. Hence, reconstructing the past before reconstructing the future becomes of vital necessity for the community. That's why, unlike Futurism, Afrofuturism isn't always about imagining and fantasizing about the future but also about reimagining and reconstructing the African-American community's past.

Raynaldo Anderson defines Afrofuturism 2.0 as a genre in which "History is revisited, re-examined, and rewritten through a critical lens that imagines a different type of future for African Americans" (AL-Shawaf, 2023, p. 128). So, retrieving and reconstructing the past becomes an important aspect of Afrofuturism rather than simply imagining the liberated future. Afrofuturism has been an ambiguous term for scholars leading to various definitions. Ytasha Womack is one of the scholars who emphasized the healing purpose of Afrofuturistic works. She states "...nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing" are "partners to technology, science, and achievement" (Sonic Acts, 2017). Womack illuminates the origin of Afrofuturism in the music providing "sonic healing" (Sonic Acts, 2017). She describes "how writers use the aesthetic as a healing device" (Sonic Acts, 2017). This paper stands on Ytasha Womack's idea about Afrofuturism, that is, Afrofuturism is not only about reconstructing the future but also about healing the past. According to Tananarive Due, Afrofuturism may include many genres like "fancy, alternate history, sometimes technology" (UCLAAnderson, 2020). According to him "sometimes it's futuristic but it is always black-centred and revolutionary" (UCLAAnderson, 2020). This is how he states the sole and sound purpose of Afrofuturism that is African American healing via revolution and reclamation.

In the eminent poem, *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou, an American memoirist presents the life of two birds. One is free while the other is caged. The entire poem is about how a caged bird cannot fly but "sings of freedom" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). This shows the caged bird experiencing freedom by hoping for it and singing about it even after being caged. While the free bird flies without any restriction and "dares to claim the sky" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194) the caged bird "sees through his bars of rage, his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). This line shows how the situation in which the caged bird is where it isn't allowed to fly leads him to sing for freedom. The freedom of the caged bird is "unknown but longed for still, his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom" (Angelou, 1994, p. 194). Here Angelou depicts the bird experiencing the freedom completely unknown to it, something which it never had and experienced but now experiencing it by singing about it, while seeing someone else enjoying it. This thought establishes that the bird experiences the unknown but longs for freedom by singing about it because it cannot experience it in action. So, to establish that not only actions but also speech can be a medium of experience. Along with the speech and longing is its anger as mentioned by Angelou it "sees through his bars of rage" the free bird. The rage is one of the reasons behind his desire for freedom and the situation in which it's been put by the world. As contended by Adichie (2014) "Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change" (p. 21).

The prejudices imposed on African Americans resulted in their suppression in all spheres of life, including psychological, social, or political domains. An analysis conducted by Otu (2015) underscores the contemporary manifestations of slavery. “When slavery was abolished in principle in 1863, the spirit of slavery was kept alive through various means by which the rights, privileges and opportunities that are natural entitlements and inalienable rights of citizens were still withheld from Negroes” (Otu, 2015, p. 102). In his plays Wilson depicts his characters engaged in a struggle against these prejudices, striving to not only create their current identity but also their collective historical identity.

In an analysis of the concept of otherness in Wilson’s plays, Zhang highlights the detrimental impact of white characters on the lives of African Americans in a post-slavery United States. Zhang represents the cultural and psychological obstacles faced by African Americans in their quest for self-actualization and communal connection within a culture that marginalizes them. Zhang (2016) asserts that “Most of the narratives about whiteness in Wilson’s dramatic world enforce a dualistic perspective by dissociating the white from the black and underlines the negative impact of the white men in the black world” (p. 172). Zhang examines how Wilson portrays the erosion of black identities through the mere presence of white individuals, even in the absence of the theatrical performance. In order to substantiate this Zhang (2016) states that “He (Joe Turner) resents the evil that takes away all the potential identified with black men, whether that evil historically took the form of slavery, sharecropping, or convict labour as a result of being jailed without any semblance of due process... It is not necessary for Turner to appear as a character in the play for the destructive history of his collective representation to be felt” (p. 172).

Mitra (2021) examined key issues in Wilson’s plays, including the psychological impact of racism, the discourse imposed on African Americans and the process of reconstruction of their collective identity via generational memory. In her work, she highlights that Wilson’s plays provide an Alternate history from an Afro-centric perspective by asserting that “Wilson tried to reconstruct those parts of black history which are lost due to dislocation or displacement” (Mitra, 2021, p. 9). Furthermore, the plays portray how the dominant discourse characterizes African Americans as “murderers, rapists and criminals” (Mitra, 2021, p. 11). Therefore, it is imperative to construct a counter-discourse of the labelled.

Theoretical Framework

The margins of the society, the blacks, have their own discourse as the whites do (Sepehrmanesh, 2015, p. 211).

The present study analyses Wilson’s monologues not only as descriptive but also as performative utterances. The monologues are not only words but also actions taken against the oppressive and traumatic past to achieve liberation. The application of the speech-act theory is to read the monologues as a medium to establish a counter-discourse to challenge the mainstream discourse that prevailed against African Americans and their past. To substantiate this point, the paper discusses the “speech-act theory” given by J. L. Austin. Primarily the

speech-act theory focuses on refuting the preconception of language being only descriptive. Austin explores the idea that utterance is not only descriptive rather in some cases it is performative as well. He claims that “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin, 1962, p. 6). Austin explains some characteristics of performative utterance that differentiate it from descriptive utterance. Firstly, he proposes that a performative utterance is “neither true nor false” (Austin, 1962, p. 5). Secondly, it intends not only to report on something, but also to indulge in it. He exemplifies it via the following example, that is, “When I say, before the registrar or altar ‘I do’ I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (Austin, 1962, p. 13).

Other than this, Austin (1962) describes some necessary conditions of performative utterance where he emphasizes the need for “uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” (p. 14) for the invocation of the desired emotion. Austin (1962) necessitates “The execution of the procedure by all participants both correctly and completely” (p. 15). The procedure is the action which one wants to invoke during the utterance. To specify the importance of the participants Austin (1962) mentions that “the participants must intend so to conduct themselves” (p. 15). The participants are the characters who are actively involved in the conversation. Their conduct is their effort to understand and indulge in the action performed by the performative utterance.

The monologues in Wilson’s plays are working as the Counter-memory which Foucault describes to be a form of resistance that disrupts established power structure and offers alternative perspectives on history, culture, and society. According to Foucault (1977) “literature has been transformed, since the nineteenth century, into a counter-memory; and the subjects that naturally evolve from this language manifest the history of our otherness” (p. 8). In this light, Wilson’s plays are that part of literature that works toward the establishment of the history of otherness. The monologues work in this direction by “re-examining African American history” to “reimagine a reconstructed future through” (AL-Shawaf, 2023, p. 123). The monologues are the depiction of the past via imagination to reconstruct the history of the marginalized to enlighten their future.

Freud explains ego and id by differentiating them on the basis of their nature of being influenced by the external world or being free from any external influence. “The ego” according to him “is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (Freud, 1960, p. 18). As explained by Freud (1960) “The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions” (p. 19). The ego which is shaped in the light of external influence is also influenced by biases based on gender, race, and class. Hence, the ego and the social consciousness of the marginalised are seemingly influenced by the dominant discourse which produces inferiority complex. On the other hand, the id is the self which is protected from any external influence or bias and hence the confident truer self. So, while during dialogues the involvement with someone else causes one to be conscious about their social image. On the contrary, monologues set someone free of any social or political consciousness.

That's how monologues prompt a person to express the passions which are stored in the id. Consequently, dialogues express the ego while monologues express the id of a person. This is what makes it important to focus on the monologues to read the most real self of any character. Our ego can never motivate us to resist because it's been taught to conform to sustain the power structure. Freud's (1960) idea of "resistance remaining unconscious" (p. 21) alludes to the resistant nature of the id. The conscious or the ego that is influenced by the dominant discourse induces the marginalised to conform. On the other hand, our subconscious or the id induces them to resist and fight for equity. In the context of the marginalised, the dialogues are the expression of conformity and knowledge produced by the powerful. In contrast, monologues are the expression of the resistant nature of the marginalised which is individualistic. The next aspect to discuss about the psyche in the context of African American people is the double consciousness. The double-consciousness is "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 8). The double consciousness places them (African Americans) in a world in which "One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 8). The monologues are the representation of the "dogged strength" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 8) of the African Americans which motivates them to resist and survive.

The function of monologues isn't merely to express the resistance hidden in the id. Rather, the expression is the first step for the ultimate liberation achieved by the characters and desired by the readers. Along with expressing the dark past, the monologues heal them from within to liberate them not only from external oppression but also from the internal inferiority caused by the long-lasting oppression. Although the concept of "textual healing" (p. 521) was given by Griffin (1996) in the context of reimagining black female bodies. This paper in the same light analyses the monologues as the healing providers to the African American community from the traumas of the centuries-long slavery and its aftermaths. Griffin (1996) states that the fictional works by African American female writers such as bell hooks, Susan Taylor and Maya Angelou "document the pain, domination and exploitation of black women's bodies... to explore female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance" (p. 521). This is what she calls a "textual healing project" (Griffin, 1996, p. 521).

These texts, Griffin (1996) explains, perform textual healing "By historicizing the social constructions of these standards" (p. 521) the standards related to beauty and black female bodies. Also, these texts help the readers to understand how "historic discourses have constructed all of us" (Griffin, 1996, p. 521). According to Griffin (1996), textual healing is performed by "the author's storytelling, like the character's remembering, acts as a means of confronting the legacy of slavery and re-imagining a different future for their characters and for the readers as well" (p. 527). In other words, textual healing "...is a project of reclamation as resistance" (Barber et al., 2015, p. 8). In the same manner, the monologues in Wilson's plays call upon the oppressive past and perform healing for a future liberated from the traumas of the past.

Methods

Research Questions

1. What is the significance of reliving the suffering through monologues in the personal and communal liberation?
2. How does Wilson use monologues as a tool to explore themes of memory, trauma, and liberation in his characters and reimagine their individual and collective identity?
3. How do the monologues of Wilson's characters contribute to the construction of the marginalized-centric history by challenging the prevailing dominant discourse?

Methodology

In this research paper, a combination of theoretical frameworks and analytical methods has been employed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the monologues in the plays written by August Wilson. The study utilises theoretical analysis to illuminate the concealed themes within the narratives. Speech Act Theory is applied to the monologues to examine how characters' speeches break the limitation of speech and function as actions during their recollection of the past. Additionally, psychoanalytic analysis draws on *psychic repression*, a concept introduced by Freud (1913), defined as "The easy and regularly occurring deviation of the psychic process from the former painful memory" (p. 476) to enlighten how it weakens the African American discourse and how the characters combat the repression. Finally, the lens of Afrofuturism is applied to understand how Wilson reimagines African American identity, history and future possibilities via the intersection of race and speculative fiction in the select monologues to reconstruct the Afro-Centric history in his *Pittsburgh Century Cycle*. The study enlightens how *psychic repression* (an idea given by Freud), that is, "The easy and regularly occurring deviation of the psychic process from the former painful memory" (Freud, 1913, p. 476) works to weaken the African American discourse.

Results and Discussion

Afrofuturism and Historical Trauma

The traumatic history of African Americans has imposed upon them enduring nightmares and anguish. The sense of hopelessness yielded by the trauma is palpable in the song Zonia sings in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* "Tomorrow, tomorrow; Tomorrow never comes" (Wilson, 1988, p. 27). The memory of the traumatic past is an integral part to African American history and contemporary experiences, which is why "Collective memory and trauma is an issue that concerns Afrofuturists" (Womack, 2013, p. 114). A primary objective of Afrofuturistic works is to address and heal the psychological trauma caused by centuries of slavery and racism, enabling them to reconstruct their identity and future. Incorporating African culture and rituals into literary works is a significant step toward healing. Womack is an Afrofuturist who advocates the healing power of Afrofuturism. In her work, she also introduces D. Denenge

Akpem, an Afrofuturist “who teaches Afrofuturism as a pathway for liberation” (Womack, 2013, p. 114).

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis embodies the half-lives experienced by African Americans in the 1910s, constrained by pervasive prejudice. Loomis is seeking his wife, who departed from their house in pursuit of a brighter future, when he is captured by Joe Turner, a slave hunter. He arrived at the scene accompanied by his 11-year-old daughter Zonia. To all the characters he appears to be a dubious individual. However, his revelation of his true personality in subsequent monologue dispelled all such speculations.

“Joe Turner caught me when my little girl was just born... Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight... He’d go out hunting and bring back forty men at a time... My wife Martha gone from me after Joe Turner caught me... he let us go on his birthday. I made it back to Henry Thompson’s place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha’s gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North... I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That’s what I been looking for” (Wilson, 1988, p. 72).

The monologue clearly indicates that Loomis is unable to abandon his past. Despite experiencing regrets, rage, and wretchedness, he does not succumb to his past. He states in the later portion of the monologue that he is seeking his wife solely to abandon the past and progress toward a new future. To attain that liberated future, he was willing to undertake any action. His determination is shown in the last scene where “LOOMIS slashes himself across the chest. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization” (Wilson, 1988, p. 93). He departs, leaving Zonia with his wife and proceeds on his journey toward the future he envisioned. He is a victim of neo-slavery that emerged in the USA following the elimination of “slavery as punishment for a crime, as the Thirteenth Amendment says” (Lichtenstein, 2009, p. 118).

To Conform or to Disdain the Dominant Discourse

Toledo, an African American character in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and the sole literate individual, holds a low regard for African Americans. He asserts “You can’t satisfy a nigger no matter what you do. A nigger’s gonna make his dissatisfaction” (Wilson, 1985, p. 93). It illustrates how white-cantered knowledge frameworks perpetuate biases and inferiority complexes towards African Americans. Throughout the play, Toledo demonstrates his superiority to his fellow band members by engaging them in philosophical topics that they cannot comprehend. Through Toledo, Wilson illustrates the desire of certain prejudiced African Americans to disassociate themselves from their community. However, it manifests as a pretended personality when he aligns himself with his community in the subsequent statements:

“See, we’s the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what’s the colored man gonna do with himself? That’s what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now, who knows that? You find me a nigger that knows that and I’ll turn any which way you want me to... And that’s what the problem is. The problem ain’t with the white man... But we don’t know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man’s belly and now he’s full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself” (Wilson, 1985, p. 57–58).

Through this monologue, Toledo is reliving the history of his forebears. He addresses the leftover treatment the African Americans encounter in their lives. They are getting used to it, which is being normalized to the extent that they fail to recognise their true position in society. The fear expressed here is not that the African Americans are the leftovers but rather that they don’t know what they are. They are unable to comprehend their position inside the white-centered culture. They attempt to assimilate in the stew while they have been thrown out time and again since the era of slavery. Wilson, through this depiction, underscores the necessity of acknowledging the reality of the current power structure. Toledo’s aggressive tone reflects his wrath and frustration caused by the ignorance of his community members over their true identities. He seeks to make them understand the power of an accepted past regardless of whether your history has been a dream or a nightmare, it cannot be transcended without acknowledgement.

Levee is the youngest member of the band in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. He uses a practical form of materialism. All the band members become agitated by him when he addresses the white men as “sir”. He asserts “I can say “yessir” to whoever I please. What you got to do with it? I know how to handle white folks” (Wilson, 1985, p. 68). Throughout the play, he plays remixed music which he says is the need of the hour. He wrangles with Ma Rainey over the topic of remixing the Blues with the trending mainstream music. This character appears to be a contemporary, materialistic young man seeking to integrate into the dominant culture. However, his monologue elucidates his behaviour and unveils the concealed truth underlying his beliefs.

“You don’t know Levee. You don’t know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here! (He pounds his chest.) I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy’s house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted... I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker’s face... smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he’s planning how he’s gonna get him and what he’s gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them” (Wilson, 1985, p. 68–70).

While recalling his past Levee relives it and endeavours to illustrate the insights gained from his experiences that create his current identity. through this level of self-expression, he facilitates his own healing. Ultimately, he asserts “I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me” (Wilson, 1985, p. 70) which illustrates his bleak past, his struggles in the present, and his aspirations for an improved future. Levee is leading a dual

existence, presenting one persona to others while embodying another internally. His authentic personality is revealed in his monologues.

Liberation via Healing

These are a few examples of monologues written by August Wilson. Each life is unique, resulting in distinct healing and liberation experiences. Loomis' psychological healing signifies his liberation from the mental turmoil induced by his wife's deceit and the traumatic recollections of his history as a slave. He attempted to heal his psychological state by inflicting physical injuries onto himself, illustrating his need for healing and defiance. Toledo's liberation signifies the liberation from the socially constructed prejudices against African Americans and the disparities engendered by their educational status within the community. His healing strategy involves educating his fellow African Americans about the principles he understands. Levee requires liberation from the malevolent temper he developed due to his terrible experiences. He seeks healing by pretending to be assimilated with the dominant culture. Levee's defiance is illustrated in the subsequent apostrophe when he confronts God:

“LEVEE *becomes so caught up in his dialogue with God that he forgets about CUTLER and begins to stab upward in the air, trying to reach God.*) Come on! Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me! Come on! Where is you? Come on and turn your back on me!” (Wilson, 1985, p. 100).

Herald Loomis, Toledo, and Levee are carrying their melancholic past into their present and future. Similar to Langston Hughes' (2002) description of the “dream deferred” in his poem *Harlem*, “Maybe it just sags like a heavy load”. And in the final line of the poem, Hughes contemplates the potential explosion of the deferred dream. These monologues represent an eruption resulting from an overflow of anguish. The explosion of Loomis's and Levee's deferred aspirations is seen in Loomis' self-inflicted wounds resulting in bleeding and Levee's attack on Toledo with a knife, respectively.

Turning Back to Liberate

The theme of liberation is prominently present in all the monologues. Along with that, the notion of time travel is appearing frequently in the monologues, as Toledo reflects back to the time of slavery while talking about the status of being leftovers; Loomis reminisces about the moment he was apprehended by Joe Turner; and Levee recalls the traumatic experience of witnessing his mother's gang rape at the age of eight. The narrative reverts to an era of anguish to present and establish the counter-discourse of the sufferers of the past which was suppressed by the dominant discourse of the powerful. The counter-discourse is articulated by reinterpreting the monologues, highlighting the community's resilient spirit. Their struggle against the dominant discourse in their voices as action demonstrates their determination toward their future. They speak of liberation, as they are currently lacking the agency to act, like the caged bird referenced by Maya Angelou. Though Wilson doesn't provide a definite vision of the community's future in his plays, he resurrects the past and reconnects it to the

present to envision a more promising future, the feasibility of which is in question because of its unknown past.

Generational Memory as Counter Discourse

In addition to contesting linear conceptions of time, Wilson's Afrofuturistic plays present counter-memory, defined as "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (Foucault, 1977, p. 160). Wilson employed the monologues as a robust vehicle to construct the counter-history of his community, rooted in memory, in opposition to the white-washed Eurocentric history. As Foucault (1977) asserts about language "the experience of language penetrates into the domain of discursive thought. (p. 8). Similarly, Wilson employed memory in the monologues to contest the dominant discourse. Memory is crucial in Wilson's plays, as Shannon indicates in an interview with Wilson about his plays, that his plays are a "combination of memory, history, myth-making, and the blue" (Shannon, 1993, p. 539). Wilson himself, in the note from the playwright to *Seven Guitars* recognises the significance of memory in his works by asserting "I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life – her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes-parched lips, her thoughtful repose, and pregnant laughter are all worthy of art" (Wilson, 1996, p. XIV). By proposing the counter-memory, Wilson critiques the dominant discourse and the current power structures, providing marginalized individuals with hope to thrive against the oppressive system in the future through resistance.

The characters (Toledo, Loomis, Levee) in the monologues are contending with otherness. The otherness that "Foucault postulates... we bear within ourselves" (Habib, 2008, p. 571). The otherness within us is the ingrained otherness shaped by the dominant discourse and the power dynamics. This renders Wilson's monologues more than mere utterances. In Austin's words, the monologues are performative utterances as they are "neither true nor false... have a certain conventional effect, uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, executed by all participants (Austin, 1962, p. 14) and represents "doing something... rather than reporting" (Austin, 1962, p. 13) in the utterances. In this way, the monologues propose the resurrection of African history and cultural heritage to facilitate a more promising future.

Conclusion

Wilson has employed the literary technique of monologues to reveal the concealed realities behind the socially and historically constructed and idealized characters. The monologues written by Wilson resemble poetry, one that is characterised by a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth, 1997, p. XIV). During such emotional states, the characters disregard social constraints, temporarily forsake the socially prescribed roles, and float in the flow of their emotions. That's how Wilson rejects the notion of double consciousness proposed by W. E. B. Du Bois. The trajectory towards the future of African Americans proceeds by traversing their historical background. They cannot achieve the future until they are not at peace with their past. The monologues "reconstitute the past in the present" (Elam, 2006, p. 40) and

living the same suffering via recalling, again and again, diminishes the trauma attached with it with time. Only when the past ceases to traumatize you, you can engage in contemplation, envision, and strive towards a more promising future. The following dialogue by Loomis elucidate the high-spirited determination of African Americans to anticipate the future, despite enduring a sombre past: “Whichever way the road takes us that’s the way we go” (Wilson, 1988, p. 15). So, the research paper indicates that although recalling the sad past to achieve liberation is not a conventional method; yet, for individuals lacking agency, speech becomes the sole means to navigate a particular course of action. This was referenced by Maya Angelou in her poem Caged Bird.

Implication of the Study

The study demonstrates that the African American characters are combating trauma by re-establishing connections to their traumatic history and undergoing healing in the process of retelling. Although conducted within the limited framework of African American characters and their struggles against social, political and psychological oppression, the study extends beyond this specific issue. Although the subject of the study may vary in terms of race, class, gender, and religion, the ability to communicate a counter-discourse, and the capacity to heal by accepting one’s past in order to improve their future will remain constant. From a wider standpoint, this study refutes Dery’s (1994) doubt in his question “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out... imagine possible futures?” (p. 180) and proposes that the future will be accessible to everyone, irrespective of their repressed history or promising current circumstances. Therefore, one should start striving towards it either through observable behaviour or communication. The sole imperative is to resist any form of oppression and actively seek means to combat it.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

The focus of this study is restricted to specific monologues in order to analyse the occurrence of the counter-discourse in Afrofuturistic literature. The identical expression can be examined within a broader literary context, where the historical narratives of any marginalised population are reconstructed. Furthermore, this study suggests that a following investigation can be conducted to determine if the social, historical, and psychological self-healing of African Americans can eliminate the psychological trauma and prejudices that prevailed against a particular race as a result of the most heinous period of slavery.

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**Apocalypse, Gothic and Rupturing of Societal Hierarchy: An
Interpretation of Marxian Tendencies in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies***

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Abstract

The assertion by Karl Marx that “there must be something rotten in the very core of a social system which increases its wealth without diminishing its misery” serves as a profound critique of socio-economic structures, resonating in contemporary socio-political contexts. This statement captures the enduring tensions inherent in capitalist systems, where the accumulation of wealth often coexists with the perpetuation of human suffering. The modern adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, particularly the 2009 film *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, illustrates this dynamic by integrating a gothic and apocalyptic dimension into the narrative. The depiction of a zombie apocalypse in this context can be interpreted as an embodiment of Marx’s critique, where the capitalist system thrives at the expense of the working class, metaphorically represented by the blood-sucking zombies. These creatures, driven by an insatiable hunger for human flesh, mirror the capitalist exploitation of labor, where workers are drained of their vitality in a system that survives and flourishes on their suffering.

Keywords: Gothic dialectics, Gothic Marxism, negation, manipulated consumerism, rupturing society, voodoo economics

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.

(Grahame-Smith, 1)

A crucial aspect of the capitalist framework is the pervasive culture of consumerism. The more individuals immerse themselves in the cycle of commodity consumption, the more they become entrapped in a system controlled by multinational corporations. This consumption-driven mentality, as Marx suggests, distorts individual consciousness, fostering a compulsive desire for material goods while obscuring the exploitative labor conditions behind their production. In this sense, the consumer's ignorance regarding the origins of commodities – often born from the oppression of marginalized workers – is a direct consequence of capitalist ideologies that obscure the social relations of production. The consumer's unrelenting pursuit of goods, therefore, resembles the insatiable hunger of the zombies, whose thirst for human flesh can never be quenched. Both the capitalist consumer and the zombie exhibit a compulsive, destructive drive that perpetuates their existence.

Marx's analysis of capitalist society as a system of exploitation is further elucidated by his theory of "blood money," which underscores the extraction of value from labor without corresponding compensation. This is mirrored in the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, where the imperialistic expansion of Britain – which brings with it not only material wealth but also a "virulent and abominable plague" – serves as a metaphor for the economic and moral rot at the heart of imperialism. The plague, much like the capitalist system, spreads insidiously, transforming human beings into mindless consumers, driven by a relentless desire for consumption. In both instances, the desire to accumulate wealth and resources leads to a dehumanizing cycle that ultimately undermines the integrity of society.

Furthermore, Marx emphasized the necessity of collective action by the working class to dismantle the structures of capitalist oppression. In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, this theme of resistance is embodied by the Bennet sisters and their allies, who take up arms to confront both the literal and metaphorical plague that threatens to destroy their world. Their revolt against the zombie menace serves as a symbol of the potential for collective action to challenge and overthrow oppressive systems. Just as Marx advocated for the formation of labor unions to break the chains of capitalist exploitation, the Bennet sisters' struggle represents a form of resistance against the forces that seek to exploit and dehumanize the working class.

The appropriation of *Pride and Prejudice* in the form of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* serves as a powerful allegory for the enduring critique of capitalist exploitation and consumerism. Through its portrayal of an apocalyptic world dominated by zombies, the narrative underscores the dehumanizing effects of an economic system that thrives on inequality, consumerism, and the manipulation of desire. Just as Marx argued, it is only through collective resistance and the dismantling of these exploitative systems that society can hope to achieve true liberation.

In the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Seth Grahame-Smith establishes the thematic foundation of his work, immediately addressing critical issues related to the dehumanizing effects of societal structures. By adopting a parodic tone that engages with Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Grahame-Smith raises pertinent questions about the consequences of capitalist fervor on the labor force. Through this reimagined narrative, he exposes the moral and psychological degradation that modern individuals endure under the relentless pressure of economic systems. This state of dehumanization, depicted in the form of zombie-like beings in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, serves as an allegory for the alienation experienced by workers in capitalist economies.

One of the central metaphors in Grahame-Smith's work is the comparison of "possession of brains" to the accumulation of capital wealth, while the "want of more brains" mirrors the insatiable desire for profits that characterizes capitalist greed. The zombie insurgency in the narrative can be traced back to the economic conditions of the Victorian era, particularly the growth of trade manufacturing and the expansion of colonial enterprises. During this period, economic policies aimed at increasing domestic production and trade often came at the expense of the working class, whose labor was exploited to fuel the wealth of the capitalist elite. This unrelenting drive for economic dominance, motivated by the pursuit of profit, inevitably led to the suffering of laborers, who found themselves trapped in cycles of exploitation.

The consequences of this economic greed are starkly reflected in the social and moral disintegration of society. The exploitation of workers, particularly in the industrial sectors, is evident in the harsh conditions described by writers like Charles Dickens. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, the iconic line "Please, Sir, I want some more" symbolizes the extreme poverty and hunger experienced by the working class, and serves as a critique of the widespread food inflation and dire living conditions of the time. This literary image underscores the disconnect between the voracious appetite of the capitalist system and the abject suffering of the laboring poor.

In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Grahame-Smith uses the figure of the "undead" to dramatize this social reality. The laborers, metaphorically zombified by their harsh working conditions, are rendered little more than lifeless entities, perpetually consumed by an insatiable hunger. This is mirrored in the image of the zombies in the narrative, whose constant, brain-devouring desire reflects the endless greed of the capitalist elite. In this way, Grahame-Smith uses the zombie apocalypse as an extended metaphor for the consequences of unchecked capitalism: a society where the oppressed are drained of their vitality, and the powerful remain insatiable in their pursuit of profit. Through this allegorical structure, the novel critiques both the economic system and its dehumanizing effects on individuals, framing the rise of the undead as a symptom of societal collapse driven by inequality and exploitation.

Gothic Dialectics and Geo-Politics

The relentless pursuit of global trade during the Victorian era significantly influenced cultural exploration and played a central role in shaping Britain's colonial ambitions. This capitalistic

drive, motivated by the desire for wealth and imperial dominance, led to a catastrophic consequence: the return of not only valuable commodities such as silk and spices, but also a “virulent and abominable plague”. The plague, which spreads across England, triggers a zombie apocalypse, transforming the populace into monstrous, blood-sucking, brain-devouring creatures. From a critical perspective, this apocalyptic scenario can be seen as a direct result of Britain’s imperialistic ambitions, which, in their quest for profit, reduced the laboring class to little more than expendable bodies. The work of Löwy and Sayre in *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* underscores this critique, praising Marxist scholars for their insight into the state-driven oppression of the working class. They argue that “the world-view is co-extensive with capitalism itself,” reinforcing the notion that the superstructure of capitalist societies is inherently profit-driven, often at the expense of the very lives it exploits.

The Gothic elements in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* can be understood through the lens of capitalist culture. Karl Marx, in *Das Kapital*, famously stated that “Capital is deadly; it lives only by sucking living labor”. The Gothic genre, emerging from the dissonance between medieval class structures and the rise of capitalist relations of production, serves as a metaphor for the class struggle that defines capitalist societies. The historical oppression of the working class, embodied in the figure of the bourgeoisie, manifests in supernatural forms, where the haunted castles and abbeys of Gothic literature become symbols of a past that continues to haunt the present. This spectral presence reflects the unresolved tension between the oppressor and the oppressed, and the psychological imprint it leaves on society. As Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” suggests, the return of these past conflicts in the form of supernatural disturbances underscores the alienation felt by the working class, as ordinary spaces are transformed into sites of dread and fear.

In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, this Gothic motif is manifest in the English countryside, where once-thriving villages, representative of a small-scale agrarian economy, have been decimated by the plague. These regions, previously untouched by industrialization, become the breeding grounds for the “Undead”. Similarly, the grand castles, once vibrant centers of social life, have become infested with zombies, representing the collapse of the old social order under the weight of capitalist expansion. This decay is a cultural echo of the uneven development between imperial powers and marginalized regions, where the autonomy of local economies is destroyed by the larger, predatory forces of imperialism, resulting in the creation of “a thousand Gothic worlds”. Adam Trul, in *A Thousand Lost Worlds: Notes on Gothic Marxism*, argues that as long as capitalism persists, it will continue to generate new “Gothic worlds,” particularly in the ruins of industrialization and the emptied spaces of once-thriving communities. These spaces – factories, union halls, and abandoned mansions – become physical manifestations of the alienating effects of capitalism, marking the landscape with the ghosts of its oppressive past.

Grahame-Smith’s map of England in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* distinguishes between areas devastated by the plague and those that have managed to retain some semblance of order and sanity. London, as a center of mercantile activity, is particularly vulnerable to the effects of the plague, while rural areas and smaller towns, which have been less integrated into the

capitalist system, continue to resist the spread of the infection. This geographical division reflects the uneven impact of capitalist practices, where the affluence of larger towns and coastal areas, driven by capitalist commodity fetishism, results in their downfall. The wealth and materialism of the bourgeoisie, in its endless pursuit of profit, becomes the cause of the broader societal collapse.

The physicality of capitalism's impact on the body is vividly depicted in the novel. The grisly portrayal of labor extraction, particularly in the London trade sectors, mirrors historical realities where workers were subjected to inhumane conditions, even during times of crisis. The plague spreads through the very goods being produced, infecting laborers and their families as they are forced to continue working under hazardous conditions. This narrative echoes historical instances of British imperialism, where the economic ambitions of the empire were pursued at the expense of marginalized populations. Margaret Cohen, in *Profane Illumination*, argues that the term "Gothic" evokes the historical "abortions and aberrations" of a system defined by continuous cycles of innovation and destruction. In this sense, the *Gothic in Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* serves not only as a reflection of capitalist exploitation but also as a critique of the destructive and dehumanizing forces that capitalism has historically unleashed on both people and the environment.

Thus, Grahame-Smith's novel uses the Gothic framework to expose the dark undercurrents of capitalist society, where the thirst for profit leads to dehumanization, environmental collapse, and the emergence of monstrous forms – both literal and metaphorical. The zombie apocalypse, in this context, becomes a powerful allegory for the inevitable consequences of unchecked imperialism and the brutal exploitation of labor, resulting in the collapse of both social and moral structures.

The Emergence of the Negatory Forces

Of all the classes that stand face-to-face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.
(Marx and Engels, 62)

Friedrich Engels, in his *Dialectics of Nature*, explicates Karl Marx's concept of the "Negation of the Negation," asserting that the progression of truth occurs through the sublation of lesser truths by higher truths. This dialectical process suggests that, in the struggle between opposing forces such as good and evil, the superior force – representing a higher truth – ultimately prevails. In the historical context, Engels and Marx posit that the proletariat, as the revolutionary class, holds the potential to overthrow the bourgeoisie, which is inherently oppressive. The triumph of good over evil is viewed as a fundamental law of nature. Within this framework, it is not surprising that in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, the dystopian world, dominated by zombies, is met with opposing forces – those that strive to negate the

bloodthirsty dominance of the undead and restore human harmony. These zombies are symbolic of the destructive consequences of unchecked imperialism and consumerist greed, which, as the narrative suggests, have corrupted the laboring masses, who are often depicted as the victims of this capitalist system.

As Löwy contends, “The failure of the working class to carry out its historical mission has forced the faithful to search for a substitute proletariat.” This failure has led to a re-imagining of the revolutionary subject, represented in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by the Bennet sisters and their male counterparts, who embody the life force necessary to counteract the zombie plague. These characters serve as symbols of vitality and resistance, positioning them as the true agents of change in a society corrupted by capitalist exploitation.

The novel’s social structure further reflects the pervasive influence of capitalism, as it is shaped by the global networks of trade and colonialism. The Bennet sisters, for example, receive combat training in China, which equips them with the skills necessary to navigate a plague-ridden England without male protection. This reflects the intersection of class and imperialism, with a distinction made between the perceived superiority of Japanese combat techniques and the Chinese approach. This social stratification is evident when Miss Caroline Bingley mocks Elizabeth Bennet for her martial prowess, invoking geographical and cultural hierarchies to dismiss the legitimacy of Chinese training.

The phrase “blood, sweat, and tears” in this context is no longer a mere metaphor, but an explicit representation of the physical violence and exploitation that capitalism imposes upon the laboring body. This idea is explored by David McNally in *Monsters of the Market*, where he links Marxist analysis to the physicality of labor, particularly through the concept of “body panics” that emerged in the 19th century. McNally contends that bodies, as sites of capitalist violence, are central to understanding the alienating and dehumanizing effects of labor exploitation. In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, this is powerfully depicted in the transformation of the laborers, who, after enduring the brutal demands of capitalist industry, are turned into grotesque “undead” creatures. Their once-human forms are disfigured by overwork, starvation, and the violence of exploitation, symbolized by their sickly, pallid appearances and decaying bodies. These “undead” workers continue to function in a semblance of life, but are fundamentally broken, embodying the destructive effects of capitalist labor systems.

This transformation of the workers into monstrous figures parallels Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, which exposes the meatpacking industry’s exploitation of labor in early 20th-century America. Sinclair’s portrayal of workers as little more than raw material for capitalist production mirrors the depiction of the undead in Grahame-Smith’s novel, where the laborers are reduced to mere flesh, consumed by the capitalist machine. The “undead” serve as an allegory for the dehumanization wrought by the economic system, in which the workers’ labor is extracted until they are hollowed out, both physically and morally.

The Gothic genre, as explored in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, embodies the return of a violent past into the present. The classic themes of the Gothic novel often revolve around the haunting of the present by past traumas, symbolized by the dead who cannot remain buried. This “re-emergence” of the past in the form of the undead can be understood in psychological terms, as the horrors of capitalist exploitation are not only a matter of material suffering but also of psychological distress. Freud’s theory of the “uncanny” posits that repressed fears and desires often resurface in distorted forms, creating a sense of discomfort and alienation. In the case of the zombies, the horrific transformation of the laboring body represents this repressed violence, manifesting as a subconscious terror that disrupts the social order. Freud suggests that “psychological factors, such as the amount of constitutional aggressiveness,” play a role in the creation of horror in the mind, and this can be applied to the societal trauma inflicted by capitalist oppression. The Marxist understanding of institutionalized ruthlessness contributes to the mental and emotional degradation of the working class, as the oppressive forces of capitalism generate both material and psychological horrors.

In sum, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* can be interpreted as a critique of the dehumanizing forces of capitalism, using the Gothic genre to explore the physical and psychological consequences of exploitation. The novel’s depiction of the undead serves as a powerful metaphor for the laboring class, whose bodies are consumed by the insatiable drive for profit. Through its engagement with Marxist theory, particularly the concept of the “Negation of Negation,” Grahame-Smith’s work highlights the potential for revolutionary change, represented by the Bennet sisters and their allies, who stand as the bearers of life and resistance in a world dominated by capitalist decay. He quotes:

“The strength of Marxism clearly lies not in its view of history or its prophecies of the future that are based on it but in its sagacious indication of the decisive influence that the economic circumstances of men have upon their intellectual, ethical and artistic attitudes” (Freud, 215).

The influences of capitalist oppression are manifold upon a society conditioned by consumerism, particularly upon individuals whose intellectual faculties remain undernourished or unaware of the inherent cruelties of the capitalist system. This intellectual and moral malnourishment leads to physical exhaustion and what Marxist theorist David McNally describes as “body panics.” It becomes the responsibility of the intellectuals and socially conscious individuals to address the imbalances created by the relentless pursuit of profit and the vanity of consumerism. In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, this imbalance is represented through the dichotomy between the brain-deadened zombies, symbolic of the dehumanizing effects of capitalist exploitation, and the skilled, humane fighters who serve as the agents of resistance and restoration in society.

This structural dichotomy in the novel resonates with Marxist historical materialism, which examines the ways in which class struggles and systemic violence shape societal development. A Gothic-Marxist lens brings attention to the supernatural forces at play within the narrative, while also reflecting upon how revolutionary movements grapple with the use of violence as a

means of transformation. In this context, capitalist modernity, with its inherent violence and exploitation, disrupts the naturalized notion of linear progress, presenting a society where the pursuit of profit and imperialistic ambitions have corrupted both the material and moral foundations of life.

One example of this disruption is found in the character of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who, although belonging to the same social hierarchy that represents the imperialistic bourgeoisie, takes on the role of an anti-imperialist force. Her actions in eliminating the zombie insurgency mirror the novel's broader critique of capitalist exploitation, where commerce and consumerism seduce individuals in much the same way that vampires prey upon their victims. In this sense, the rupturing of the "base" (the material conditions of society) becomes crucial, as it directly impacts the "superstructure" (the ideological and cultural institutions that support the capitalist order). The decay of the "base" in the novel, exemplified by the rise of the zombies, signifies the destructive effects of unregulated capitalism and its capacity to consume not only the body but also the mind and spirit.

The novel also draws a direct parallel between the capitalist thirst for profit and the ravenous hunger of the zombies. Just as the zombies are insatiable after their first consumption of human brains, capitalist consumption creates an exponential craving for more, which ultimately leads to the devouring of society itself. This mirrors the human tendency toward commodity fetishism, where material goods are imbued with an almost mystical significance, creating a form of "voodoo economics" that perpetuates an endless cycle of desire. The zombies, then, can be seen as allegorical figures for consumerist demons, representing the apocalypse brought about by unchecked greed and the fetishization of commodities.

This notion is underscored by the historical understanding that past events, and the violent systems that created them, continue to haunt the present, shaping contemporary society in profound ways. In this sense, the novel positions the zombie apocalypse as not merely a fictional horror but as a modern myth that encapsulates the enduring consequences of capitalist exploitation. Through this Gothic lens, the horrors of the past – imperialism, consumerism, and class struggle – are reanimated in the present, forcing society to confront its historical debts and their implications for the future. Thus, the novel encourages readers to critically engage with the possibility that the past is never truly buried, but instead constantly resurfaces, transforming into the specters of modern myths such as vampires and zombies.

Characterisation

In her 2013 conference presentation in Chicago, China Miéville introduced the concept of "Gothic Marxism", which she applied to the notion of "solidarity with the monsters." In this context, the "monster" – specifically the zombies – becomes a dual symbol. On one hand, the zombies represent the laborers who have been victimized by the exploitative practices of multinational corporations, which have exacerbated the global system of imperialistic extraction. On the other hand, they also represent those individuals who, seduced by consumerist desires, become complicit in their own destruction, falling victim to the very

system that they have been drawn into. This dual representation highlights the ways in which capitalism produces a perverse form of solidarity, where both the oppressed and the oppressors are ensnared by the same system, leading to their mutual degeneration. Miéville's use of Gothic Marxism as a framework for understanding this dynamic underscores the capacity of the Gothic genre to hybridize and expand in multiple directions, thus allowing for a complex critique of capitalist exploitation.

Through the outbreak of the zombie plague, which is framed within the novel as a consequence of the rise in global trade and imperialism, Seth Grahame-Smith reinforces the notion of Gothic Marxism as a Marxist phenomenology of capitalist structures. In a society where commodification permeates every aspect of life – even extending to human subjectivity – the personal conscience becomes subordinated to the relentless forces of consumerism. This process leads to what could be described as a form of necrophiliac neoliberalism, where a parasitic, insidious force consumes society from within. The outward manifestation of this internal decay is grotesque, a reflection of the inhumanity fostered by the capitalist system. Grahame-Smith vividly captures this in his portrayal of zombies. Upon being bitten, the victim undergoes a gradual transformation, remaining in denial about their impending fate while continuing to mingle with the living. This delayed transformation mirrors the behavior of consumerist individuals who, fully aware of their own complicity in the capitalist system, continue to lure others into the same cycle of consumption and exploitation.

This deceptive process is evident throughout the novel, where zombies use manipulative strategies to increase their ranks. Mrs. Featherstone, a newly turned zombie, reveals a secret to Elizabeth Bennet with the sole intention of getting closer to her and spreading the plague. Similarly, Jane Bennet encounters a mother and child, both infected, who seek help as they journey through the forest to Netherfield estate. These zombies actively infiltrate mass gatherings, such as balls and parties, not only to consume the living but also to recruit more individuals into the ranks of the undead. This mirrors the tactics employed by capitalist forces, which manipulate and seduce consumers, luring them into an insatiable cycle of consumption. As Marx famously described, capitalism operates as a predatory, ghoulish force, one that is “red and spooky, tooth and claw,” evoking the imagery of both vampires and zombies. In Marx's view, such monstrous forces are pervasive throughout modern society, operating as systemic agents of exploitation and dehumanization.

However, the novel also presents forces of resistance – figures who oppose the spread of this evil and seek to regenerate society. Characters such as Darcy and Bingley, who are enlisted by the government to eradicate the zombie plague, symbolize the potential for renewal and social purification. Darcy, in particular, devises a method for identifying individuals who have recently been bitten but have not yet fully succumbed to zombification. He carries a collection of bees, which he uses to detect the slowly decomposing bodies of the newly infected. This method echoes Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the “rag pickers” who, in his *Passagenwerk*, scavenge through the debris of history, searching for the remnants of progress among the discarded detritus of the past. In this sense, Darcy's role in identifying and purging the undead

parallels Benjamin's vision of historical materialism, where the past is constantly reworked and repurposed in the struggle against oppression.

Through this Gothic-Marxist framework, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* offers a powerful critique of capitalist society, using the metaphor of the zombie apocalypse to explore the consequences of imperialism, consumerism, and class exploitation. By aligning the zombies with both the oppressed laborers and the consumerist bourgeoisie, Grahame-Smith highlights the ways in which capitalist forces create a system in which both the exploited and the exploiters are ultimately dehumanized. The presence of opposing forces, embodied in characters like Darcy and Bingley, suggests the possibility of resistance and transformation, offering a glimmer of hope for social regeneration in the face of capitalist decay.

In his *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin states that: "Poets find the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse. This means that a common type is, as it were, superimposed upon their illustrious type. ... Ragpicker or poet – the refuse concerns both" (Benjamin, 351).

Walter Benjamin's work is particularly concerned with the marginalized histories of modern cities, focusing not only on what "is," but also on what "was" and what "might be." His method seeks to uncover and recover those histories that have been omitted or neglected, particularly those that lie on the peripheries of dominant narratives. Benjamin attempts to find a critical intersection between the imagined, idyllic city and the actual, material one. In a similar vein, Seth Grahame-Smith disrupts the idealized image of England, particularly the capital, London, by juxtaposing it with the spectral projections of a zombie apocalypse, where the streets once associated with prosperity and progress are now inhabited by hungry, relentless undead.

In Grahame-Smith's narrative, the government-assigned officials who hunt the zombies function analogously to the rag-pickers described by Benjamin, tasked with identifying and eradicating the "societal rubbish" – in this case, the undead. These officials represent an effort to cleanse society of its perceived moral and physical decay. In contrast, the Bennet sisters, though not officially sanctioned, take matters into their own hands, training in combat as a means of self-preservation. Mr. Bennet, much like the progressive father figures often seen in 19th-century novels, is portrayed as supportive of his daughters' martial skills, encouraging their empowerment in the face of danger. His support stands in stark contrast to that of Mrs. Bennet, who remains fixated on securing advantageous marriages for her daughters. She sees their combat training as detrimental to their prospects, fearing it has compromised their femininity. This view is echoed by Mr. Collins, who shares Mrs. Bennet's concerns and believes that Elizabeth's martial prowess would diminish her desirability as a wife. His subsequent pursuit of Charlotte Lucas – who is not a fighter – illustrates his alignment with this traditionalist mindset.

The irony deepens when considering that Mr. Collins's benefactor, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is a woman, is not only a member of the aristocracy but also a highly skilled combatant. Her martial prowess is renowned and admired throughout the nation, a fact that Mr. Collins

himself acknowledges, thus exposing the hypocrisy in his and Mrs. Bennet's attitudes toward the Bennet sisters' training.

Amidst the conflict between good and evil, the character of George Wickham occupies a unique position in the narrative. Traditionally seen as a rogue and deceiver, Wickham is here portrayed as caught between the forces of life and death. He is a government soldier tasked with eliminating zombies, yet he is also revealed to be involved with a clan of zombies located in the eastern part of London. This group, known as the "Church of St. Lazarus," consists of zombies who have yet to fully embrace their predatory nature. Unlike other zombies, they have refrained from consuming human brains and instead sustain themselves on pig brains, maintaining a semblance of humanity. It is only after they begin to consume human flesh that they fully transform into the monstrous beings familiar in zombie lore. This situation can be analyzed through the lens of Slavoj Žižek's concept of "disavowed violence," as outlined in **Violence**. Žižek argues that such violence involves a brutal repression of one's ethical instincts, resulting in a denial of the true nature of a situation. In this case, the "Church of St. Lazarus" represents an illusion of peace and harmony, which Wickham aspires to realize, believing it to be the solution to the ongoing struggle between the living and the undead. However, this idealistic vision unravels when it is revealed that Wickham himself has been bitten and is concealing his condition, refusing to accept the inevitability of his transformation into a full-fledged zombie.

Wickham's actions thus reflect a denial of the violence inherent in his situation, and his desire to maintain the illusion of peace within the zombie community mirrors the larger themes of repression and self-deception that permeate capitalist societies. Just as the zombies in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* represent the consequences of unchecked consumerism and imperialism, Wickham embodies the tensions between survival and self-delusion, offering a critique of the ways in which individuals and societies try to evade the brutal realities of their circumstances.

Conclusion

The concept of "Gothic Marxism" is grounded in the idea of civilization's detritus – what could be considered the historical debris of bourgeois society. Cohen observes that Gothic Marxism "charts the contours of a Marxist genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational pervades existing society and dreams of using it to effect social change" (pp. 1–2). In this framework, the irrational and insatiable hunger for human brains, as depicted in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, serves as a metaphor for the pervasive social anomaly that has come to define capitalist society. This zombie-like thirst for consumption echoes the broader societal forces that continually destabilize the social order and demand intervention for restoration. As Cowie suggests, labor history, when appropriately examined, can engage a broader political audience outside the confines of academic discourse. This notion is further exemplified in the 2016 film adaptation, which demonstrates how Gothic elements can serve as a vehicle for Marxist ideologies, effectively making these theoretical concerns accessible to a larger public.

Furthermore, the Gothic element within this context serves to reinforce Marx's assertion in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the bourgeoisie... produces, above all, its own gravediggers." This idea aligns with the Gothic portrayal of capitalist society as inherently self-destructive. The "Gothic Marxism" explored here provides a lens to understand this self-destruction as both a metaphorical and material process – one where capital, in its vampiric form, feeds upon the labor of the working class, thereby ensuring its own perpetuation and growth.

In this analysis, the fear of modern transformation is framed through the imagery of the "Dark Satanic Mills", which, as the text suggests, symbolize the encroaching terror of a world being consumed by an insatiable monster. This monster, unlike the mythical creatures of gothic fiction, is not bound to the gothic castles of Transylvania but resides at the very heart of modern economic systems – specifically, in the globalized, market-driven citadels of capitalism. Marx's description of capital as a "blood-sucking beast" in *Das Kapital* further underscores this metaphor, where he describes capital as "dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." This metaphor illuminates the inherently parasitic nature of capital, which draws life from the labor of the proletariat, becoming more powerful and expansive the more it exploits.

Through this lens, the modern world assumes a vampire-like, or zombie-like, character, with individuals reduced to mere vessels for the accumulation of capital. In an era marked by digital commodification and surveillance, this critique becomes increasingly relevant. The concept of "blood money" and the zombified labor force – workers who, in their disempowered state, continue to function as cogs in the capitalist machine – become subjects of scrutiny in the context of contemporary society. This examination of the monstrous forces embedded in the capitalist system reveals a world where exploitation is both pervasive and hidden, much like the undead forces that haunt Grahame-Smith's narrative. Through Gothic Marxism, the irrational forces of capitalism are exposed, demanding a reckoning with the ways in which they deform both individuals and society at large.

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Affects of Resistance: Candomblé Rituals in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction

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Abstract

Collective rituals are representative and phenomenological sites of religious affects. These rituals counter colonial discourses, facilitating the interaction of folk-festive African cultures with hegemonic Catholicism to fashion Afro-Brazilian identity. These folk elements resist the hegemony of objectivism in religious practices, especially in previously colonized societies like Brazil. The traditional religions of the Afro-Brazilians have been delegitimized by colonial regulations that aimed at suppressing embodied emotions and its public expressions. In Brazil, *candomblé* is a religious ceremony that signifies syncretism in which the spirits of ancestors and natural phenomena are invoked by Healers, in spaces that transcend the public/private binary. These eco-ancestral rituals emerge as sites of expressive emotions in which the drumming, singing, and dancing bodies of the performers are embedded. The proposed paper situates the *candomblé* rituals in *Crooked Plow* (2023), a contemporary Brazilian novel, within the socio-cultural and political matrices of the plantation communities of the twentieth century. The novel is set in a colonial plantation in Bahai, a Northeastern province in Brazil, where plantations owned by Portuguese colonisers operationalized tenant farming, installing slaves brought in from Africa during the Transatlantic trade as bonded labourers. The paper examines how Afro-Brazilian religious rituals facilitate political mobilization and agential potentialities using insights from affect theory.

Keywords: affects, colonialism, embodiment, emotions, ritual

Crooked Plow (2023), authored by Brazilian writer Itamar Vieira Junior and translated into English by Johnny Lorenz, is a novel set in the plantation community of Água Negra in the Bahian province of Brazil. This community, controlled by Portuguese colonizers, is predominantly populated by Afro-Brazilian tenant farmers. The narrative unfolds within a socio-political context that institutionalized tenant farming among Afro-Brazilians following the abolition of slavery in 1888. The story centers on the lives of two sisters, Belonísia and Bibiana, daughters of bonded laborers residing in Água Negra. The plantation is depicted as a cohesive community, deeply informed by the communal religious practices of Candomblé and Jarê.

These religious practices occupy a central role in the spiritual and social lives of the community members, functioning as alternative sites of worship that incorporate elements of Catholicism while rejecting its hegemonic individualism and disembodied rationality. Rituals of Candomblé and Jarê emphasize the embodied nature of spirituality, employing drumming, singing, dancing, and communal celebration to foster affective ties within the community. These practices validate the expression of intense emotions – forms of expression marginalized by Catholicism’s ideology of religious objectivism – and serve as a mechanism of resistance against the colonial paradigm. This paradigm, rooted in the reduction of Afro-Brazilians to their laboring capacity, systematically delegitimizes their lived experiences.

Through these rituals, tenant farmers affirm the generative potential of their bodies and social connections, transcending the alienation imposed by colonial structures. Candomblé rituals reanimate sensory and corporeal potentialities, enabling participants to articulate shared experiences of bodily suffering and to develop tactics for political mobilization and organized resistance. By fostering intersubjective relationships, these practices energize the participants’ suppressed capacities for collective agency and protest.

This paper explores the subversive potential of Afro-Brazilian rituals in *Crooked Plow* as critical sites of mobilization and resistance. It emphasizes the role of the body and its affective experiences, arguing that the rituals serve not only as spiritual expressions but also as platforms for political solidarity and empowerment.

Literature Review

This paper draws on a robust body of scholarship that situates Candomblé within its epistemological and socio-political contexts. Selka (2007) explores the interplay of traditional, modern, and postmodern elements in Candomblé practices and their role in shaping Afro-Brazilian identity. Similarly, Matory (2005) examines how Candomblé functions as a folkloric emblem of Brazil’s racially democratic state. Selka (2010) further investigates the religious discourses underpinning Candomblé rituals and the ways they invigorate normative moral frameworks. Johnson (2002) provides an analysis of the ideology of secrecy in Brazilian Candomblé, framing it as a fluid social boundary imbued with historically layered meanings.

Lafitte (2010) highlights the African influences within Candomblé rituals and their articulation of power dynamics.

Other scholars have addressed the syncretic elements of Candomblé. Sansi (2011) interrogates the presence of imagery in Candomblé rituals, revealing its significance in mediating Christian and African traditions. Ogunnanike (2020) investigates the political dimensions underlying the syncretism of Roman Catholicism and African religious traditions. Performative dimensions of Candomblé are explored by Dantas (2009) and Harding (2003), who emphasize the role of ritual performance in constructing Afro-Brazilian identity. Anthropological (Herskovits, 1956; Seligman, 2010) and ethnographic (Braga et al., 2017; Wafer, 1991) approaches have also enriched the study of Candomblé, with particular attention to aspects such as temporality and rhythm (Sjørsløv, 2013) and food culture (Souza, 2015). Additionally, Seligman (2010) and Voeks (1997) highlight the medicinal and healing beliefs inherent in Candomblé practices, while Pares (2013) explores its historical connections to the African Vodun religion. Selka (2010) and Soler (2011) examine the market dynamics underpinning Candomblé rituals.

This study is further informed by interdisciplinary work on religion and affect. For instance, Schaefer (2015), Richman (2018), and Riis and Woodhead (2010) emphasize affect as a relational phenomenon, employing Spinoza's conceptual distinction between *affection* – the force exerted by an affecting body – and *affectus* – the impression left on the affected body. This framework positions self-formation as contingent upon engagement with the Other. The present paper adopts this relational framework to analyze the political potentialities of Candomblé rituals, extending these critical reflections to explore their subversive capacities as depicted in the contemporary novel *Crooked Plow*.

The belief systems and ritual performances of Jarê illuminate the religious lives of the inhabitants of Água Negra, as depicted in *Crooked Plow*. Jarê, a regional subset of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, is primarily practiced in the northeastern Brazilian province of Bahia. Its emergence is historically linked to the influx of African slaves brought to the region during the 19th century for diamond mining. This influx facilitated the fusion of diverse African traditions with the dominant Catholicism of colonial Brazil, resulting in the development of Jarê cosmology and rituals.

Enslaved Africans working on plantations adopted and adapted Jarê practices, which, while incorporating Catholic elements such as saints, theological concepts, biblical verses, and crucifixes, were initially shrouded in secrecy due to stringent colonial restrictions on African religious traditions. Over time, as the regulation of enslaved workers' religious lives shifted from the Church to plantation owners, these proscriptions were relaxed (Johnson, 2002). By the late 19th century, Jarê rituals were performed with minimal interference among Afro-Brazilian plantation workers.

In the temporal context of *Crooked Plow*, the performance of Jarê rituals encounters little resistance from the Portuguese colonizers who own the plantations. This relative freedom

allows for the continuation and evolution of these rituals, which play a central role in the spiritual and communal lives of the Afro-Brazilian tenant farmers depicted in the novel.

Jarê, as both a belief system and a ritual practice, is deeply entrenched within the religious and cultural lives of Brazil's enslaved plantation workers. It is subsumed within the broader framework of Candomblé, a complex and hierarchical Afro-Brazilian religion that privileges the body as a site of continuous, dynamic intersubjective interaction with the community. As a communal religious tradition, Candomblé preserves African spiritual elements within the interstitial spaces of colonial modes of worship, emerging from sustained contact between West and Central African religions and Roman Catholicism.

Candomblé rituals venerate African deities and *encantados* – divinized ancestral spirits – through embodied practices such as drumming, singing, and dancing. Diverging from the individualistic ethos of Catholicism, Jarê cosmology emphasizes human vulnerability and communal interconnectedness, situating individuals within relational networks that encompass familial, social, and spiritual dimensions. Illnesses and afflictions are understood as originating from disturbances within these entangled relationships. To address such afflictions, designated Healers mediate between the human and spirit worlds, embodying a pivotal role in communal well-being.

In *Crooked Plow*, Zeca Chapéu Grande, the father of Bibiana and Belonísia, exemplifies this dual role as both an agricultural laborer and a Jarê Healer. His body becomes a conduit for communication between the human and spiritual realms during rituals characterized by possession. The possession process is inherently corporeal, integrating the Healer into a social network that spans both the community and the spirit world. During these rituals, the *atabaque* drummers create rhythms that intensify to a frenzied crescendo, facilitating the ecstatic state of the possessed Healer. The ritual itself involves the use of herbs, water, and animal sacrifices, underscoring its embodied and material dimensions.

One prominent *encantado* featured in the novel is Velho Nagô, or “the old African,” a spirit who possesses Zeca Chapéu Grande to dispense blessings and perform acts of healing. Through Velho Nagô, the novel highlights the integration of African spiritual heritage into the lives of the Afro-Brazilian community, affirming the resilience and adaptability of Jarê within the context of colonial and postcolonial Brazil.

Collective religious rituals, such as those practiced in Candomblé, engage the body as a medium for experiencing and expressing religious affects (Richman, 2018). Historically, the communal spaces in which these rituals occur have facilitated the expression of demonstrative and enthusiastic emotions, often mediated through modalities of music, dancing, and drumming. These elements, culminating in rhythmic crescendos, enable states of bodily possession that are central to the ritual experience.

Candomblé encompasses a complex set of religious practices designed to address both existential and pragmatic concerns. As Johnson (2002) observes, these rituals “work to preserve life with its abstract problem of meaning, the universal human *horror vacui*, and especially in all of its pragmatic needs – financial prosperity, health, love, and fecundity – against forces of anomie, death, and consumption” (p. 36).

The novel *Crooked Plow* vividly portrays the spatial and corporeal dimensions of Candomblé rituals, capturing the intricate interplay of embodied practices and communal spirituality that define these ceremonies. The following description in the novel underscores the centrality of affect and embodied religious performance in Afro-Brazilian cultural and spiritual life:

“It was a hot night. The devotees were dripping with sweat, wiping their faces with the backs or palms of their hands, their lips never faltering in the recitation of prayers. The crowded saints’ room was so small that the congregation, mostly made up of women and older men, had to look on from the centre room. The younger folks and children stayed away from the prayers, talking to each other in low voices... ‘ê Santa Barbara, the virgin with blonde hair, her golden sword flashes in the air,’ sang the crowd in unison, hands clapping to the rhythm of the drum. As the men accelerated the beat, Saint Barbara grew more animated in her steps and sudden turns. Two women dropped to the floor, their eyes half-open, their movements announcing the arrival of more Saint Barbaras” (loc. 687).

Spirit possession in Candomblé rituals is primarily manifested through the body of the Healer, though on occasion, spectators may also experience possession. This phenomenon is accompanied by a trance state, which typically begins with sensations of vertigo and progresses to bodily spasms. When a devotee undergoes spirit possession, they are ceremonially removed from the ritual space and adorned with brightly colored garments and symbolic accoutrements. For instance, as depicted in the novel *Crooked Plow*, these items may include “a red skirt, Iansã’s sword, and her traditional *adê*—the crown and veil” (loc. 681).

Ritual nights dedicated to Candomblé often serve as opportunities for communal celebration and sanctioned revelry. Within the narrative, such occasions provide moments of reprieve from the relentless physical demands of plantation labor, described as “opportunities for folk to loosen up after day on day of relentless hard work,” during which behaviors such as alcohol consumption and even drunken altercations are tolerated (loc. 1553). These gatherings frequently extend beyond their spiritual focus to include the consumption of alcohol, cigars, and hallucinogenic substances, reflecting the integration of ritualistic and social practices within the context of Afro-Brazilian religious life.

This duality of spiritual solemnity and communal revelry underscores the multifaceted nature of Candomblé rituals as both sites of embodied religious expression and spaces for sociocultural engagement.

As a communal ceremony, Candomblé rituals are performed in autonomous houses, or *terreiros*. These *terreiros* consist of inner rooms that are devoted to worshipping saints and *encantados*. In the novel, this room is described thus:

“It is the room of the saints, where the *Iadainha*, or litany, was sung... it is illuminated by candles and the brilliant colours glimmering from the sacred portraits and dolls... both plaster and wooden, some in pristine condition, others rather shabby: Saint Sebastian, the Crucified Christ, the Bom Jesus, Saint Lazarus, Saint Roch, Saint Francis, and Padre Cícero. There were small portraits, some bright and others faded, of Saint Cosmas and Damian, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, and Saint Anthony” (loc. 680).

The Spatial Dynamics of Emotional Expression in Ritual Practice

The domestic spaces of devotion and performance in Candomblé serve as a counterpoint to the suppression of emotional expression in public spaces under colonial rule. In Western cultures, the devaluation of strong emotions and their exclusion from public domains were intensified by the influence of Reformation theology (Richman, 2018; Riis & Woodhead, 2010). Enlightenment rationality further reinforced this shift, instituting a dualistic framework that separated public rationality from private affect. Within this paradigm, the public sphere became synonymous with rationality, while emotions and their expressions were relegated to the private sphere, encoded into bodies and systematically regulated.

Donovan Schaefer (2015) employs the concept of “intransigence” to describe the persistent and embodied nature of emotions, arguing that they are artifacts of the corporeal history of human evolution. Despite the institutional confinement of emotions to the private, this segregation has never been absolute. Private emotions, dynamic by nature, frequently transgress the fluid boundaries between private and public spheres. The anti-ritualism of Reformation theology, which sought to internalize religious affects and curtail their collective expressions, paradoxically facilitated the emergence of embodied emotions in unanticipated ritual forms. The residual and intransigent qualities of emotions mediate their manifestation on the surface of socially constructed bodies, forcing the creation of new spaces for self-expression (Richman, p. 14).

The intransigence of human bodies enables emotions to transcend imposed boundaries, allowing them to flow into and animate new contexts, producing novel formations for collective and individual expression. These dynamics underscore the resilience of embodied emotions and their capacity to subvert the structures of colonial and Enlightenment paradigms that sought to marginalize them.

The Socio-Affective Landscape of Tenant Farming in *Crooked Plow*

The depiction of Candomblé rituals in *Crooked Plow* serves as a counterpoint to the repressive socio-political structures shaping the lives of tenant farmers. These rituals manifest as outlets for “hot” emotions – intense, biologically embedded religious affects encoded in the bodies of the laborers. Drawing from Ahmed (2004), such emotions are relational, intertwining individuals with communal networks and situating the self within a broader web of affective attachments. In this context, Candomblé becomes a site of affective sociality, where embodied religious practices preserve traditional knowledge rooted in lived experience and African heritage, inscribing the body as a medium for epistemic and cultural resistance.

This embodied knowledge, derived from sensory interactions with the natural world, contrasts with colonial rationality, which objectified and devalued nature to legitimize its exploitation. The veneration of natural phenomena within Candomblé rituals thus resists colonial epistemologies that sought to marginalize both nature and the African-derived traditions of the enslaved. These practices uphold alternative forms of relationality that reject the extractive logics of colonialism, instead emphasizing interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm (Mignolo, 2021).

Candomblé, as a syncretic cultural formation, emerges from the intersection of African and Catholic religious traditions, energizing African diasporic identities while resisting colonial hegemony. Through these rituals, enslaved and later emancipated Afro-Brazilians asserted their agency, reclaiming cultural heritage and mobilizing resistance against colonial oppression. As Johnson (2002) notes, Candomblé establishes an ideological link between the diasporic present and African ancestry, creating a dynamic, transatlantic cultural continuity. This fluidity resists monolithic interpretations of African religiosity, positioning Candomblé as a practice that adapts to and challenges the discourses of colonial modernity.

The socio-political context of *Crooked Plow* is situated in the aftermath of Brazilian slavery’s abolition in 1888. The tenant farmers, descendants of enslaved Africans, inhabit a precarious socio-economic landscape shaped by exploitative plantation economies. Despite the nominal abolition of slavery, the plantation owners retained control over land through mechanisms like the 1850 Land Law, which ensured their dominion over former slaves who lacked legal property claims. These laborers were coerced into tenant farming arrangements disguised as acts of colonial “benevolence,” which in practice extracted unpaid labor in exchange for temporary habitation rights.

The tenant farmers’ precarious conditions are compounded by the exploitative practices of plantation managers, such as Sutério, who confiscate personal produce under the guise of landowner entitlement. This systemic exploitation reinforces cycles of poverty and hunger, symbolized in the narrative by malnourished children with swollen bellies and scrawny limbs. The persistent threat of dispossession further exacerbates the community’s collective suffering, forging affective bonds that anchor their identities in shared hardship: “Suffering... it tied you,

irreversibly, to your people. Suffering was the secret blood running through the veins of *Água Negra*” (loc. 2934).

The architecture of the plantation reflects this precarity. Mud huts, deliberately unsanitary and impermanent, symbolize the transience of the tenants’ existence. Colonial authorities prohibited the construction of brick houses, precluding any lasting markers of the generational presence of tenant families. Vulnerable to weather and environmental hazards, these structures embodied the tenants’ disposability. Furthermore, plantation owners routinely displaced tenant families using coercion or fraudulent legal tactics, severing ties between laborers and the land that sustained their lives.

Dispossession not only inflicted material deprivation but also fostered profound psychological and emotional trauma. The evicted were left with an enduring sense of homesickness, their forced dislocation erasing the histories inscribed on the landscapes of their labor. Children, orphaned or deemed unproductive, were particularly vulnerable, denied the right to inherit or remain on plantation land. Such conditions engendered pervasive fear within the community, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation, dispossession, and precarity.

The narrative of *Crooked Plow* thus explores the intersection of labor, affect, and identity within the plantation system, illustrating how rituals like Candomblé offer countermeasures against the dehumanizing forces of colonialism. By recuperating embodied traditions and fostering communal solidarity, these practices articulate a form of resistance that situates identity within a broader, interconnected social and spiritual framework:

“The fear of being kidnapped from your home. The fear of not surviving the journey over sea and land. The fear of being shipped, of hard labour under the scalding sun, the fear of the powerful spirits of those people. The fear of leaving your house, the fear of displeasing those people, the fear of simply being. The fear that they don’t like you, they don’t like what you do, they don’t like your smell, your hair, the colour of your skin. The fear that they don’t like your children, your songs, your sense of brotherhood” (loc. 2117).

Colonial Structures, Alienation, and Embodied Resistance in *Crooked Plow*

The pervasive fear experienced by the tenant farmers in *Crooked Plow* is entrenched within colonial hierarchies and their logic of instrumental rationality, which governs the plantation economy and its socio-cultural framework. Drawing on Mignolo (2021), colonial thought constructs an epistemological and aesthetic schema that frames colonized territories and their inhabitants as objects of control. This framework negates the systems of sensing, believing, and emoting rooted in the lived experiences of the colonized. By alienating them from their embodied knowledge and dynamic relationship with the environment, colonialism transforms nature into a resource, objectified for extraction and exploitation. This instrumentalization simultaneously devalues the colonized communities, whose harmonious interdependence with the environment is recast as “uncivilized,” thereby reinforcing their marginalization.

The plantation owners exacerbate this alienation by obstructing educational opportunities, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of generational cycles of exploitation. Children are viewed by the colonizers merely as replacements to sustain the plantation economy. In contrast, the tenant farmers aspire to shield their children from the humiliation and precarity inherent in tenant farming. This aspiration is exemplified by Zeca Chapéu Grande's invocation of divine intervention during a *Jaré* ritual to compel the mayor to build a school in Água Negra. Despite the establishment of the school, its curriculum perpetuates colonial ideologies, glorifying Portuguese conquests while erasing Afro-Brazilian histories and marginalizing the lived experiences of the students. The colonial discourse embedded in the classroom delegitimizes the pluriversal knowledges of the colonized (Mignolo, 2021). For the children, schooling becomes alienating, as it disregards their relational understanding of the world. This disconnect is reflected in Belonísia's preference for engaging in farming activities, which embody the dynamic and sensory practices of her community.

The lack of effective institutional mechanisms to resist colonial structures ensures that the lives of tenant farmers remain confined to the plantation and its relentless labor demands. The colonizers' neglect of their well-being is particularly evident in the lack of access to healthcare. For instance, the sisters Bibiana and Belonísia spend their childhoods within the plantation, venturing out only once for medical treatment, where they encounter predominantly white patients, highlighting the racial inequities in healthcare access. In this context, Candomblé rituals emerge as vital forms of alternative medical care.

Candomblé's significance in *Crooked Plow* is especially pronounced in addressing women's reproductive health, which is otherwise neglected in the plantation system. The plantation owners deny medical leave for pregnant women, forcing individuals like Grandma Donana to endure labor under precarious conditions. Within this gendered landscape, Candomblé rituals provide an alternative framework for reproductive care. The *Jaré* Healer and trained midwives like Grandma Donana and Salustiana oversee childbirths, employing herbal remedies, hygienic practices, and prayer. These practices are imbued with spiritual authority, believed to be guided by *encantados* like Velho Nagô, who sanctify the healers' interventions.

Beyond childbirth, the *Jaré* Healer addresses various afflictions, both physical and spiritual. Neurotic episodes, for example, are interpreted as instances of spiritual possession and are treated with a combination of medical remedies and ritualistic care. The Healer's household functions as a site of holistic healing, where therapeutic practices integrate prayer, herbal concoctions, and moral responsibility. This fusion of embodied and spiritual practices underscores the community's reliance on traditional knowledge systems in the absence of institutional support.

In *Crooked Plow*, the juxtaposition of colonial neglect and embodied resistance reveals the resilience of the plantation community. Through rituals, midwifery, and alternative healing practices, the tenant farmers reclaim agency over their bodies and health, forging networks of care that challenge the alienating forces of colonial modernity. These embodied practices

affirm the value of relational, pluriversal knowledges, positioning them as acts of resistance against systemic dehumanization.

Communal Spaces, Political Mobilization, and Ritual Resistance in *Crooked Plow*

The Jarê Healer's residence in *Crooked Plow* transcends the boundaries of private domesticity, functioning as a *terreiro* – a sacred communal space integral to the plantation community. This household operates as both a place of worship and a site of healing, where saints are venerated, and the afflicted seek solace. The Healer dedicates extensive time and effort to tending to individuals perceived as being possessed by malevolent spirits, integrating traditional rituals and herbal remedies to restore balance. Religious feasts and saintly commemorations further transform this space into a communal hub, where tenant farmers gather to perform *Jarê* rituals, honoring the *encantados* and reinforcing shared bonds.

For Bibiana and Belonísia, their childhood unfolds amidst sacred objects, ritualistic prayers, and the performative ecstasies of possessions, deeply embedding them in the spiritual lifeworld of Água Negra. The plantation itself becomes a melting pot of diverse socio-cultural identities, brought together by economic necessity. Communal rituals such as Candomblé not only introduce but also sustain a sense of kinship among these workers, who rely on shared networks of midwives, neighbors, and familial ties to build affective bonds. The Healer's household, therefore, emerges as a liminal space – both domestic and public – where medical care, spiritual healing, and community solidarity converge.

This communal structure challenges Enlightenment-informed binaries of public and private spheres, as articulated by scholars like Duncan (1996) and Grosz (1995). Within colonial modernity, public spaces are framed as sites of rational discourse dominated by men, while private spaces are relegated to emotionality and femininity. The Healer's household subverts these constructs, embodying the characteristics of both spheres. Its fluid boundaries accommodate communal gatherings and ritual performances, cultivating a shared sense of identity and belonging among the tenant farmers.

In the context of the plantation, Candomblé rituals serve not only as spiritual expressions but also as outlets for encoded emotions of shame, anger, and indignation. These emotions, suppressed under the biopolitical control of colonial structures, find release during moments of devotional frenzy and permissive revelry within ritual performances. Such gatherings facilitate communal discussions about the injustices endured by the workers, including exploitative labor practices and the seizure of personal produce. These dialogues nurture political consciousness, particularly among younger members like Severo, who spearhead efforts to organize the community for collective action.

Severo's leadership catalyzes transformative initiatives, such as the introduction of durable housing materials and unionization efforts advocating for land ownership and fair wages. These actions mark a departure from the complacent obedience of the elder generation, represented

by figures like Zeca Chapéu Grande. Zeca's adherence to colonial ideologies and his role as a mediator between workers and plantation owners exemplify the reactionary tendencies that resist systemic change. His death, however, creates an opening for Severo's political mobilization, which, despite initial setbacks, ignites a sense of purpose among the younger generation.

The assassination of Severo by the colonizers disrupts this momentum, leaving the community fragmented and hesitant to unite around a common course of action. Amid these tensions, political mobilization and Candomblé rituals emerge as parallel yet interconnected sites of resistance. Bibiana and Belonísia embody these dual trajectories, with each sister contributing to the community's resilience in distinct ways.

Belonísia channels Severo's legacy by educating the community's children and preserving the traditional knowledge and environmental wisdom of the tenant farmers. Her efforts integrate the marginalized histories of Afro-Brazilian plantation workers into consciousness-raising initiatives, countering the colonial erasures of the past. In contrast, Bibiana's grief over Severo's death leads her to a supernatural encounter with the *encantado* Santa Rita, a guardian spirit marginalized by patriarchal interpretations of Candomblé.

Santa Rita's possession of Bibiana offers a private modality for mourning and resistance. Through nocturnal rituals, Bibiana expresses her repressed grief and anger, culminating in an act of vengeance against the plantation owner. These solitary acts of possession and ritualistic expression, unobserved by the community, reflect a deeply personal enactment of justice that aligns with the broader spiritual ethos of Candomblé. The owner's death, orchestrated through Bibiana's nightly possessions, simultaneously avenges Severo and alleviates her grief.

In *Crooked Plow*, the intersections of spiritual practices, communal solidarity, and political consciousness illustrate the multifaceted resistance of the tenant farmers against colonial oppression. While collective action and organized protest face challenges, the embodied and ritualistic responses to systemic injustices sustain the community's resilience and assert its agency in the face of persistent exploitation.

Conclusion

Crooked Plow is set within a plantation community that institutionalizes tenant farming among Afro-Brazilians, unfolding within a colonial framework that incorporates communal religious practices such as Candomblé. These practices, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the community, serve as a medium through which emotions – often repressed and encoded in the bodies of the tenant farmers – are expressed. The communal nature of Candomblé rituals allows for the corporeal manifestation of these emotions through drumming, singing, and dancing, thereby activating the body and its interconnectedness with the collective.

These rituals provide a space for the expression of intense emotions, which have been suppressed due to the tenant farmers' precarious existence. The socio-economic conditions of the workers – marked by the lack of individual or collective land ownership and the relentless burden of unpaid labor – generate affects of suffering, pain, hunger, anger, and shame, deeply embedded in their lived experiences as bonded laborers. In the context of Candomblé, these repressed emotions are externalized, fostering a sense of attachment to the *Other* and strengthening communal bonds.

The ritual spaces of Candomblé thus operate as vital emotional and social landscapes where tenant farmers, after enduring the exhausting hardships of their daily labor, find validation for their emotions and reinforce their ties to the community. These performances enable a collective awareness of the systemic injustices within the plantation system, catalyzing discussions and collective action aimed at securing rights to paid labor and land ownership. Moreover, the loud expression of emotions within these rituals mediates potential agency through the articulation of resistance, allowing individuals to engage with and confront their feelings of injustice.

Candomblé, through its integration of African religious traditions and Catholic theology, functions as a crucial vehicle for affirming Black identity in a society that marginalizes and otherizes Afro-Brazilians. These practices not only reinforce affective ties within the community but also equip participants with emotional and political tools to negotiate the repressive mechanisms of colonialism. Ultimately, Candomblé becomes both a spiritual and a socio-political force, facilitating emotional expression, fostering solidarity, and empowering Afro-Brazilian communities to challenge the oppressive structures of the colonial system.

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**Rock Music and The Political Scripting of Vietnam War: Reading
Dispatches by Michael Herr**

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Abstract

Projections regarding the Vietnam War were articulated through various forms of representation. In 1960s America, a countercultural movement centered on country-folk music emerged and thrived as an alternative to mainstream nationalist music. Folk music evolved into folk-rock and ultimately into “rock and roll,” carrying distinct political and psychological messages that resonated with the collective conscience through diverse narratives and personas. The Vietnam War significantly influenced music production across genres, including the adoption of rock music by South Vietnamese bands, as observed by David James. The music industry played a pivotal role in reinforcing anti-war sentiments in the United States, exemplified by songs such as Buffy Sainte-Marie’s “*Universal Soldier*” and Phil Ochs’ “*Vietnam Talking Blues*.” Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), based on his tenure as a war correspondent for *Esquire* (1967–1969), underscores the integral role of music in shaping the cultural montage of the war. Herr’s narrative incorporates numerous musical references, providing a vivid and unrelenting portrayal of the war experience. This study explores the cultural interplay between music and literature during the Vietnam War, examining the implications of conceptualizing the conflict as a “mass media montage.” Using Herr’s *Dispatches* as a case study, it investigates how rock music encapsulates the war’s ambiguous energy, blurring the boundaries between artistic expression and the realities of conflict. The analysis considers the artistic, ideological, and cultural dimensions of the music produced and disseminated during the war, while also reflecting on how the lyrics referenced in Herr’s work reveal the psychological state of soldiers and the growing significance of counter-cultural music as the war progressed.

Keywords: country-folk, mass media, rock music, Vietnam war

Out on the street I couldn't tell the Vietnam veterans from the rock and roll veterans. The sixties had made so many casualties, its war and its music had run power off the same circuit for so long they didn't even have to fuse. (Herr, 1977, p. 261)

This excerpt from Michael Herr's nonfictional account of the Vietnam War, *Dispatches* (1978), represents one of the earliest acknowledgments of the role of music during the conflict. This reference underscores the profound influence of music on American cultural and psychological landscapes both during and after the war. By incorporating specific soundtracks from the 1960s and evoking the dynamic energy embodied in rock music, Herr's narrative provides a valuable lens for examining the socio-cultural dimensions of music produced during the war in relation to its discussion in print media.

Philip D. Beidler, in *Late Thoughts on an Old War: The Legacy of Vietnam* (2004), highlights the lack of critical discourse on music as a significant omission in the cultural and historical narratives of the Vietnam War. Beidler also explores the financial implications of musical references within war literature, pointing to the economic factors underlying these artistic allusions. This perspective positions Herr's journalistic account as an essential text for understanding the collective intersections of war, music, and cultural memory (Beidler, 2004).

This paper seeks to explore the intersection of artistic and ideological dimensions of music and literary works produced during the Vietnam War, examining how they collectively represent and shape the war's memory within individual and collective consciousness. It traces the evolution of "rock and roll" from its politically charged but relatively modest origins in the folk genre, highlighting how songs from both genres of the 1960s mobilized public sentiment for the anti-war movement and fueled the countercultures that resisted institutional authority.

In this context, the paper employs Michael Herr's *Dispatches* as a case study to analyze war narratives through the lens of musical references, which became a defining feature of the Vietnam War. For Herr, rock music encapsulates the war's ambiguous, ecstatic energy, rendering music and conflict interchangeable metaphors. Rather than categorizing war-related music and its literary representation into binary frameworks of pro-war or anti-war sentiment, this study examines how musical discourse permeates Herr's narrative, influencing successive generations of readers.

Finally, the paper investigates the dual ideological dimensions of these musical references: on one hand, the lyrics reflect the psyche and ideology of American GIs serving in Vietnam; on the other, the protest music of the counterculture gained increasing prominence as the war progressed. This analysis underscores the cultural and political significance of music as both a historical artifact and a tool of resistance.

The Vietnam War and the Mass Media Montage

As a war correspondent for *Esquire*, Michael Herr reported from Vietnam over a two-year period (1967–1969), during which he witnessed several pivotal events, including the 1968 Tet Offensive, the siege of Khe Sanh, and the Battle of Hue. Herr's firsthand combat experiences, coupled with his vivid and detailed narration, lend his account an experiential authority that establishes *Dispatches* as both a critically acclaimed and widely influential war narrative.

Herr delves into the psychological resonance of music for soldiers, illustrating how specific tracks echoed in their minds, evoking memories, nostalgia, and the haunting flashbacks of the Vietnam experience. For veterans, these musical recollections became intertwined with the enduring trauma of the war, manifesting as vivid reminders during waking hours. Herr's work captures the profound ways in which sound and music became embedded in the collective and individual memories of those who lived through the conflict:

“Everything seemed a little dull, heaviness threatened everywhere, you left little relies lying around to keep in touch, to keep it real, you played the music that had been with you through Hue and Khe Sanh and the May Offensive, tried to believe that the freedom and simplicity of those days could be maintained in what you laughingly referred to as ‘normal circumstances’” (Herr, p. 253).

Dispatches was initially published as a series of articles in consumer-oriented, lifestyle magazines such as *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. This publication context helps to explain the text's emphasis on war as a deeply personal narrative, characterized by subjective commentary rather than the detached tone of conventional reporting. During the mid-1960s, *Esquire* became closely associated with the emerging genre of New Journalism, which brought a transformative approach to journalistic practices. As Spindler (1991) notes, this genre marked a significant “shift in tone of voice from the cultivated, restrained, detached voice of conventional reportage to one that possessed urgency and immediacy in order to recreate the action as experienced by someone who was involved” (p. 26).

Spindler further observes that New Journalism foregrounded the journalist's presence at the scene, integrating not only consensually accepted public facts but also subjective impressions (1991, p. 26). In his reportage, Herr embraces this approach, referencing and acknowledging the lyrics of seventeen songs. These musical allusions are, for Herr, “deeply integral to a narrative strategy of relentless verbal, visual, and aural juxtapositions variously described as postmodern collage and/or mass-media montage” (Beidler, 2004, p. 108). This innovative narrative technique underscores the interwoven nature of sound, image, and text in representing the fragmented reality of the Vietnam War.

The years preceding the Vietnam War witnessed a series of transformative events in post-World War II America. Social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement were significantly documented through popular music, with songs like “*We Shall Overcome*” and Leslie Gore's “*You Don't Own Me*” serving as

emblematic anthems of these respective causes. Bruce Franklin, a prominent American cultural historian, examines the symbiotic relationship between music and the Vietnam War in his 1996 anthology, *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems*. Franklin highlights how, by the mid-1960s, the Vietnam War had become a central concern of the American collective consciousness.

The decade also saw a resurgence in the popularity of folk music among the youth. Characterized by its simple melodies and narrative-driven lyrics, folk music played a pivotal role in chronicling social history. Its adaptability allowed it to resonate with audiences through diverse narratives and personas. As the Vietnam War escalated, its cultural implications paralleled the transformation of folk music into the more dynamic and electrified sounds of rock and roll, exemplified by artists such as Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary.

While many songs of this era carried anti-war sentiments and supported the countercultural movement, Franklin points out that music also served other purposes. It provided “an inspiration for pro-war sentiment, and [was] an essential part of G.I. culture in Vietnam. In more subtle ways, the war exerted deep and lasting influences on the form and content of popular music” (Franklin, 1996, p. 203). Protest against the war was often expressed through folk-rock hybrids, whereas pro-war sentiments were more prominently reflected in country music, highlighting the diverse ways in which music engaged with the complexities of the Vietnam War.

Characterized by its socially and politically conservative orientation, country music often conveyed pro-war sentiments. One of the most prominent examples of such music is Barry A. Sadler’s “*Ballad of the Green Berets*” (1966), a patriotic anthem performed by the Green Beret himself. Franklin highlights the song’s role in fostering a sense of patriotism and glorifying the ideal of sacrifice for the “oppressed.” Although the song does not appear directly in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, Herr references the ethos associated with the Green Berets. He recounts a sign displayed at a Special Forces A Camp in Me Phuc Tay, which read: “If you kill for money you’re a mercenary. If you kill for pleasure you’re a sadist. If you kill for both you’re a Green Beret” (p. 260).

The closing verses of Sadler’s song further emphasize themes of sacrifice and duty, portraying a father’s acceptance of his son’s ultimate contribution to the nation, underscoring the song’s cultural resonance within pro-war narratives:

“Back at home a young wife waits
Her Green Beret has met his fate.
He has died for those oppressed,
Leaving her this last request.
Put silver wings on my son’s chest,
Make him one of America’s best” (Sadler, 1966).

Since the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the “war of interpretations” has unfolded, characterized by a more polarized contest over meaning than during the two decades of the conflict itself. The accessibility of the English language, as opposed to Vietnamese, and the dominance of consumerist culture – including its representations in Hollywood films, music, literature, and journalism – enabled narratives from the defeated side to prevail. These narratives engaged audiences with a broader cultural vocabulary, diverse perspectives, and varied personas.

The war significantly influenced and shaped different genres and styles of music production. David James (1989) notes that rock and roll even found expression among South Vietnamese music bands. In the United States, however, debates surrounding popular culture have historically revolved around representations of national identity and the frontier myth. Mike Marqusee (2006), in his study *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s* (originally published as *Chimes of Freedom*), examines the global dissemination of American consumerist culture during the 1960s. Marqusee attributes this expansion to the influence of American capital, facilitated by factors such as “the weakness of socialist traditions, especially within the labor movement, the absence of mass parties, the centrality of racial oppression, [and] the widespread belief in America’s exceptional destiny and identity” (p. 9).

The limited popularity of anti-establishment and anti-war music within the folk-rock genre until the late 1970s can, in part, be attributed to these cultural conditions. During this period, the anti-war stance remained a marginal position, insufficiently aligned with mainstream consumerist values to achieve significant commercial success.

Pro-War vs. Anti-War Approaches to Music

Although rock music was among the first genres to dissociate from American patriotism and engage in anti-war protest, it struggled to establish a cultural foothold comparable to that of country music in relation to the Vietnam War during the 1960s. Anti-war sentiment in rock music remained marginalized until as late as 1967. As Bindas and colleagues (1989) note, “more than sixty-seven percent of those polled by Gallup that year favored continued bombing of North Vietnam ... Rock music reflected national sentiment by releasing few songs that mentioned the war, and fewer still that objected to it” (pp. 7–8).

This limited visibility of rock music’s anti-war messaging was not necessarily due to its inability to capitalize on anti-war sentiment but rather stemmed from its inherently rebellious, anti-establishment ethos. Rock music, embraced by the counterculture and the political New Left, was inherently tied to the consumerist structures of the music industry. As Abbie Hoffman (2000) asserts, “loving rock music just makes you a good consumer. It was only ‘revolutionary’ because we said it was” (p. 177).

Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) played a significant role in suppressing anti-war rock music. Federal authorities exerted control over entertainment channels, warning radio and television stations of legal consequences if they aired songs that

could disrupt public sentiment about the war. In contrast, pro-war songs such as Barry Sadler's "*Ballad of the Green Berets*" (1966) faced no such restrictions. Targeted at the key record-buying demographic aged 21–29, Sadler's song achieved widespread popularity, topping the charts in 1966 and reflecting mainstream national sentiment.

By the time Michael Herr arrived in Vietnam in late 1967, American opposition to the war had begun to exert significant pressure on its supporters. The transformative events of 1968, including the Mỹ Lai Massacre in March, the Tet Offensive on the warfront, and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States, catalyzed a shift in American attitudes toward the war. The election of Richard Nixon as President amidst domestic upheavals further altered both the nature of the Vietnam conflict and public perceptions of these transitions. By this period, it was increasingly evident that the commercial success of rock 'n' roll was contingent on consumer demand, which itself was shaped by the popularity of varying responses to the war. Rather than representing a purely revolutionary movement, the embrace of anti-war themes in rock music was often a profit-driven decision within the music industry.

Herr's narrative reflects this surge in the popularity of rock music, emphasizing its predominantly commercial motivations. He recounts his first experience hearing Jimi Hendrix's 1967 track "*Foxy Lady*" played on a cassette recorder by a Black corporal while lying low in rice paddy fields under enemy fire. Herr observes the growing appeal of Hendrix among soldiers, particularly for fostering a sense of camaraderie, noting that Hendrix himself was a former member of the 101st Airborne. Herr writes, "the Airborne in Vietnam was full of wiggly-brilliant spades like him, guys who always took care of you when things got bad. That music meant a lot to them. I never once heard it played over the Armed Forces Radio Network" (Herr, p. 182). This remark underscores the selective curation of music broadcast over Armed Forces Radio and highlights the personal role of cassette recorders in enabling troops to listen to music privately in bunkers.

Lydia Fish (1993) documents the rising prevalence of rock music in Vietnam, noting the accessibility of equipment such as Sony radios, Akai stereos, and Teac tape decks, alongside live performances by Filipino rock bands and continuous broadcasts from AFVN Radio. She also highlights how newly arriving soldiers often brought the latest records from the United States and, in some cases, musical instruments, enhancing the integration of music into military life. Fish further observes that many young soldiers were already skilled musicians upon arrival, contributing to the vibrant musical culture among troops.

Herr also reflects on the increasing popularity of rock music in the United States after his deployment in 1967. Describing life in the garrison with fellow correspondents, Herr illustrates how music became a central element of both camaraderie and coping mechanisms during the war, capturing the deep interconnection between music and the lived experience of Vietnam.

“[D]rift[ing] in and out for a drink or a smoke before bed, some talk and some music, the Rolling Stones singing, ‘It’s so very lonely, You’re two thousand light years from

home,’ or ‘Please come see me in your citadel,’ that word putting a chill in the room. Whenever one of us came back from an R&R we’d bring records, sounds were as precious as water: Hendrix, the Airplane, Frank Zappa and the Mothers, all the things that hadn’t even started when we’d left the States ... It seemed like such wintry music; ... Flares dropped over possible targets three blocks away, and all night long, armed jeeps and massive convoys moved down Tu Do Street towards the river” (Herr, 1978, p. 235).

The shift in narration from the auditory description of music as a rare refuge to the sound of flares descending outside symbolizes the fusion of music with the sensory experience of war. *Dispatches* reflects this blending of music and war’s physicality, where the music both contrasts with and becomes intertwined with the violence and chaos of the battlefield.

However, *Dispatches* does not provide an extensive depiction of many of the war’s more brutal realities, most notably the American act of waging war itself. The consistent use of collective pronouns like “we” and “they” eliminates the possibility of an objective portrayal typical of war journalism. Instead, Herr predominantly adopts the perspective of the American soldiers. At the time of his deployment, Herr was 27 years old, slightly older than many of the young recruits, which may have shaped his alignment with their worldview. His account reflects a broader discourse within the military, focusing on the power dynamics between Americans and the Vietnamese, whom they view as “the enemy,” rather than on the shared human experiences of soldiers like those who sat in a circle one night singing “*Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*” (Herr, p. 147).

Instances where anti-war songs appear are often presented disparagingly, suggesting that music for Herr does not necessarily function to advocate for one side. This approach further demonstrates his avoidance of framing the war as a politically motivated act. In an interview included in Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands*, Herr offers a similar perspective on the nature of the war, distinguishing between external political interpretations and the internal human experience: “The war was behavior. Archetypal behavior beyond judgment ... From the outside the war was perceived as exclusively a political event. On the inside it was fundamentally and externally a human event” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 334). Herr’s narrative, shaped largely by his experiences alongside the American troops, emphasizes the camaraderie among soldiers rather than any overt political critique.

The suppression of anti-war discourse or any criticism of American involvement in Southeast Asia renders the soldier’s endurance and acceptance of vulnerability as heroic rather than absurd. The conflict is depicted as a primal struggle, where “men hunt men,” and Herr does not provide significant political critique of the war or its consequences. Regarding the political awareness among the GIs and fellow correspondents, he writes, “Who could you discuss politics with except a colleague? (We all had roughly the same position on the war: we were in it, and that was a position.) Where else could you go for a real sense of the war’s past? There were all kinds of people who knew the background, the facts, the most minute details, but only a correspondent could give you the exact mood that attended each of the major epochs” (Herr,

p. 227). The framework through which Herr views the war is heavily influenced by his position as a correspondent reporting for an American magazine. This lack of critical analysis, prevalent in much of the war literature produced during and after the conflict, allowed the United States to avoid deeper scrutiny of its involvement in the war. As Spindler (1991) notes, presenting the war as a myth and distancing oneself from critical evaluations of governmental policies played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Vietnam (p. 29).

Herr's portrayal of American intervention and the tragic loss of life on both sides is assimilated into a universal narrative, where the tragedy is presented as inherent to the soldier's experience, not as an individual loss but as a collective one. Herr writes, "Somewhere on the periphery of that total Vietnam issue whose daily reports made the morning paper too heavy to bear, lost in the surreal contexts of television, there was a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims" (p. 217). In reducing the war to a surreal and dehumanizing event, Herr portrays the Vietnamese as an inferior race, denying any recognition of their humanity. He describes how Americans, with their supposed nomadic spirit, could never match the "savagery" of the Vietnamese:

"We napalmed off their crops and flattened their villages, and then admired the restlessness in their spirit, Their nakedness, their painted bodies, their recalcitrance, their silent composure before strangers, their benign savagery and the sheer, awesome ugliness of them combined to make most Americans who were forced to associate with them a little uncomfortable over the long run" (Herr, pp. 94–95).

This portrayal reinforces a reductive and racialized view of the Vietnamese, stripping them of complexity and humanity, and situating the American soldiers as superior in their supposed resilience and cultural dynamism.

Conclusion

Examining *Dispatches* as a document that scripts a nation's collective memory of war strengthens the argument that the interdisciplinary references to music within the text resonate with and respond to the dominant discourses of the time. Herr's involvement with iconic war films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) as a scriptwriter further influenced the shaping of public perceptions of the Vietnam War. In *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Coppola with Herr's screenplay, Wagner's 1856 composition "*Ride of the Valkyries*" is used as a symbolic trope for psychological warfare. The piece plays loudly over the speakers mounted on the helicopters of the 1-9 Air Cavalry squadron as they attack a Vietnamese village, an action infamously described as "Death from Above." Coppola effectively mirrors a military tactic by using music to amplify the violence and spectacle of the war, thus glorifying its chaotic nature. The significance of music in war-related media – whether in films, books, or other representations – serves to manipulate and shape the responses of the audience, much as it does for the soldiers engaged in actual combat. For these soldiers, music often functions to evoke patriotic feelings, reinforce a sense of purpose and honor, and promote an idealized image of masculine strength, as

exemplified by the character of Colonel Kilgore. Similarly, Herr's text incorporates subtle references to songs that are not explicitly acknowledged but are woven into the narrative in a manner that mirrors how certain musical pieces can trigger memories or emotional responses, either contradicting or reinforcing the war experience. As Herr writes:

“Once we fanned over a little village that had just been airstruck and the words of a song by Wingy Manone that I'd heard when I was a few years old snapped into my head, ‘Stop the War, These Cats Is Killing Themselves’ [Sic]. Then we dropped, hovered, settled clown into purple lz [landing zone] smoke, dozens of children broke from their hootches to run in towards the focus of our landing, the pilot laughing and saying, ‘Vietnam, man. Bomb ‘em and feed ‘em, bomb ‘em and feed ‘em.’” (Herr, p. 10).

In his 2006 autobiographical narrative *Rattler One-Seven: A Vietnam Helicopter Pilot's war Story*, Chuck Gross mentions one of the most heart-wrenching aspects of wars in general, the longing for female companionship in an environment (the war zone) that is almost exclusively male:

“I heard that Vietnam caused more “Dear John” letters than any other war in our history ... There was nothing worse than getting a Dear John letter from your wife or girlfriend and not being able to go home to try to resolve (or dissolve) your relationship ... As for this lieutenant, he suddenly turned very inward and started volunteering for every dangerous mission that came along like he was trying to get himself killed” (Gross, 2006, p. 173).

The “lieutenant” referenced in this passage, a young man in his early twenties who is always talking about his wife, receives a “Dear John” letter from her. This event exemplifies the phenomenon in which soldiers, overwhelmed by the emotional loss of love, respond by becoming increasingly reckless, erratic, and violent on the battlefield. Herr addresses this complex emotional dynamic through his integration of music, highlighting how it reflects the soldiers' psychological state. Toward the final pages of the novel, Herr employs a series of song lyrics, which he sequences strategically, weaving them seamlessly into a description of the soldier's psyche. This blending of music and psychological turmoil captures the interplay between the emotional consequences of love and the brutal realities of war.

“At An Hoa we heard ‘Hungry for those good things baby, Hungry through and through,’ on the radio while we tried to talk to an actual hero, ... ‘Galveston oh Galveston I'm so afraid of dying,’ at LZ Stud, two kids from Graves having a quarrel ... ‘Black is black I want my baby back.’” (Herr, p. 260).

“Only one song from Hue, ‘We gotta get out of this place if it's the last thing we ever do’; ... ‘I said shot-gun, shoot ‘em ‘fore they run now,’ at Nha Trang, talking to a man just starting his second tour” (p. 260).

The lyrical references to songs such as *Hungry* by The Animals, Glenn Campbell's *Galveston*, and Los Bravos' *Black is Black* reflect the soldiers' longing for a life with an imagined or distant lover. In contrast, tracks like Junior Walker and the All Stars' *Shotgun* and The Animals' *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* convey the horrors of war, evoking a sense of urgency to escape the battlefield and return to the safety of home and loved ones.

To borrow a concept from Beidler, the music of the Vietnam era charts the trajectory of the “American experience of Vietnam across a popular culture continuum recognizable at once at home and abroad” (Beidler, p. 104). This music, which both reflected and shaped the perceptions of the war, serves as a crucial cultural artifact. It is not only representative of the polarized views on the government's war policies but also holds significant critical potential in its treatment of various other conflicts – personal, racial, social, and generational – that summarize a nation's collective memory of the Vietnam War. As Herr concludes, encapsulating the shared experience, “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there” (Herr, p. 262).

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