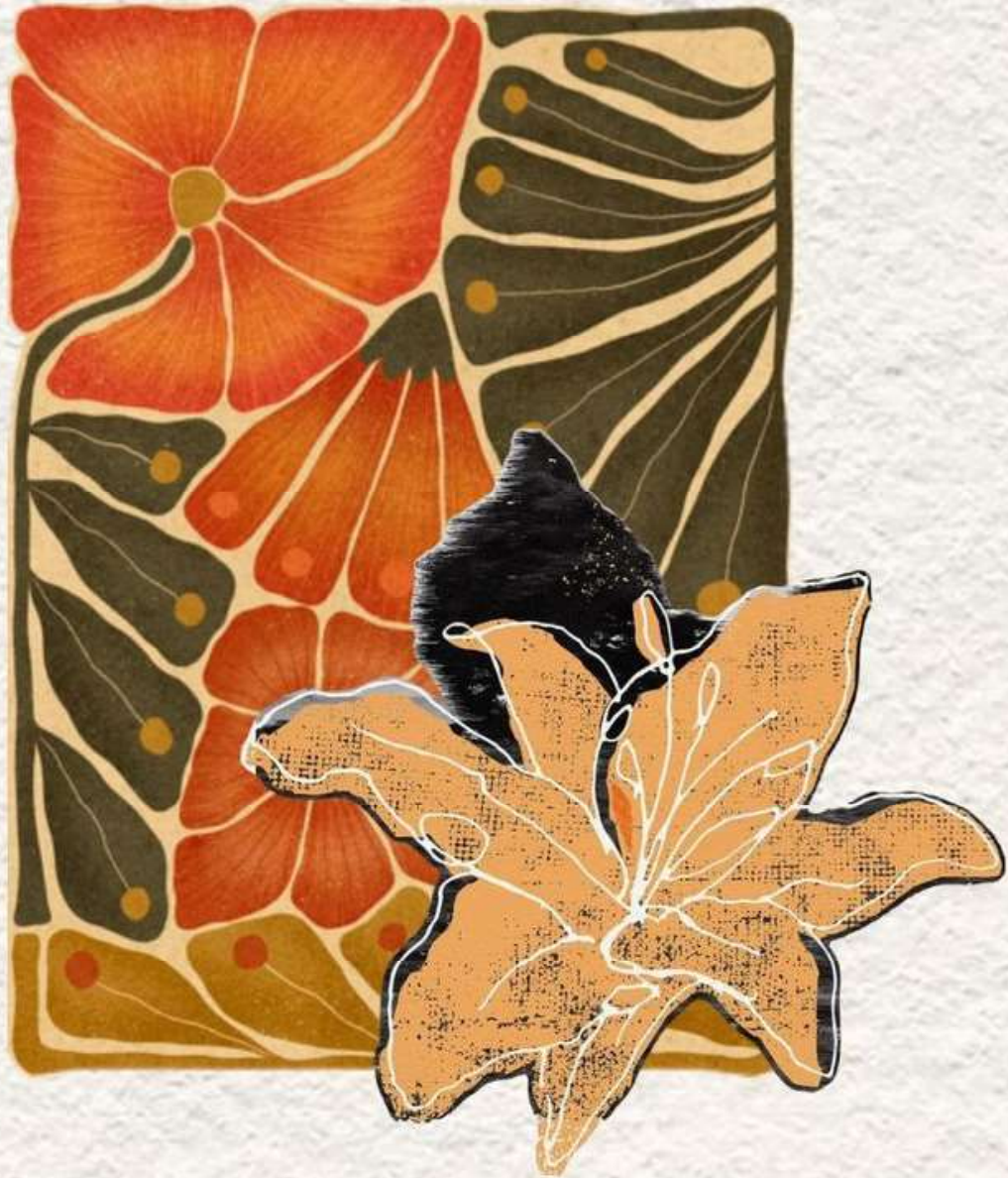# Creativitas:

Critical Explorations in Literary Studies

Volume – 1, Issue – 1 (2024)

A Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Journal of English Studies

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Creativitas: Critical Explorations in Literary Studies

A Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Journal of English Studies

(Volume – 1, Issue – 1, 2024)

Editorial Board

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From the Publisher's Desk

Dear Esteemed Readers and Contributors,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the inaugural issue of *Creativitas: Critical Explorations in Literary Studies*. As the Publisher and Founder of *Sapientia*, I am thrilled to see this ambitious project come to fruition.

Sapientia, established in September 2023, has grown into a vibrant community of over 1200 English studies scholars. The launch of *Creativitas* represents the natural evolution of our academic aspirations. As an open-access, multidisciplinary platform, *Creativitas* aims to foster scholarly discourse, advance knowledge, and encourage intellectual diversity in English studies and allied fields.

This journal emerged from within our community, reflecting the collaborative spirit that defines *Sapientia*. We hope *Creativitas* will serve as a cornerstone for our members, providing opportunities for publishing research and engaging in peer review.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all who have made this possible. Our dedicated reviewers and editorial board deserve special recognition for their commitment to maintaining high academic standards. I also want to express my sincere thanks to the members of our esteemed Advisory Board for their invaluable insights and guidance.

Special thanks to Dr. Achyut Chetan (Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata), Dr. Prayag Ray (Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's University), Dr. Bidisha Kantha (Assistant Professor of English, Xavier Law School, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata), and Prof. (Dr.) Ranjan Ghosh (Professor of English, University of North Bengal) for their exceptional support.

To our authors, thank you for your contributions. To the *Sapientia* community, your support has been crucial. I also acknowledge our technical team and administrative staff for their tireless efforts behind the scenes.

As we embark on this journey, I invite all members to engage actively with *Creativitas*. This inaugural issue marks the beginning of a new chapter in our mission to promote collaboration and knowledge advancement in English studies.

Welcome to *Creativitas*!

Arpan Mitra

Publisher, *Creativitas*
Founder, *Sapientia*
Ph.D. Research Scholar, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata

Note from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

On behalf of the editorial board, it is with great pleasure and scholarly excitement that I welcome you to the inaugural issue of *Creativitas: Critical Explorations in Literary Studies*. This journal marks a significant milestone for our *Sapientia* community, which has flourished since its establishment in September 2023 as a collaborative hub for English studies students and scholars.

Creativitas emerges as a natural progression of *Sapientia*'s mission, driven by our community's passion for the advancement of knowledge and intellectual exchange. As we have grown to nearly 1,200 members, we recognized the need for a platform to showcase the depth and breadth of our collective expertise. This journal is the realization of that vision.

Our inaugural issue exemplifies the multidisciplinary spirit we aim to foster. From innovative readings of graphic novels and children's literature to explorations of Anglo-Saxon medicine and postcolonial narratives, the articles herein represent the diverse interests and rigorous scholarship of our community. We are particularly proud to feature emerging voices alongside established scholars, reflecting our commitment to nurturing the next generation of literary critics and theorists.

As we launch *Creativitas*, we reaffirm our dedication to open access and the democratization of knowledge. We believe that scholarly discourse thrives when it is accessible to all, and we are committed to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity through our double-blind peer review process.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our contributors, editorial board, reviewers, advisors, and the entire *Sapientia* community for their support and enthusiasm. Your collective efforts have made this journal possible, and I am confident that together, we will continue to push the boundaries of literary studies and foster meaningful academic dialogues.

As we look to the future, we invite submissions for our upcoming issues and encourage ongoing engagement with the ideas presented in these pages. *Creativitas* is more than just a journal; it is a testament to the vibrant intellectual community we have built together.

Thank you for joining us on this exciting journey. Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Dr. Pradipta Shyam Chowdhury
Editor-in-Chief, *Creativitas: Critical Explorations in Literary Studies*

Negotiating Rubble: Ruins, Architecture and Affect in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Saikat Pradhan

Abstract: This paper attempts to offer a new reading of Michael Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel *The English Patient* (1992). It begins by describing Ondaatje's interest in architecture as well as the link between literature and the built form. This article subsequently explains and elaborates on the theoretical concept of ruins and shows how Ondaatje's novel needs to be read in terms of the materiality of ruination that remains a pervasive presence in this text. While the earlier approaches looked at Ondaatje's narrative primarily from a postcolonial perspective or through the lens of historiographic metafiction, this paper makes a non-essentialist critique of the novel primarily from the viewpoint of architecture, ruination, and affect. Using Juhani Pallasmaa's views on the phenomenology of architecture and, especially, the sensuous and affective quality of architecture, this paper will investigate how space and materiality influence the human sensorium in Ondaatje's novel. Considering Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology" and Tim Edensor's thesis on the spectrality of industrial ruins, an attempt is then made to explore how the disordered spaces of ruination question standard, conventional ways of remembering in urban spaces. The discussion finally highlights how the sensual memories evoked by Ondaatje's haunted space of ruins contest ordered forms of social remembering, ones which are usually represented by heritage and commemorative places like museums and memorials.

Keywords: *Ruins; Architecture; Affect; Michael Ondaatje.*

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's masterly narratives frequently engage with the theme of architecture. References to buildings and their materiality fill the pages of his novels and sometimes, his poems too. In his very short poem "The First Rule of Sinhalese Architecture," Ondaatje cautions the reader never to construct "three doors/in a straight line" (1-2) because if one does so, a devil might "rush/through them/deep into your house," (3-5) where house, as Ondaatje suggests, corresponds to "life" (6). This correlation itself indicates how important architecture is to human life: it is the built edifice that harbours and sustains life to its fullest and, hence, the need to secure its protection.   Needless to say, life and literature are also inalienably linked: literature represents life just as life becomes part of literature, each caught in a seamless continuity. There also appears to be a strong connection between literature and architecture in Ondaatje's meticulously woven corpus. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observed this correspondence between literature and the built form when they wrote that "the literary or musical work has an architecture" which, like a built edifice, "holds heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous" (329). Hence, literature is conceived as a container or receptacle that is filled with diverse, heterogeneous elements while keeping its homogeneity intact. This is especially true of Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient* where the textual space is replete with allusions to multiple "heterogeneities" (Deleuze and Guattari 329). Ondaatje's works take into account the link between these structurally analogous components (poetics and the built edifice) in their understanding of human existence, but it is also a relation (more specifically, between the language of poetics and architecture) that betrays its attunement to human emotion. Following the eminent theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, one may argue that the architectural environment of a building is endowed with the ability to broaden human consciousness as much as language, which is one of the most fundamental skills of every human being (107). Hence, issues related to architecture, space, language, and poetics are revealed to be

inalienable, thereby building a complex web that defines and refines human consciousness and sensibility.

Understanding Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

It is important to note that Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel, among other things, exhibits vast spaces of ruination. The novel is set in the war-torn, derelict landscape of Italy, her geography utterly shaped by the destruction and dissipation of World War II. The first chapter begins in the bombed and depleted Villa of San Girolamo, which visibly bears traces of the devastating war. Chapter II of the novel itself is entitled "In Near Ruins," which undoubtedly reverberates one of the novel's central preoccupations. This is important because the opening of the novel with an image of debris sets the scene for later images of ruination to follow which, in fact, remain deeply entrenched in the text. The reader is told that the villa has certain rooms that "could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs - where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair" (Ondaatje 8). It is hardly surprising that a novel that begins with ruination should end with similar implications: Ondaatje's text concludes with the Indian sapper Kip learning about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America, one of the most devastating events in human history, one which reduced human bodies and vast, expansive topographies to countless piles of debris.

The Villa of San Girolamo is undoubtedly one of the most important spatial locations of Ondaatje's text. The villa, which was once a military hospital for the Allied Forces, has been stripped of its previous status and identity, now inhabiting four characters from four different backgrounds: the Hungarian count Lazlo de Almasy (once a desert explorer as well as the novel's eponymous patient assumed by Hana to be "English"); Hana, a Canadian Army nurse taking shelter in the villa; Kip, an Indian sapper; and David Caravaggio, an Italian-Canadian thief. The villa has a

unique location and as Marijke Denger suggests, "although the villa has been assigned to the margins of organized human coexistence, those who retreat to its environment are not necessarily barred from investing in their surroundings in a potentially productive way" (36). In the villa, only the shattered and the littered remain, thus making debris one of the principal concerns of the narrative, defining its very texture and quality. The villa's location and its connection to its inhabitants are, no doubt, supremely important in understanding how space and the materiality of ruination affect the human sensorium in Ondaatje's text. It is precisely so because both Hana and the patient (the two most important figures of the novel) share many affinities. Significantly enough, these are two bodies in ruins which corroborate the villa's ruined state and affect each other's functions. Denger has brilliantly observed:

> In San Girolamo, Hana not only takes on the responsibility of nursing a dying man. She is also incited by the villa's ruined topography to take up certain responsibilities concerning her spatial surroundings. Both the patient and their mutual environment then come to perform certain functions for Hana. (41)

Another significant example of a body in ruin would be Katherine's decaying body lying in the Cave of Swimmers. Although Almasy undertakes a three-day long trek to British-controlled El Taj to seek help to rescue the dying Katherine, he is detained as a secret agent because of his exotic name. He is even further delayed for a host for other reasons too long to include here. In fact, during this long detour, Katherine has already died in the enveloping darkness of the cave; her body, once in a state of gradual decay and ruination. has now completely turned into debris.

It is noticeable that the Villa of San Girolamo presents the reader with a space and materiality that can allow a meeting or encounter between internal and external spaces to take place so much so that the garden outside the dwelling can invade the interior seamlessly and vice versa:

> Now, the villa's interior spills out into its surroundings: "There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms" (*EP* 43). One consequence of the villa's permeability is that it is no longer divided into distinguishable sub-spaces with individual, predetermined functions. For Hana, this means that there are no restrictions to the purposes to which her surroundings may be put. (Denger 41)

This possibility seems perfectly aligned with French urban thinker Henri Lefevre's contention about space. Lefevre suggested that it is the complex, and often conflicting interactions between internal and external spaces that characterize the whole of human history, and the history of space and life (176). Thus, architecture, a means to containing and nurturing life, can also invite forces of the outside in, that is to say, the closure separating the inside from the outside can only be an abstraction, not a solid, concrete demarcation (176).

It must be stated here that the focus of this paper is exclusively on Ondaatje's use of ruination and affect in *The English Patient*. It is significant in this regard to look at the novel's title which, metaphorically speaking, immediately conjures up a body in ruins (as suggested previously), something that brilliantly tallies with the representation of a house or a nation in a state of decay and dissipation, as it is evident in Ondaatje's text. It is hardly easy to separate buildings and bodies. In some cases, as Victor Buchli argues, built forms exceed the materiality of bodies in terms of animacy, and can contain "ancestral substances and presences" that preexist as well as outlive human lives and bodies (157). Buchli notes how, as a result of the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, the victims' bodies have been utterly and unidentifiably mingled with the remaining parts of the built edifice, leaving the post-9/11 setting an increasingly complex, puzzling, and unnavigable landscape (157).

Ondaatje's placing of four characters in the derelict and war-torn landscape of Italy in this light is indeed apt while the villa's bombed and ruined architectural construction could be viewed to imply the total inseparability of bodies and buildings. Following Gell and Buchli's line of argument, it could be established that the characters inhabiting the Villa of San Girolamo are almost absorbed in and subsumed under the influence of the villa who, like Gell's Māori figures in the meeting house, are mere "furnishings," mobile appurtenances of the villa's structure. In Ondaatje's novel, they indeed have become part and parcel of the villa's habitation and surroundings. As Ladislaus de Almasy dies in the Villa of San Girolamo, his lifeless and decayed material body not only becomes part of the villa's ruined environment but also of life in an extended and collective form. It is important to note that architecture and the built edifice construct one's being in the world. As Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa astutely observed, architecture aims to mobilize and deploy rhetorical devices that constitute one's lived experience and embodiment (71). Ruination, on the contrary, demonstrates utter destruction and dereliction, depriving the built form of its integrity, something that American architect Frank Lloyd Wright considered the most significant element of modern architecture (72). In this sense, the stable materiality of architecture and the built edifice can be mere wishful thinking.

While speaking of the body and its relation to history and space in *The English Patient*, Christopher McVey has observed that Michael Ondaatje's novel deploys images of corporeality, monstrosity, and destruction (both in terms of materiality and metaphoricity) to indicate a restless, tensional and ambiguous relationship between the space of the sovereign self and wider communities of belonging while implying that subjectivity in the text remains largely entangled at the intersection of these two different, conflictual spatialities. As McVey seems to suggest, dreams of a total and independent subject are completely de-totalized and thrown into relief by Ondaatje's utilization of the deracialized, mongrel body which acts as a provisional, interstitial and constantly shifting space between two unstable

spatial markers (141). This hybrid body that is simultaneously somewhere and nowhere is, no doubt, ridden with ambivalence and ambiguity. It occupies a liminal space between two materialities which are often in disagreement with one another. Interestingly enough, the spatial location of the villa can also be said to be endowed with liminal attributes. As "it is at once profoundly shaped by its previous involvement in and defined by its current removal from social structure, Villa San Girolamo can be said to display liminal attributes" (Denger 36).

Throughout human history, spaces of ruination have had a certain glamour and beauty in popular imagination. They are sometimes particularly appealing for their affective, sensual/sensorial details and conditions as they instantly evoke a sense of desolate beauty, but also, importantly, the grandeur of the past (Macaulay 255). In Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, it is the context that provides the reader with an understanding of how important ruins are in this text. The setting of the novel in a war-devastated Italian villa at the height of the Italian Campaign during the Second World War is quite clear enough. Here, it can be argued that the use of ruins in this novel is not only to show the large-scale devastation of World War II but to embody and generate an affective response that is somewhat aligned with Macaulay's conceptualization of ruins. Italy itself is a city with remarkable antecedents in history, famous for such historical sites as Venice and Milan. Thus, it is not hard to believe that Ondaatje's intention to use a Tuscan villa as the setting of his novel is to foreground Macaulay's idea of "dead cities" which "stir us with their desolate beauty" (255). The sense of affect or sensual/sensorial data can also be registered by certain formal properties of the text in discussion. One may argue that ruination in Ondaatje's novel operates not only in a geographical or physical way (at the level of content) but also in a metaphorical or figurative fashion (at the level of form). Roland Barthes has argued in his discussion on Marquis de Sade that "the pleasure of reading […] proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions)" (6). It will be intriguing to view one of Ondaatje's passages in the novel to illustrate Barthes's idea at work.

Ondaatje writes: "So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a sense of tapestry" (7). These gaps and fissures certainly imply a sense of violence, an effect of some destruction even in the textual space, but at the same time, can generate the pleasure of reading, an affect that is resultant of this archi-textual destruction.

This article would like to discuss the notion of "affect" a little later and show how ruins and affect are closely linked together. For the time being, it is important to focus on the idea of ruination at a slightly greater depth. As Jonathan Hill aptly notes, materials of temporary endurance and intricacies of ecology and acoustics hardly remain intact during the long process of decay and dissolution. As a result, the forms that are most substantial in quality may offer a somewhat fragmented, distorted, and unrealistic portrait of the original architectural environment (194). Hill thus challenges the essentialist notion of decay as ruins as he proposes a more inclusive and refined understanding of it: ruination, to say the least, is not an effect, but rather a process, a seamless continuity (194). In this sense, the Villa of San Girolamo can be argued to be in a state of ruination even before it is occupied by either of the novel's protagonists, namely, Hana, the patient (Count Ladislaus de Almasy), Kip, and David Caravaggio, or the process of decay may have started even before World War II erupted. It is to be remembered in this context that Almasy's burnt body is no less than a bombed and depleted landscape, just as Hana's broken and bleeding body is in ruins, intricately entwined with the war-devastated geography of Italy. The decay and degeneration of the built form are also caused by various natural phenomena, as the building in discussion is provisional, contingent, and circumstance-dependent. A building, as Hill argues, transforms into a ruin in due course:

> A building is in a constant state of transformation…. Harsh weather
> and atmospheric pollutants undermine components; plants, insects,

animals, and birds enlarge fissures and cracks; building materials react to each other; and people adjust, abandon, or destroy whole structures. (194)

Here, it may be advanced that this is what Ondaatje precisely aims at in his novel *The English Patient*. It is a truism to say that throughout the novel the ruined and depleted villa's presence is all-pervasive. Instead of depicting any material practice of maintenance and repair, Ondaatje prefers to leave the villa and other sites of excess and debris in an unchanged, unrepaired state. It is also significant to note that the novel was published in 1992, and written probably in the late 1980s, a decade symptomatic of the upsurge of neoliberal capitalism. Although practices of maintenance and repair can stall the process of gradual decay, an acceptance of partial ruination can interrogate the norm of consumption in capitalist societies (194). Thus, using the unrefined and undefined material space of ruins can be seen as an attempt on Ondaatje's part to challenge the norms and values of consumerism.

However, it is to be noted that the notion of waste can both strengthen and threaten the foundations of capitalism. As material culture expert Tim Edensor explains, it is indeed paramount to properly dispose of the produced waste (whether at an individual or institutional level) in order to meaningfully respond to a fast-paced, capitalist epoch that is in favour of exerting more rigorous control over spaces ("Waste" 315). The proper and timely deposition of waste can secure an ordered sense of social life. On the other hand, waste matter, if it is not properly deposited or disposed of, can pose a threat to all forms of heritage, commodified spaces as well as practices of maintenance and repair. Most often, these sites of excess are not easy to cleanse or expunge as they are particularly replete with unbounded litter and remnants, profuse in matter and meaning ("Ghosts" 829). Edensor observes that such sites, when haunted by disruptive ghosts, "seethe with memories" and "haunt the visitor with vague intimations of the past, refusing fixity" (829). It may be worthwhile to remember in this regard French philosopher Jacques Derrida's

contention about his project on hauntology. To explain his concept, Derrida gives the example of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet,* which employs Derrida's concept as it shows "the expected return of the dead King" (10). The spirit of Hamlet's late father, symptomatic of the death or end of history, comes by being revenant (coming back) as the play figures both "a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again" (10). The past can indeed haunt or affect the present in numerous ways. Even though the unrecognizably burnt patient Almasy can somehow suggest the disappearance of the traces of history, it must be noted that this elision can also entail the coming of a ghostly spectre, a past that no longer exists except in spectrality. Even though Hana modifies and appropriates her surroundings just as she likes, it does not, in fact, bring about a complete transformation in the villa's architectural set-up. Although she makes a vegetable patch in the courtyard of the ruined villa in order to trade vegetables with other food items from the town, it does not take away the fact that this built edifice was once a war hospital, the traces of which are still visible (Hana is a nurse looking after the English patient).

Sometimes ghosts and spectres are so pervasive and influential that they easily become part of one's day-to-day life. As far as Sadeq Rahimi's anthropological perspective is concerned, one's everyday, mundane life consists in living and working with spectres, ghosts, and apparitions just as unmistakably as spending time and cooperating with friends and colleagues. Whether it is a Balinese driver showing respect to spirits or a Javanese friend trying to appease the troublesome apparition responsible for keeping him awake, ghostly spectres are found to be everywhere in human society (7). Here, it must be pointed out that the concept of the ghost can function at both literal and metaphorical levels. As the English patient lies in his bed in the desolate, decrepit villa, tightly holding Herodotus's *Histories*, it is this intertext that allows the reader to catch a glimpse of his pre-crash life as a cartographer and desert explorer, as a secret lover of Katherine

Clifton, finally leading to her and her husband Geoffrey's death. Almasy can do nothing but mumble and reminisce about the past the traces of which, most importantly, the ghostly spectre of Katherine, still loom at large in the villa's surroundings, either in the process of Almasy's faint recollection, Hana's intermittent readings from *Histories*, or through her presence itself just as the patient activates and opens a window into Hana's past whence the phantasma of her father comes back, again and again. The past haunts the present in multiple ways in the built environment of San Girolamo and especially, the presence of the library in the villa's material condition can be viewed as an important instrument in this case. As Denger points out:

> In the library, selected episodes from the past are made tangible by German mines as well as numerous copies of canonical works of literature. The library not only allows for an intermingling of very different moments of the past in the present. Considering that it has been "sealed for safety" (EP 11), it is also a space in which the past endures to such an extent as to potentially impact dramatically on the future of anyone foolhardy enough to enter it. Manifesting the impossibility of neatly separating past events and their consequences from those of the present and the future, the library inserts an anachronous understanding of time into the heart of San Girolamo's architectural set-up. (45)

The past is hauntological but is also affective. Affect here can be said to mean either a sudden change or transformation due to the collision of two bodies or "the transitional product of an encounter, specific in its ethical and lived dimensions, and yet it is also as indefinite as the experience of a sunset, transformation, or ghost" (Colman 11-13). In fact, affect is not just produced by the collision of two bodies. There are a number of other factors which play a crucial role in generating affects: geography, memory, ecology, meteorology, culture, etc. The fact that an affect is as

indefinite as a ghost may also indicate its grounding in spectrality. Hence, haunting must be affective, and the functioning of memory and hauntology must be very closely connected. However, there appears a notable departure between the two. As Gaston R. Gordillo has suggested, a haunting is to be distinguished from memory, as it is not analogous to linguistically articulated narratives. Rather, it amounts to an affect generated by a non-presence which deploys a somewhat non-discursive, hard-to-articulate, and yet positive force on the body, thus transforming this absence into a material presence (31). Gordillo reframes ruination as "rubble" which, no doubt, broadens the creative possibilities of spaces of debris. He intends to show how the space of rubble affects material bodies and, more importantly, how the same object can bring into play a certain pressure on people with different class as well as cultural milieu (5). In addition, he wishes to outline the affective dimensions of matter and space through rubble's very negativity and the ruptures it foregrounds (6). Gordillo points out that whereas the notion of "ruin" clearly evokes a sense of disconnection, disembodiment, and rupture, it suggests, at the same time, a unified object that is considered somewhat fetishistic as far as elite sensibilities are concerned. In his analysis, this popular elitist conception of ruination lies heavily predicated on a sense of utter disregard for heaps of rubble, generally designated as "ruins" by the heritage industry (6). Hence, if the notion of ruins is an elite construction, the idea of rubble can be said to constitute a possibility that significantly interrogates the elitism surrounding piles of debris. "Rubble," as Gordillo states, emerges thus both as a concept of philosophical and political significance as it thoroughly deglamorizes ruins by revealing the gradual sedimentation and destruction of its material condition (10). It is important to note that Ondaatje, in his text, not only gives examples of ruins in the general sense (as an elite construct) but also of rubble (a framework that questions this sense of elitism).

It must be mentioned here that even though the ruin is a somewhat unified object, this paper will be using the word "ruins" or "ruination" throughout the rest of

the essay for the sake of convenience. There is indeed no denying that the tension between commodified metropolitan spaces and sites of excess and debris is an important concept in the theoretical literature on "ruins". The ordered and heritage spaces of the city can be found as similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "Apollonian," one which sharply contrasts with the "Dionysian" side of existence (vast spaces of ruination, a disordered sense of social remembering). One should not fail to notice Lefevre's insightful observations on these two sides of existence which, as already noted, conflict with and complement each other. As Lefevre argues: "If the living organism indeed captures, expends, and wastes a surplus of energy, it must do so by the laws of the universe" (178). However, the importance of the Dionysian challenging the totality of Apollonian, monitored, regulated domains is perhaps demonstrated nowhere better than in the work of British cultural geographer Tim Edensor. Edensor, in his thesis on industrial ruination, writes that the modern city is never able to assume a Apollonian, regulated domain of existence as it is continuously visited by the neglected and the repressed, most conspicuously in sites and spaces of marginality because these are sites where ghostly memories and hauntings cannot be completely expunged. ("Ghosts" 833).

In Edensor's study, these peripheral sites are the spaces that play a crucial role in evoking ghostly memories that can challenge preferred versions of history. As opposed to heritage and commemorative spaces like museums and memorials which often serve to reinforce an ordered sense of social remembering, the spaces between two or more buildings, the cluttered, unfurnished backsides of urban spaces, culverts, alleys, and service areas (833), often work to interrogate and disrupt this order and harmony. It is important to note that the villa in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is situated at the margins of human existence, a space that is, in Edensor's logic, would be continually haunted by disruptive ghostly spectres and involuntary memories, thereby refusing totalization and commodification. Ondaatje's refusal to glorify heritage spaces is also apparent in the total absence of museums and memorials in the

novel, spaces which are usually tasked with preserving and commodifying materialities through practices of maintenance and repair, something that promotes an ordered social remembering in the Western metropolis.

Conclusion

This essay has mainly tried to point out the interconnected nature between ruins, architecture, and affect in Michael Ondaatje's 1992 text. As already noted, Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel boasts of ruined landscapes and sites of debris which serve multiple functions in the context of the novel. First, these spaces of excess, ruination, and waste serve to interrogate the commodified and sanctified spaces of the heritage industry, practices of maintenance and repair, the upsurge of a consumerist, capitalist democracy, and an ordered sense of social remembering. Second, the sites of debris in the novel generate a sense of affect and haunting, both of which are heavily invested in the project of resisting fixity and totalization in urban spaces which in turn link this objective with the one mentioned above. Third, ruins in Ondaatje's text reveal architecture in a vulnerable, decayed, and decaying state by destroying its most valued component: integrity, thereby turning the material stability of architecture into wishful thinking. Fourth, ruination can occur in a building even before it is occupied or completely abandoned as it is conditioned by meteorological, ecological, and many other cultural factors. Fifth, bodies and buildings are inseparable from each other so much so that built edifices can serve not simply as anthropomorphic representations but as extensions of body or life collectively. Last but not least, this article responds to the complex interactions between literature, architecture, memory, hauntology, capitalism, waste matter, and affect in the rich, intricate tapestry of Ondaatje's puzzling yet interesting novel. The originality and wider implication of the analysis can be found in its repeated stress on the condition of materiality (an important concept in contemporary cultural criticism), as well as in stimulating further discussions about Ondaatje's multi-layered prose and his overriding interest in architecture. Further studies in this area may take into

consideration a geocritical reading of Ondaatje's novel, underscoring the complex dynamics and interdependence of space and place and the perspective of disability studies in approaching a more nuanced and refined understanding of the characters (Almasy, Hana, and Caravaggio) in the novel.

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"I saw my other self at the Zoo": Internal Focalizers and Illustrative Spaces in Zoo Narratives

Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez

Abstract: Utopian spaces have the ability to open possibilities for humans to interact with animals in desired spaces. However, one space that can reflect a positive and negative desire for humans and animals is the zoo. Zoos can be seen as a space where humans can experience different wildlife and examine a variety of species of animals. While this is one of many illustrations we see of zoos, Anthony Browne's *Zoo* and Katherine Applegate's *The One and Only Ivan* demonstrate instances where both humans and animals use the zoo as a space to narrate their social problems to the implied reader as a type of double address. Both narrators, a little boy going to the zoo, and Ivan the gorilla, display characteristics of internal focalizers who invite their readers to interpret the illustrations provided by the picture book and novel to demonstrate a side of their life that can be interpreted as their other. With the little boy, the reader has a glimpse of possible family abuse and mental health issues, and with Ivan, a sort of representation of how life would be if not born and trapped in a small mall zoo. In addition, both literary works show the zoo as a space to feel empathy for the implied reader as a type of internal focalization to voice their perspectives represented through the physical space of the zoo. Scholars such as McCloud, op de Beeck, and Leah Anderst agree on how illustrations can evoke empathy towards the implied reader as these provide an opportunity to analyse the illustrations as a form of hidden narrative. This research paper will explain how Chatman's focalization of narrative voices in texts highlights characteristics of empathy, and voices of human and non-human animals in zoos through written text and illustrations.

Keywords: *Children's literature; Zoo narratives; Internal focalization; Spaces; Animal studies*.

Zoo narratives have been described by scholars such as Aaron Santesso and Catherine Elick, as a space where the wild animal world is brought in and compounded into manmade spaces. Animal stories in literature provide the space for "animals and humans [to] cooperate, trick each other, fight with each other, talk to each other… we can say that in the cultures in which the tales were created, the boundary separating humans from (other) animals may not be hard and fast" (DeMello 2). In other words, the fluid boundaries between humans and animals in literature, emphasize how animal stories create a space for complex interactions and relationships. Moreover, Maria Nikolajeva articulates three types of animal stories, "animals in their natural environment with humanlike thoughts; animal fantasy, in which anthropomorphized animals are human stand-ins, living in humanlike communities; and finally, anthropomorphized animals" (Cunningham et al. 17). This provides a clear framework for understanding the different types of animal stories in literature, where there is a focus on the realistic depiction of animals in their habitats while attributing human thoughts and emotions to them. In the case of zoo narratives in children's literature, this approach allows readers to empathize with animals by bridging the cognitive and emotional gap between humans and animals, thus fostering a deeper connection to and understanding of the animal world.

However, in zoo narratives and zoo spaces, there is human authority and power involved when it comes to capturing, taming, and using animals for human entertainment. The zoo space within literature, zoo narratives, provides a "panoramic replication of the displayed animal's actual environment [as] part of our story" (Santesso 449) while also reminding the audience of the dangers and risks zoos can pose for animals. Such zoo spaces are a physical representation of animals being removed from their natural habitat, and without proper care, "many such animals also die, reminding readers of the trenchant critique of institutions like zoos" (Elick 212). Furthermore, zoo narratives invite readers to reflect on the duality present in zoo literature and real-life zoos: the effort to educate and entertain juxtaposed with the

ethical implications of confining and exploiting animals. It calls into question the justifications for zoos and urges a deeper consideration of the impact on the animals themselves, thus promoting a more informed and empathetic understanding of the issues at play.

Another perspective on animals in children's literature is the relationship between children and nature. Dobrin and Kidd in their book, *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, acknowledge how children are involved with nature given the legacy of romantic and Victorian literature, but children are also protected from nature due to the potential dangers this environment has in literature, including the description of wild animals. Both Dobrin and Kidd agree that many children "have limited opportunities for such experiences. Many of the activities that occupy the time of young children take place in settings that isolate them from the natural world or present only simulations of that world" (7). These simulated experiences, while valuable, can never fully replace the profound impact of firsthand interaction with nature. Literature, therefore, serves as a crucial medium through which children can explore and understand the natural world, bridging the gap between isolation and engagement with nature.

Literature offers a space for conversation where humans and animals are not treated as enemies, rather as individual beings with a voice to speak and interact with the readers of their respective books. A reminder of this can be seen in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) where it is possible for a tiger and a young man to survive days in the ocean without one eliminating the other. In children's literature, including picture books, comics, magazines, poems, and novels, zoos serve as a nexus where humans and animals converge. These texts depict zoos as curated spaces offering visitors a glimpse of wildlife within a controlled, human-designed environment. Animals inhabit artificial habitats meant to replicate their natural ecosystems, allowing young readers to experience a sanitized version of the wild world. This representation introduces children to the concept of human-animal interaction while raising subtle questions

about the authenticity of such encounters and the ethics of keeping animals in captivity for human education and entertainment. The text offers two different perspectives in terms of what the voice of the main protagonist is telling the reader and how animals and humans are used as points of reference in the narrative. In other words, it is the idea that the zoo, as an institution built to keep wildlife safe and for human entertainment, is a space entrapped where the voice of the child-protagonist in *Zoo* and Ivan from *The One and Only Ivan* engage with the other characters of their stories and demonstrates acts of empathy and a need for social action.

Therefore, the illustrations of the picture book *Zoo* (2008) by Anthony Browne and Katherine Applegate's novel *The One and Only Ivan* (2012) demonstrate instances where both humans and animals use the zoo as a space to narrate directly or indirectly positive and negative experiences to the implied reader as a type of internal focalization to voice their perspectives through the experience of going to the zoo. Here, levels of empathy are important to understand the way the characters from these books interact with other characters to demonstrate the need to act. In this case, I am using empathy to explain how the reader can feel emotion towards the narrator's lived experiences and experiencing self. Although there are different ways to define what empathy is and how readers can react towards it when a character is describing moments of vulnerability or emotional pain. In the article titled "Feeling with Real Others: Narrative Empathy," Leah Anderst explains how empathy allows the audience to understand the mind of the narrator as she or he shares their feelings, experiences, and imaginative moments. Since *Zoo* and *The One and Only Ivan* touch upon social problems, such as family abuse, animal cruelty, and lack of human empathy, Anderst's article contributes to the idea of how the narrator hints at how his relationship with their family or other characters in the story affect their way of thinking or acting in the story.

Furthermore, according to Anderst's explanation of empathy, she argues that situations presented in stories serve as a space for readers to explore not only how characters

react to actions of injustice, but also how these characters have the opportunity to display empathy, yet sometimes fail to do so. This allows readers to reflect on their own capacity for empathy and understand the complexities of human responses to injustice, ultimately fostering a deeper comprehension of moral and ethical behavior. Therefore, "the empathy of a reader for a fictional character, the reader's feeling with a character, imaginatively taking her perspective over the course of an engaging novel, functions as a training ground of sorts for increased empathy and altruistic behaviors in the real world" (Anderst 272). Anderst agrees that literature provides a space where the reader can see how characters handle real-world situations in an attempt to prepare the reader for similar situations they may face in real life. While the characters and the spaces they walk in are fictional, the situations they are presented with are accurate to what its implied readers may experience. Of course, this will also depend on the time period the book is representing and the target audience the author is writing for. In zoo narratives like *Zoo* and The *One and Only Ivan*, animals serve as catalysts for empathy development. *Zoo* illustrates this through the family's interactions with animals and the animals' responses, while *The One and Only Ivan* explores empathy through Ivan's attempts to communicate with humans from his mall enclosure. These stories align with Dobrin and Kidd's assertion that early exposure to nature, despite potential risks, is crucial for children's development. They argue, "close contact with nature can be dangerous, but so, too, can our evasion and denial of it. Perhaps if children are encouraged to explore nature from the beginning, they will not need the encouragement of nature writers or seek 'extreme' experiences" (2). By presenting animal perspectives and human-animal interactions, these narratives foster empathy and environmental awareness, potentially mitigating the need for more drastic measures to reconnect with nature later in life. William Nelles explores the idea of how it is possible for an animal to be the narrator if by nature animals cannot speak. Thus, it forms an inquiry where different perspectives of narratology, such as internal focalization and homodiegetic narratives, would answer and explain how animals can

voice their experiencing self in the story. As a response to this, Powell suggests the idea of a free pre-focalization in which the knowledge of the narrating self exceeds the experiencing self, thus the narrator is able to have a command of the human language. Moreover, a dual mode of focalization is suggested as a way to explain how human and animal speech are parallel with each other during narration. For my own paper, Powell's suggestions will be used to think further into the focalization of the animal narration within a zoo narrative and how that comes into play when the animal narration is focused solely on the animal's experiencing self and not any other character.

Edmiston provides a historical and cultural overview of key theories and terms within the field of narratology at the time. Edmiston points out specifically how Chatman challenges Genette's view on focalization saying how it is possible to consider point of view and character perspective if that same character is the one narrating the story. Therefore, based on these arguments and sharing of ideas of focalization and whether the first-person narration is a valid point of interest in the field, Edmiston offers other innovations in the theory by describing how it is possible for the narrator to be the main character of the story or simply an observer by defining these actions as internal focalization and external focalization. Edmiston's work also identifies the perspectives and narrative positions displayed in the sequence of action found in *Zoo* and *The One and Only Ivan*. Moreover, the focus on how an internal focalization works hand in hand with the relationship between images and text in multimodal genres such as picture books and children's novels with illustrations in specific chapters.

Yannicopoulou's work also explains how focalization is used in children's picture books, and why it is important for readers to learn how to read a picture book as a multimodal genre. The paper offers the idea that for a person to understand and grasp the full meaning a picture book is portraying, a person must read the picture book in three different modes: reading the narrated text; looking at the illustrations of the

picture book; and finally make connections between the text and the images and explore if the two complement each other in any shape or form. With this last statement, there is also the possibility that the illustrations are telling the reader a completely different story than the written text, thus providing a different form of focalization to the narrative of the story.

To understand the different perspectives narratology can offer on how protagonists express their experiences in their stories, a few key terms are introduced to explore how internal focalization is used with both human and animal protagonists. The book *Keywords for Children's Literature* edited by Philip Nel and Lissa Paul offers various entries of terms found within the field of children's literature and how have these terms evolved. The term "voice" can be used in diverse ways, especially to identify the way a character and narrator is representing their person in a story. Therefore, voice can be defined as "the set of signs characterizing the narrator and, more generally, the narrating instances, and governing the relations between narrating and narrative text as well as between narrating and narrated" (Cadden 225). By examining how these characters use the first-person, readers have a sense of how the narrators are addressing themselves to the narratee when the narrator wants to focus the reader's attention to the narrator as an individual or the narrator as part of the family unit, such as the unnamed child narrator talks about his family trip to the zoo and how he felt about it after the family returns home. In the case of *The One and Only Ivan*, Ivan always uses the first person "I" to refer to himself and the activities he does in the mall zoo, and how he sees and thinks about other gorillas that he sees on his T.V. and humans looking at him from the glass display window.

The choice of narrative voice in different genres can significantly impact how protagonists connect with readers. When a character uses first-person singular ("I" or "me"), it creates a sense of individual experience and intimate perspective. Conversely, the use of the first-person plural ("we") suggests a collective identity or shared experience. These shifts in self-reference can reflect the character's evolving sense of

self, their relationship to their community, or their attempt to engage readers in different ways. An example of why it is important to notice the singular and collective use of the first-person is because the narrators are demonstrating key moments of their social selves in their stories and what the power dynamics with the other characters are like. The child narrator in *Zoo* begins by telling the reader that "last Sunday, we all went to the zoo. Me and my brother were really excited" (Browne 3). Although this narration is presented as a past memory, the illustrations and detailed storytelling of the narrator imply the accuracy of the story, suggesting that these events happened recently. Moreover, since this is a story of a family outing, these could also serve as an example of an emotional moment that represents good and/or bad memories for the child narrator, which could also be another example of how real this experience is to not only the narrator, but how it is also received by the implied and real reader. On the next page of the picture book, the narrator describes how he had a fight with his brother out of boredom from the long car ride to the zoo. The child narrator caused his brother Harry to cry, which then caused the dad to tell "me off" and how the dad implies that it is always the child narrator's fault this event happens with the italicized "my" (Browne 3). The pronoun "my" emphasized by the narrator in *Zoo* points out how he is blaming himself for what happens, especially since the father is quick to blame the narrator. Furthermore, after the dad expresses his anger about the traffic jam, where the child narrator responds, "everyone laughed except Mum and Harry and me" (Browne 4). In other words, this is a moment where only the father is laughing due to the situation in the traffic jam. It seems the child narrator wants to tell the reader some information about his family or relationship with the father, but something is stopping him. If the reader reads this section of the picture book from the viewpoint of the child narrator, the reader might understand how the narrator is hesitant to give specific information because we have a character that has a more authoritative voice than the narrator, which in this case is the father. Furthermore, the child narrator demonstrates a different point of view in the narrative where the reader has a space to understand

the power dynamics within the family unit. Since "point of view is the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-orientation to which narratives events stand in relation" (Chatman 153), then the dimensions of the illustrations suggest how different information is being said even if it is not from the narrator of the story.

Similarly, in *The One and Only Ivan,* the animal narrator offers moments where he is representing his identity to the reader. There are certain moments in the novel where Ivan expresses his identity as how he sees himself and how people, specifically the people who are in charge of the mall zoo, see him as a dangerous silverback gorilla. In other words, he is the one and only Ivan, as in Ivan of the Big Top Mall Zoo, "the Freeway Gorilla. The Ape at Exit 8. The One and Only Ivan, Mighty Silverback" (Applegate 2), where his identity is based on how the mall zoo uses his him as a marketing tool to attract people to go to the mall and see him as the chief entertainment that the mall zoo has to offer. In another instance during Ivan's narration, he tells the reader how he understands his identity as not only the sole gorilla in the mall zoo but how he understands his own existence as Ivan. It is at this moment where Ivan expresses that, "sometimes I press my nose against the glass. My noseprint, like your fingerprint, is the first and the last and only one. The man wipes the glass and then I am gone" (Applegate 14). It is interesting how Ivan's words demonstrate his awareness of life, as in, he knows that each person and animal in existence is never the exact same being as stated by Ivan mentioning fingerprints as an example of identification. In addition, this part of the novel represents another side of voice as defined by Chatman as "the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience" (153). Therefore, the narrator's voice, in this case, Ivan's, is addressing the readers by demonstrating his awareness of his own identity as a gorilla in a mall zoo, but also his awareness of life outside the zoo and the humans who visit the Big Top Mall Zoo to see the one and only Ivan. However, voice is not the only tool being used in the narration of the child and animal protagonist, internal focalization is also put into practice to place the reader's attention on the narrator as a

character, and the actions that follow along with the type of genre being read (as in reading a picture book and a children's novel).

Chatman's theory of focalization and how this led towards internal focalization as "to designate the vantage point of the narrating self and that of the experiencing self" (Edmiston 738). However, focalization has been debated by Chatman, who argues for a different perspective from the original use of the term, which imposes restrictions on how narration and characters are perceived, "if we accept Genette's definition of focalization" (Edmiston 738). Chatman suggests viewing focalization as the perception of the "human who… participated in his story" (Edmiston 738). It should be noted, that Chatman is suggesting a way where the narrator can be the main character expressing her or his voice and social experiences. Hence, internal focalization is when the narrator of the story and the character doing the action in the plot sequence are the same person. However, the definition best describing what is happening in both "Zoo" and *The One and Only Ivan* is when the "narrator can place the focus in [her or] his experiencing self, a participant inside the story, and allow the latter to focalize characters and events just as [she or] he perceived them at the time of the events" (Edmiston 739). Furthermore, with internal focalization, since it is narrated as the narrator perceives what is happening around her or him, I argue that the protagonist in both stories have the ability to point out how the actions of other characters affect them since it influences their experiences and perceptions of going to the zoo as a family activity, and life being born in a mall zoo and being labeled another identity where Ivan the gorilla did not choose to be.

In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Regression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites defines power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons" and acknowledges that "all individuals hold a certain amount of power" (4). This concept of power extends beyond physical strength, focusing on power dynamics and structures among characters. In adolescent literature, adults often occupy a higher power position due to their authority. This manifests in adults

withholding information from adolescents and expecting respect regardless of their own flaws or mistreatment of others. However, adolescent characters in these narratives frequently develop their own power, finding their voice and agency. This process also allows secondary characters to bond with them, serving as models for the protagonists to become autonomous individuals. Through these interactions and power negotiations, adolescent characters navigate their place within complex social structures and develop their own sense of identity and agency. Returning to *Zoo*, as the family enjoys what seems to be a peaceful and fun day at the zoo, there are some signifiers from the focalizing perspective of the child narrator that hint at how the child is being treated by his father. This is clearly evident in the lack of care and interest the father presents to the kids, the language he uses through the picture book, and the way he is illustrated. In the text, the child narrator informs the readers that his mother brought chocolates for him and his brother. We know the father had the chocolates because the child narrator was asking him for it because he and his brother were hungry. The father refused to give him the chocolates "'because I say so,' said Dad. It seemed he was in one of his moods" (Browne 8). Here, the tone of the narrator shifts slightly as he reacts to his father's words. Despite his brother's whining for the chocolate, which was probably caused by his hungry state as information provided to the reader by the narrator, it seems the father is demonstrating his authority and dominance by not giving his children the chocolate. Moreover, with the illustrations of the picture book, the reader can see more of the gestural mode of the father that highlights his attitude and behavior towards his kids. In the following pages, the father throws away the chocolates to the ground, and prior to that, the father was looking down on the child narrator, where the clouds took the shape of horns on the father's head. Both the narration and illustrations combined represented some sort of change in the position of the child narrator, which becomes "notable for what they [in this case, the authorial relationship between the narrator and his father] indicate about shifts in social priorities, that is, for what they reveal about alterations in the desires and

behaviors of adults" (Sanchez-Eppler 35). The child narrator's perspective shifts between interactions with his father and observations of the zoo animals. This contrast highlights a parallel: the child's relationship with his authoritative father mirrors the animals' confinement for human entertainment. Both the child and the animals experience restrictions imposed by more powerful figures, suggesting themes of control and limited freedom. Thus, it can be argued that since *Zoo* is 'told' to the implied reader through a child's viewpoint and *The One and Only Ivan* is narrated by an animal, the reader will only receive information that is accessible to the child and animal narrator. As Chatman describes the different ways the narrator can describe what is happening in the story, "[she or he] may be restricted to the contemporary story moment… speaking of events of long duration or iteration in only a sentence or two, or, contrarily, expanding events in such a way that it takes longer to read about them than it took them to occur" (212). Both *Zoo* and *The One and Only Ivan* provide illustrations to show the audience information that is not available to the narrator. Either the narrator is not aware of the information outside his internal focalization or the illustrations in both the picture book and novel add a different lived experience that the narrator does not want to talk about. Moreover, this would also suggest that the reader would then have to read the picture book in three ways: following the narration of the child protagonist, the reader paying attention to the illustrations, and finally the implied reader internalizing the information received by both modes of storytelling. The reason why the reader would have to engage in a picture book at different levels of reading would be to understand the different levels of narration that are happening on the multimodal practices of a picture book as a genre, and the novel containing key illustrations to understand Ivan's voice. In other words, this would suggest a "word-and-picture combination, a captioned illustration, or a graphic sequence- presented to the reader via some physical medium, whether a book, a canvas, or a living body- helps the active reader generate the image" (op de Beeck 118) where the implied and real reader would also have to "possess these elementary skills of visual literacy before we

can start speaking about meaning-making" (Nikolajeva 28). In the following sections of both stories, illustrations demonstrate how the visual space and facial expressions of characters give perspective on a way for the reader to understand how each narrator and character is being represented by a version of their experiencing self.

Maria Nikolajeva explains in her chapter "Interpretative Codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks" that since picture books do not follow the same literary structure as other written genres for children, such as children's short stories and novels, picture books are considered to be "simple" since readers won't have a full engagement with the plot. However, for this same reason, Nikolajeva addresses this idea and argues that "the alleged simplicity, however, is only manifest on the most elementary plot level and often without taking text/image interaction into consideration" (29). In other words, although picture books are written in a simpler way compared to other written genres in children's literature, picture books offer the space to read them in different ways that are not available in short stories or novels, which is the space where the written text tells a story, and the illustration may represent the story in the same or different way. *The One and Only* Ivan's illustrations offer additional information of the story where the text fails to tell the reader. Ivan explains how he draws *X*s on the wall to mark how many days have passed. On page 145, there is an illustration of multiple *X*s, representing how long Ivan has been trapped in the mall zoo. Nikolajeva also states that "images can range within a broad continuum of representation modes, from photography to abstraction. Visual literacy demands understanding of the connection between the signifier (iconic sign) and the signified" (28). This also explains the importance of distinguishing how the implied narrator speaks in picture books and how the implied reader gives importance to the text or the illustrations when engaging in this form of multimodal genre. Unlike novels or short stories, where the implied reader and narrator would engage in a conversation within the detailed description provided by the text, and the different viewpoints provided by the plot, the reader would have to learn to adopt her or his understanding of the plot or

structure of the story by reading both the text provided and the illustration in the picture book.

Additional examples of how images can add information to the plot and illustrate different multimodal aspects that help the reader understand the narration are images in both *Zoo* and *The One and Only Ivan* where the characters look directly at their "other experiencing selves" or parallels to their situations. On pages 18 and 22, while the child protagonist is the one narrating and playing with his younger brother, the illustration focuses on the mother as she sees gorillas and monkeys at the zoo. The moment when she is viewing the monkey exhibit on pages 18 and 19, her children are fighting, the same way as the monkeys are also fighting inside their cage at the zoo. The mother then comments that ""They remind me of someone," said Mum. 'I can't think who.'"" (Browne 18). This moment is particularly revealing as it illustrates a stark disconnect between the mother's attention and her immediate surroundings. While her children are engaged in a squabble, the mother's focus shifts entirely to the animals in the zoo. Powell, using Kafka's animal fables as examples, claims that animals in literature can "evoke an overwhelming sense of entrapment experience by their protagonist [and other characters]" (132). It is possible that the mother does feel entrapped in her own home and life situation and is using the zoo as a space to escape from her family problems. Another example that hints at this is on pages 20-21, where a crowd of people are trying to get an orangutan to move and entertain them. The people are "shouting and banging on the glass, but it just ignores us. Miserable thing" (Browne 20). In the illustrations, the picture book *Zoo* is structured in a way where the reader can see what the family is experiencing at the zoo. The family is seen in the left panel, while the animals are at the right. In this panel, the dad, the child protagonist, and his brother disturb the orangutan, but the mom looks at it with concern, almost as if she feels sorry for the animal. This could represent how the mom is reacting towards the animal's isolation and confinement, by "self-understanding and one's sense of others, self-identity and others' identities" as a way to "define the relationship between

individuals and the socio-historical structure that traps them" (Powell 132). While there is no direct way for the child narrator or the characters to convey to the reader their problems at home, the interactions with the family and the animals show the possibility that there are problems within the family, enough for the reader to think and reflect upon the possible situation the family is going through. In addition, there is also the claim that the mom is displaying acts of empathy towards the animals trapped in the zoo since in the illustrations she is the only member of the family with no intention to bother the animals and the one who feels a connection towards them.

Moreover, Powell examines Kafka's animal fables to find connections between the self and the other in the narrations of the animals' point of view. Powell argues that Kafka expresses otherness in the sense that these animals define themselves in different identities in their stories. Although these animal narrators don't define themselves as another type of being, rather Powell analyzes what aspect of the animal narration defines them as "the self" and "not the self" as signifiers that highlight the space of identity and notions of it during the story and narration of these non-human characters. Although Powell's paper primarily addresses the wild and protesting nature of animals, as represented by Kafka's animal stories, Powell adds an interesting conversation on how the ontology of otherness and the notions of identity are portrayed in animal and human narrations. This is explained as the "relationships between external sociological constructs and internal psychological constructs [which] define the existential condition of self and other in terms of obsessive need to maintain those constructs as a sole source of safety and solace" (132). Powell adds the possibility that *Zoo* represents how humans represent their psychological state and communicate this through the journey of going to the zoo, where the zoo is both an entrapped space for the animals, but a space away from the human's problem and entrapped space, which would be represented as their own home.

Further into the picture book *Zoo,* the mom expressed that "a zoo is not for animals, rather it is for people" (Browne 22). With this information alone, the reader

cannot be sure what the mother is referring to, since the reader can see her words in the position of the child narrator's voice. The text is making a claim that the family trip to the zoo is an escape from the problems the family is suffering in their home and using the zoo as a space to escape what is happening in their home. Another aspect to think about is how "the face itself, the line between the visible and invisible worlds become even less clear…but when such images begin to drift out of their visual context they drift into the invisible world of symbols" (McCloud 130). Throughout "Zoo," the illustrations skillfully use the mother's facial expressions to convey her inner state and concerns. Each animal encounter seems to mirror an aspect of her family life, creating a poignant parallel between her domestic world and the zoo's inhabitants. The monkeys' squabbles reflect her sons' constant bickering, visually representing the chaos she manages daily. As she observes the primates' conflicts, her expression subtly shifts, revealing a mix of recognition and weariness. In other scenes, the mother's face betrays a sense of isolation, mirroring the solitary animals in their enclosures. This visual metaphor powerfully communicates her emotional distance from her family, despite their physical proximity. The most striking moment occurs when the mother locks eyes with a gorilla. The illustration captures a profound moment of mutual understanding. Her expression conveys a complex blend of empathy and resignation, suggesting she feels as trapped in her role as the gorilla in its cage. Empathy demands that individuals transcend their personal boundaries and imaginatively inhabit the experiences of others. This process requires one to step beyond their own perspective, envisioning the circumstances and emotional landscape of another person or animal. By projecting themselves into different realities, people can recognize and relate to feelings that may be unfamiliar to them, appreciating the nuances of situations outside their immediate experience. Batson's "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena," explains how asking questions could lead a person to start creating a space where she or he can imagine possibilities of how another person feels with the goal to "form [an] action: action by one person that effectively addresses the

need of another" (4). Therefore, as a tool, empathy is used to answer questions individuals have about the possibilities of what another person is feeling or going through. In other words, empathy uses "feelings for the other – feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like – to produce motivation to relieve the suffering of the person for whom empathy is felt" (4). Taking into consideration the information received from the child narrator and the internal focalization provided by the narration and the illustration, one can argue that *Zoo* represents an escape from possible family abuse by the father, interpreted by how the animal illustrations correlate with the child's narration, and how at the end, the illustration shown to the audience is the child narrator sitting on the floor, sad, and the shadow of cage bars covering his person.

Consequentially, *Ivan* also remarks how his experiencing self is represented at the mall zoo when he talks about how silverback gorillas are supposed to use anger as a way to protect others from predators. However, as Ivan expresses, this cannot be possible for him since he cannot protect anyone in his current space, referring that he is a gorilla trapped in a mall zoo. In *The One and Only Ivan,* his experiencing self is demonstrated in a scene where he is describing how gorillas born in the wild act and behave in their natural habitat. In the chapter called "tv," Ivan tells the reader how he enjoys watching the different colors displayed on the TV and how he is "fond of cartoons, with their bright jungle colors" (Applegate 23). While it seems that the animal narrator is not providing any insightful information to the reader, as the text demonstrates little information about the scene itself, there is one illustration found on the next page of the chapter. The TV Ivan talks about in this chapter can be seen by humans outside Ivan's domain. What humans see is how Ivan is viewing other people on the TV, but Ivan also says that the TV is old, and Ivan says that the zookeepers would forget to turn the TV on for Ivan, meaning that this device is functional only when the zookeeper turns it on for Ivan. The illustration is an image of Ivan watching the TV. With the evidence presented by the text itself, the reader can determine that Ivan is indeed seeing a reflection of himself on the TV and not other gorillas in a nature

channel. However, since the illustration is in black and white, we are unsure if Ivan is watching the nature show and seeing other gorillas in their natural habitat, as a way for the novel to demonstrate Ivan's understanding of his other identity in another space outside the zoo. At the same time, this could also show Ivan staring at his own reflection on the TV screen where he is looking directly at himself. In this case, the image can be more complex than it actually is, regardless of what the text is presenting. This could also be an example of how images can become symbols as stated by McCloud, for the chapter "tv" gives us the idea that Ivan is watching his reflection on the device, but the following chapter "the nature show" does show Ivan seeing other gorillas and observing the environment they are living in, and Ivan comparing his current space to those of gorillas outside of the zoo.

Through a narratological perspective, the voices of the child protagonist in *Zoo* by Anthony Browne and the animal protagonist in *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate were used to express each narrator's experienced self. Therefore, examining the space from a more cultural and historical perspective could challenge the idea of seeing the space of a zoo as more of a facility where people keep animals, take care of them, and allow others to see them and experience a sense of wildlife and more in terms of how the space of the zoo represents conservation to animal life and/or entertainment for humans. As previously discussed, empathy plays an important role where readers can view situations in works of literature and learn from the actions taken by the characters or by the actions done to them. Empathy, in a way, represents a gateway where characters can reflect on their own image and reflect on their lived experience within the entrapped space of the zoo. This is the case in *Zoo* where the boys and their mom find a sense of self as they observe the animals being locked in their cages and away from their environment. In a way, the boy from *Zoo* does feel trapped at home due to the way his father is treating their family. In *The One and Only Ivan,* Ivan presents his image of self by explaining the ways he is being presented to the public. As a mighty and dangerous silverback gorilla, Ivan entertains the people

who visit the mall zoo. Trapped in the closed environment of the zoo, he recalls his memories of being a free animal in the zoo space. What is interesting about the use of voice in *Zoo* and *The One and Only Ivan*, is how the narrator changes focalization during their individual zoo narratives and how they address the implied reader as they describe their social experiences taking a trip to the zoo or living in a mall zoo.

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Of Linkage and Separation: The Semiotics of Borders in Graphic Narratives

Maitrayee Mukherjee

Abstract: The traditional panel structure of comics, *The Adventures of Tintin* or the *Amar Chitra Katha* books, expects the reader to read each page in a particular sequential pattern of left to right, and top to bottom. The distribution of the panel boxes in the space of the page thus influences the narratorial interpretation, indicating a dependency between sequentiality and spatial distribution in comic narratives. In this context, the spaces left within the borders of two panels, their possible representations, and their interplay with the plot interpretation become relevant. On the contrary, graphic novels like *Palestine*, or *Bhimayana* hold an alternative structure of a flowing image narrative, without this distinction of panel borders, and a fundamental thematic change in their plot from that of the publications above. Again, in *Drawn to Berlin* although there are no panel lines drawn on most pages, the eyes of the reader tend to follow the traditional pattern of reading comics. Thus, a relationship between the thematic shift of the comics narrative, and the intact, interrupted, or completely dissolved panel borders can be identified, bringing attention to creative expressions in a transmedia language. This paper will investigate how the semiotic system of such a language works, and whether the breach of the traditional comics borders aligns with a thematic shift of borders within the text. In this context, the aforementioned works of Hergé, Joe Sacco, Ali Fitzgerald, Subhash Vyam, and relevant others will be discussed under a comparative lens, to understand how illustrative and textual borders of comics contribute to meaning-making. The intersected relationship between temporality and space, text narrative and image sequence, and border representation of different media in both Western and Indian contexts will be traced.

Keywords: *Graphic narratives; Borders; Transmedia language; Meaning-making; Narrative sequence.*

Literary narratives are weaved with a certain ordering of events along temporal threads. These threads can run linear, can create loops or knots, and each time resulting in a different possibility of narratorial expression from the same set of events. In the process, the narrative is organized, and infused with certain thematological, genological or historiographic elements. It is the literary components[1] of both the content and structure of the narrative, along with the physicality of the book covers, or the enclosing lines of poems, the endnotes and footnotes and such other 'paratexts', as termed by Gerard Genette (Berlatsky 164), that mould the events, turn the 'plot' into a 'tale'[2], and simultaneously, create a verbatim or metaphorical frame around it that distinguishes a representation from reality. Thus, the frame of the text does not only operate as an ornamentation to highlight its existence but also carries the characteristics of borders. A bordered space can be understood as a territory, that has selective elements within it that created the requirement for drawing the border and has necessarily excluded other elements while doing so. The border can be associated with 'restriction', a division between two entities, and simultaneously a space to invade, to cross. The frame that borders a literary text not only creates an inside world of the author-reader interaction but also marks the outside, as 'outside', a space not to be frequented by the text. This outside can be imagined as a dark contrast, against which the text illuminates the selected content. Georg Simmel notes the urge of artwork to be whole for itself, separated from the world around where the events flow multi-directionally and multi-dimensionally by its acquired autonomy (Simmel 11). Translating such understanding in the case of literary texts, the bordered space would convey a curated self-sufficiency, an autonomous structure. Within this structure, Simmel (11) argues, the threads of the artwork seem to run back to its own centre within the frame, thus in the case of literary texts, the movement of the temporal threads creates the order of text-specific

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[1] My use of the term 'literary' is in terms of what Jauss argued to be internal to the literary process itself, not dependent on other systems for their dynamics (Chanda iii).

[2] Plot and Tale are to be understood as content categories of the thematological method of textual analyses (Bandyopadhyay 10). The rearrangement of the timeline of events and the formation of the narrative timeline is referred to here.

sequentiality, causal relationships among events, and an overall narratorial flow - birthing the "stoff" from the "rostoff' (Bandyopadhyay 10). Hence the text, if imagined as a sovereign entity with a systemized distribution of a centre and a periphery, of power and common, analogous to a state, the politics of both its territory as well as inner society becomes relevant. This centre is new and can be synonymous or antithetical to its contemporary centre of the outside reality, thus holding a possibility of creating a critical dialogue with the latter.

However, the border, as mentioned above, becomes the gateway of distinction/interaction between the intra-textual and outer elements. In this metaphor, the border or framing of paratexts, ink marks of boxes or lines in a book page, or other kinds indicate not only what the text addresses, but also the inevitability of 'absentia' within the text. For any literary text to be formed, for any event to be represented (for any experience to turn into a recorded event within the text), a deleted, unchosen and unvoiced set of events are left outside the border, for otherwise, it will be impossible to create any order, detect patterns, and weave a 'tale' as a thematological content category (Bandyopadhyay 10). To question the text, to critically understand that it is indeed separate from the whole of reality, and a 'representation' with specific politics, and not the lived experiences themselves, it is extremely important to search outside the border. Thus, at this point of the current discussion, in the case of the reader, two tensions can be recognized; the act of reading is necessarily a critical activity in the context of reality, as the border marks the literary text as a self-governing structure itself, and here, especially the fiction provides a guard[3] with the veil of fantasy; and secondly, the border of the literary text confines or challenges the readers' horizons of expectations for the particular text, and asks to identify the new centre within it, and how the threads of events are running from or toward that centre. Thus, the reading experience of a literary text becomes not only a task of exploring the framed perimeter but also recognising the absentia, which is left out to highlight the text-specific prioritization. This priority cannot be understood

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[3] I use 'guard' not only in terms of the presence of the physical framing, but as a shelter that nurtures resistance.

as only an authorial decision, to meet or subvert the horizon of expectation, but the criticality of the frame itself, its physical and inferred characteristics and its impact must be taken into account.

As mentioned above, these framings of texts, literary or extra-literary, can be manifested through the physicality of the paratexts, the book covers, or the margins of pages as well. It may look like straight or curvy ink markings, that directly instruct the reader to deal with the words inside the marking as separated from outside, or it may look like spatial distances in between sentence(s). for example, in school textbooks, often there are sections in pages titled 'Did you know?' or 'Activity' and others printed in a separate box.

Figure 1: Page of NCERT Class 7 Science Book (NCERT)

In Figure 1, the blue box in the right column is distinguished from the rest of the texts printed on the page with its heading 'Activity', the blue colour, and the box shape, asking the reader to engage in an act different from reading the rest of the page. The two columns of the page, however, are separated with a blank

space in between, instructing the reader to complete the left column first from top to bottom, and then proceed to the right column. Interestingly, the eye of the reader is trained to inevitably go from left to right first, stop if there is an infringement in the continuity of printed words, and then continue reading from top to bottom of the text, when reading languages whose scripts are written in left-to-right direction[4]. This system of reading adheres from textbooks to newspapers, leisure reading, and in case of graphic narratives as well. The whole of the page, distinguished from the physicality of the outer world, is not perceived all at once, but in a predetermined directional way of trained reading or seeing the images. In comic books, the text within a panel box, and all the panel boxes in the space of the page are read in the same fashion. In this paper, I am interested in understanding how the two elements of distinction, the literary components of the text and the ink markings of the panels interact with each other, in support or criticality. What they leave behind, and what falls in between the panel boxes, is erased by the white space of the paper is also to be investigated. The following is an attempt to understand the politics of panel boxes or their absence in comic pages, by comparing multiple English (original or translated) graphic narrative texts.

Fights Inside the Border

Tintin the reporter has travelled deep in the sea, through deadly snow mountains, conquered high waves, and even went to the moon. The comic started publishing in various magazines in January 1929 and came out as the first book format in 1930 (Sarkar 88). Hergé created the mega narrative of Tintin, a reporter with quirky friends and a pet dog, who travelled over six continents, more than twenty countries, and at least four imaginary terrains (Sarkar 88). Yet, the author did not clarify any specific place as the home of the reporter; comic issues like *The Seven Crystal Balls* may indicate Tintin lives in England, as he says of returning to London to Professor Calculus at Marlinspike in the beginning (Hergé, *The Seven*

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[4] For other languages with different order of writing, the eye is preprogrammed accordingly, for example, Japanese Manga, even in translation is read from back to front, and from right to left.

Crystal Balls [Adventures of Tintin] 3). However, no publications of the comic series mention a home address for Tintin, which provokes the reader to think of him as belonging everywhere, to every nation and beyond borders. Hergé kept the element of journalism as his profession, thus binding him to the search for news, having access to multiple forbidden places, and his goodwill bringing him favour from police or other state authorities. With permission to carry a pistol, brave Tintin would investigate suspicious events, till he discovers an answer which he believes to be the truth. Here, at this point, the critical readership of the comics may raise two questions; one is regarding the construction and nature of this investigated 'truth', and secondly, the sociopolitical position of Tintin in these narratives.

A European white-skinned reporter when investigating in America, Congo or Peru, encounters with 'Red Indians', African natives, or the Incas, is turned into their saviour. Zorrino, the orange seller in Peru, while guiding Tintin, Snowy and Haddock to the Sun Temple, mentions repeatedly how Tintin is saving his life in forests, over rivers, or mountains (Hergé, *Prisoners of the Sun [Adventures of Tintin]* 26). Tintin is not from the land of the Incas, while Zorrino knows the route toward the Sun temple, the hooks and dangers on the way, the animals of the forest, and the tide of the rivers, and yet, Tintin is necessarily the one who saves Zorrino. In Congo, he prescribes Quinine for malaria to the tribe and becomes their figure to worship. In the narratives, thus he elevates from the horizontal plane of his fellow characters to a distinctive hierarchy, creating a radical binary between the white-skinned educated urban reporter and the locals. The 20th-century context of the contemporality of the publication of the Tintin books further strengthens this argument. In the documentary *Tintin and I.- Interview with Hergé*, the author of the comics claimed that he did no pro-German propaganda, he didn't have any German friends, but on the other hand, researchers like Jan Bucquoy wrote that Hergé used to draw antisemitic cartoons in a Nazi newspaper entitled 'Brusseler Zeitung', and when he went to the archive to find some of the copies of the newspaper, he found the cartoon pages had been

cut out (Sarkar 63). Again, in 1944, when the Allied forces occupied Belgium, 144 names of traitors were distributed in leaflets, which included Hergé among other Germans (Sarkar 65). In other places, it has also been claimed that Hergé wrote Tintin in a certain way under the Nazi regiment to keep publishing the books, but again, Hergé himself has admitted that he drew Africans in the pure spirit of paternalism that was prevalent in those days (*The Economic Times*). This paternalism, the assumed colonial gaze of the author was transferred to the text, banishing any narratorial possibility that may create an obstacle for the white European inside the borders- that of the panels, or the content categories. Tintin is the centrepiece within the panel boxes; the speech bubbles and other words must defend his cause with such confidence, that the narratorial truth becomes his.

In *Tintin in America*, when Bobby Smiles meet the 'Redskins' (Figure 2), a distinct shift between the language of the latter from the former can be easily observed. The Sachem of the natives calls themselves 'Blackfeet', is easily manipulated by the white-skinned Bobby, and is stupid enough to forget where they have hidden the hatchet after fighting (Hergé, *Tintin in America [Adventures of Tintin]* 11). The panel borders do not remain ink marks anymore but turn into boundaries within which only the dominant narrative of the power is uttered from the mouth of both the powerful and oppressed. The possibility of an alternative voice of the marginalised slips in the spaces between successive panel boxes. At the end of the book, when Tintin defends the natives by claiming the oil pit as part of their land (29), he again elevates to the position of the saviour, and the rejected voice of the marginalized renders into a deafening silence. They do not get their rightful authority over the land, and the comic narrative escapes the racist discriminatory blame by deploying this strategy. Since this point, the 'Redskins' vanish from the story and the thematic threads again converge on the success of Tintin as the rescuer of Chicago.

Figure 2: A page from *Tintin in America* (*The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé)

The border does not always operate in such clarity but often creates an illusionary liminality, a space for transaction. Zorrino, in *Prisoners of the Sun*, resides in such a juncture through whom the hierarchy operates, subjectifying the natives of all land as those who need to be saved. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon notes:

> They picked out promising adolescents, they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture, they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words, that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country, they were sent home, whitewashed (Fanon 7).

This branding is subtle in Tintin's narratives, veiled under the childish humorous representations, and thankfulness of Tintin as a character trait. The appearance of

Tintin with a round face of innocence, and his affectionate relation with Snowy makes it easier to plot. Again, it is not only the colonial agenda that deepens the border blackness but in the Indian comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* by Anant Pai, a homogenous narrative of hegemony, rather than Indian heritage can be observed to become dominant. In *Soordas* (Bharati), the tale of a 16th-century Hindu poet, no dark-skinned character can be found, and contradictorily, in *The Churning of the Ocean*, which narrates the fight between deities and demons, the latter is portrayed in dark skin, and in fact, it features the highest number of dark-skinned characters in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series (Parameswaran and Cardoza 23). The argument of racism, or colourism becomes further strengthened as in *Akbar* (Patel and Kavadi), again no dark-skinned character can be found, thus potentially associating a darker skin tone with demons and the residents of Southern India, while simultaneously highlighting the North Indian hegemony of hierarchy over them. Further, Parameswaran and Cardoza (24) note, that 35% of all men characters in the series are dark-skinned, and only 15% of the women are so.

Figure 3: *Shankuntala* **from** *Amar Chitra Katha* **(Doongaji and Lavangia 7)**

Books like *Shakuntala* in the series paint women in an objectified and 'desirable' tone (Figure 3), thus labelling them with feminine performativity, which strongly aligns with their spoken words or activities. It evokes the 'male gaze' (Mulvey) among the reader-subconscious, and as a grandiose part of Indian childhood readings, the series successfully reinforces a man/woman,

dark/light, god/demon, caste-based, religion-based and class-based canonized narrative of homogeneity. Again, this discriminatory politics is subtle and strategic, for the series also includes publications like *Brave Women of India: 5 in 1*, or *Karna*.

The new centre created within the panel borders thus magnifies a dominant narrative of its contemporary sociopolitics and often resembles the state centres of reality. Even with the possibility of countering the latter, it does not attempt to rupture, but further constructs a border around itself to be safe, from the screams of the excluded voices trapped in the absentia of the white spaces between those borders, and from criticism of the readership with the shield of being literary, childish or fictional. But these borders are built by agencies of the centralised power, and it is inevitable for the unheard voices or silences to overrun the inter-panel space, slip through and attack the borders. It can be questioned whether such an intention and invasion would result in decentralizing the semiotics of comic narratives entirely, or rather simply create another matrix with a new centre and periphery.

The High Tides of Absentia

The complete dissolution of the panel borders in graphic narratives does not only imply the removal of the ink marks on the pages but also a destabilization of the thematic character of the text. As literary frameworks, the panel borders contribute to turning 'Rostoff' into a sequential 'tale', thus directly participating in the formation of the semiotic code, distinguishing the textuality from the non-textual[5]. In the last section, it has been discussed in detail how this non-textual often resides in conscious absentia, doomed and cast outside the panel boxes, by the politics of the textual. When in graphic narratives, such absents and unfits dare to cross the border of the panel (or the political border between the textual

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[5] Here, I differentiate between the 'textual' and the 'non-textual' on a restrictive and literal basis; the former indicating what has been selected and thus included within the text, and the latter referring to those experiences/events excluded from the text.

and non-textual/the literary and extra-literary[6]), the temporal threads of the narrative, knotted with each other creating a chronology of the 'tale', bursts and breaks apart, giving rise to chaos in the semiotic system of images, words, and narratives. The artwork and the words interact with each other, not only within single panel boxes but overall the pages, thus indicating two areas of concern: firstly, whether these interactions happen instantaneously, as soon as the panel borders open, or is there a pattern of ongoing and chronic communication, and secondly, if such interactions and rupturing of the panel borders decentralise the semiotics and textuality, including the non-textual and co-existing with it in a horizontal plane, or simply a structural change occurs. In other words, it is to be investigated if the syntagmatic shift on the pages of the graphic narratives deploys a paradigmatic shift in both the narrative and the artwork.

The 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, caused by the excessive and rapid increase in the flow of migrating Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans, Afghans and others (Peters et al.) creates the context for Ali Fitzgerald's *Drawn to Berlin: Comic Workshops in Refugee Shelters and Other Stories from a New Europe*. As a comic artist and author, Fitzgerald recognizes the visual potential of images and their possibility of invading sociopolitical biases and structures. The novel is a collage of multiple fragmented imaginations and lived experiences, tangled with each other, of passing refugees in Berlin. Living on the outskirts of Paris, Fitzgerald recognizes her privileged position and the vertical gap between herself and the refugees, which makes her question her action of turning the refugee experience and events into a comic book whether it is voicing the oppressed, or mocking and hence recolonizing the already-colonized (Murel). This questioning by the author of the authorial decision to mark the boundary between textuality and non-textuality breaches borders- the refugee life, with all its pain and endurance, lores and screams pour hard into each other, destabilising the centre/periphery binary. A new narrative, fragmented and scattered, analogous to the migration of millions,

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[6] The literary and the extra-literary are differentiated based on various intrinsic properties and politics, and yet they share a very porous differentiating membrane in-between. Thus, the active transport between these two broad textual categories becomes relevant here.

rises and finally, revolts to break down the homogenising labelling, criminalization, and systematic exclusion. The ones who are not included within the security of state borders, flood and bleed on Fitzgerald's comic pages, repeatedly triggering the initial quest of reading the non-text within the readership. The author notes to explain the second half of the book title,

New Europe was a shifting kaleidoscope, alternately dark and uplifting (Burrows 98). This spirality of the dual, the restlessness is mirrored in the novel, but also in the self-questioning of the author, which reminds of the same in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, recognized by Edward Said as an attempt to give Palestinians a narrative (Sacco iii).
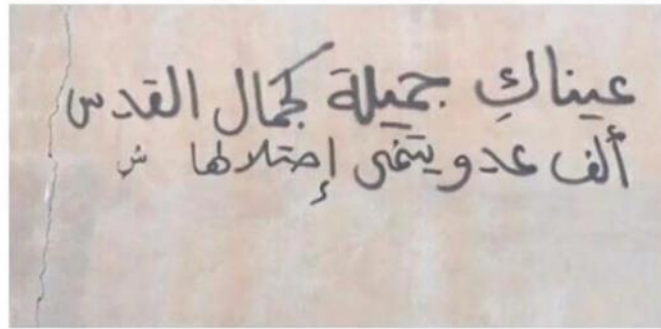
Your eyes are as beautiful as Jerusalem, a
thousand enemies wish to occupy it.

Figure 4: "Walls of Palestine" (*art.of.resistance*)

The politics of amnesia propagates a dehistoricization of the existence of the state from the sea to the river, eradicating the memories and extant of the people. Said notes that, unlike the superhuman comics of the American mainstream, Sacco's text does not deal with the winner, the hero who is physically and politically able to save himself and the people, but it captures the lives of 'history's losers' (Sacco v). They hold neither organization nor willpower, they get erased by Israeli bombing, in the real and literary space of the novel. Yet *Palestine* recognizes two things: firstly, when the war-torn walls of occupied lands read "Your eyes are as beautiful as Jerusalem, a thousand enemies wish to occupy it (Figure 4)," in contemporary reality, the textual spreads and engulfs the

non-textual, poetry and struggle becomes synonymous; and secondly, the self-questioning of the author through words and images regarding their possibility of recreating hierarchy in the name of voicing the silenced encourages critical reading. Sacco does not mask anything and certainly does not attempt to disregard or decline the existence of a vertical distance between the privileged and marginalized, but amplifies the suppressed voices, passing on the microphone whenever necessary. His politics of collecting information and the methodology of hearing out both Palestine and Israel become an extremely important and relevant part of the narrative.

In this positioning of self within the narrative, Sacco transparently shows his emotional refutes to the 'uncivilised', the 'uncultured' people of the streets. Sacco refused to give the kids in the Valley of Kidron money, they almost stole it from him, and when he returned to Jerusalem's old city, he despised the street hawkers (Sacco 24). He spoke in his mind:

> "They get me sick. Their big, sad eyes…Their empty pockets…I
> want to kick them (Sacco 24)."

The artwork portrays him in light of rich snobbery, his face turned from the people, and the people as intruding in his way with their hands and 'big, sad eyes', reminding and hammering him repeatedly not only about his privilege but how the privilege of one costs the rights of others, and how it is indeed the responsibility of the powerful, the central to subvert the dominant systematized narrative. Further, this subversive portrayal of Sacco aligns with Fitzgerald, and they locate themselves in a sensitized sphere of identifying the structure of both sociopolitical and economic oppression, and how the thematic-temporal threads may create an antithesis to the dominant reality. Such self-portrayal of the authors can be read as a reverse of Fanon's 'branding' or 'whitewashing' the colonised as part of colonial strategy. In other words, I propose that the borders can be used as a liminal space for resistance or manipulation. While the latter is what Fanon and the postcolonial arguments convey, regarding the former, the oppressed cross the border revolting against the powerful, and the powerful, if sensitized enough,

perhaps in a utopic imagination (yet not fantasy), visit the border and find themselves in confusion and vulnerable to the possibility that the oppressed may stop conceiving the border as absolute or static.

Figure 5: A page from *Palestine* (Sacco 24)

The entirety of *Palestine* is not without the panel borders, but it strongly creates confusion as even the bordered panel boxes interfere with each other. *Drawn to Berlin* creates a similar impact by not having any panel borders and pages full of block images. The predetermined habit of the reader to read in a certain (trained) direction lingers, but whether it is necessary, or whether the chronology of the narrative as set by the author is the only possibility haunts such existing horizons of expectations. Again, these attempts at words and artwork raise the next question of textuality and reading: how to

include/represent/textualize/read the inner and the world, the self and the outer, the psychological fancies and compromised reality in the same body of a text.

Memories of All that Did Not Happen

Published in 1985, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with the dystopic setting of Gilead, a state with military dictatorship and religious orthodoxy, dominated by interpretations of the Old Testament. The narrative belongs to Offred, a handmaid in the household of Commander Fred (thus, Of-Fred), who talks about her lived experiences of the 'Ceremony', a ritualistic rape impersonating the story of Rachel and Bilhah, of childbirth, and of mundane horror of extreme physical and psychological oppression. The illustrated version of the novel was published in 2019, and here, through the artwork and the words, the distribution and interactions of thoughts and experiences can be observed. It raises the question of what constitutes an experience, whether it is only the physical-environmental palpable events or the intimate intra-personal thought strings as well; and secondly, the question of public and private in the history-making course.
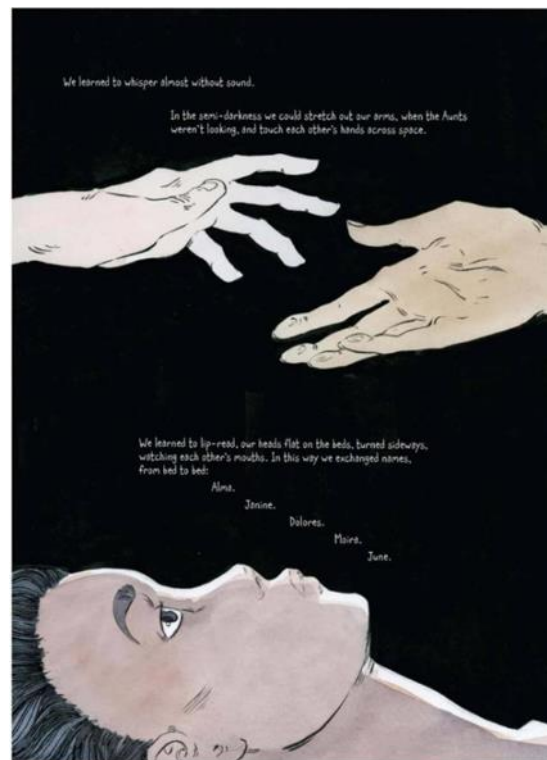
Figure 6: At the Red Centre (Atwood and Nault 7)

Gilead is a fictional state, governed by existing religious and political possible extremities, and the text discusses its making and ruling through the voice of a handmaid, one of the lowest classes, most peripheral and dismissed identities in such a state. In the Red Centre, during her training as a handmaid, June recalls how she learned to lipread, to communicate without words, in silence. In Figure 6, her name appears at the very bottom of a staircase structure of names of her fellow handmaids (Atwood and Nault 7); the staircase can be read from top to bottom, delivering a sense of dystopia and bleakness, as she finds herself lowest in the list, or in contrary, if the page is read from bottom to the top, with her name building the first step, then Moira, Dolores, Janine, and finally, at the top of the page, an indication of solidarity, of the names becoming comrades. Here, not only the panel borders are broken down, but the spatial distribution of artwork and words on the page directly claims a change in the reading approach, a syntagmatic shift, altering the predetermined directional reading of graphic narratives. The dystopic numbness of mind is poured out in the blackened background, and in resilience, the hands come closer, although unable to hold each other.

In her room at the commander's house, June aka Offred found a scratching behind the walls of the closet, which read, 'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum' (in English translation, 'Don't let the bastards grind you down') (Atwood and Nault 50, Figure 7). This screaming of the previous handmaid has remained doomed and dusty in the inner corner of a closet, never came out, and did not align with whatever happened to her, and perhaps will never align with whatever happens to handmaids in Gilead. But with this discovery of Offred, as her hands touch the fierce revolt of another nameless, the private becomes as important as the public in history-making. Antionette Burton notes how the home has always been disconnected from the historical discourses due to the absence of the public witness (Burton), and thus, the graphic narrative of Reneē Nault and Atwood substantially subverts and extends the boundaries of what to be included

in historical discourse, what should we talk about when narrating the history of a country.

Figure 7: 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' (Atwood and Nault 50)

The book does not eliminate panel borders, but it deconstructs the interpretation of borders, they are reduced to permeable membranes through which communication, or the absence of it, becomes a choice, not imposition. What did not happen, becomes an alternative to what did, and to access such alternatives, the transparency of intra-personal and psychological searches and findings becomes necessary for the readers.

In the place of the membrane metaphor, on the other hand, *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* turns the borders into communicative pipelines, running through the images and words on the pages of the graphic narrative. Using the Pardhan Gond art, the Digna patterns and the colours become imageries of resistance possibilities. For example, in Figure 8, the narration reads Ambedkar's speech in Mahad, and the artistic imagination

portrays the microphones as water sources, raining the rightful sprinkles on the audience (Vyam et al. 48). These audiences will later follow Babasaheb into an organized Dalit movement, continuing to this day with the vision of Ambedkar. The speech bubbles throughout the book have been drawn and categorized based on the tone and speaker of the words, for example, the 'bird speech bubble' belongs to those whose speeches are soft and who are victimized, 'the thought bubble' is indicated with a line of eyes, representing the sight of the mind, and others (Vyam et al. 100).
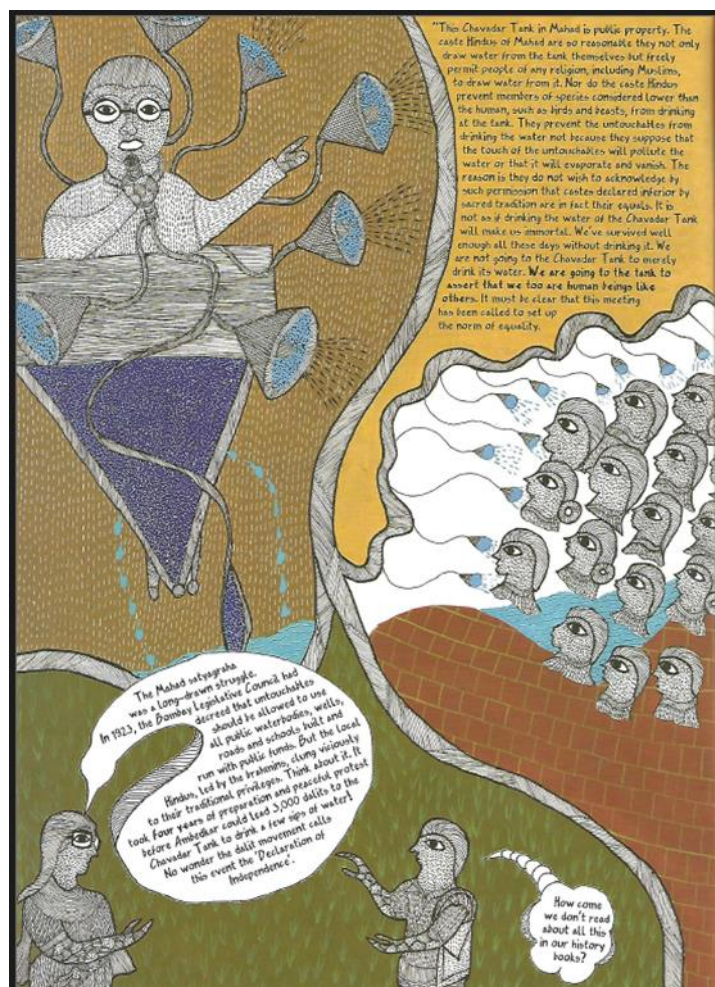
Figure 8: The Mahad Speech (Vyam et al. 48)

There can be further arguments made regarding the responsibility of the readership and how the reading methodology can be constructed or deconstructed in the case of graphic narratives and comic books, but it is evident that the

author/artist of the narratives must inspire such reading exercises. Graphic narratives are important not only because of the visual elements but for the images interact with the lexical, developing a new, conglomerated semiotics on the narratorial spatiotemporality. These semiotics hint at the presence of the non-textual, not in absentia, but as alternatives. The textual centre, when decentralised, opens up heterogeneous possibilities of multiplicity, the context becomes a textual (literary) extension (to the extra-literary). Such rhythmic resilient linkages within imposed separations must strive hard to prevail.

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"In the Street There Will Only Be Black and White": A Cultural Studies Analysis of Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue*

Matias Corbett Garcez

Abstract: The 1970 album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue* contains a host of themes that would appear quite often throughout the artist's, Gil Scott-Heron, vast discography, such as structural racism, police brutality, economic disenfranchisement, and political corruption. At the same time, it also incorporates and transforms different musical cultures, such as jazz, blues, and spoken word poetry. In it, Scott-Heron creates a powerful narrative that still resonates with the lives and experiences of marginalized voices and communities today. The form of his work, the way he makes use of themes, tones, imagery, symbols, and styles, that mix through a provocative poetics, is interpreted vis-à-vis different domains of social formation, such as the political and cultural upheavals that happened throughout the sixties in the United States. Much like the socio-cultural atmospheres of the time, there is a sense and atmosphere of immediacy, rawness, and brutality in the album. Through his graphic imagery coupled with savvy and witty social commentary, he exposes American society and praises Black communities' resilience and resistance. This research paper explores some cultural and musical aspects of Gil Scott-Heron's seminal album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue*, through a critical perspective of cultural studies. It discusses Scott-Heron's usage of spoken word in the album as a form of culturalexpression and resistance, as sonic fiction. The research highlights the interconnectedness of politics, culture, and identity in *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue* by analysing some of its songs. I discuss how Scott-Heron's lyrics reflect broadersociocultural and political critiques of the time. Finally, the analysis discusses the album's relevance to contemporary cultural discourse by analysing its significance for better understanding certain structures of contemporary cultural identity and social activism.

Keywords: *Gil Scott-Heron; Small Talk at 125th and Lenox Avenue; Poetics of*

Resistance; Sonic Fiction.

Introduction

Gil Scott-Heron was born in Chicago in 1949, but soon after went to live with his grandmother in Jackson, Tennessee until the age of 12, when she died. He then moved to New York, to live with his mother. According to his autobiography, *The Last Holiday*, during this period he was deeply influenced by the social and political atmospheres of the Civil Rights era, having experienced second-class citizenship and economic disenfranchisement in different places firsthand. Moreover, during the same period, he mentions being moved by the works of Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, as well as John Coltrane and Billie Holiday. By 21, he had published his first novel, *The Vulture*, and recorded his first album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*.

Chronologically, he is part of this 'stemming' of new black poets, whose seed had been planted in the 1920s and 30s, and whose initial sprouting was in the mid-60s. These 'new' poets were trying at all costs to approximate poetry (art), to life, to talk about things that the common person knew about, and in a manner which he or she could understand, in his or her language. This seemed to be the backbone of Scott-Heron's work: To be understood by people, not to be misinterpreted, not to be vague, not to be wordy or verbose, but objective and up-front. What mattered for him, what many of these new poets wanted, was to be heard or read by as many people as possible; to spread the word, and communicate. It must be underscored that many of these artists, Scott-Heron included, brought poetry to these people and places, that would otherwise have never known about the existence of this powerful communicational tool, and, above all, they delivered poetry to these people in a way they could understood it as a form of resistance, a weapon. The idea was not to make people awe-struck by the vastness of art, but rather to make people react to what was being exposed/said/sung; to capacitate people, pollinate their minds, and activate their spirits. Therefore, there was an underlying concern among many artists and intellectuals of the time with being understood, they wanted to be able to communicate with all people, not just a select

group of people. After all, if art (culture) was to be understood or interpreted as a form of participatory action, as an awakening tool, then, logically, the more people related to it, or interiorized and externalized it in some manner, the more chances there were of creating effective revolutions, or provoking collective and individual changes.

Scott-Heron's work interconnects music, poetry, and activism. Since the beginning of his career, he showcased a blend of spoken word, blues, jazz, funk, and soul, which he developed into a form of cultural expression and resistance. Beyond the musical innovations, discussed below, his outspoken critique of social, political, and economic disparities enriches the breadth and depth of his work.

His work continues to resonate deeply within the realms of music, literature, and activism. His pioneering fusion of spoken word and music laid the groundwork for the emergence of hip-hop as a potent form of cultural expression, inspiring subsequent generations of artists to use their voices as instruments of social change. Moreover, his incisive critiques of racism, inequality, and political corruption remain as relevant today as they were during his lifetime, serving as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggles for justice and equality.

In 2003, the BBC hired musician/movie maker, Don Letts, to direct a documentary about Scott-Heron, called *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. In the opening sequence, in just less than two minutes, many artists, poets, and musicians sing a few lines of Scott-Heron's famous song from his debut album, which is also the title of the documentary. Among them are: Sarah Jones, the Tony and Obie award-winning playwright and performer, Richie Havens, musician/activist, Abiodun Oyewole, member of The Last Poets and hardline activist, Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Jamaican-born, UK-based dub poet and activist, and Chuck D, from Public Enemy. In this short sequence, we see such a vast array of people, covering diverse areas as literature, theatre, music, politics, and activism, that it gives us an awareness of the depth, scope, and importance of his work and life.

His debut studio album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970) displays a unique spoken word performance, where he tackled issues of racial injustice, poverty, and

systemic oppression. The cover of the album says a lot about the poet, his poetry, and poetics. It is a picture of Scott-Heron sitting in some dodgy alley; he stares directly at the camera. It is a black-and-white picture, which makes part of his bodily contours hover over the full darkness of the alley. Right above the image, a small description reads:

> Gil Scott-Heron takes you Inside Black. Inside, where the anger burns against the Ones Who "broke my family tree." Inside, where the black man sorts his miseries "while white man walk on stars." He penetrates the core, where, blurred by the "plastic patterns" of a culture not his own, dulled by drugs, or held down by unremitting poverty, the Black's rage smolders, ready to flare into riot. In Small Talk at 125th and Lenox, Gil Scott-Heron, a twenty-year-old poet speaks for his people with an eloquence that has won him recognition as a major new talent. He is the voice of a new black man, rebellious and proud, demanding to be heard, announcing his destiny: "I AM COMING."

Above his name, but written in a smaller font, reads: "A new black poet." This heading, his name, and the name of the album are written in white capital letters. The choice of sudden and stark contrasts, as black and white, is in and by itself quite representative in terms of what the whole album is about: blacks and whites living in the same space, yet in completely different, or downright adverse circumstances. Beneath his leg, is a folded newspaper, perhaps suggesting that the narratives present in the newspaper are also part of the album. His long stare is embedded with the attitude and posture so characteristic of the intellectual/activist/militant of the time. Symbolically, 125th and Lenox refer to a place located in the heart of Harlem, or what Harlemites call Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (125th) and Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox).

Throughout the album, certain words are loaded with significance and meaning. For instance, Heron mentions the brutal assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. ("Evolution (and Flashback)"), the Black Panthers, Nat

Turner, and the Vietnam War ("Comment #1"), and Stockley Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, influential activists, ("Small Talk at 125th and Lenox"). Even his shorter songs are already full of information and images; a stanza can sum up a lifetime. For example, this is a 34-seconds-long song called "Paint It Black":

> Picture a man of nearly thirty
>
> Who seems twice as old with clothes torn and dirty
>
> Give him a job shining shoes
>
> Or cleaning out toilets with bus station crews
>
> Give him six children with nothing to eat
>
> Expose them to life on a ghetto street
>
> Tie and old rag around his wife's head
>
> And have her pregnant and lying in bed
>
> Stuff them all in a Harlem house
>
> And then tell them how bad things are down South. (1-10)

In ten lines, he managed to cover thirty years, which seems more like sixty. It is as livid as it is vivid. As much as it sketches a picture of a man, very detailed and specific, or context-based, it also sketches a picture of many African Americans, who live under the same conditions, and have almost the same appearance; local, yet national, speaking to one and all. He mentions the type of menial jobs that are offered to African Americans and the kind of living conditions that blacks must endure in the ghettos. He creates this horrible reality, and to make it worse, as if downgrading all this harshness and brutality, which in many ways is exactly what the government and corporate media do, says that down South things are even worse. By doing that, the violence and degradation present in the depiction are normalized, and the people are dehumanized by making it seem like they are mere statistics, victims of the system.

Poetics of Resistance: A New Communicative System

Concerning the African-American History of the 20th Century, specifically the sounds and songs that helped compose it, it is argued that a lot of this input comes from the vinyl, the LP record. In an album like *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, there is a surplus of knowledge, wisdom, histories, and a crisscross of potentialities, cultural patterns, and techniques. Further, it is also a multi-medium artefact that contains sound codes, visual stimuli, tactual textures, a most peculiar smell of enveloped remembrance, as well as manifold layers of narratives: personal, communal, imaginative, and soulful.

As will be discussed further on, Scott-Heron's album is but one example of a torrent of narratives that emerged throughout the 20th Century, as more and more African Americans began experimenting with this new medium, the vinyl. Especially after the 50s, as the technologies became more and more accessible, the record became a powerful means of resistance, as well as a way of spreading a whole culture and lifestyle for many African Americans. It is understood that African Americans transformed the LP record and the song into a fundamental chapter of the history of African Americans. Amiri Baraka has already made such a statement, that albums and songs are historical narratives, in his 1963 book *Blues People*. In it, Baraka argues that the study of the different stages and styles of *negro music*, and its development, presented excellent data, or primary sources, for a better understanding not only of African American history but also of the history of the United States. He saw music as one of the ethos of Black culture and argued that by analysing in-depth a music style linked almost exclusively to African Americans, such as the blues in the early 20th Century, one can have a clear picture of their overall living conditions and life experiences at the time. Music is a valid chronicle of African American history. He writes:

> It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up
> using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of
> Negro's social history was selected, and that in each group of
> songs, a certain frequency of reference could pretty well

> determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that
> particular period. (1965)

According to him, *negro music* displayed sophisticated communicative systems, or languages, as slave work songs, the blues, and jazz, each with specific techniques, vocabulary, and poetics. This research makes use of his ideas to analyse albums and songs as historical narratives. Following his argument, this research understands that a music album such as Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970) is as important for a critical discussion of what it meant to be black in the United States during the 60s and 70s, as Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963).

Following this premise, certain parallels and correspondences can be traced between specific African American music styles and artists, and sociocultural movements of the 20th Century. For instance, some underlying tenets of the New Negro movement of the 20s and 30s, which was intensified by the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities, were: a sense of racial pride, cultural awareness, and self-determination. Similarly, during the same historical period, jazz music became each time more popular, as did musicians like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Billie Holliday, all of whom distinctly displayed a sense of racial pride, cultural awareness, and self-determination. Another example, is during the '60s and '70s, the decades of Civil Rights, and Black Power, when more and more people were becoming radicalized, politically engaged, and going to the streets, the same sort of poetics can be detected in music and certain artists of the time. For instance, Max Roach's *We Insist!* (1960), whose very cover is a direct reference to the sit-ins happening all over the US, in which blacks and whites would go into segregated restaurants and sit together; Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971), which contains songs like "What's Going On" or "Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler)", which directly mention the Vietnam War, political and economic disenfranchisement, as well as black on black violence; and Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* (1973), which contains "Living for the City", a brutal chronicle of the day-to-day life of a black man born in Mississippi.

African American music of the 20th Century, therefore, is completely interweaved with the experience and condition of being black in the United States, or Black culture as a whole within the country. Anna Everett, in the introduction of her essay "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere," wrote about these manifold and deep connections between music, and what she defines as the "African-Diasporic Consciousness." She wrote:

> Despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations. The formation of these new African-inflected communications strategies enabled this heterogeneous mass of people somehow to overcome their profound dislocation, fragmentation, alienation, relocation, and ultimate commodification in the Western slavocracies of the modern world. (126)

She believes that music played a fundamental role in the lives of many African Americans because it not only preserved their ancestry, which had been usurped during the Middle Passage, or the forced trip of enslaved people across the Atlantic, but also functioned as a common ground for the establishment of new interpersonal relationships, new collectivities.

Throughout the 20th Century, black music and poetry were not only catalysts of change and transformation but also 'thermometers' of what was happening at the time. As Howard Zinn (2005) writes: "It was all there in the poetry, the prose, the music, sometimes masked, sometimes unmistakably clear – the signs of a people unbeaten, waiting, hot, coiled" (446). Through music and poetry, as in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, or hip-hop culture, African Americans wrote significant chapters of their collective history by establishing important struggles of resistance against a racist and colonial system

of government.

It is argued that during the 20th Century, African American music and poetry blended into a new communicative system, which developed new expressions, words, concepts, codes, and signs, as well as attitudes, sounds, techniques, and aesthetics. This new art is similar to what Wynton Marsalis calls 'existence music,' or the kind of music which:

> Does not take you out of the world, it puts you in the world. It
> makes you deal with it. It's not religiosity like 'thou must,' it says
> 'this is.' It deals with the present. It is the range of humanity that
> is in this music. (*Jazz*)

It is a form of communication that shares correspondences with what composer and theorist George E. Lewis (2004) termed 'improvised music,' or:

> [A] social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-
> day musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and
> musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a
> central part of their musical discourse. … [An] intercultural
> establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes,
> antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice. (280)

Overall, it is a communicative system embedded in Blackness and the Black Experience, similar to what Stephen Henderson (1973) terms 'new black poetry' or poetry "that speaks directly to Black people about themselves to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom" (16).

To paraphrase what Lewis says about improvised music, that its composition is more performer-supplied rather than composer-specific, and also that it is a transnational, transcultural improvisatory musical activity, this research argues that this new art has become a transnational and transcultural improvisatory communicative system focused on domain-specific contexts/performances; where intersubjective exchanges of knowledge and information happen. Therefore, in a sense, more than something racial, it is a set of attitudes, feelings, rhythms, verses,

and sounds that seems to always affirm the necessity of having self-determination of one's own life, as well as self-agency of situations and things in life.

   This research aims to discuss the ways Gil Scott-Heron's album managed to contribute to this vast database of knowledge and information. His poetry and music are interpreted as counter-narratives. Counter in the sense of being completely different from official and hegemonic narratives fabricated by oppressive systems of control, as in the song "Enough", which begins as follows:

> Had a poem here somewhere called "Enough" / That I'd like to
> do / Because every once in a while / A brother gets shot
> somewhere for no reason / A brother gets his head kicked in for
> no reason / And you wonder just exactly what in the hell is
> enough. (1-6)

Counter because he openly supports certain people, ideas, and organizations, which are understood to be dangerous elements within American society, according to the establishment, for instance, in the song "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox", in which he sings: "Who cares if LBJ is in town? / Up with Stockley and H. Rap Brown / I don't know if the riots is wrong [sic] / But whitey's been kicking my ass for too long" (16-19). Counter because he recollects the past that many official historical chronicles prefer to omit, as with "Evolution (and Flashback)", in which he sings:

> Until 1600 I was a darkie / Until 1865 a slave / In 1900 I was a
> nigger / Or at least that was my name / In 1960 I was a negro /
> And then brother Malcolm came along / And the some nigger shot
> Malcolm down / But the bitter truth lives on. (6-13)

Counter because he uncovers certain day-to-day stories and tragedies, which the State tries to keep veiled. Counter because he calls for immediate action, as with "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", when he sings "The revolution will not be televised / Will not be televised / Not be televised / The revolution will be no re-run, brothers / The revolution will be live!" (57-61); or in "Enough", which he finishes saying "Look over your shoulder, motherfucker, I am coming!" (55).

This research also discusses Scott-Heron's work in terms of the poetics of the immediate. Immediate because the living conditions of African Americans were deteriorating faster and faster. Immediate because police brutality was increasing, but the States seemed each time more silent about it. Immediate because he wanted to provoke revolutions in people's minds, where the first revolutions happen, as he said many times throughout his career. Immediate because he sang like many revolutionary political activists of his time.

Sonic Fiction

Theorist and filmmaker, Kodwo Eshun, writes at the beginning of his book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, (1999) that music must be experienced before it is analyzed. He argues that instead of resorting to different theories to discuss and explain music, we should choose instead to try to make sense of it by understanding which ways it affects, changes, and transforms us and our environments (7). As he writes:

> In CultStud, TechnoTheory and CyberCulture, those painfully archaic regimes, theory always comes to Music's rescue. The organization of sound is interpreted historically, politically, socially. Like a headmaster, theory teaches today's music a thing or 2 about life. It subdues music's ambition, reigns it in, restores it to its proper place, reconciles it to its naturally belated fate. (3)

However, he thinks that the opposite should happen and that music should be "encouraged in its despotic drive to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps, to eclipse reality in its willful exorbitance, to put out the sun" (3). The way he sees it, music is already a theory, a political act, a world view: music in and by itself already offers more than enough data for a critical and theoretical discussion of our social, cultural, political, and economic surroundings. He writes a lot about black music creating counter-memories, which function like alternative histories, or new beginnings, in that they operate from within the fissures and gaps of 'official' narratives and history. Black music, therefore, can create cracks in certain

systems of power and control. In the realm of music, for instance, black people had way fewer impediments and restrictions when compared to their history of social, political, and economic limitations created by a racist and diffused power structure.

He understands music as a communicational tool and suggests that blacks have managed to reinterpret the album, as well as the song, in such a manner, that they have been inventing all sorts of new technologies with these reinterpretations, such as sampling and scratching. Eshun's study focuses on enhancing the possibilities and pluralities found in music. It is dedicated to the *newest mutants* and musicians who have used technology/electronics to prosthetically enhance and extend their art. For instance, he argues that some of these *mutants/aliens* have learned to intensify their music's sensory traits, a form of enhancement, by electronically engineering its content and form, in search of fluidity, spontaneity, and trance-inducing mind states (4).

Throughout the book, Eshun analyses some albums and songs as part of the massive database of black/alien music; sounds which he interprets not only as valid and insightful narratives of our times but also as a necessary means for dealing with the pains and effects of living in alienation in an alien nation. He writes that these counter-memories of black/alien music are sonic fiction (SF): a crossbred combination of sleeve notes from albums, photographs, and drawings seen in albums, lyrics from songs, sound patterns and instrumentations in songs with no lyrics, samples/samplings which crisscross time and space, and much more. SF, thus, is the sum of all parts of a record or song, the stories, and possibilities that such totality pours out.

Small Talk at 125th and Lenox: Scott-Heron's Poetics of Resistance Through Sonic Fiction

Small Talk at 125th and Lenox is a quick glimpse into the mind of a man whose career would cover more than four decades. In it, we can notice his ability to disrobe the US of its portentousness and self-proclaimed virtues. He sees through and beyond the necessary illusions that had been fabricated to maintain systems and spheres of power and control. For example, in the song "The Revolution Will

Not Be Televised", he discusses how corporate media tries to create illusions through television ads and programs to divert people's attention from the real world, where revolutions happen. As he sings:

> You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able
> to plug in, turn on, and cop out / You will not be able to lose
> yourself on skag / And skip out for beer during commercials /
> Because the revolution will not be televised. (1-5)

The tone of his voice is intimidating and assertive, and as the intensity of the lyric rises, so too does the tempo of the song, with a strong percussive element. He also does not accept many of the delusions he sees. For example, the song "Whitey on the Moon," refers to the landing on the moon as if it were a part of the delusions of grandeur of people in power, and that even though America had sent some white folks to the moon, within the US many people were still striving to survive. Its imagery is repugnant at first, then contrastive and impactful. As he sings:

> A rat done bit my sister Nell / With whitey on the moon / Her face
> and arms began to swell / And whitey's on the moon / I can't pay
> no doctor bills / But whitey on the moon / Ten years from now,
> I'll be paying still / While whitey's on the moon. (1-8)

There are also some songs that discuss the absurdities and inconsistencies happening within the black communities. For instance, the song "Brother" refers to certain African Americans who insist that they are part of the Black struggle, that they are revolutionaries, yet they also see themselves as 'blacker' than most African Americans (blacker than thou reasoning) just because they have an afro hair or wear a dashiki. He expresses his opinion and criticism of this type of person, by pointing out that these so-called 'brothers' run away at the first sign of real danger: "But you're never around when your B.A. is in danger. / I mean your Black Ass" (25-26).

Overall, the album shows his ability to cut deep into different practices and discourses of the US. His lyrics/poems reveal to us a man who fathoms America's

racism, prejudice, and historical blunders, as well as the unconstitutionality of many day-to-day things and situations. For instance, in the song "Enough," he expresses anger and frustration over what blacks have had to endure throughout history, and still endured at present of the song. He says things like it was not enough that Blacks were brought to this world as property, and shackled; now they continue to be treated inhumanely. The way he sees it, all the talk about integration that had been happening in the country represented something different than what the government and the establishment were doing: "Somehow I cannot believe that it would be enough / For me to melt with you and integrate without the thoughts of rape and murder" (24-25). It is extremely explicit and threatening, and as discussed above, ends in an extremely violent manner.

Another example of his ability to analyze the manifold layers and hierarchies of the United States can be found in the song "Evolution (and Flashback)," which, as the title suggests, reports a different history, one told by African Americans. In it, as was briefly mentioned above, he uses different names African Americans have been given by white people, such as darkie, slave, n-word, and negro, to make parallels with different moments in history. There is a moment where he says: "We are tired of praying, and marching, and thinking, and learning/Brothers wanna start cutting, and shooting, and stealing, and burning" (27-28). It is as though the song stretches back to the banned part of John Lewis' speech at the March on Washington, which said that the changes and improvements happening all over were 'too little, too late.'

The album reaches back to the fear and anger of watching another lynching, hanging, quartering, or burning, and turns that to gunpowder. It mentions the frustration and hopelessness that jolts through the body and mind when one learns that most social problems happening in impoverished areas are political creations, nothing more than man-made decisions, and demand immediate reparations. Furthermore, the album also displays Scott-Heron's distinctive blend of jazz, blues, and spoken word. For instance, songs like "The Vulture" or "Who'll Pay Reparations on My Soul", in terms of form, are blues numbers. Nonetheless, they are transformed through his distinct use of spoken word, and the way he performs

them into a confrontational tool. Other songs, like "Comment #1" or "Whitey on the Moon" display polyrhythmic beats, with complex dialogues between percussive elements, tones, and timbres, which give them a jazzy effect.

Overall, it is evident that for him, the US, its history, its political and economic system, and its establishment of joint ventures, corporate capitalism, offshores, and outsourcings, was founded on and maintained by an extremely racist, oppressive, and aggressive system. From its most basic cultural and discursive practices, all the way up to its institutions, productive forces, ideologies, and values. As he sings in the song "Enough", at the end of the day it does not matter if you are a Republican or Democrat, a Liberal or Moderate, or "any of the rest of that shit you have used to make me forget to hate," because "in the street there will only be black and white." However, the album is less about suggesting any type of solution for all this, than it is about people being out on the streets starting the revolutions, demanding immediate change.

Conclusion

All this is part of Scott-Heron's immediacy poetics. His songs engage people with ideas, things, feelings, and situations. There is urgency in his rhetoric, in his style, which brings the listener closer to him. His music stands miles away from entertainment music and is extremely close to direct action, involvement, commitment, and taking sides. His poetics gravitate towards the social function of the poet/musician, it is about being conscious of the struggles of people who have been marginalized, excluded, and written out of history. It is about recognizing these people and their plights and transforming these historical conflicts into present-day wars. It is about pointing out who is part of the establishment, explaining why there is an establishment, and denouncing how the establishment works. By doing this, Scott-Heron manages to redefine the technology of record-making, by transforming the album into a tool of resistance. Far from being a mass-oriented cultural product, the record becomes a form of remembrance and a call for action.

He talks about macro-level relationships and social orders, such as the country's history, race and racism, in a manner that places the listener right in the middle of it all. He brings to the forefront what has been omitted from the media, forgotten by the government, and denied by official history. His poetry interweaves individuals into collective spheres, past struggles to present ones, macro relationships to micro relationships.

This is another characteristic trait of his work: He uses the pronoun 'we' quite often in his songs as if always placing himself within something greater, and always in an affirmative manner, asserting himself, never as a passive participant, always proactive. Therefore, there is the idea that this is the plight of a group, it is part of a movement. A good example of this can be seen in the first song of his first album, which starts like this: "Good evening, my name is Gil Scott-Heron, my accomplices are …" ("Introduction / The revolution Will Not Be Televised"). This was his way of introducing himself in his first album. It sounds like a testimony, he is giving his statement to the court, addressing the jury, and he begins by admitting he is guilty by using the term accomplice. In a country in which structural racism dictates day-to-day life, he will always be guilty, from the get go.

Words had quite an appeal to Scott-Heron. The first chapter of his memoir, *The Last Holiday* (2000), begins like this: "Words have been important to me for as long as I can remember. Their sound, their construction, their origins" (7). He was controversial and subversive, but also extremely conscious of many worldwide struggles for dignity and equality. His biggest concerns, however, always seemed to be grounded back home, in the US. He wrote a lot about the problems which black people and immigrants faced within the US, and also about the problems which many workers were going through. In an interview he gave to Jamie Byng, for *The Guardian*, there is a moment where he says: "If someone comes to you and asks for help, and you can help them, you're supposed to help them. You have been put in the position somehow to be able to help this person" (Byng 2011). Byng comments on this passage by saying that Scott-Heron was always helping those around him, that he:

> Lived by this creed throughout a magnificent musical career, he
> helped people again and again, with his willingness and ability to
> articulate deep truths, through his eloquent attacks on injustices
> and his enormous compassion for people's pain. (Ibidem)

Like few other black poets, he managed to hear and understand what people in the streets were talking about, managed to speak like them in the same language, the language of combat, of fighting back and standing tall. The poet and political man are one in him. This is what Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about him: "Chance taker / Emotion voyager / Street-strutter / Contemporary spirit / Untamed proud poet / Rough Healer / He is His" (1-8) (Qtd. in Byng 2011). Like all other activists of his time, he too was taking his chances. His contemporary spirit strutted down many streets completely untamed, as he healed those around him as well as himself through his poetry and music.

He was a musician, but also, above all, a bluesician, as he defined himself. He knew a lot about race relations in the US, the history behind such problematic issues, and also its present-day status. He wrote a lot about black history, he knew a lot about the history of black music, and he was a magnificent exponent of black culture. To say he is a jazz poet binds him to Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, or even Charles Mingus, all of whom used their art as a means of resistance; to say he is a proto-rapper places him in the same league as The Last Poets or Watts Prophets, notorious for having used music to galvanize people into taking action.

These are but a few things that can be said about his life and work. These are the pieces of the man, some of the fragments he has left behind for us to piece together. These are a few of his sound explorations, but they already reveal a talented musician, who was willing to search for new rhythms and styles. The more we understand and discuss his work, the more we understand about the Black Experience within the US; in that he was certainly responsible for maintaining Black culture alive in people's minds, for expanding it into new spheres, and transforming and renewing it. Above all, it must be underscored that he repeatedly manifested his support for various minority struggles from all around the world,

and his political positioning was beyond bipartisan, he was from the party of the common man and woman, as he said.

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Navigating the Idea of Postmemory and Material Memory Among the *Girmitiyas* and Their Descendants

Harshita Manchanda

Abstract: The historical exploration of the indentured diaspora predominantly depends on the narratives and archives containing the official documentation pertaining to its history. The indentureship was a particular form of contracted labour that had limited documentation, and the discourse to this date remains absent in the public domain. The idea of 'home' and 'homeland' has always been a conflicting one and has become a challenging one when it comes to indentured labour. Is it the place of fixed origins, the place where our ancestors were born, or is it an ever-changing idea that is only a utopia? And how do we explore the idea of 'home' and its memory, if the movement is voluntary/involuntary at the same time? This article seeks to examine the role of memory in indentured labour and how the notion of 'home' is (re)constructed through the idea of 'material memory'. The stories in the volume *We Mark Your Memory* explores how the descendants of indentured labour trace their *roots* and their ancestors' *routes*, the impact it has on them, and how they experience these intergenerational memories. This text explores items that recreate home — through objects, photographs, food and culture, how they become sources of memory and, by extension, oceanic memories, and act as a witness to the *Girmit* consciousness. This paper argues how *Girmit* ideology can be constructively interpreted through the lens of 'postmemory' by Marianne Hirsch, where the notion of tracing 'home' becomes impossible to attain, as it is indirect in nature. Building on this, Avtar Brah's concept of 'homing desire' helps us to understand the complex longing for a place of origin that may be geographically distant, culturally unfamiliar, or even lost to history.

Keywords: *Girmitiyas; Indentured labour; Diaspora; Postmemory; Home*.

The genre of indentured labour is convoluted and unstable, situated between ethnography, autobiography, and archives. Historical accounts are constructed primarily from either provided narratives or archival materials containing official documentation about the subject's history. However, a question arises: how should one approach writing and rewriting history when both types of materials prove inadequate? The short stories "The Tamarind Tree" by Brij V. Lal and "Mother Wounds" by Gitan Djeli in *We Mark Your Memory* account for these two different narratives - the official archive which is reduced to numbers and names — the political memory and personal/collective memories the narratives of people/community that exist solely within a confined or transitional realm. Within the rich tapestry of narratives in *We Mark Your Memory*, I have chosen to focus on "The Tamarind Tree" and "Mother Wounds" due to their distinct exploration of postmemory and material memory. While the book encompasses a wide range of struggles faced by indentured labourers across various geographical locations (Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji, Malaysia, etc.), these two stories particularly resonated with the way they depict the reconstruction of fragmented memories. These stories utilise objects which serve as potent triggers for remembering experiences not directly lived in these stories. The titular tamarind tree acts as a collective heirloom, while photographs function as personal heirlooms. This emphasis on material objects for memory transmission sets these narratives apart from others in the book, which may explore the indentured experience through direct storytelling or focus on different themes such as resistance or cultural preservation.

As we explore the act of "memory" associated with objects and artifacts, it becomes crucial to consider whether the act of remembering evolves with time and generations. Moreover, as we transition into the digital age and, by extension, to digital memory, does the meaning of memory and amnesia remain constant? Numerous authors have dedicated substantial time to unravelling the intricate connections between memory, culture, and history. One such work is *Remembering with Things: Material Memory, Culture, and Technology* (2017) by Guy Allimant. In his book, Allimant dives into the dynamic nature of memory,

arguing that objects function not just as passive repositories of memories, but actively participate in the process of remembering and function as an active vessel for subsequent generations. He further explores how material memory then performs with technology and the cultural implications it creates. The change that stands at the current of time is perhaps the tension that exists between material and digital memory — the digital shift is probably one significant shift that has changed the dimensions of almost all niches of literature.

Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation* (2019) explores the power of material memory against the backdrop of India's 1947 Partition. It examines objects taken across the India-Pakistan border, investigating the movement of memories, possessions, and individuals' relationships with these items and their transferred memories. Malhotra, along with Navdha Malhotra, co-founded the Museum of Material Memory, a digital repository of the Indian subcontinent's material culture and memory. This platform traces family lineages and histories through artifacts, collectibles, heirlooms, and antiques. Whereas, Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* (2022) spans multiple locations and timelines, connecting characters across centuries through the materiality of artifacts and environments. It examines how experiences and memories are transmitted and preserved through physical objects. On the other hand, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) uniquely combines material memory and climate change themes. It explores climate change challenges and, in one section, depicts groups collecting objects and stories to preserve Earth's memory and record what has been lost.

Over the past two decades, the understanding of memory has evolved from mere reminiscence to a more complex concept of storage. Paul Longley Arthur, in his essay "Material Memory and the Digital," argues that memory digitalization impacts how memories are retained and passed down, focusing on the changing nature of "remembering—and forgetting—in the digital era" (1). This shift raises intriguing questions about the relationship between digital memory and intergenerational memory. The implications of such a shift would

differ significantly from traditional methods employed by communities like the *Girmitiyas*.

The abolition of slavery by Great Britain in 1833 created a vacuum that led to the emergence of indentured labour. This new system evolved to address the insufficiency of cheap labour when the system of slavery was abolished. India and China became the two major recruitment sites for cheap, unskilled workers. Over 2 million labourers from British India were sent to distant locations such as the Caribbean Islands, Peru, Brazil, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Mauritius, Fiji, and Hawaii. Recruitment in India was primarily conducted by agents called *Arkatis*, who operated in rural areas. The indentured labour system appeared voluntary, requiring labourers to sign an 'agreement' - a contract that included conditions for returning to India after the contract period. Interestingly, this led to the coining of a new term: '*girmit*', a mispronunciation of 'agreement'. Consequently, the indenture diaspora became known as the '*Girmit* Diaspora' (Lahiri 36).

The uneducated men and women likely did not fully comprehend the contract's terms and legalities. *Arkatis* painted an alluring picture of plantation life, promising prosperity to entice workers into undertaking sea journeys on ships (*jahaz*) to work on sugar, rubber, and tea plantations in foreign lands. While the agreement was ostensibly voluntary, research and testimonies reveal that many were kidnapped or recruited under false pretences, without complete knowledge of the journey.

The term 'Gladstone's coolies' misleadingly emphasizes the indenture system's Caribbean origins. It specifically refers to John Gladstone, father of future Prime Minister William Gladstone, who hired a Calcutta firm to recruit Indian labourers for his two Guyanese estates (in what was then British Guiana). Many critics argue that the *Girmit* diaspora was merely a variant of the slave diaspora, citing the inhumane and dehumanizing conditions endured by labourers during their sea voyage and in their host lands. Islam, in her review of *We Mark Your Memory: Writing from the Descendants of Indenture*, observes: "...the introduction of indentured servants needs to be apprehended not as indexing a

shift from the systems that facilitated enslavement but as a continuation of similar structures of exploitation" (77). Similarly, Cohen notes in *Global Diasporas* that "after the collapse of slavery, the new milch was indentured labour" (64).

Many indentured Indians were housed in the former slave barracks of African slaves, a poignant reminder of their purpose. Their journey and arrival were met with disappointment. They endured cramped sleeping spaces, with the dead thrown overboard without rituals. Their diet consisted of dog biscuits, sugar, rice, and dried fish (Mishra 42). Upon arrival, workers were assigned to supervised, identical estates. They lived in small quarters, with three single men or women, or a couple, sharing each room. They were prohibited from leaving without an official pass, worked endless hours, and were forbidden from taking any other employment. Misconduct resulted in pecuniary and physical punishment. Offences against the labourers were also very common, such as inadequate rations, corporal punishment, sexual abuse and irregular payments.[1]

The increasing issues in indentured colonies led to higher suicide rates. These coercive aspects left an indelible mark on the psyche of the labourers, who longed for an often-impossible return to their homeland. The main difference between indenture and slave diaspora was that indentured labourers couldn't be traded like slaves and had a falsified promise of return after completing their agreement or a pledge of freedom after renewing their indenture.

'Indenture' and '*girmit*' are often used interchangeably, but incorrectly so. 'Indenture' signifies a system of confined contract labour embodied by capitalism and colonialism. In contrast, '*girmit*' represents a traumatic fissure and failure in apprehension and meaning, considered a "failed millennial quest" (Mishra 172). The promised land fell far short of expectations, resulting from a misleading contract that led labourers on an erroneous excursion to the wrong destination.

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[1] This is not to say that the testimonials only showcase the persistent narrative of degradation — accounts also include peaceful relations between Hindu and Muslims, and ability to save and rise in ranks occasionally. Although, in general *girmit* are subjected to have collective trauma due to the inhumane conditions and words such as '*narak*' meaning 'hell' is often present in these narratives.

The *Girmitiyas* were violated in terms of time and space, their reality bearing no relation to their fantasized haven.

The tumultuous journey led to a "split subject or self." Their journey was divided into two parts: first, an imaginary journey promising affluence, decency, and freedom from caste; second, the physical journey on the ship. This led to what Mishra terms a 'spectral translocation.' During the ship journey, the indentured labourer, not yet a *Girmitiya*, was split between a 'spectral self' (a feeling of comfort and ease) and a 'corporeal self' (enduring the voyage's hardships). This experience created communities of *jahaji bhais* (ship brothers) and *jahaji behins* (ship sisters) - foundational elements for a new diasporic society.

As they departed from the port, the homeland was gradually erased from their collective memory during the journey. The aftermath of this split led them to question their agency and identity, as there existed an absence of home and a lack of sense of origin or belongingness towards both the homeland and 'hostland'. They hardly resonated with either society, reinforcing their sense of being outsiders in both.

The faint and fragmented memories of the homeland were accumulated through a few objects — manifesting in terms of culinary practices and festivals like Tua Tua. The complex idea of home and homeland was then analysed by the *Girmitiyas* — a term that evolved in such a manner that it lacks any precise definition, where any meaning is rendered indeterminate.

Perhaps the idea was a dream image, a complex term interpreted differently by each successive generation that envisioned and idealized an altogether different home. Avtar Brah delves deep into the problematics of home and hyphens. She proposes a new concept she calls 'homing desire': "The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (192–3). 'Homing desire', as Brah defines it, is "a wish to return to a place of 'origin,'" (193) which, again, not all diasporic communities might possess.

For each subsequent generation, the links to India gradually dissolved. The idea of finding refuge and peace was kept alive through stories and mythical narratives such as *Ramayana*, where being in exile becomes a synonym for their experience, something they could associate themselves with. Through artifacts and memories, the idea of home was preserved, establishing a link to their origins. The issue of homecoming is complicated by the *Kala-Pani* or the 'black waters' and the myths associated with it. The traverse of the *Kala-Pani* carried a sense of breaking away, a rupture from society and an orderly social world — and beginning anew — which might have been the reason for many people to leave India. However, archives note that people who returned to India also faced discrimination, as they had crossed *Kala-Pani*, and their 'self' was now considered polluted, thereby making them aliens in their own homeland.

Within the narrative of "The Tamarind Tree", the mention of Ghalib's poetic verses, symbolizing 'ash', evoked a profound sense of loss. It suggested the transformation of something cherished into mere remnants, evoking a feeling of emptiness. These ashes served as a familial link for the author, connecting him to his ancestors, who once gathered beneath the tree's sheltering branches. As Arnab Sinha noted in his review, "The tamarind tree...has been a witness to the several cultural and religious activities of the generations of indentured labourers in Labasa, Fiji" (4). Moreover, the lines indicated that the loss was not just metaphorical but also physical, implying a break or rupture so grandiose that it demolished the fabric of their world, echoing the loss of their home and homeland:

> Indeed, everything about *mulk* (homeland) was golden, perfect:
> the nostalgia of a displaced people dealt a rough hand by fate.
> What strikes me now about the girmitiyas is how they were a
> people caught inbetween, stranded in the cul-de-sac of a past
> vanishing before their eyes. They were living in a place they
> could not escape, making home in a land they could not fully
> embrace (127).

The lines denote the in-betweenness and the plight of the *Girmitiyas*, as they are stuck between the two worlds, neither of them being their own. Hence, there arises a need to reconstruct or replicate the homeland in the 'hostland'. The pronoun 'We' from the title of the book situates the narrators of the current generations, whilst the determiner 'your' alludes to the ancestors — the *Girmitiyas*. The book tries to demonstrate academic activism by emphasizing the importance of personal narratives in the context of communal narratives. The book's cover features a photograph portraying a married indentured couple, accompanied by a scanned emigration pass belonging to Juman Khan, an indentured worker from Allahabad. Khan embarked on the ship 'Hereford'' from Calcutta port in March 1894 to migrate to Fiji, as indicated by the details on the pass. The editors note that this pass belonged to Akhtar Mohammed's maternal great-grandfather, who was one of the contributors to the volume. These documents serve as tangible evidence of the historical journeys being documented and emphasized in the current endeavour. The anthology is a 'commemorative volume' and attempts to build creative and critical pieces together through 'faction'— combining fact and fiction simultaneously by the descendants of indentured labourers.

Home became a distant idea, and the crossing of *Kala-Pani* further made it distant. As the migration was often involuntary, the idea of the great return or rather, 'homecoming' always stayed with them. The 'imaginary journey' — which was imagined to be a land of prosperity, turned out to be a false narrative. It became difficult for the *Girmitiyas* to create a home in 'hostland'. It is also important to remember that the 'diaspora space' is crucial to understand and conclude if the 'hostland' can become a homeland. The diaspora space is "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them,' are contested" (Brah 208–9). It is important to note that if every day experiences of life are marked by racism and oppression, it may lead to a different definition of 'home'. The idea of home is thus meticulously linked with how processes of inclusion or exclusion operate. In the case of the *Girmitiyas*, the violence and dehumanization experienced abroad did not let that

place become a 'home'; the host land remained an alien space for them, and the idea of homecoming stayed with them, for them 'India' or rather 'South Asia'[2] remained a home and homeland, which was impossible to attain. In such circumstances, it is important to understand how the *Girmitiyas* — first and subsequent generations — made the host land a 'home', even if temporarily. Unknowingly, in unique ways, this memory, or rather memories of 'home,' was transferred, and the 'homing desire' was attained through inanimate objects. These objects acted as catalysts for memories, triggers for remembering, as well as gateways into the past.

Material memory, in simple terms, refers to the relationship between people and artifacts, how this relationship produced memory, and the significance of these inanimate objects. The concept becomes complex in places where memories are fragmented and associated with displacement and trauma. It is compelling to note that though the memory might have diluted over time, the object remains untouched and unaltered, allowing for a historical study of the time and for further generations to draw from that history and possibly even understand their genealogy and lineage better. The inanimate objects can be photographs, jewellery, clothes, food, utensils, and roughly anything that transcends from an object to memory, and perhaps even a '*mulki* tree' as seen in "The Tamarind Tree". These artifacts have the ability to transfer us into a particular period of time and connect us to private and collective histories in a distinctive way. Each object acts as a balm to the wounds of the people and something that connects the community all together. It is interesting to note that though these things remain underappreciated, and in the backdrop, these 'inanimate objects' are something that helps the community to sustain and remain

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[2]Since India gained independence in 1947, 'Indian' increasingly refers to citizens of the Republic of India. However, as the Indian indentured labour started from 1834, the term 'India' is used in its initial sense encompasses countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan. Consequently, the term 'South Asia' is preferred in academic circles for its accuracy in describing the geographic area.

closer to the idea of 'home', even if it is an imagined one now.[3] Aanchal Malhotra, in her book *Remnants of a Separation,* states that "Memory dilutes, but the objects remain unaltered. It allows one to study the history within it…" (32). Material memory becomes an incredible yet unexplored route in navigating personal and collective narratives. In the text "The Tamarind Tree", we observe that the tamarind tree, a '*mulki* tree' — evokes the roots and additionally the routes of the homeland of the *Girmitiyas*; it becomes a site of memory, witnessing celebrations, rituals, resistance, a ray of hope and communion among several generations of *Girmitiyas*. The *mulki* tree served as a *terra sacra*[4] for the ancestors and the descendants until the tree's demise by lightning in 1962. The tamarind tree transformed personal memory into collective memory, where 'I' is transformed to 'We'. Thus, collective memory illustrates the idea of community which dwells in the oceanic memories and the shared beginning of "collective servitude" and a "site of communion", and it becomes a place where 'home' is reconstructed: "It was….under the Tamarind Tree that people recreated the rituals and ceremonies that they remembered from their childhood back in India" (127). We see other artifacts such as food and traditional Indian attire, "*satua*" "*lakdi ke mithai*", "*dhoti*", "*pagri*", and "*kurta*", denoting the land left behind and their attempt to recreate a home in host land.

The celebration of different festivals, irrespective of the religion, such as 'Holi' and 'Mohurram', were also ways to replicate home and recuperate the loss of a home. In fact, in "The Tamarind Tree", we see how a major portion of the text is actually a narrative made up of different celebrations as well as conflicts under the tamarind tree. The presence of the tamarind tree also indicates that tamarind is an important component in many South Indian recipes, evoking memories of home through food.

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[3]As stated by Rushdie, the concept refers to complex and often contradictory feelings of attachment and estrangement, of migrants who seek an understanding of the places they live now and the places they come from.

[4] Terra sacra is a Latin term that translates to 'sacred land' or 'holy land'.

Dominiek Dendooven explores the relevance of war keepsakes or entities that endured the Great War, in his book *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War*. He states, "We all know how unreliable memory can be, how transient reminiscences are…Herein lies the beauty and power of conflict-related objects, some of which withstand the ravages of time in a way that memories do not" (28).

In the other text that I have considered, "Mother Wounds", the presence of photographs and certificates are conspicuous and forms the very basis of the tracing or analysing the matrilineage. The "monochromatic photograph" and the "sienna-tones" become a powerful method for writing down the impossible — the narratives lost in between — and is an attempt to reassess the idea of 'home' and achieving the homing desire through photographs. As Misra observes the idea: "since loss and absence of memories are natural and remembrance is an attempt to impose meaning upon a constructed discourse, historical or otherwise" (1). Remembrance of a memory that is not one's own leads to superimposition on their own account.

The photographs help the narrator to recapitulate her ancestors' limited identity, which is "unknown and unspeakable"[5]— there is a distinct lack of women in archives. They are either limited to their marriages or are reduced to their reproductive organs. The act of writing here is demonstrated through the material photographs of Gouna and Tina and the fragmented narratives act as a way to recreate her matrilineage outside of indentured patriarchy. Additional artifacts mentioned in the text include the "*dholak,*" a "thick necklace," a "stiff ring", a "large, elegant nose stud" (36), and a set of "thick, heavy bangles," along with a necklace. These items symbolize the migrants' endeavour to establish a sense of home in their new land through cultural markers such as clothes and music and thus trying to attain a "homing desire," as Brah mentions, even though the recreation is not entirely possible or might be an apotheosis of 'home'. Abandoned by the dark waters, condemned by the loss of social status, and

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[5] Inspired by Saidiya Hartman in 'Venus in Two Acts', it is a process which happens at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown.

deprived of the possibility of returning due to geographical distance, individuals of the plantation diaspora sought solace and understanding through the lens of memory. The "*dholak*" embodies the essence of folk music and folklore, particularly those celebrating the seasons, births, and weddings, which were prevalent among their peasant roots. It is interesting to note that though 'food' is an intangible object, it becomes difficult to access as its very essence is not captured compared to the other objects. Nevertheless, it remained very poignant. The artifacts in the case of *Girmitiyas* played a twofold role. First, as discussed earlier, they served to retain and reconstruct 'home'. Second, these objects became markers of identity — their clothes, jewellery, and food became assertions of their culture against colonial rule. The relationship between the artifacts and the narratives was complex and crucial to understand. These objects acted as silent witnesses, harbouring untold stories. The descendants later traced these stories, helping them to uncover their roots and synthesize their heritage.

In these narratives, we realize that there is a lacuna in terms of the 'speaker's perspective'. In fact, it is reduced to only a few lines, and quite often, the narrator's presence seems to feel like that of an intruder. This lack indicates how the narratives of their ancestors have dominated 'their' narratives, which raises the question of whether it is even possible to talk about something that one hasn't experienced. The speakers in both "The Tamarind Tree" and "Mother Wounds" possess a second-hand memory, something that is not their own. Marianne Hirsch's works present postmemory as a method of penetrating and apprehending the experiences of the offspring of Holocaust survivors, but are not linked to the trauma directly. Postmemory is primarily ideal for diasporic texts, where the idea of 'home' becomes unattainable and unachievable, as it resides in a different nation and at a different time. As Hirsch asserts, "condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is a characteristic aspect of postmemory" (243). She further adds that this persists in the "children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora" (662). It is important to note that postmemory moves

beyond the dichotomies of 'true/false', 'credible/incredible' and are subjective in nature; they focus more on affective theory than on statistical data.

Postmemory explores a memory that a person hasn't experienced themselves; it is a belated memory, a memory handed down by family members, a trauma passed down through personal/collective narratives and leads to the protagonist questioning their own narratives; Ward conceptualises this as "a strong identification with what happened … inscribing them into one's own life story … giving way to vicarious victimhood" (278–9). The idea of 'post' makes the 'memory' go beyond its known nature, i.e. the memory is then transferred to the subsequent generations, but with such an impact, something that feels personally experienced by the listener. The memories are passed down the generations and become intergenerational, something that acts as an open wound, as Long asserts "...a wound inherited by the affective internalisation of the suffering narrated by those who lived through it" (167). Unique in nature, it is often formulated through personal accounts and stories told to successive generations during childhood. These narratives can function as fairytales, phantoms, nightmares or myths, that can be internalized when children are too young or juvenile to comprehend the meaning and reality behind it. Similarly, among the *Girmitiyas,* these narratives, including their routes/roots, are shared in their formative years — in the form of folklore of the *Ramayana* and folk songs related to homeland[6]. These narratives tend to shape the identity of the subsequent generations. It is an esoteric narrative in which the 'self' is written, and as it is vague in nature, there exists a risk of having one's narrative being displaced or even evacuated (Hirsch 6). The broken refrains of lives lived by their ancestors are recurrent in their descendants, thus, making a connection that is mediated through material memories and oral narratives. As a result, it incorporates ambivalence, desire, longing, mourning, recollection, presence, and absence. The concept of absence here is to be noted as it is dual in nature. The

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[6]For those who never made it back, traditional songs offered a glimpse into the hardships of indentured labour. These folksongs offer an alternative perspective on the memories and stories of subaltern memory and narrative, tracing roots and routes and functions as a bridge 'between past and present.'

primary being the absence in the archives and the secondary being the absence of a home and a homeland. There are 'empty memories' in both texts, where a void exists because of a lack of archives and narratives, places erased, and thus, there arises a need to retrace their identities — both personal and collective. It is also clear that cultural narratives and rhetoric have a real impact on the way in which members of that community write and the way that they conduct politics. In the same way, the *Girmitiyas* have a collected conflated mythology of inherited memories and fail to create an absolute and attainable history. Henri Raczymow and Alan Astro note a void in these narratives as "memory full of absences and caesuras as records were lost, genealogies interrupted, stories forgotten, places erased" (104). In the eponymous text "Mother Wounds" are defined as "...generational trauma carried by women and passed down to their daughters and granddaughters in a patriarchal society…" (35). It is evident from the fact that the archives do not provide any information about the females and that they are filled with empty, horizontal, unimportant lines. Their stories are also restricted to stereotypes. The narrator asserts that, "I would have preferred not to focus on the marriages and the motherhood of women…but it seems to have an integral part of the colonial archive" (44). The personal narratives and memories are absent in the texts and are dominated by the lives of their ancestors.

In "The Tamarind Tree", we see even the subject 'I' is confined to a few lines, despite the narrative being in first person. For example, "I can still recall Father's tattered, wet khaki clothes…" (112). The act of writing and imagining historical narratives exposes the limitations of colonial archives and traditional historiography. Personal anecdotes often reveal gaps in official records, highlighting the inadequacies of conventional historical documentation. When confronted with incomplete or biased archives, writers must interpret silences and fragments, engaging in what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation" (11). This process involves creatively yet critically reconstructing narratives, especially for marginalized groups underrepresented in official records.

By incorporating personal stories and imaginative interpretation, writers can provide a more nuanced understanding of the past, demonstrating how the act

of writing itself challenges and expands the boundaries of historical knowledge. In the texts, we observe how there exists a limitation in the speaker's own narrative, and it often exists only in terms of a space where they are imagining the lives of their ancestors, "Allowed me to imagine" (26), "I could only picture" (31), "I imagine" (32), and "I can deduce" (35) in "Mother Wounds" and "from my scarce notes and fading memory" (115) in "The Tamarind Tree." As the human memory is fragile, we store experiences as memories. However, it cannot be assumed that our memories will not remain in a pristine mnemonic condition, especially as time progresses. The recollection of memories years later is perhaps its reconstruction, and as years and generations pass, the memory becomes malleable and accumulates minor ruptures that are filled or replaced with new experiences — imagined, fabricated, and sometimes an integration of several unconnected memories into a single memory. As these gaps of memories exist within generations, the fragmented memories of our ancestors indirectly become our own. The interesting thing about these fragmented memories is that there exists a thin line between fact and fiction, and it becomes difficult to assess such memories as they are not entirely our own, which raises the question if a 'true memory' exists through oral recollections, recorded histories and archives especially in case of a traumatic one.

It is riveting to see how the past and present interact with each other. In the process of grappling with the past, a historian endeavours to construct and reconstruct knowledge based on his navigation of historical complexities. As Ranjan Ghosh states, history "cannot be either absolutism or relativism" (668), and fragmented narratives cannot simply be an abstract method. There is also a theatrical and imaginative element to them. Historians and writers have to make an attempt to recreate a sense of the past and its circumstances. The narrator in "Mother Wounds" precisely does this and recreates a sense of the past of women outside patriarchal colonial oppression. She enhances her investigation by identifying and imagining the matrifocal society along with the facts from the archives such as the dates of arrival of *Utchamah* (great-great-great grandmother of the narrator) from India.

According to Vijay Mishra, the culmination of the indentured labourers saw "people illiterate in origin" (132). Owing to the fact that many *Girmitiyas* were illiterate and semi-skilled in the traditional sense, the following generations with developed and developing capabilities were unsure and ambiguous about their origins. The memories were passed down indirectly through retrospective witness by adoption and became a part of their identity. As Hirsch states, "Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world "bleed" from one generation to the next" (34).

In many historical accounts, the past is either omitted or is present as stained and dishonourable. The *Girmitiyas* and their memory are complex, intricate mazes of disputes; it is postmemory experienced by the descendants of the next generation, who are confused and semi-repressed. Therefore, the memories from the past persistently influence the present narratives. This brings us to a crucial question: If they are haunting memories, should such memories be retained? The reflection demands that we constantly visit them and make sense of our complex relationship with the ghosts of *Girmitiyas*. However, at the very heart of diasporic imagination is the loss and mourning; not with regards to the homeland but to the *girmit*'s realm of the *Jahazi* community, its passage, and moments of belongingness felt through the experience.

The meaning of diaspora in the present generation has entirely changed forming new branches in its genre; however, what always remains is the presence of longing and nostalgia in all the narratives. Indian diaspora has come a long way from the *Girmitiyas* to the postcolonial diaspora, which is overwhelming — as there is a transnational movement of Third World professionals hailing from middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds, such as doctors, engineers, and skilled personnel, who are interestingly labelled as 'cyber-coolies', a term that ironically underscores both the nature of their professions and their desire for upward movement in First World nations. The term also establishes a link between the two branches of diaspora and is distinct in its nature as the focus shifts not on longing for a homeland but attaining 'Green Cards' and citizenship. The implications of the digital era and digital memory also open new avenues for

memory and postmemory, as the disappearance of the material objects, which were the heart of personal testimonies, are being altered, and communication processes are being transformed from physical to digital. It will be interesting to see how these memories will be inherited in a digital age and how postmemory will function for future descendants. The spectre of data loss, a potential 'black hole' for information necessitates careful curation and preservation strategies to ensure these digital memories endure.

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Fanny Fern and Marie Catherine Ochs, Bunnies by Any Other Name: Feminist Ideologies Through Pseudonyms

Crystal Calhoun

Abstract: *A Bunny's Tale* tells the story of freelance writer Gloria Steinem's journey as she discovered the dark underbelly of New York's Playboy Club. Steinem's ideas of uncovering women's issues did not begin with her undercover research or the other 1960s feminists. In the 19th century, Sara Willis Parton became well known for her pseudonym Fanny Fern, which she used to publish articles concerning different struggles featured in the daily lives of women. The act of assuming a *nom de plume* in order to publish has become somewhat of a common practice. However, in the 1800s it was a different society, and women like Parton did what they had to in order to survive, even if it meant being known as someone else. Other than Parton's Fanny Fern and Steinem's Marie Catherine Ochs, many other female writers have taken up their own pennames. These pseudonyms helped to shape them into the women that history reflects them as. Without Fanny Fern, Parton would have more than likely not survived, and her ideals concerning women would have never come to light. Without Marie, Steinem would have continued to write as a journalist, but she would have never seen how far women can sink without even realizing, and her work as a feminist would have never touched the lives of those who continue to look up to her. These two very different women had one thing in mind: the success of women. The final line in *A Bunny's Tale* sums up Steinem's philosophy and puts a modern spin on Fanny Fern's ideology: "…what I gained was far more important: my own voice as a writer, a subject that needed writing about—women's lives, and the knowledge that all women are bunnies. But it doesn't have to be that way." In a world that claims to value stories for their ability to draw attention, both Parton and Steinem used pseudonyms to disguise

themselves while bringing awareness to the side of womanhood that society generally overlooked.

Keywords: *Pseudonyms in Women's Journalism; Fanny Fern (Sara Parton); Gloria Steinem; Feminist Writing Strategies; Social Criticism.*

Pseudonyms provide writers with a tool that can grant protection, freedom, or even inspiration for the welder. Newspapers and magazines published, and continue to publish, stories that catch people's attention in order to attract customers, and informing readers remains a secondary goal. However, reporters themselves contribute to the success or failure of their stories depending on the names they use, due to biases and politics of the time. In the 1800s, misogynistic critics rarely embraced female writers. Many female journalists and authors began implementing *noms de plume*. The meaning behind these pseudonyms highlighted what the person behind that name valued and also the importance of women's rights. In nineteenth-century newspapers, a social taboo persisted in journalism: a woman's name must never appear in print (Gottlieb 601). Using a pen name instead of a real name gave an author a measure of privacy and freedom while writing stories. Sara Payson Willis Parton began publishing articles in 1851 under the *nom de plume* Fanny Fern. For Sara Parton, "Fanny Fern" gave her an outlet to explore the world of journalism and authorship, and she suffered heavy criticism from society in doing so. Critics believed female writers were not suited to speak about politics, so the subjects that female authors often discussed revolved around the home (Wood 6). Sara Parton ultimately rejected topic regulation and focused much of her writing on social justice issues surrounding poverty, divorce, and the discrimination of women.

Carrying on Parton's legacy a century later, Gloria Steinem created an alternative identity for her undercover work as a journalist. "Marie Catherine Ochs" allowed Steinem to mask her identity when she discovered the foundation of what ended up being the most significant part of her career: feminism. Marie Ochs presented an opportunity for Steinem to gain acceptance in a small area of society otherwise

unknown to her. Steinem claimed that *Pygmalion* gave her the idea for this reversed transformation from upper-class journalist to lower-class waitress (Steinem 103). In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, Steinem said that she took the assignment as a lark, but she soon became invested in the lives of the women in the club[1]. Those women believed that working at a Playboy Club would lead to a better future, a "glamorous, well-paying job, which of course, it wasn't". By creating a secret identity, Steinem thought this assignment would be revolutionary for not only herself but those who would read it. The 1985 film *A Bunny's Tale* further immortalized Steinem's journey in a similar way that *Ruth Hall* did for Sara Parton.

Both Sara Parton and Gloria Steinem focused much of their research, writing, and discussions on the everyday injustices of working-class women. Between Parton and Steinem, a century passed; however, the issues discussed in Fanny Fern articles did not completely disappear from the notice of Marie Ochs in the Playboy Club. The discrimination, difficulties, and danger of a woman working as a Playboy bunny echoed and magnified the same elements of womanhood throughout the United States in the 1960s. However, these issues did not begin in the 1960s, nor did women initially write about them in the 1900s. Female writers a hundred years earlier wrote about the same or similar problems, just in different areas of society. Both of these female journalists simply focused on different groups of working women a hundred years apart. In fact, in a review of Parton's novel, *Ruth Hall*, the *Times* questioned, "[H]ow could a *woman* write such a book" ("Introduction" ix). Gloria Steinem witnessed similar injustices while undercover at the Playboy Club, and they weighed heavily on her. Steinem found that she began to think of the other Playboy bunnies even when she was away from the club, and, in the film, her character poignantly said, "I used to think about writing a novel, and now all I think about are my feet. And the women at the club. God, they work so hard. I think about them" (*A Bunny's Tale*). Women in both

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[1] "For feminist Gloria Steinem, the fight continues." MPR News, 12 June 2009, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2009/06/15/midmorning1

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries experienced discrimination and unfair expectations, and while society evolved between the lives of Parton and Steinem, the struggles did not simply disappear. More updated expectations replaced them. As society and technology evolved, so did discrimination. Publishing articles about these discriminatory expectations proved one of the most effective ways to affect change in American society. Both Sara Parton and Gloria Steinem used pseudonyms to explore the elements of womanhood that society tended to overlook and brought that awareness to the public in order to enact change through their work in the male-dominated literary and journalistic spaces, even though working with pseudonyms functioned differently for both women.

For female journalists, the struggle to educate and inform the public about the various aspects of the world around them proved a difficult task, especially because patriarchal society did not want to see or acknowledge these struggles. A *nom de plume* allowed Parton to create space within journalism that typically ignored women or rejected injustices done to women due to misogynistic ideologies. With the disparagement Parton received, she used the inspiration she gained from those criticisms for other articles such as "Male Criticism on Ladies' Books." Parton frequently commented on the critiques of male critics: "Whether ladies can write novels or not, is a question I do not intend to discuss; but that some of them have no difficulty in finding either publishers or readers is a matter of history" ("Male Criticism on Ladies' Novels"). Historically, women struggled to find traction in publishing; however, some female authors found great success, often using pseudonyms or pen names to counteract misogynistic practices. Unlike Parton's Fanny Fern, Steinem's Marie Ochs allowed her to act differently than she normally would have while uncovering her story. Where Fanny Fern was a *nom de plume*, but Marie Ochs was a secret identity. Without the use of her false name, Steinem would not have been able to achieve that level of access within the complex and dramatic society of gentlemen's leisure clubs such as the Playboy Club. Sara Parton's pen name allowed her to create

a space for women to be accepted as journalists in the future. Fanny Fern appeared in print for the first time in 1851, and readers clamored to know her real identity ("Introduction" x). Many believed that Fanny Fern was a *nom de plume* for a male writer due to the indelicate topics covered in her pieces. At the beginning of women's journalism, asterisks signified which articles had a female author, and Parton's work established Fanny Fern as one of the first female names in print (Gottlieb 601). Parton chose the name Fanny Fern for its obvious feminine aspect and its imagery of plants or flowers. Most often, when women used pseudonyms for writing, they took male names, like George Eliot or Vernon Lee. Having a male name allowed for more freedom in publication and writing topics. However, Parton deliberately chose a female pseudonym in order to highlight the necessity for women to write about the world around them. Steinem wrote about her experiences in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, a collection of essays. She explained her choice of pseudonym: "I've decided to call myself Marie Catherine Ochs. It is, may my ancestors forgive me, a family name. I have some claim to it, and I'm well versed in its European origins. Besides, it sounds much too square to be phony" (Steinem 97).

Sara Parton struggled to find success as a journalist, and her *nom de plume* helped create a space for her work. Her first true attempt to become a paid journalist ended in perceived betrayal. Parton sent several articles to the New York *Home Journal*, the journal edited by her brother N. P. Willis; however, he refused to help her and claimed she had shamed him with her vulgar and indecent topics ("Introduction" xiv). Despite this betrayal, Parton refused to surrender her dream of being a journalist. She began to write several articles each week for the publications *Olive Branch* and *True Flag*. Many other magazines and newspapers pirated her work to reprint for themselves, and *Home Journal* was one of them. Parton's articles inspired a following, including another editor for *Home Journal*, James Parton, who would eventually become Sara Parton's third husband. According to Joyce W. Warren, Parton's increasing popularity led to her becoming "the first…columnist in the twentieth-

century sense of the word: a professional journalist paid a salary to write a regular column expressing the author's opinions on social and political issues" ("Introduction" xv). Before Parton, a few women worked as correspondents or editors; however, journalism remained mostly closed off for female writers until Parton broke through that barrier. Parton used her false name to achieve success as a writer, and even though she did write novels, her primary area of success was as a journalist. Without a pen name, Sara Parton could not have published her work since her entire family, who owned a magazine and proved successful journalists, constantly rejected her work. Parton's contributions under the name Fanny Fern highlighted the need for answers to social issues that did not come from an organized movement. She wrote about poverty, divorce, labor, and prostitution.

Marie Ochs as a pseudonym acted as a mask for Gloria Steinem and allowed her to find her breakout story. Similar to the discrimination that Parton faced in the 1800s, Steinem also had trouble finding work as a journalist: "The cultural upheaval in the United States in the 1960s was slow to benefit female journalists, who were often limited to jobs writing for women's sections in newspapers and women's magazines or told they could not be hired for gender-related reasons, such as the possibility that they would have a baby" (Phillips 78). Steinem spent several years in search of work as a journalist, and she did not receive her "first serious assignment" (81) until 1962 where she covered the impact of birth control on the daily lives of women for *Esquire*. She then moved to work for *Show*, an arts and culture magazine, and that publication led to the Playboy Club article "A Bunny's Tale." According to Lisa Phillips, "Steinem produced groundbreaking journalism on the working conditions of servers at New York's Playboy Club" (78). A pseudonym provided Steinem with an entry into the heavily guarded Playboy Club. Supervisors and even other employees working undercover surveilled the bunny servers, hoping to exploit or control them in ways considered inappropriate by those outside the club. Steinem

used her experience as Marie to focus her journalistic endeavors moving forward, including founding *Ms. Magazine*.

Once they found their place as journalists, both Sara Parton and Gloria Steinem experienced discrimination and injustice from which their pseudonyms only partially protected them. A pseudonym provided protection for a brief time from those who criticized Sara Parton's opinions on her male-dominated surroundings. In the 1800s, the preset standards of women's literature strictly guided what women should write about and even why they should write (Wood 4). Parton challenged those preconceptions with not only her articles but also her novel *Ruth Hall*, "because it was largely autobiographical, and Fern, believing her incognito to be safe, had mercilessly portrayed the unkind treatment she had received at the hands of her father, brother, and in-laws" ("Fanny Fern" 212). Essentially, Parton believed that women should be able to pursue a writing career if they wanted, and the terrible treatment of her family nearly prevented her from achieving that goal, so in her writings as Fanny Fern, she presented an undoctored view of the challenges she faced at the hands of her family. The use of a penname for Parton gave her the ability to hide her identity to save her private life and the reputation of her daughters, as well as to declare herself a woman and that women could also be educated and publish articles just as well as men. Steinem's contribution to feminism produced criticism after her undercover assignment ended, but using a false name during the assignment helped protect her from remaining in that life. Her assignment preceded a court case unrelated to her experience, except that it happened at a Playboy Club: "[A] Playboy Club lawyer had spent cross examination time trying to demonstrate that I was a liar and a female of low moral character" (Steinem 174). Steinem found that using a false name only protected her as long as she actively used the name. The moment she published her story under her real name, that protection disappeared. For a time after acting as Marie Ochs, Steinem believed the entire experience to be a mistake; however, "[i]t was only later that she understood the usefulness of the ruse to allow her to expose Playboy's 'phony glamour and

exploitative employment policies'" (128-129). Steinem used her Marie Ochs experience to connect to working women across the country, and they shared their own experiences of discrimination and abuse.

By hiding their identities, Parton and Steinem both gathered experience and presented in writing the everyday injustices that women face. In *Ruth Hall*, Sara Parton, as Fanny Fern, heavily drew inspiration from her own life, including the poor treatment at the hands of her family, the deaths of her first daughter and later her husband, and the desperation of barely surviving in poor boarding houses on nothing but bread. In her articles, Parton focused on the injustices of working women, and believed women should have access to their own independence: "She had seen too many people—particularly working women—struggling against impossible odds. She felt a kinship with suffering humanity and believed that society had a responsibility to help 'life's unfortunates'" ("Introduction" xxi). Gloria Steinem's approach to covering similar injustices was to create a secret identity. She used that identity to work undercover at a Playboy Club in order to gain insight and experience. Her experience at the Playboy Club revealed the struggles of the women working not only at that club but in similar positions around the country. Despite the expectations of social change, the "social revolution that engulfed the 1960s had yet to trickle down to women" (Kroeger and Hamill 129). Both women wrote about how society discriminated against women. Parton, in both *Ruth Hall* and her journalistic pieces, "describes how women are deprived of the dignity, respect, and treatment they deserve in the male-controlled society and inclines to transform this reality" (Mahmoud et al. 1358), and Steinem "has spent the last five decades on the road, lecturing and organizing around issues of equality" (Duncan 193).

Using alternate names allowed both women to avoid internalizing every injustice. In *Ruth Hall*, Parton described the circumstances that led her to want to become a successful writer; her previous experience while in boarding school gave her the idea. And when her brother rejected her articles, she became overcome with

outrage: "[I] shall soon be heard of… sooner than he dreams of, too. I can do it, I feel it, I will do it, but there will be a desperate struggle first…Pride must sleep! but…it shall be done. They shall be proud of their mother" (*Ruth Hall* 116). Her pride, as well as her belief in her own success, drove her to continue to search for a job at a newspaper or magazine. The struggle of female authors to find a writing job and succeed in that job exemplified the larger struggle of women attempting to find achievement in traditionally male roles. Even with a history of women writing poetry and novels, journalists and their companies continuously refused to allow women to write articles during the 1800s. Parton's struggles, immortalized in her writing, provided women with an example of female success in a patriarchal society; however, that success did come with great hardship and grief. Steinem encountered many obstacles in her search for her story; for instance, *A Bunny's Tale* presented arguments between Steinem and her boyfriend, where they frequently argued about the undercover work to write the article. They also argued about their respective jobs, including which one held more significance: his job as a playwright or Steinem's job as an undercover journalist (*A Bunny's Tale*). Steinem's uncover work found women at their most insecure and most used, a part of the world that society never sees. In *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, Steinem remarked that the bunny costume paired with the treatment from club members made her feel like "a nonperson in a Bunny suit" (138). Not only did Playboy bunnies work as waitresses, cigarette girls, and various other roles that essentially provided club members a pretty girl to look at, but their bosses also required them to complete a full gynecological exam from a doctor's hotel room, and the bunnies worked and moved under complete surveillance from a big-brother type figure that heavily criticized their appearance and demeanor. Both Parton and Steinem used their pseudonyms to inspire them to continue fighting against the injustices they experienced.

Success for both Parton and Steinem came in different packages; however, both women inspired feminist change through their use of alternative names. Parton's

pseudonym allowed her to view her negative criticism without internalizing that feedback. Instead, she used the negativity to further fuel her writings. By the time Steinem became a journalist herself, she expanded on that space to fight to ensure society treated women fairly in all walks of life. Pseudonyms created a barrier of protection for the criticism these women faced, which led to the growing popularity and success of their feminist ideas.

The injustices and hatred of her family nearly destroyed Sara Parton's life and the lives of her daughters because, as a woman, Parton had limited options to provide necessities for her children or even thrive in the 1800s. However, most women writers wrote novels and did not pursue a career in journalism, so Parton's contribution to women's rights created space for women that future journalists, like Gloria Steinem, took advantage of. According to Joyce W. Warren, "Until recently, twentieth-century critics had equated 'popular woman writer' with 'sentimental nonentity,' and—without reading her work—had dismissed to popular Fanny Fern as the 'grandmother of all sob sisters'" (214). Out of the pool of women's literature, society still expected women to be soft and "vivid and accurate" (Wallace 204), and Parton attempted to break out of that preconception; contemporary critics of the time considered customary women's literature "trash" (Wallace 205). Many critics found *Ruth Hall* unworthy of praise. One reviewer from *Putnum* claimed that the novel full of "unfemininely, bitter wrath and spite," and another reviewer said she "demeaned herself as no right-minded woman should have done, and [as] no sensitive woman could have done" (Wood 3).

Steinem's secret identity of Marie Ochs provided a way to anonymously gain access to a heavily monitored misogynistic space, protecting her own life at the same time. But that access came at a price. Many bunnies frequently dealt with "sexual demands" (Steinem 177) and threats to their lives if they tried to stand up for themselves. Steinem herself experienced many threats after she revealed herself. She discovered that not only had the people in charge taught the women at the club to criticize their own bodies, but women also had so many restrictions on their income

that many of them turned to theft (Steinem 126) or prostitution with other employees or patrons (Steinem 166). These obstacles that Parton and Steinem faced highlight the inequality within the workforce, as society frequently degraded women for trying to elevate themselves or simply survive. However, because of that time spent as Marie Ochs, Steinem earned the confidence of the women in the clubs around the country. She created a temporary persona that provided a safe haven for women to share continuing criticism they received while working as a Playboy bunny. One former bunny told Steinem that she had been threatened to have acid thrown in her face if she continued to complain about sexual abuse (Steinem 177), which highlighted the prevalence of sexual abuse experienced by the women. Steinem's notes of her time as a bunny did not include any mentions of speaking with police, so it seemed like any complaints were only shared within the club itself with little to no oversight or protection.

The legacy of Sara Parton using the name Fanny Fern provided an opportunity for experimentational writing that critics often denied women. In fact, "[t]he majority of [Fanny Fern's] writings…were sharp, satirical, even outrageous. She was one of the few women writers to give free rein to a delightfully witty sense of humor. Male and female critics of the day criticized Fern's lack of 'delicacy,' but her sentimental writings were seen as a redeeming grace" (214). Essentially, having a female pen name created a space for women writers that publishing lacked at the time. Parton explored not only controversial topics but tone and language as well. Parton received a lot of attention, and while positive reviews from established authors or critics were few and far between, writer Nathanial Hawthorne held her work in high regard (Wallace 203). Ann D. Wood's "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote" explores the reception that Fanny Fern received from Hawthorne, "[He] penned a protest…against the 'mob of scribbling women' who were, in his opinion, capturing and corrupting the literary market" (Wood 3). Wood reports that Hawthorne made an exception to his critique of women writers for Parton, and his comment about her

praised her, "The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading" (Wood 3). Many readers echoed Hawthorne's surprising praise, and Parton's popularity soared, leading to a future of female journalists.

Steinem absorbed the negative experiences of her undercover work without injuring herself with the use of her pseudonym, leading to a surge of popularity for feminist ideas. As a journalist in 1963, Steinem had just barely begun to gain respect as a writer; however, after the Playboy piece, she began to lose assignments: "I was supposed to've [done] something about the USIA (United States Information Agency)…and the kind of assignments I got were to, you know, pretend to be a hooker" ("For Feminist Gloria Steinem, the Fight Continues"). Steinem commented in an interview that "[Bunnies] were much more likely to get an advance if you were willing to go out with the guy who distributed liquor…you just saw the profoundly different circumstance from the glamorous one that was presented. I felt that it was funny…and I came out feeling unified with the women who worked there. So that in itself was a feminist experience, so now I accept [the undercover experience]" ("For Feminist Gloria Steinem, the Fight Continues"). Customers, supervisors, bosses, and vendors treated the women working in the Playboy Club so poorly that many of them did not even recognize their own objectification or see the discrimination that they faced. Steinem's choice to write her piece inspired some revisions to Playboy's policies and internal knowledge about how the clubs operated prevented more clubs from opening. Years after writing her piece, Steinem's story continued to attract women who wanted to share similar experiences. The film *A Bunny's Tale* provided another source for Steinem's story to reach women: "Thanks to the [film], I also began to take pleasure in the connections it made with women who might not have picked up a feminist book or magazine, but who responded to the rare sight of realistic working conditions and a group of women who supported each other" (Steinem 178). Being able to connect to women and inspire change and advancement became Steinem's legacy.

Both Parton and Steinem sought to create or expand on the space for women to achieve acceptance and reject discrimination. Parton used her pen name to achieve that space for women writers, and Steinem continued that fight as a journalist when she used her own pseudonym to make space for feminist ideals. In the eyes of the public readers, Fanny Fern was a hit. Her popularity continued to rise, and she, in turn, continued to write. Despite having some negative results, especially in terms of assignments succeeding the Playboy Club, Steinem proved popular and life-changing for many women. The reactions to both Parton's works and the article that Gloria Steinem wrote remained both powerful and very similar. Parton, already popular for her articles dealing with the issues women face in their daily lives, wrote in her preface to *Ruth Hall* "[I] have entered unceremoniously and unannounced, into people's houses, without stopping to ring the bell" (*Ruth Hall* 3); her goal, through her novel, exemplified how very low a woman can fall through no fault of her own, and how that woman can save herself and not rely on a man's help. She used the novel to declare vengeance on her brother and other family members who abandoned her, destitute, while trying also to raise her two daughters (Wallace 205). In "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," women's literature takes center stage in the article, "There was clearly a conventional set of preconceptions as to why women should write and what kind of literature they could write which…Fanny Fern challenged and even attacked in her novel about a woman writer" (Wood 4). Wood states that *Ruth Hall* was a "test case, questioning the validity and value of genteel tradition" (4). Parton hosted interviews with herself and said, "When we take up a woman's book, we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and the lovely reliance on the patronage of… [the male] sex which constitutes a woman's greatest charm—we do not desire to see a woman wielding the…blade of sarcasm" (5). Similarly, Gloria Steinem claimed her undercover work remains successful: "My exposé of working in a Playboy Club has outlived all the Playboy Clubs, both here and abroad" (Kroeger and Hamill 129). In ways that Steinem did not initially perceive, her work highlighted

many injustices acted upon working women; however, her short time acting as Marie Ochs yielded many positive results. According to "The Color Factor," "The [*Show*] magazine is long forgotten but not that story; it lives on among the most amusing and talked about of undercover exploits. It was instrumental in stopping Hugh Hefner's clubs from giving physical examinations to applicants. It also made Steinem a celebrity" (Kroeger and Hamill 128). Steinem went on to lead many feminist charges, including founding the National Women's Political Caucus and the Women's Action Alliance. Gloria Steinem's success as an undercover Playboy bunny forecasted her success as a feminist icon, much in the same way that Sara Parton championed the freedom and success of working women in the 1800s.

The act of assuming a *nom de plume* in order to publish articles and novels has become somewhat common practice in the present world; however, in the 1800s, it was a different society, and women like Sara Parton did what they had to in order to survive, even if it meant being known as someone else, someone like Fanny Fern. Other than Sara Parton's Fanny Fern and Gloria Steinem's Marie Ochs, many other female writers have taken up their own pen names, such as Sara Clarke's Gracie Greenwood in the nineteenth century (Wood 5) and today's Howard Allen O'Brien's Anne Rice, A. N. Roquelaure, and Anne Rampling. For Parton and Gloria Steinem, their pseudonyms helped shape them into revolutionary women reflected in history. Without "Fanny Fern," Parton would have likely not even survived, and her ideals concerning women would have never come to light. Without "Marie Ochs," Gloria Steinem might have continued to write as a journalist; however, she would have never seen how far women can sink without even realizing, and her work as a feminist would have never touched the lives of those who continue to look up to her. In the 1960s, Gloria Steinem experienced her own transformation into not only another person but also into another part of society when she assumed the name of Marie Ochs, which started as a simple story to pay her rent. Both women adopted false names in order to afford to stay where they were in not only society but also to survive. Both Parton and

Steinem changed their lives by changing their names. Parton still lives today through her work, and she still continues to influence her readers. Steinem's undercover project helped her to not only identify with other women who are exploited but also to have a focus on her future career as a feminist. Leah Fritz wrote in a review that Gloria Steinem was declared "a hero to Middle America" (7) for her contributions to feminism. These two very different women had one thing in mind: the success of women. The final line in *A Bunny's Tale* sums up both Gloria Steinem's philosophy and puts a modern spin on Sara Parton's ideology: "[W]hat I gained was far more important: my own voice as a writer, a subject that needed writing about--women's lives, and the knowledge that all women are bunnies. But it doesn't have to be that way."

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Transcending Exiles: Countering the Epic Master Narrative in Haga's *For the Sake of Sita*

Rusha Chowdhury

Abstract: In recent years, feminist scholarship of the *Ramayana* has called attention to the epic's dogmatic nature, especially Sita's characterization as the devoted wife par excellence. While Brahminical patriarchy hails Rama as a hero and Sita as his submissive consort, it pays little attention to the horrors of Sita's ultimate fate. The *Uttarakanda* addresses Sita's ordeals following her return to Ayodhya where she is accused of having become impure in the company of Ravana, and is ultimately banished from the kingdom in spite of her having proved her fidelity by undertaking the *agnipariksha*. The ordeals of the mythical Sita are similar to those faced by many women even today. In a patriarchal system, the Everywoman Sita is either a Madonna or a whore. The webtoon *For the Sake of Sita* (2013-15) by Haga showcases the ordeals of a young girl named Sita Jaruna from Nepal, who, besides sharing her name with Sita of the Hindu epic, also goes from possessing the status of a living goddess as a *Kumari* to ending up in a brothel and ultimately dying. However, the story introduces an alternate reality where the soul of the departed Sita Jaruna facilitates a different trajectory for her younger self. According to Hilde Lindemann Nelson, the counterstory is a means through which oppressed persons resist their oppression by challenging master narratives. This paper shall examine Sita Jaruna's second chance in life as the counterstory of the archetypal figure of Sita. This examination shall reveal how contemporary speculative adaptations of epics empower traditionally oppressed and stereotyped characters and liberate them. By breaking free of the original trajectory of Sita institutionalized through Valmiki's epic, Sita Jaruna opens up possible futures for herself, which are amicable, peaceful, and enduring.

Keywords: *Speculative adaptation; Counterstory; Feminism; Epic; Narrative afterlives*.

Introduction

Let us begin by pondering over three basic questions: What exactly is this monolith named the *Ramayana* that seems to have taken over all aspects of social and political life in India? What is the *Ramayana* about? Who is the *Ramayana* about? There may be no linear answer to the aforementioned questions. One's preliminary knowledge of the *Ramayana* usually comes from stories exchanged vertically across generations and horizontally between different peoples. An individual growing up in an Indian household with a tradition of storytelling is well-acquainted with the tale of a mythic hero named Ram who, along with his companions Lakshman and Hanuman, undertake a quest to rescue his hapless wife, Sita, from captivity under Ravana. This tale has a divine significance in that it tells of the incarnation and earthly exploits of one of the most important deities in the *Hindu* pantheon, namely, Vishnu. So, a part of the purpose of passing the story on to the newer generation is also indoctrination into *Hindu* culture and ethos, which not only confers religious identity upon the listener but also presents models of moral and social conduct. Sita and Ram embody the archetype of the perfect conjugal couple, where the latter becomes the epitome of the *purusha* who honours his *dharma* by actively protecting his wife and community and the former becomes the ideal wife, a fitting secondary to Ram, whose selflessness and devotion for her lord always comes at the expense of her well-being. Linda Hess observes how the subsequent composers and commentators of the *Ramayana* have readily accepted the story as a fitting framework for the self-conception of an ideal community (Hess 2). Its time-tested religious-communal significance lends the ideals double legitimacy to the point that it becomes an expectation from a certain individual to dedicate her or his life to emulating the archetypes of Sita and Ram. Since a woman in patriarchy has to bear the brunt of societal expectations, she has to show an unusual commitment to embodying Sita's sacrificial and selfless ideals to the fullest extent. Jacqueline Hirst notes from her conversations with young expatriate men of Indian origin in the United Kingdom that men take Sita as an ideal when it comes to their choice of a spouse (Hirst 19). Such is the centrality of the *Ramayana* in the

psyche of the Hindu community, and its co-option into the Indian nationalist discourse, that it situates it all the more firmly as a monumental cultural touchstone. Sikata Banerjee reflects on the unfolding of muscular nationalism in the Indian context where the epitomised view of masculinity becomes deeply entrenched in Hindutva ethos. Muscular nationalism, she notes, is the intersection of the discourse and conception of nationalism with a particular notion of masculinity (Banerjee 272). As such, muscular nationalism is militant, enforcing the idea that men are protectors of a feminised nation-state. Importantly, she notes that the traditional androgynous, almost feminine presentation of the *Hindu* deity Ram was reconfigured as an aggressive, muscled warrior to fit the agenda of militant Hindutva patriarchal politics (Banerjee 274). Banerjee's discussion on muscular nationalism and women's position under Hindutva is especially important for the purpose of this paper which we shall return to shortly.

When one talks about the epic narrative of the *Ramayana*, one automatically connects it to the epic composed by Valmiki in approximately the 3rd century BCE. However, as A. K. Ramanujan observes, there have been as many *Ramayana*s as there have been storytellers and with each act of telling the story has undergone subtle changes indicative of the location of the teller (Ramanujan 133). At this point, it might be appropriate to reflect upon the questions of who and what the mythic tale is about. It depends upon the position of the teller, and various factors come into play in deciding who becomes the central figure in it. For instance, while mainstream Hindutva voices may claim the Valmiki/Tulsidas texts as the only authoritative ones with Ram as the pivotal figure, a folk narrative like that composed and sung by Chandrabati in the 16th century situates Sita and her woes at the forefront to reflect critically upon the female experience that is almost always understood as passive in male-centric telling (Chakraborti 4).

Given the existence of countless telling of the myth and their construction from various vantage points, one understands that the acceptance of a few narratives over others is politically motivated to sustain the dominant powers in place, and it is this constructivist knowledge that may help one challenge the idea of the monolith. Hence, Sita need not always be the passive, devout female

secondary whose life follows the same trajectory laden with woes and misfortunes, solely dependent on the men in her life to come to deliver her, only to be rejected when she is seen to be threatening the norm. There are, in fact, already extant telling where Sita is portrayed in more radically subversive terms, such as in the *Adbhuta Ramayana* and the *Satakantharavana* where she is shown to take up arms against Ravana, and in Santhali telling where she enjoys a free sexual life (Ramanujan 155). The tradition continues in the numerous adaptations throughout the last few decades. Since Sita's predicament is not peculiar to herself but speaks to the experiences of most women in the patriarchy, it is not uncommon for the reader to identify a pattern similar to that of the trajectory of Sita's life in various other stories about women survivors and victims of abuse. This is not a simple coincidence but stems from the policing power of religious patriarchy, which institutes divine feminine figures as role models to be emulated by women of a given community. Most often, these female models also undergo a similar reconfiguration as the one observed in muscular nationalism, where the purity and conservatism of the deities are over-emphasised, leaving out any other element that might threaten patriarchy.

Sita is an ideal candidate for obvious reasons and her qualities of passivity, chastity, and devotion to her husband are upheld as doctrinal. Hilde Lindemann notes that these kinds of idealised visions emerge as master narratives that perpetuate inequalities and marginalisation in a given culture. All women are either identified as or expected to be like Sita to suit the purpose of the power-holders, who are invariably male and Savarna. Women are also romanticised as hapless, needing support from the men of their community to survive. Lindemann also notes that a culture uses these master narratives to render a group of individuals intelligible for its convenience, thus stripping them of agency to form their own identity (Lindemann 152). The genre of speculative adaptation becomes particularly subversive in this scenario, which takes an institutionally typified narrative and introduces alternatives to the story elements that sustain and perpetuate oppression. Since categories of identity are narratively constituted, they can also be rehabilitated and repaired through complex narrative structures. The radically reconstituted narrative that debunks oppressive master narratives of

identity is termed 'counterstories' by Lindemann. With this as the guiding theoretical framework, this article shall examine Haga's 2013-15 serialised webtoon, *For the Sake of Sita* as a speculative adaptation of Sita's story that challenges the typically accepted trajectory of her life using the novel subgenre of *Isekai*.

Adaptation in a Participatory Platform

Webtoon, a free online platform for the publication and consumption of digital comics, is an essentially participatory zone where content creation is most often a dialogic process. The content is largely influenced by the responses of the consumers, and the latter also interpret and explain plot points in the comments, thereby adding to the narrative, from which other readers can derive insights. This dialogic-participatory tendency is much akin to the open-ended nature of oral folk cultures that resist the totalisation of narratives in their democratic approach to storytelling. Platforms like Webtoon are, therefore fertile spaces for the rise and proliferation of subversive modes of storytelling as they are largely shared and sustained by a diverse fan community.

Isekai has come to be one of the most popular sub-genres of portal fantasy in East and South-East Asian manga, light novels, manhwa, and anime industry and its presence and proliferation are associated with the consolidation of online media spaces and fan communities in the new digital economy. The term itself has a Japanese lexical origin where the word '*sekai'* indicates 'world' and its prefix *'i'* denotes anything different, unusual, and non-conforming (Levy 87). Statistical research states that the use of the term had been rare on online platforms before the year 2013 (Price 60), though conceptually, traces of it can be found in several earlier transmigration or portal fantasy texts, the earliest of its kind to be found in Japanese folktales, especially in that of Urashima Tarou. To break it down, it is a speculative device that transports the protagonist of a narrative from the world that they inhabit to another world where the brunt of the action takes place. The reason for transportation may vary depending on the context of the tale.

Online forums such as *Reddit* and *Royal Road*, which document trends in fan communities, list the various types of *isekai* of which three can be found to recur across platforms — the *shoukan* or summoning type, where the protagonist is evoked into another world for a particular purpose; the *teni* or transference, where the protagonist crosses over to a different dimension; and *tensei* or reincarnation, where the protagonist having passed away in their own world, usually by getting hit by a truck[1], is reincarnated into another world. Besides, several subtypes have been listed as well. The *isekai* subgenre embodies a kind of subversion reminiscent of the radical reversal of expectations in the speculative fantasy genre. In its unique way, the *isekai* provides the underdog avenues to reclaim their purpose in a narrative. Where death and oppression cast their shadow, the trope of transmigration offers second chances to the protagonist to live and assert the validity of their existence. As such, the radical subversive possibilities of this subgenre are endless in that it may be utilised to weave stories that resist the persistence of master narratives and constant typification of characters in terms of their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or any other basis of identity.

For the purpose of this study, let us take Sita as such a character whose identity and being are wrapped up in a dominant, overarching narrative of deeply gendered qualities of passivity and self-sacrifice. In most of the stories recounted, Sita has to meet the same kind of tragic suicidal end, no matter how radical some of her actions may have been. The institutionalised narrative imposes a very specific structure on her life: usually, it begins with her birth and adoption by Janaka, which follows the *swayamvar*, where a Sita of age is won over by Ram. After her marriage and coronation comes the expulsion of the triumvirate — Sita, Ram, and Lakshman — into the forest, where Sita gets abducted by Ravan. Later comes the episode of her apparent liberation when Ravan is defeated by Ram in the battle of Lanka, but this does not ensure a happy ending for Sita. Following her liberation from captivity, she is faced with yet more ordeals. Ram curtly spells out

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[1] One of the most popular tropes used in *isekai* manga and anime to depict the death of the protagonist is by making them get hit by a truck. The popular usage of this trope has led to the image of the truck becoming an Internet meme in the fan community.

that he had undertaken the siege of Lanka not entirely for her sake, but primarily to safeguard his own *dharma* as a man and king[2]. He expresses his unwillingness to accept her because she has been under the auspices of a man other than her husband. He questions her fidelity and firmly rejects her, much to Sita's dismay. This is when Sita undertakes the infamous ordeal of fire, or the *agnipariksha*, where she walks through blazing flames to prove her fidelity to Ram. Having passed this ordeal, she is accepted into Ayodhya for the time being, but once again, gossip about her infidelity amongst the subjects of the kingdom taints her image, and this time, Ram orders Lakshman to banish a now pregnant Sita into the forest by deception. There she is sheltered and harboured by Valmiki, a sage residing in the forest.

Her second ordeal comes when Ram is brought to Valmiki's residence by the singing of Lava and Kusha, and he seeks to take Sita back on the condition that she undertake the *agnipariksha* again. This time she does not comply and, taken up by rage and despair, descends into the earth. Therefore, the tale of Sita is never quite happy in its ending, but is upheld as the epitome of female suffering and termination of life. This begs the question of whether there can be any alternative to this insistent pattern. The speculative subgenre of *isekai* might come in handy in this context to create a rift in the linearity of the narrative that is Sita's tale and turn it into a counterstory.

Research Question

Haga's *For the Sake of Sita* falls under the subgenre of *isekai,* which is a story about a girl named Sita Jaruna in Nepal whose life takes a similar trajectory as that of the mythical Sita. Initially, the webtoon begins with introducing Sita Jaruna as a "fallen goddess" who now haunts the alleys of Baglung, the red-light district of Nepal, earning a living as a sex worker[3]. There is some hint as to her striking fall from grace, but none of it is clearly recounted in the first part of the story until her

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[2] Debroy, Bibek. "Yuddha Kanda, Chapter 6(103)" The Valmiki Ramayana. Translated by Bibek Debroy, Penguin Books India PVT, Limited, 2017.

[3] Haga. "Ep. 0." For the Sake of Sita. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon.

death since the story is told from the perspective of the male lead, Sangmin, a doctor from South Korea who marries Sita after having met her. The tragic essence of Sita Jaruna's life reaches its peak when, despite having pulled herself out from her wretched life in Baglung and coming to South Korea with her now beloved husband, she loses her life after being diagnosed with an unnamed disease, which, there is ample evidence for the reader to surmise, may have been contracted amidst the unhygienic surroundings of the brothel she inhabited.

Like the archetypal Sita, though happiness and contentment come very close to her, she has to get tied down by the constraints of life, and if we may, of narrative. That is until a narrative shift takes place with Sangmin getting *isekai'd*[4] into a parallel dimension, which is the same world as the one he inhabited, except that he goes back in time and wakes up on the streets of Nepal as a middle-aged man. *For the Sake of Sita* falls under the *shoukan* or summoning type of *isekai* where the male lead is evoked into another world by a transcendent spirit emanating from the sculpture of *Taleju*[5] to help change the course of Sita's life. Although the rest of the story is also told from the primary perspective of Sangmin, I argue that since the moment of transmigration, the perspective of Sangmin is overridden by the will of the transcendent spirit, who is revealed at the end of the story to be none other than the departed Sita Jaruna herself now closer to the cosmic embodiment of the goddess.

For the convenience of the reader, a distinction between the two Sitas can be made by referring to the soul of Sita Jaruna as Sita the Soul. The unfolding of Sita's story in the *isekai* world takes place under the guidance of Sita the Soul, who places Sangmin in Nepal right where he can find a six-year-old Sita Jaruna before she is inducted into the Kumari initiations. At the level of narration, I argue that the unfolding can be read as Sita the Soul narrating her own story, situating Sangmin therein as he follows through and addresses his purpose of protecting and guiding the young Sita. This act of self-narrating one's story as a *Kumari* becomes doubly

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[4] *Isekai'd* is the finite verb form of the term *Isekai*, widely used in the fan community to indicate the phenomenon of getting transported to another world.

[5] *Taleju Bhawani* is the royal goddess of the Malla dynasty of Nepal.

imperative for this study given the striking lack of first-hand narratives by ex-*Kumari*s in general, a few of which have only emerged very recently. The life and being of the young girls who are selected as *Kumari*s are ridden with an air of mystery, and the legends and lores around them are always already narrativized by society at large, which compromises the self-identity of these girls, as shall be discussed further in the essay. To return to the plot, it is as much as Sita the Soul's own will to protect herself in a parallel world and make space for an amicable future as it is of Sangmin's to safeguard the future of the person he loves. When read from this perspective, *For the Sake of Sita* opens itself up to be read as a counterstory where the figure of Sita is no longer a passive victim but actively challenges the master narratives to reconstitute her identity through storytelling and affirmative narrativization.

Hilde Lindemann comes up with the concept of the counterstory, which she envisions as an analytical tool that would challenge master narratives and how they perpetuate and reinforce oppressive hierarchical structures based on different identities. Identities, Lindemann argues, are complex sites of contestation where an individual or group's self-conception interacts with how others see them. As such, identities are not only centred around the self but also interact with and draw from what others ascribe to the individual (Lindemann 6). Often, there is a clash between the two perspectives where the personal sense of self is overshadowed by the gaze of another, usually an oppressive group, which narrates the identity of the individual or group it oppresses. A pertinent example of the same would be how patriarchy has narratively constituted the oppressive gendered identity of women as overly emotional and weak. When the said individual or group is oppressed, they are usually stripped of independent moral agency and are viewed as inferior and lowly situated. Such an identity under epistemic and moral violence becomes what Lindemann calls a damaged identity, the possessor of which is understood to be unworthy of full moral respect. The persistent oppression of identity results in the distortion of the self-conception of the individual or group who accept the hierarchy as given and begin to see themselves through the gaze of the oppressor. This is called infiltrated consciousness, which essentially means the hijacking of one's

sense of self by a larger narrative. This, in turn, leads to deprivation of opportunity where the oppressed individual or group is denied a meaningful, identity-constituting social role based solely on their social inferiority (Lindemann xii). This kind of oppression is instituted through narrative.

Counterstories, on the other hand, are narratives woven by the oppressed individual or group themselves to replace the harmful stories with better ones. Hence, the genre of *isekai* is conducive to the building of counterstories given the opportunity it provides for its characters.

Comparison between Sita Jaruna and Sita Janaki

As noted above, the action of *For the Sake of Sita* primarily takes place in Nepal, where the tradition of instituting and worshipping the *Kumari* is still extant. It is a major attraction for pilgrims and tourists from all across to witness the *Kumari* either on the balcony of her residence or during the *Indra Jatra* and other festivals. In the words of Isabella Tree, the *Kumari* is Nepal's "Living Goddess." The word '*kumari*' means a virgin girl, and the ideal candidate for the position of the *Kumari* is a female toddler who must belong to the Buddhist Shakya lineage, the highest caste in the *Newar* community, second only to the priestly *Vajracharyas* (Tree 75). She acts as the earthly representative and vessel for the Goddess Taleju, who is regarded as the highest form of Durga, and thus, her adoration can only be performed by *tantrics* through esoteric practices that remain shrouded in dark mysticism. The first recorded Buddhist tantric worship of a *Kumari* can be found in the *Samvarodaya Tantra* composed around the 11th century CE in Nepal (Tree 7). The *Kumari*, all-seeing and all-knowing, is said to be the protector of the country of Nepal and is worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists alike (Tree 13). The first royal *Kumari* was established at Bhaktapur in 1491 (Tree 7). In the webtoon, the origin of the cult of *Kumari* is attributed to the lapse and repentance of a Nepali king who instituted the practice of initiating young girls into *Kumari*hood to contain and appease the goddess[6].

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[6] Haga. "Ep. 0." For the Sake of Sita. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon. Accessed 10 March 2024.

The actual myth, which is associated with the popular Malla king Jaya Prakash, follows a similar trail. The myth tells that the goddess would visit the king's chamber every night to play *Tripasa* with him on the condition that her visitations are not disclosed to anyone. However, once the queen became aware, the goddess left in a rage, and later, Jaya Prakash Malla dreamt of her telling him that she would timely incarnate as a girl child in the *Shakya* and *Vajracharya* communities. To honour her, the king instituted the practice of *Kumari* worship (Tree 18). The Malla king is also accredited with the installation of the royal abode of the *Kumari*, also called the *Kumari Ghar* or the *Kumari Chen*, on Durbar Square in Kathmandu in 1757 (Tree 7). During her reign as the goddess's vessel, the *Kumari* stays at the *Kumari Chen* and is attended to by a hoard of caretakers and family members. The child who is supposed to become *Kumari* has to fulfil a list of almost unattainable requirements to be eligible to represent the goddess. She must be exceptionally beautiful without any blemishes or birthmarks on her skin, embodying the thirty-two *lakshinas*, that is, physical perfections of a *bodhisattva*. She must exhibit divine calmness and patience, unusual for a toddler of her age (Tree 15). The most imperative rule for the *Kumari* is that she must never bleed. If she does cut herself or bleeds, even by accident, it is believed that the goddess inside her will disappear. Tree notes that the people of Nepal view blood as the creative energy or *shakti* of the goddess, which is contained by *Kumari*. All the energy is supposed to remain inside the child's body (Tree 66). If and when a *Kumari* shows signs of puberty, she is dismissed before she begins bleeding (Tree 14-15). From her interaction with several Nepali people on the matter of the dethroned *Kumari*'s fate, Tree observes that former *Kumari*s have a history of being viewed through a superstitious gaze where they are thought to wreak havoc wherever they go and how accepting them into a family through adoption or marriage brings misfortune and death. The people also insisted, she says, that the former *Kumari*s go into sex work and are trafficked into brothels in Mumbai or Bangkok (Tree 16), though that is not the case with the ex-*Kumari*s from more privileged backgrounds such as Rashmila Shakya, as Tree documents later in her book. The female protagonist of the webtoon, Sita Jaruna, the daughter of an

extremely underprivileged family, is unfortunately not lucky enough to return to the comfort of her home once she is dismissed from *Kumari* Chen.

In the context of this analysis, the choice of the name Sita is interesting. Besides its function as an approximate phonetic replacement for the name *Shakya*, it also becomes a fitting name for a character like Sita Jaruna. Sita Jaruna embodies all the ideals of femininity that a patriarchal culture asks of a female individual. Like the mythical Sita, she is beautiful, compassionate, kind, and selfless. Portrayed as possessing captivating beauty both through the perspective of Sangmin as well as through the visual medium of the graphic narrative, Sita is always shown to test limits in her attempts to lift up the people around her. When an older Sangmin lands in the parallel universe, Sita is the first to find him. Despite her family's abject poverty and starvation, the six-year-old Sita manages to smuggle food for him. Although she is repulsed by the sight of blood and dead animals, she pushes herself to get used to touching them so that she can help her ailing family in the only way that she can. Like the mythical Sita, she is elevated to the level of a goddess in her lifetime but suffers a humiliating fall once she starts menstruating. The once reverent vessel of *Taleju* is cast out into the streets with no apparent explanation as to why she is being thrown out and where she must go thereafter. Even though there have been laws in place for the last two decades to adequately rehabilitate a former *Kumari*, the universe of the webtoon does not bring in any governmental intervention for two plausible reasons.

Firstly, the story takes place in the 20th century — possibly in the second half, given the visual depiction of the world — when Nepal had been undergoing deep political turmoil as protests for a move towards democracy surged through the country. Amidst such unrest, the question of rehabilitating the former *Kumari* may not have been the utmost priority of the people in power. Moreover, there may not have been any provision in place to help the menstruating girls to begin with. Secondly, the superstitions surrounding the figure of the ex-*Kumari* were so deeply entrenched in the culture that no one would be willing to help her. In the webtoon, Sita Jaruna's own family abandons her for fear of being cursed by her presence. The circumstances of her expulsion also make her akin to the Sita of the Ramayana.

While the latter Sita was expelled during her pregnancy, Sita Jaruna is thrown out while she is menstruating. Both women who had been idolised as goddesses now found themselves slandered and reduced to homelessness. For Sita Jaruna, the only option becomes to leverage her sexuality to earn a living since she possessed no assets with which she could find some other kind of employment. For her, it is not an automatic choice but comes as an impulse to self-destruct as a result of men degrading and trying to violate her, as well as starvation and lack of a proper place to lodge.

The place of the *Kumari* in the cultural imagination of Nepal is extremely crucial, as is that of Sita in India. Both the figures are important for the self-conception and preservation of nationalistic identity — the *Kumari* because she is heralded as the custodian of harmony in Nepal, and Sita because she is the consort of Ram and is deemed to embody the ultimate *dharma* of women. To invoke Banerjee again in this context, she has observed that the male-centric notion of militant muscular nationalism is predicated upon the mapping of the nation upon the body of the woman. Women become border guards whose chastity is to be maintained at all costs. The nation is thus symbolised through images of women in multiple forms, such as that of a suffering mother, a vulnerable virgin, a treasured wife, or a warrior goddess (Banerjee 273). Most often, it is the dichotomy of the warrior goddess and vulnerable virgin that is found in metaphorical narratives of nationhood, where the invocation of either is dependent upon context. In the case of Nepal, the *Kumari* represents both the embodiment of a fierce goddess and a vulnerable virgin in the form of the girl child who is overly supervised by the elders around her to ensure her purity, which is emblematic of the health of the nation. The men who act as the so-called protectors of the feminised nation-state attribute the sustenance and advancement of their militancy to the image of the woman envisioned as a virgin/warrior.

In Nepal, the festival of *Dashain*, which is also the occasion for the installation of the new *Kumari*, is observed by the country's military forces as an auspicious day to honour the goddess's victory over *Mahisashura*. On the ninth day of *Dashain*, popularly known as *Maha Navami* or the Glorious Ninth, it is a

tradition to make blood sacrifices in the name of the goddess. In her book, Tree specifically describes the military sacrifice at Kot Square, where hordes of victims were gathered to be slaughtered by the army. The significance of the mass sacrifice in the career of a military man is described to be critical as it either spells his success or fall. The spraying of the ritual blood on the weapons works as a sacrament to bless the weapons and enhance their efficiency. The sacrifice also stands in for military training and makes them virulent, increasing their tolerance to blood and gore (Tree 46-50). This aggressive brand of nationalism with the tradition of *Kumari* worship in place invariably translates to the sustenance of gender roles in society as women are insisted to be passive goddesses at home to be protected by active, weapon-wielding men in the public sphere. The notion of the *Kumari*'s power in the political sphere is in itself a dubious claim, as her only task has been to validate the reign of the King of Nepal.

The same culture that places such a heavy premium on a girl child also degrades her as she begins to come of age. In this world Sita Jaruna succumbs to death while having no say in the formation of her identity. From the beginning, it is her clan that places expectations of becoming a *Kumari* upon her shoulders. It is her family and socio-economic circumstances that prompt her to become a *Kumari*, and that is how her identity as a living goddess comes into being. Later, when she is dethroned and thrown into the streets, she is forced to take upon herself the identity of a fallen goddess turned sex worker. Throughout her life, her identity is narrativized by the gaze of the patriarchy that repeatedly oppresses and strips her of the little fortune that came her way in the form of love through Sangmin.

For the Sake of Sita as Sita's Counterstory

The genre of *Isekai* endows Sita Jaruna with a second chance in life where, with adequate intervention, she is able to steer herself towards a safer, healthier future. It also provides her with the security to take control and sustain her choices as her identity is no longer narrativized by an outsider's gaze. Since narratives have emphasised how stories perform a moral function in society, it becomes doubly imperative for Sita the Soul to intervene and narratively repair her story

(Lindemann 36). If the story of Sita is supposed to teach girls codes of feminine conduct, they might as well be empowering ones. The repaired narrative will also help numerous girls and women like Sita reinvent themselves as human beings with social and moral agency.

So far, Sita has inhabited an identity damaged by patriarchy. Her idolised life as a *Kumari* prevented her from access to basic education, both institutional as well as societal. When she emerges from the *Kumari Chen*, her social awareness is less than adequate, which drives her into unpleasant situations. The overprotection and reverent treatment distorted her sense of self to the point where her consciousness gets infiltrated with the idea that she is truly a cosmic being who would be adored and provided for no matter what. This illusion caused Sita to rudely intrude into a stranger's house in the middle of the night, who naturally throws her out and shuts the door on her face.[7] Another case of infiltrated consciousness can be found when, upon being constantly viewed as nothing more than a sexual object by the men on the street, Sita starts to believe that her sexuality is the only marketable asset that she possesses. Sita's encounter at the public eatery with the men who want to sexually exploit her convinces her that she is not fit for any job other than to sell her body. The lack of social knowledge prevents her from being aware of manual employment opportunities other than sex work. Her inexperience as a social being prompts her to take up sex work, the first opportunity that she sees as conducive to her condition. Here, she suffers from deprivation of opportunity as her body seems to her to be the only sellable asset, and she decides to capitalise on it.

It is at this point that the middle-aged Sangmin intervenes and helps her make a wise choice by telling her of the health hazards of the occupation she has decided to opt for. In this context, it is possible to read Sangmin as a figure identical to that of Valmiki, similar only in his efforts to guide and shelter Sita. Unlike the epic poet who narrativizes the tale of the *Ramayana* and through it Sita's, Sangmin remains in Sita Jaruna's life solely as an acting father to help her evaluate her

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[7] Haga. "Ep. 7." For the Sake of Sita. Webtoon, 2013-15. Webtoon. Accessed 10 March 2024.

choices. He never forces her to make a decision but lays bare the reality for Sita to take the final call. Here, Sangmin performs what Lindemann calls emotional work.

Lindemann defines emotional work as a set of useful functions performed by the inhabitants of the survivor's community of choice that reinforces the will of the survivor to counter and stand up to the narratives that oppresses them. She invokes Marilyn Friedman's definition of two kinds of communities in this context, namely, the found community and the community of choice. The found community is often the community in which an individual is placed without choice or say, such as the family, which tends to impose values and suppress non-group members. A community of choice, on the other hand, helps the survivor relocate and renegotiate their identity (Lindemann 9-10). While her family, the *Kumari Chen*, and the hostile street life are Sita Jaruna's found communities, that is, communities in which she found herself by chance, Sangmin becomes her community of choice. He performs meaningful emotional work, such as giving her a sense of companionship and security, helping her get accustomed to the mundane social world and look for alternative employment opportunities, boosting her confidence, and encouraging her to become independent and self-assertive. In this space, she finds a chance to adequately assess herself and make well-guided choices.

Growing out of absolute self-abnegation, she learns how to put her happiness first, all the while sustaining her deep sense of empathy and compassion. When she meets the young Sangmin on the streets and fosters a romantic tie with him, she decides to leave Nepal and build a happy conjugal life for herself rather than throwing the opportunity away. At the same time, she makes sure that the old Sangmin has enough sustenance to keep well after her departure. This is how she achieves a balance between self-love and love for the other, hence breaking the cycle of tragedy. To sum up, one may say that she saves herself — with Sangmin's assistance — as Sita the Soul takes it upon her to tell her own story in a way better than the one that has been told through the centuries. Her counterstory is powerful enough to equip young girls with the knowledge that they can help themselves, find communities of choice, and thrive no matter how hostile the world may become.

Conclusion

Haga's *For the Sake of Sita* ends with the revelation of the identity of the cosmic spirit that had been guiding Sangmin to help his departed wife, and the spirit, he discovers, is none other than that of Sita Jaruna herself. Breaking the norm of passive silence, Sita then emerges as an agential being who is perfectly capable of mending her own identity. She does not wait for Ram's mercy to deliver her. This also critically challenges the stereotypical notion that a woman's ultimate purpose in life is to marry a 'suitable man' who would free her from spinsterhood. Instead, Sangmin is shown to be a supportive companion who strengthens her rather than dehumanising her as a dependent. Counterstories like these highlight the absurdity of the oppressive hierarchies in society and emphasise the need to challenge them through individual or collective action. They also stress the importance of affirmative community as a driving force in the reconfiguration and repairing of a damaged identity. Hence, one need not stand alone in their fight against oppression, but be supported, encouraged, and fuelled by others in whom they find a sense of community.

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Sēocnes ond Læcecræft: Treating the Body, Healing the Spirit in the Anglo-Saxon Era

Martina Lamberti

Abstract: The essay explores the multifaceted approaches to body care during the Anglo-Saxon era, focusing on the Anglo-Saxon metrical charms. The aim is to analyse the dynamics of Anglo-Saxon 'medicine', intending to derive from it a thorough study of the beliefs and knowledge related to the concept of *sēocnes*, 'illness', and the practices of *læcecræft*, 'healing'. First, it intends to uncover the intricate relationship between physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of body maintenance, emphasizing practices such as hygiene, medical treatments, and religious rituals as the main expressions of the intertwining of medicine, religion, and magic in the Anglo-Saxon era. In a period when the modern concepts of magic, medicine, and religion had not yet been coined, illness was approached through a multitude of practices related to herbalism, superstition, and religious rituals. Religion played a central role in both spiritual and physical well-being since the divine intervention and the power of prayer shaped medical practices. Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England encompassed a variety of approaches, blending empirical observations with folk remedies and herbal treatments. Magic, closely intertwined with both religion and medicine, played a significant role in healing practices. Charms, amulets, and incantations were believed to ward off illness, protect against malevolent forces, and promote healing. Then, the essay analyses some of the main texts of the *Lacnunga*, transmitted in the *Harley MS* 585 manuscript, and of the *Bald's Leechbook* contained in the *Royal 12 D XVII* manuscript.

Keywords: *Anglo-Saxon literature; Magic; Medicine and religion; Poetry*.

The Anglo-Saxon era stands as a pivotal chapter marked by its rich blend of tradition, belief systems, and remarkable advancements in medicine. Within this

period, the complex interplay between treating the body and nurturing the spirit unveils profound insights into the holistic approach to well-being. Delving into the depths of this era, it is possible to find a civilisation deeply attuned to the interconnectedness of physical health and spiritual vitality, who perceived and practised the art of healing, where the mending of the body was intricately woven with the restoration of the spirit, fostering a harmonious equilibrium essential for the flourishing of the individual and the community alike.

During the Middle Ages, the realms of medicine, religion and magic intermingled seamlessly, both driven by a common purpose: resolving ailments and afflictions. This era saw a diverse array of practitioners, encompassing sorcerers, witches, thaumaturgists, and necromancers, each employing their unique methods. However, amidst this variety, one notable figure emerged in medieval England – the "lǣce," akin to a modern-day physician or healer (Lamberti 1). Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge the enduring presence of Germanic heathen traditions among the Anglo-Saxons, existing alongside Christian beliefs. This fusion resulted in a complex tapestry of classical medical principles mingled with pagan superstitions.

Consequently, the concept of *sēocnes* ('illness') fluctuated between adherence to the doctrine of the four humours,[1] the intrusion of supernatural entities, or divine punishment for sin. The Anglo-Saxon *lǣce*, therefore, resorted to *lǣcecrǣft*, which included a diverse array of methods to combat illness, ranging from herbal remedies to the creation of amulets and recitation of prayers, as for the *Nigon Wyrta Galdor* and the *Wið Lencten Adle*.

The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Medicine: Manuscripts

The corpus of Anglo-Saxon medical expertise encompasses four collections of medical texts and remedies, alongside fragments such as the *Wellcome* fragment and some marginalia. Such collections were transmitted through two manuscripts housed at the British Library in London: codex *Royal 12.D.XVII* and codex *Harley 585*. These manuscripts include the compilations known as Bald's

Leechbook, *Leechbook III*, *Lacnunga*, and the Old English *Pharmacopoeia*. These resources were intended to provide support for the treatment of diseases through the employment of botanical and herbal, but also spiritual, and magic practices prevalent during that era.

1. *Royal 12.D.XVII*

The manuscript, identified as London, British Library, *Royal 12.D.XVII* was meticulously crafted in a single script, likely within Winchester's scriptorium during the 10th century. Comprising 128 folios of medieval parchment, each measuring 270×205 mm, it houses a collection of medical treatises and enchantments written in Old English. Notably, interspersed within its pages are supplementary inscriptions in Latin, suggesting a later origin, perhaps from the 12th or 13th century (Ker 333).

Bald's *Leechbook* derives its name from the final Latin colophon in six verses, revealing that the work was compiled by the scribe "Cild" for an individual named "Bald", who was probably the book's owner (Cockayne xxi):

> Bald habet hunc librum Cild quern conscribere iussit,
>
> hic precor assidue cunctis in nomine Cristi
>
> Quo nullus tollat hunc librum pefidus a me
>
> Nec ui necfurto nec quodam famine falso.
>
> Cur? Quia nulla mihi tam cara est optima gaza
>
> Quam cari libri quos Cristi gratis comi.[2]

The work occurs in the folios 1r-111r, and it includes a wide range of remedies not solely confined to medical applications. The inclusion of some prayers and Biblical excerpts holds remarkable significance, emphasizing the healing potential attributed to the divine intervention of God. The composition comprises two distinct books, each preceded by a comprehensive table of contents: Book I (folios 1r-64v) which meticulously addresses internal ailments,

often arranged systematically following a *capite ad calcem order*[3]; Book II (folios 65r-111r) which initially delves into general anatomical structures before addressing external maladies[4] (Wright 14).

The major inspiration for these two Leechbooks is the Salernitan compilation of *Passionarius*. However, additional influences have been discerned from *Physica Plinii*, Oribasius, Pseudo-Antonius Musa, Celsus, and the later Latin translations of Soranus of Ephesus, namely *Esculapii* and *Liber Aurelii*. Furthermore, for Book II, other sources include the Pseudo-Galenic *Liber Tertius* and the Latin *Practica Alexandri* (Cameron 154-155; Talbot 163).

After the colophon of *Bald's Leechbook* in the same manuscript, *Leechbook III* (folios 111r-127r) commences with a table of contents. The recurrence of certain textual content between the initial two books of Bald and the third Leechbook suggests the likelihood that these works were initially conceived as separate compilations, potentially drawing from shared sources, and subsequently transcribed by another scribe into this manuscript. *Leechbook III* comprises 73 chapters and is organized in a manner reminiscent of both Book I and Book II[5].

2. *Harley 585*

Harley 585 is a parchment codex of uncertain origin, dating back to the 10th or 11th century (Ker xx-xxiii). Comprising 194 folios measuring 192x115 mm, it is bound in red under the title "Anglo-Saxon Charms and Receipts". This manuscript holds significant historical importance as the oldest extant witness to the *Old English Herbal* (folios 1r-129v). Additionally, it contains two other notable medical works: the Anglo-Saxon translation of *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* (folios 101v-114v) and *Lacnunga* (folios 130r-193r).

From a palaeographical perspective, the manuscript is written in a "rough square Anglo-Saxon minuscule", indicating that it was conceived for practical work (Cameron 46; Meaney 229). *Lacnunga*, translating 'remedies', serves as a compilation featuring nearly two hundred prescriptions, recipes, prose, and

metrical charms predominantly in Old English. Additionally, it incorporates Latin invocations, along with attestations in Old Irish and Old French.

Due to variances in compilation periods, the work has been split into two sections: the initial section (folios 130r-179r) originating from the late 10th century, and the subsequent section (folios 179v-193r) dating to the early 11th century. Mainly, the remedies consist of herbal lotions, beverages, and syrups aimed at alleviating health issues and disorders (Voigts 256). Frequently, these solutions incorporate animal substances and are influenced by classical teachings, with some overlaps observed in Bald's *Leechbook*. The compilation draws from a diverse array of sources, ten identified texts for its textual content. These include Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, *Medicina Plinii*, *Physica Plinii*, Marcellus' *De Medicamentis Liber*, Pseudo-Apuleius' *Herbarium*, Sextus Placitus' *Medicina ex Animalibus*, *Practica Alexandri Latine*, *De minutione sanguinis sive de phlebotomia, Virtutes Iohannis*, and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (Grattan and Singer 94; Pettit 161-162).

Within *Lacnunga*'s collection of recipes, a distinct series of alliterative charms stands out. Critics have described *Lacnunga*'s content as "Semi-Pagan" or "folk medicine" due to the presence of such charms. However, it is essential to note that the compilation defies strict categorization as solely "pagan". While certain charms incorporate Christian references, the prevailing notion within *Lacnunga* portrays disease as stemming from supernatural entities such as dwarfs, worms, demons, dragons, and elves (Pettit 27).

Sēocnes ond Lǣcecrǣft

> The fundamental aim of primitive religion was to safeguard life ... Primitive medicine sought to achieve the same end, and not unnaturally used the same means. Hence in the beginning religion and medicine were parts of the same discipline, of which magic was merely a special department. (Rivers vii)

From the above statement by W.H.R Rivers we can assume that medicine, magic, and religion were interwoven and considered that the boundaries between these realms were fluid. It is not surprising that individuals often sought remedies from multiple sources, reflecting a complex blend of faith, tradition, and practicality in the pursuit of well-being (Kieckhefer 821).

The Anglo-Saxons did not adhere to a singular belief system regarding the origins of disease or the rationale behind the treatments they replicated or translated. The causes of illness in the medieval era were multifaceted, revealing a combination of natural, supernatural, and spiritual beliefs:

> If we examine the beliefs of mankind in general concerning the causation of disease, we find that the causes may be grouped into three chief classes: (I) human agency … (II) the action of some spiritual or supernatural being … (III) what we ordinarily call natural causes. (Rivers 7)

Indeed, environmental factors such as poor sanitation, contaminated water sources, and inadequate nutrition play a significant role in predisposing individuals to various diseases. Moreover, Anglo-Saxon medicine was profoundly influenced by the theory of the four humours. Drawing from the works of ancient Greek and Roman physicians like Hippocrates and Galen, Anglo-Saxon healers believed that human well-being depended on the balance of four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile (Cameron 12). This theory guided medical practices in Anglo-Saxon society, where healers often employed a combination of herbal remedies, dietary adjustments, and ritualistic treatments to restore humoral equilibrium (Ayoub 341).

However, supernatural explanations were also prevalent, attributing illness to malevolent spirits, curses, or divine punishment (Grimm 460). Folklore depicted various supernatural entities, including dwarfs, elves, demons, and dragons, believed to inflict diseases upon humans (Lamberti 5). Elf-related diseases, for instance, were often treated as if they were demonic possessions

(Závoti 74). Moreover, the influence of Christian beliefs introduced a new layer of understanding illness. Some viewed illness as a test of faith or divine punishment due to a sinful life, reflecting the prevailing religious worldview of sin and redemption and the conviction that God was responsible for afflicting people with diseases even if, in most of the texts, God is a helpful and benevolent creature (Závoti 67).

Accordingly, the *læce* or healer utilized a diverse array of techniques and methods to address sickness and enhance health. Central to the leech's practices were herbal remedies, often derived from a rich ancestral tradition of botanical wisdom, passed down across generations and often documented in texts such as the *Lacnunga* (Rubin 66). These remedies ranged from simple poultices to complex mixtures, harnessing the healing properties of plants like chamomile, sage, and yarrow. Alongside herbalism, complementing these botanical treatments, the leech relied on magical practices, such as incantations and spells, to invoke supernatural forces believed to ward off sickness or facilitate recovery. For example, charms engraved on amulets or spoken aloud during rituals were thought to possess protective powers against illness. Besides, religious rituals and prayers held considerable influence, as individuals sought divine assistance through petitions to saints or through Christian liturgy (Payne 94).

Charms and Prayers: Exploring their Shared Essence

Despite their apparent differences, prayers, and charms share noteworthy similarities in their fundamental purposes and underlying mechanisms (Hill 145). Their distinction lies exclusively in the nature of the practitioner and the supernatural entity being invoked (Lamberti 211). Certainly, both practices involve a form of communication with the divine or supernatural realm, seeking assistance, protection, or intervention in worldly matters. They often convey a sense of reverence, faith, and devotion from the practitioner towards the higher power being invoked. Additionally, prayers and charms frequently rely on ritualistic gestures, words, or symbols believed to possess spiritual potency (Buzzoni 66).

For what concerns spells, they can be classified into five groups: exorcisms for curing diseases, herbal charms, charms for transferring diseases, amulet charms, and charm remedies. Charms typically commence with an epic narrative recounting the feats of a deity or hero (Vaughan-Sterling 189). These introductory anecdotes, termed *historiolae*, serve to establish the mythological context for magical events or miraculous occurrences involving supernatural entities (Heim 495). The intention behind invoking these tales is often to replicate past successes, thereby activating the desired magical effect. Charms commonly incorporate specific names or letters and may involve the use of threats or commands by the practitioner to achieve the desired outcome. Sometimes, the practitioner may provide instructions to the target or directly perform the spell on parts of their body. Certain symbolic numbers, such as three, seven, or nine, are frequently featured in these texts (Grendon 123). Moreover, the word often used to refer to the charms is *galdor*:

> The commonest O.E. word is Anglian galdor, West Saxon gealdor. Occasionally we find O.E. galung. They are derived from O.E. galan, 'to sing', so their meaning is 'song, magic song, charm'. In Germanic dialects we find O.S. galdar, O.H.G. galdar, galstar, kalstar, O.N. galdr. To indicate a magician or any person singing charm songs we have O.E. galere, gealdorgalere, wyrm-galere, wyrt-galere. Practising charms is called O.E. galan, agalan, begalan, gegalan, ongalan, all meaning 'to sing, to charm' (Storms 113).

From *Lacnunga*: The *Nigon Wyrta Galdor*

The *Nigon Wyrta Galdor*, commonly known as *Nine Herbs Charm*, is one of the most noteworthy Anglo-Saxon incantations, that exemplifies the fascinating witness of the blend of religious, pagan, and medical influences that highlighted the healing practices of the time. This mystical charm, found in the Harley 585 manuscript among the remedies of *Lacnunga*, holds substantial importance since it mentions the pagan god Woden, it invokes the divine assistance of Christ and

appeals to the power of nine sacred herbs (Van Arsdall 157) to combat illness and adversity (Pollington 211).

The charm opens with the healer's invocation of the nine *wyrta*, the herbs and their several properties:

Gemyne ðu mucgwyrt hwæt þu ameldodest

hwæt þu renadest æt Regenmelde

Una þu hattest yldost wyrta

þu miht wið III & wið XXX

þu miht wiþ attre & wið onflyge

þu miht wiþ þa[m] laþan ðe geond lond færð.

Ond þu wegbrade wyrta modor

eastan openo, innan mihtigu

ofer ðy cræte curran ofer ðy cwene reodan

ofer ðy bryde bryodedon ofer ðy fearras fnærdon.

Eallum þu þon wiðstode and wiðstunedest

swa ðu wiðstonde attre and onflyge

and þæm laðan þe geond lond fereð.

Stune hætte þeos wyrt, heo on stane geweox

stond heo wið attre, stunað heo wærce

Stiðe heo hatte, wiðstunað heo attre

wreceð heo wraðan, weorpeð ut attor.

Þis is seo wyrt seo wiþ wyrm gefeaht

þeos mæg wið attre, heo mæg wið onflyge

heo mæg wið ða[m] laþan ðe geond lond fereþ.

Fleoh þu nu attorlaðe, seo læsse ða maran

seo mare þa læssan, oððæt him beigra bot sy.

Gemyne þu, mægðe, hwæt þu ameldodest

hwæt ðu geændadest æt Alorforda

þæt næfre for gefloge feorh ne gesealde

syþðan him mon mægðan to mete gegyrede.

Þis is seo wyrt ðe wergulu hatte.

Þas onsænde seolh ofer sæs hrygc,

ondan attres oÞres to bote.

Stond heo wið wærce, stunað heo wið attre,

seo mæg wið III ond wið XXX

wið feondes hond ond wið frea-bregde

wið malscrunge minra wihta.

Þær geændade æppel ond attor

Þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.

Fille and finule, felamihtigu twa

þa wyrte gesceop witig <u>drihten</u>

halig on heofonum, þa he hongode

sette and sænde on VII worulde

earmum and eadigum eallum to bote (Pettit 60-69).

Translation:

Remember, Mugwort, what you made known / what you arranged at Regenmeld. / You were called Una, the oldest of herbs / you have power against three and thirty, / you have power against poison and infection, / you have power against the loathsome foe roving through the land. / And you, waybread, mother of herbs / open from the east, mighty inside. / Over you chariots creaked, over you queens rode, / over you brides cried out, over you bulls snorted. / You withstood all of them, you dashed against them. / May you likewise withstand poison and infection / and the loathsome foe roving through the land. / 'Stune' is the name of this herb, it grew on a stone, / it stands up against poison, it dashes against poison, / it drives out the hostile one, it casts out poison. / This is the herb that fought against the snake, / it has power against poison, it has power against infection, / it has power against the loathsome foe roving through the land. / Now, atterlothe, put to flight now, Venom-loather, the greater poisons, / though you are the lesser, / you the mightier, conquer the lesser poisons, until he is cured of both. / Remember, maythe, what you made known, / what you accomplished at Alorford, / that never a man should lose his life from infection / after maythe was prepared for his food. / This is the herb that is called 'Wergulu'. / A seal sent it across the sea-right, / a vexation to poison, a help to others. / It stands against pain, it dashes against poison, / it has power against three and thirty, / against the hand of a fiend and mighty devices, / against the spell of mean creatures. / There the Apple accomplished it against poison / that she (the loathsome serpent) would never dwell in the house. / Chervil and Fennel, two very mighty ones. / They were created by the wise Lord, / holy in heaven as He hung; / He set and sent them to the seven worlds, / to the wretched and the fortunate, as a help to all.[6] (Storms 1948)

Every herb holds symbolic and medicinal importance, deeply rooted in folklore and tradition, integrating elements from both Christian and pre-Christian customs. Mugwort, Plantain, Lamb's Cress, Nettle, Betony, Chamomile, Crab Apple, Chervil, and Fennel are the nine herbs highlighted in this charm, which are not only revered for their healing capabilities but also for their associations with

spiritual beliefs and magical practices. Their inclusion in the charm represents a clear example of the blend of paganism and Christianism, reflecting the interconnectedness of nature, spirituality, and human existence. Each herb symbolizes different aspects of life, from intuition and balance to strength and protection, offering a complete approach to healing and well-being (Payne 141).

In the following lines, the charm appeals to the Germanic god Woden[7] to fight the *wyrm*, a creature often depicted as a serpent or dragon, which embodies primal forces of chaos and destruction, threatening the stability of the Anglo-Saxon world. In the text, this creature is split into nine parts of nine different colours, representing nine 'poisons', which must be treated with the nine herbs, hence emphasizing the symbolism of the number nine:

Þas nigon magon wið nigon attrum.

Wyrm com snican, toslat he nan.

Þa genam <u>Woden</u> VIIII wuldortanas,

sloh ða Þa næddran Þæt heo on VIIII tofleah.

Nu magon þas VIIII wyrta wið nygon wuldorgeflogenum

wið VIIII attrum and wið nygon onflygnum

wið ðy readan attre, wið ðy runlan attre

wið ðy hwitan attre, wið ðy [hæwe]nan attre

wið ðy geolwan attre, wið ðy grenan attre

wið ðy wonnan attre, wið ðy wedenan attre

wið ðy brunan attre, wið ðy basewan attre

wið wyrmgeblæd, wið wætergeblæd

wið þorngeblæd, wið þystelgeblæd

wið ysgeblæd, wið attorgeblæd (Pettit 60-69).

Translation:

These nine have power against nine poisons. / A worm came crawling, it killed nothing. / For Woden took nine glory-twigs, / he smote the adder that it flew apart into nine parts. / Now these nine herbs have power against nine evil spirits, / against nine poisons and nine infections. / Against the red poison, against the foul poison / against the yellow poison, against the green poison, / against the black poison, against the blue poison, / against the brown poison, against the crimson poison. / Against worm-blister, against water-blister, / against thorn-blister, against thistle-blister, / against ice-blister, against poison-blister. (Storms 1948)

The final part of the charm contains an appeal to Christ as if he came to help the pagan Woden who precedes him (Galloni 123), stating the continuing presence of Germanic heathen traditions among the Christian beliefs. Moreover, the incantation ends with a prose section, more practical (Batten 7), to be used by the healer while preparing the herbal remedy.

Gif ænig attor cume eastan fleogan

oððe ænig norðan cume

oððe ænig westan ofer werðeode

Crist stod ofer adle ængancundes

Ic ana wat ea rinnende

þær þa nygon nædran behealdað

Motan ealle weoda nu wyrtum aspringan

sæs toslupan, eal sealt wæter

ðonne ic þis attor of ðe geblawe.

Mucgwyrt, wegbrade þe eastan open sy, lombescyrse, attorlaðan, mageðan, netelan, wudusuræppel, fille & finul, ealde

> sapan. Gewyrc ða wyrta to duste, mængc wiþ þa sapan and wiþ
> þæs æpples gor. Wyrc slypan of wætere and of axsan, genim
> finol, wyl on þære slyppan and beþe mid æggemongc, þonne he
> þa sealfe on do, ge ær ge æfter. Sing þæt galdor on æcre þara
> wyrta,: III: ær he hy wyrce and on þone æppel ealswa; ond singe
> þon men in þone muð and in þa earan buta and on ða wunde þæt
> ilce gealdor, ær he þa sealfe on do (Pettit 60-69).

Translation:

Against harmfulness of the air, against harmfulness of the ground, / against harmfulness of the sea. / If any poison comes flying from the east, / or any from the north, (or any from the south) / or any from the west among the people. / Christ stood over diseases of every kind. / I alone know a running stream, / and the nine adders beware of it. / May all the weeds spring up as herbs from their roots, / the seas slip apart, all salt water, / when I blow this poison from you.

Mugwort, waybread open from the east, lamb's cress, atterlothe, maythe, nettle, crab-apple, chervil and fennel, old soap; pound the herbs to a powder, mix them with the soap and the juice of the apple. Then prepare a paste of water and ashes, take fennel, boil it with the paste and wash it with a beaten egg when you apply the salve, both before and after. Sing this charm three times on each of the herbs before you prepare them, and likewise on the apple. And sing the same charm into the mouth of the man and into both his ears and on the wound, before you apply the salve. (Storms 1948)

From Bald's *Leechbook*: *Lǣcedomas eft wið Lencten Adle*

Within the folios of *Bald's Leechbook* lie remedies composed of herbs and potions but also prayers and incantations believed to invoke divine aid in the healing process. These prayers, often intertwined with Christian symbolism and invocations of saints, reflect the dual nature of Anglo-Saxon medicine. They illustrate the belief that physical ailments were not merely the result of natural causes but also manifestations of spiritual imbalances or divine punishments.

A clear example is Remedy 65 (folio 53r) which is contained in the first book of Bald. This text includes instructions to prepare a cure for *lencten-adle* 'spring fever' or 'typhoid fever', mixing features of the charm and prayer:

Eft drenc wið lenctenadle. Feferfuge, hramgealla, finul, wegbræde. Gesinge mon felá mæssan ofer þaere wyrte, ofgeot mid ealað, do halig wæter on. Wyl swiðe wel. Drince þonne swa he hatost mæge micelne scene fulne, ær þon sio adl to wille.

Feower godspellara naman y gealdor y gebed:

+++++ Matheus +++++ Marcus +++++ Lucas +++++ Iohannes +++++ Intercedite +++ pro me.

Tiecon. leleloth. patron. adiuro uos.

Eft godcund gebed:

In nomine domini sit benedictum.

Beronice Beronicen. Et habet in vestimento et in femore suo. Scriptum rex

regum et dominus dominantium.

Eft godcund gebed:

In nomine dei summi sit benedictum.

D E E R E þ . N y . þ T X D E R E þ N y . þ T X.

Eft sceal mon swigende þis writan and don þas word swigende þis on þa winstran breost and ne ga he in on þæt gewrit ne in on ber.

And eac swigende þis on don:

HAMMANẙEL . BPONICE . NOẙePTAẙEPГ. (Cockayne 140; Storms 270)

Translation:

Again, a drink against typhoid fever. Feverfew, ram-gall, fennel, waybread. Let somebody sing many Masses over them, pour ale over them, add holy water. Boil them very well. Let the patient drink a large cupful as hot as he can, before the fever attacks him. Say the names of the four evangelists, a charm and prayer:

+++++ Matthew +++++ Mark +++++ Luke +++++ John +++++ Intercede for me. I command you Tiecon, Leleloth.

Then a divine prayer: In the lord's name be blessed. Veronica. Veronica. And he has written on his robe and on his thigh 'king of kings and lord of lords'.

Again, a divine prayer: In the name of the lord be blessed. D E E R E þ. N and. þ T X D E R E þ N and. þ T X.

Afterwards, you shall write this in silence, and silently put these words on the right breast, and you must not go indoors with that writing, nor carry it in. And you must also put this on in silence: HAMMANŷEL. BPONice. NOŷepTAŷEPΓ (Cokayne 141; Storms 271).

This remedy begins with an herbal recipe, marked by a Christian influence consisting of singing masses and recurring to the employment of holy water. Then an invocation of the four evangelists occurs: it does not include instructions on how it had to be performed but the cross symbols and the Latin petitions seem to indicate that it had to be performed as a liturgy. It is also followed by two prayers: the first is addressed to Saint Veronica; the second seems to incorporate the sequences of Roman letters and runic symbols, which had to be written down in silence. The last line also contains some Greek letters, mentioning two Hebrew names: Emmanuel and Veronica (Storms 271). This last prayer is a clear reference to the blending of pagan symbols and Christian elements (Cameron 133-134), considering also that the act of writing in silence the letters is a clear witness of Anglo-Saxon magic tradition (Storms 271).

Conclusion

The significance of these magico-medical texts lies in their ability to offer insights into the Christian culture of Britain. Both *Bald's Leechbook* and *Lacnunga* provide glimpses into the intricate belief systems surrounding disease during the Anglo-Saxon era. Through the texts analyzed, taken from two of the most relevant witnesses of medical culture, such as *Lacnunga* and *Bald's Leechbook*, it is also possible to increase awareness of the remedies and rituals employed by the Anglo-Saxons to combat illness and restore health.

Lacnunga, with its collection of diverse medical recipes and incantations, exemplifies the syncretic nature of Anglo-Saxon healing practices. It demonstrates the belief in the efficacy of both natural remedies and supernatural interventions, reflecting a society where the boundaries between medicine and religion were blurred. It is the case of the *Nigon Wyrta Galdor*, with its explicit references to botanical knowledge, Christian faith, and pagan remnants in the collective imaginary. Similarly, *Bald's Leechbook* offers a perspective into the medical knowledge and techniques of the era, showcasing a pragmatic approach to treating ailments alongside the incorporation of charms and prayers, as in Remedy 65, against *lencten adle*.

Through the examination of these texts, it becomes evident that the Anglo-Saxons approached sickness and healing in a heterogeneous way, drawing upon a combination of empirical observation, folk wisdom, and religious devotion, because:

> By magic primitive man attempted to obtain results by means that seem to be abnormal and supernatural, at any rate by methods that strike us as distinct from those that we like to call normal and natural (Storms 27).

The broader implications of these findings extend well beyond the historical understanding of Anglo-Saxon medicine. They offer a valuable framework for examining how other ancient and medieval cultures integrated religious and supernatural beliefs into their medical practices. Additionally, these

texts provide a rich resource for future research into the evolution of medical traditions and the cultural factors that influence healing practices. By further exploring the interplay between magic, religion, and medicine in Anglo-Saxon texts, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of how early societies conceptualized health and disease. This research can also shed light on the resilience and adaptability of human belief systems in the face of illness, contributing to a broader appreciation of the diverse ways in which humanity has sought to understand and alleviate suffering throughout history.

Notes:

1. According to early Western physiology, humours (meaning 'liquids, fluids' in Latin) were the four fluids of the body that determined a person's temperament. These were blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile and the varying mixtures of these fluids caused a change in temperament, and in physical and mental disposition.

2. *Translation*: "Bald is the owner of this book, / which he ordered Cild to write; / earnestly here I beg everyone in the name of Christ / that no deceitful person should take this book from me, / neither by force nor by stealth nor by any false statement. / Why? Because no richest treasure is so dear to me / As my dear books which the grace of Christ attends".

3. Book I starts with the disorders of the head and proceeds with to eyes, ears, throat, face, nose, lips, thoracic organs, diaphragm, stomach, shoulders, thighs, knees, shins, feet, and genitals (remedies 1-30). The remedies 31-60 focus on cutaneous pains, while those following deal with: (remedy 62) joints, (remedies 62-66) fever, (remedy 67) alimentation, (remedy 68) bites of spiders, (remedy 70) cures for the libido, (remedy 71) feet, (remedy 72) bloodletting, (remedies 73-77) cutaneous disorders, (remedy 78) appetite, (remedy 79 and 86) some magical remedies for a journey, (remedy 85) magical charm to win a battle, and the remaining relate some disorders like insomnia, cold, drunkenness.

4. Book II first deals with (remedies 1-16) stomach, (remedies 17-24) liver, (remedies 25-33) intestines, (remedies 34-45) spleen; then it proceeds with (remedies 46-51) lungs, (remedies 52-55) purgatives, (remedy 56) dysentery, (remedy 59) paralysis, (remedy 64) a fragmentary letter from the Patriarch of Jerusalem to King Alfred, (remedy 65) miscellaneous recipes, (remedy 66) magical properties of jet, (remedy 67) densities of fluids.

5. *Leechbook* III first deals with diseases of the head, eyes, ears, mouth, teeth, neck; then the order is broken, and it focuses on cancer and bloody sputum. It progresses with internal illnesses (remedies 11-23) and then it returns to external pains (remedies 24-36). The structure *a capite ad calcem* is interrupted when it deals with eyes (remedy 46).

6. *The Nine Herbs Charm* is one of the poems containing one of the two only surviving references to Woden in Old English literature (the other one is in the Exeter Book).

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Revisiting Nationalism in Select Letters of Raja Rammohan Roy

Indira Jadav

Abstract: Nationalism played a pivotal role in constructing the idea of 'nation' in post-independent India. It immensely contributed to India's freedom struggle and made people aware of their unique cultural legacy through various social, political, and cultural reforms, thereby enlightening society in multiple ways. Raja Rammohan Roy was a precursor of these aforementioned reforms. His letters—public, private, and personal—are the carriers of this nationalist and reform spirit. In the 18th century, when India was afflicted by various social ills, Roy advocated for the introduction of modern Western education, as is evident in his letter to Lord Amherst. Roy employed the phrases "all mankind" and "one great family" in his letter to the Foreign Affairs Minister of France to illustrate ideas of universalization and peace among nations. Roy's book, *The Precepts of Jesus*, and his letter to Reverend T. Rees demonstrate his opposition to orthodox religious practices in both Hinduism and Christianity. While plentiful research has been conducted on the origin and evolution of nationalism, there is a paucity of research on its outcomes. In this context, drawing on the critical frameworks of Gramsci's hegemony and Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), this paper examines the ideology, perception, and vision of Raja Rammohan Roy as reflected in his letters and how they played a crucial role in shaping the idea of nationalism in India. Furthermore, based on Altman's theory of 'epistolarity' and communication, and employing qualitative research methodologies such as thematic analysis, content analysis, and literary analysis, this article intends to explore not only the idea of nationalism as exhibited in the selected letters of Raja Rammohan Roy but also the influence of his nationalistic ideology on the people, society, and the national movement.

Keywords: *Nationalism; Reforms; Hegemony; Epistolarity; Ideological State Apparatuses.*

Introduction

The emergence of nationalism in colonial India stands as a pivotal chapter in the nation's history, marking a period of profound social, cultural, and political transformation. Prior to the onset of British colonial rule, India was a diverse tapestry of kingdoms and regions, each with its own distinct cultural, religious, and linguistic identities. The arrival of the East India Company disrupted this social order, ushering in an era of profound change and upheaval. During this period, Raja Rammohan Roy rose to prominence, challenging entrenched patriarchal ideologies and contributing significantly to the shaping of nationalist discourse.

This research paper aims to revisit the concept of 'nationalism' as articulated by Raja Rammohan Roy in his letters to Lord Amherst, the Foreign Minister of France, and Lord Minto. It analyses how these letters significantly influenced the growth of nationalism in India during the colonial period and served as a subtle engagement with nationalist ideals. The study also examines how select letters of Raja Rammohan Roy offer invaluable insights into the intellectual and ideological foundation of his approach to nationalism.

Drawing upon theoretical frameworks—specifically Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, and Janet Altman's theory of 'epistolarity'—this paper will explore the intricate relationship between colonial power structures and the development of nationalist discourse. By situating Roy's writings within broader historical and theoretical contexts, this research aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of colonialism and its resistance in nineteenth-century India.

This paper endeavours to contribute to a deeper understanding of the origins and evolution of Indian nationalism, highlighting the role Raja Rammohan Roy played in shaping the nation's destiny. Through a nuanced

analysis of Roy's ideas and their impact on colonial India, this study seeks to illuminate the enduring legacy of nationalist thought in the postcolonial era.

Literature Review

The objective of this literature review is to explore the existing body of knowledge and research findings on nationalism while identifying gaps and highlighting emerging trends in this field. By delving into diverse scholarly perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and historical analyses, this review aims to provide a critical foundation for understanding nationalism and to address opportunities for future research.

Eugene Kamenka's *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (1973) explores the history and evolution of political nationalism, examining how national consciousness and nationalist sentiments in Europe from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries played a pivotal role in shaping historical narratives in the global history of the modern era. The work emphasizes the complexity of nationalism, highlighting its historical and social context while distinguishing it from patriotism and national consciousness. It provides historical examples illustrating the evolution of tribal or proto-nationalistic sentiments into more structured forms of nationalism, particularly in Europe.

Amit Kumar Tiwari's research article "Discourse on Nationalism During Indian National Movement" (2019) revolves around the rise of Indian nationalism, rooted in colonial interventions. It highlights how British rule and the colonial government interfered in India's social institutions. Additionally, it presents diverse viewpoints on Indian nationalism from Benedict Anderson, Valentine Chirol, Christopher Belle, Anthony Smith, Gandhi, and Tagore, offering a comprehensive outlook and multiple interpretations of nationalism. The focus lies on colonial influences and indigenous reactions.

Braj Mohun, in his research article "Interpreting Nationalism in the Indian Context" (2022), delves into the essence of Indian nationalism, contrasting it with religious nationalism prevalent in Middle Eastern nations. Mohun explores Indian

nationalism as a fusion of territorial, cultural, and postcolonial elements, highlighting its political legitimacy rooted in civic engagement and guided by principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. He argues that Indian nationalism cherishes its postcolonial heritage, celebrates freedom struggles, and resists foreign influence while embracing the diversity and unity of Indian culture.

Karan Das, in his research article "Sri Aurobindo on Nationalism-A Perspective" (2024), explores how Sri Aurobindo played a major role in the Swadeshi movement (1905), reviving India's cultural-spiritual heritage and advocating for independence beyond religious or cultural nationalism. The article discusses Aurobindo's contribution to the Indian freedom struggle, his revitalization of indigenous knowledge, and his ignition of a sense of rebirth of ideas in the form of the Indian Renaissance by rejecting Western ideals and notions of nationalism. Moreover, it highlights Aurobindo's activism, intense involvement, and holistic approach to nationalism, encompassing spirituality, culture, and politics, which were significant in achieving freedom and identity and continue to influence the contemporary discourse on nationalism.

Anup Baugh's research article "Raja Ram Mohun Roy's Contributions to Women's Rights and Education" portrays Raja Rammohan Roy as a nationalist who aimed to promote girls' rights and education. In his social ventures, Roy published significant works like "*Narider Prachin Adhikar Bartaman Sankochoner Upor Sankhipta Mantabya.*"[1] Additionally, Roy penned several essays in the magazine *Sambad Kaumadi* to shed light on societal immoralities. His contributions, including the abolition of *sati*[2], advocating for women's property rights, and reviving Indian traditions, culture, and education alongside Western influences, are indicative of his ideology and perspective toward social reforms.

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[1] Can be roughly translated from Bengali to English as "Brief Remarks on the Present Contraction of the Ancient Rights of Women."

[2] Sati was a historical practice observed in certain Hindu communities, wherein a widow would immolate herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. The practice's scriptural basis in early Hinduism is a subject of scholarly debate. However, Sati has been associated with related Hindu customs in various regions of India.

Md. Yousuf's research article "Raja Rammohun Roy and the Bengal Press in the Early Nineteenth Century: A Critical Study" presents Roy as the originator of the nationalist press in India and the father of modern Bengali prose, known for publishing *Sambad Kaumadi* and other pamphlets criticizing contemporary societal superstitions. Through the journal, he campaigned for various social reforms, including free primary education, women's right to education, freedom of the press, and medical treatment for Indians. Additionally, he protested against the Licensing Regulations, or Press Act of 1823, by ceasing publication in *Miratul Akhbar* and *Sambad Kaumadi*.

In her article "Role of Raja Ram Mohun Roy in the Historical Development of Social Work in India," Subrata Das critically examines how Raja Rammohan Roy acted as a pioneer of Indian nationalism. The study looks into how local monarchs and queens later embraced his early contributions to social service in India. Various studies in the field point to the fact that Roy cultivated liberal ideas and human rights, glorifying Indian culture and tradition while emphasizing the notion of uniformity of faith and rationality.

The review of the existing literature highlights diverse interpretations of nationalism, enriching our understanding of both Indian and European contexts. The study also explores Raja Rammohan Roy's ideas and his efforts to address socio-political issues in contemporary India. However, revisiting 'nationalism' as expressed in Roy's letters is necessary to uncover new dimensions of understanding the discourse of 'nation' and 'nationalism'.

About the Author

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), an Indian reformer and activist, was born on May 22, 1772, in Radhanagar, Bengal. He was married at the age of eight and remarried at nine. While he studied Sanskrit in Banaras, he learned Arabic and Persian in Patna. At age fifteen, Roy left home to embark on a journey through Tibet and India. He was well-versed in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. By this time,

Roy had become fluent in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Bengali, and had begun to study Western literature and languages.

In 1801, Roy "made the acquaintance of one of the best of his friends, Mr. John Digby, of the East India Company civil service" (Chanda and Majumdar xxxvi). Roy initially served as *khas-munshi* or private Persian assistant to Mr. Woodforde. Later, when Mr. Woodforde took charge of the collectorship of Dacca, Jabalpur, he appointed Rammohan Roy to officiate for him. When Mr. Woodforde was relieved of his duties as Collector, Roy also resigned and went to Calcutta. Upon Mr. Woodforde's appointment as Registrar of the Appellate Court of Murshidabad, he again appointed Roy as his private *munshi*.

In 1805, Rammohan Roy began serving Mr. John Digby (Registrar of the office of the Magistrate of Ramgarh) as a private *munshi* for ten years, developing a close friendship with him. In 1809, Mr. Digby appointed Roy as a *Deewan* in his place, requesting approval from the Board of Revenue. However, this proposal was ultimately rejected: "...in reply the Board not only refused to alter their decision but greatly disapproved of the style of Mr. Digby's letter and warned him that they would be compelled to take very serious notice of any repetition of similar disrespect towards them" (Chanda and Majumdar xxxvii).

Additionally, Roy owned a money-lending business in Calcutta and held four talukas, including Ramesvarpur and Govindapur, from which he earned 5,000 or 6,000 Indian rupees annually. Rammohan Roy employed himself in handling the company's papers and, in addition to lending money, received a good salary. Roy's consistent engagement with British officials afforded him significant status, prompting Mr. Digby to write a letter recommending Roy's appointment. This serves as evidence of Roy's direct engagement with British officials and his notable receptiveness to Western influence, demonstrating his willingness to take risks in his money-lending business to align himself with colonial rule.

Raja Rammohan Roy, along with David Hare, founded the Anglo-Hindu School and Vedanta College to teach modern Western literature and science, and

to reform Indian society. He rejected classical Indian literature in favour of a modern Western curriculum, arguing that traditional learning wouldn't prepare Bengal's youth for modern life. In 1828, Rammohan Roy founded Brahmo Samaj, which rejected the authority of the *Vedas*, incarnations, karma, and samsara, adopted Christian practices, and denied polytheism, idolatry, and the Indian caste system. In 1815, he established the Atmiya Sabha to remove social evils such as *sati pratha*, the caste system, the *purdah* system[3], and idolatry from society. In 1829, William Bentinck banned the practice of sati due to Raja Rammohan Roy's activism. In 1830, Roy went to England as the ambassador of the Mughal Emperor and played a significant role in passing the Third Reform Bill in the House of Commons.

Raja Rammohan Roy appears to have been immensely influenced by British modernism, rationalism, and scientific attitudes. His involvement with British society and culture in India and Great Britain, along with his direct participation in the British administration, suggests that the ideological state apparatus played a significant role in shaping his attitudes, ideologies, and perspectives, particularly towards the concept of the nation-state.

Analysis of the Texts

Selected letters written by Raja Rammohan Roy can be analysed through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Louis Althusser's concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses, as well as Janet Gurkin Altman's theory of 'epistolarity'.

Raja Rammohan Roy's letter to Lord Amherst, dated December 11, 1823, serves as a compelling illustration of the complex interplay between hegemony, counter-hegemony, and ideological state apparatuses in colonial India. Through

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[3] The *purdah* system is a practice of female seclusion observed in some Muslim and Hindu societies, particularly in South Asia. It involves the concealment of women from men through physical segregation and the wearing of concealing clothing. The term "*purdah*" is derived from the Persian word meaning "curtain" or "veil." This system restricts women's mobility and visibility in public spaces, often confining them to separate quarters within the home. Historically, purdah was associated with social status and modesty, but it has been criticized for limiting women's social, educational, and economic opportunities.

the lens of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), and Janet Altman's framework of epistolarity, we can unpack the multifaceted nature of Roy's engagement with colonial power structures and his vision for Indian education.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony posits that dominant groups maintain power not just through force, but through the creation of consent among the subordinate classes. In Roy's letter, we see evidence of both his internalization of and resistance to British hegemony. The opening phrase, "Humbly reluctant as the Natives of India" (Das 219), demonstrates Roy's acknowledgment of the power dynamics at play. By addressing Lord Amherst as "My Lord" and referring to "The present Rulers of India," Roy implicitly accepts British authority. However, this acceptance is not without nuance, as Roy goes on to challenge aspects of British policy, particularly in education.

Althusser's concept of ISAs helps us understand how institutions like education systems perpetuate dominant ideologies. Roy's critique of the proposed Sanskrit school and his advocacy for Western education can be seen as an engagement with competing ISAs. He argues against the Sanskrit educational model, stating it "would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness" (Das 223). Instead, he promotes a "more liberal and enlightened system of instruction embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Anatomy with other useful sciences" (Das 223). This preference for Western knowledge over traditional Indian learning reveals the extent to which Roy had internalized certain aspects of colonial ideology, while simultaneously attempting to use that ideology to advance Indian interests.

Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity provides a framework for understanding how the letter form itself shapes the message and the relationship between sender and recipient. Roy's careful construction of his argument, his use of formal language, and his strategic self-positioning as both a humble subject and a bold reformer all demonstrate his savvy manipulation of the epistolary form to achieve his goals.

Roy's critique of Sanskrit education is particularly revealing. He argues that in the Sanskrit school, "The pupils will there acquire, what was known two thousand years ago, with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since then produced by speculative men, such as are already commonly taught in all parts of India" (Das 221). He further criticizes the complexity of Sanskrit grammar, describing it as "the most difficult and mechanical language" (Das 221). This rejection of traditional Indian knowledge in Favor of Western learning exemplifies the complex workings of hegemony, where the colonized subject internalizes the colonizer's worldview to some degree.

However, Roy's position is not one of simple capitulation to British hegemony. His advocacy for Western education can also be seen as a form of strategic counter-hegemony, aimed at empowering Indians with knowledge that could ultimately challenge colonial rule. This is evident in his assertion that the promotion of education should be "guided by the most enlightened principles, so that the stream of intelligence, may flow in the most useful channels" (Das 220).

Roy's letter also reveals the workings of what Althusser would term the educational ISA. By advocating for a shift from traditional Sanskrit learning to Western sciences, Roy is effectively proposing a transformation of the educational ISA in India. His statement that "we already offered up thanks to Providence, for inspiring the most generous and enlightened of the nations of the west, with the glorious ambition of planting in Asia, the arts and sciences of modern Europe" (Das 220) shows how deeply he had internalized the idea of Western superiority in certain domains.

At the same time, Roy's letter can be read as an attempt to influence and reshape the educational ISA from within. By appealing to Lord Amherst and using the language and concepts of the colonizers, Roy seeks to effect change in a way that might be palatable to British authorities. This demonstrates the complex nature of

hegemonic contestation, where resistance often takes place within the frameworks established by the dominant power.

The epistolary nature of Roy's communication, as analyzed through Altman's framework, reveals his strategic use of the letter form. His careful balancing of deference and criticism, his appeals to British self-image as enlightened rulers, and his positioning of himself as a bridge between Indian and Western knowledge all demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how to use the letter as a persuasive tool.

While Roy's letter to Lord Amherst primarily focused on educational reform within India, his correspondence with international figures provides further insight into his evolving conception of nationalism and his engagement with global political ideologies. The letter to Prince Talleyrand, the Foreign Minister of France, written in 1831, offers a particularly rich text for analysis. This letter, composed during Roy's time in England as an unofficial representative of the Mughal Emperor, reveals how Roy's nationalist ideas were shaped by and in dialogue with broader international contexts.

Raja Rammohan Roy's letter to Prince Talleyrand, the Foreign Minister of France, written in 1831, provides a fascinating lens through which to examine the complex interplay of hegemony, counter-hegemony, and ideological state apparatuses in the context of early 19th-century international relations. Applying the theoretical frameworks of Gramsci, Althusser, and Altman allows us to unpack the multifaceted nature of Roy's engagement with global political ideologies and his evolving conception of nationalism.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony is evident in Roy's self-identification as "a foreigner, the Native of a country situated many thousand miles from France" (Das 225). This statement reflects Roy's internalization of the global power dynamics of the time, where European nations held hegemonic control over much of the world. However, Roy's praise for France as a country "so favoured by nature and so richly adorned by the cultivation of arts and sciences, and above all

blessed by the possession of a free constitution" (Das 225) can be read as a form of counter-hegemony. By highlighting the value of freedom and constitutional governance, Roy implicitly critiques the lack of such freedoms in colonial India.

Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is particularly relevant when considering Roy's engagement with international political norms. His understanding and utilization of diplomatic language and protocols demonstrate the influence of what could be termed the 'diplomatic ISA'. This is evident in his careful navigation of passport regulations and his appeal to universal principles of human dignity and freedom.

Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity helps us understand how Roy uses the letter form strategically to position himself and his ideas. His opening self-identification sets the tone for a letter that balances deference with assertiveness, and personal appeal with universal principles. The epistolary form allows Roy to present himself simultaneously as a humble petitioner and as a representative of broader human values.

Roy's advocacy for universalism and humanism is a key feature of this letter. His assertion that "all mankind are one great family of which all nations and tribes existing are only various branches" (Das 226) can be read as a form of counter-hegemony against the prevailing colonial worldview that emphasized racial and national differences. This universalist stance aligns with what Gramsci would term an attempt to create a new 'historic bloc' - an alliance of social forces united by a common worldview.

At the same time, Roy's internalization of certain Western ideals is evident in his admiration for France's "free constitution" and his advocacy for "enlightened individuals of all countries to work together for the common welfare and mutual enjoyment of the whole human race" (Das 226). This reflects the complex nature of hegemony, where the colonized subject may adopt aspects of the colonizer's worldview while still maintaining a critical stance.

Roy's discussion of passport regulations reveals his engagement with the bureaucratic apparatuses of international relations. His statement that "the granting of passports by the French Ambassador here is not usually founded for certificates for character or investigation into the conduct of individuals" (Das 227) demonstrates his understanding of and willingness to challenge international norms. This can be seen as an attempt to navigate and influence the diplomatic ISA from his position as a colonial subject.

The epistolary nature of this communication allows Roy to present his ideas in a personal yet formal manner. He uses the letter form to create a direct appeal to Prince Talleyrand, balancing respect for French sovereignty with assertiveness about his rights and dignity. This strategic use of the epistolary form aligns with Altman's understanding of letters as a site of negotiation between writer and recipient.

Roy's letter also reveals his evolving conception of nationalism. While he identifies himself as a foreigner and a native of a distant country, he also advocates for a form of universal humanism that transcends national boundaries. This tension between national identity and universal values reflects the complex nature of emerging nationalist ideologies in colonial contexts.

While Roy's letter to Prince Talleyrand reveals his engagement with international diplomacy and his vision of universal humanism, his correspondence with Lord Minto offers a more intimate glimpse into the complexities of colonial governance within India. This shift in focus from the international to the domestic sphere allows us to examine how Roy navigated the intricate power dynamics of British rule in his immediate context. The letter to Lord Minto, written in 1809, predates the Talleyrand letter by over two decades, providing insight into Roy's earlier interactions with colonial authorities and his evolving stance on British governance. As we transition from Roy's cosmopolitan vision expressed to Talleyrand to his more localized concerns addressed to Minto, we see a consistent thread of Roy's commitment to justice and fair governance,

albeit expressed in different contexts and with varying degrees of deference to colonial authority.

Raja Rammohan Roy's 1809 letter to Lord Minto provides a rich text for analysis through the lenses of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity. The letter begins with Roy identifying himself as part of "all the native subjects of the British government" (Robertson 267), immediately positioning himself within the colonial power structure. This self-identification reflects the complex interplay of hegemony and counter-hegemony that characterizes Roy's relationship with British rule.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony posits that ruling classes maintain power not just through force, but through cultural domination and the manufacturing of consent. In this letter, we see Roy both accepting and challenging aspects of British hegemony. His use of the phrase "native subjects" indicates an internalization of colonial categorizations, suggesting the effectiveness of British cultural hegemony. However, Roy's letter also demonstrates what Gramsci would term "counter-hegemonic" moves, as he uses the very structures of British governance to challenge the actions of a British official.

The letter details an incident involving Sir Frederick William Hamilton, a British district collector, who allegedly assaulted a petitioner for failing to notice him from a distance of 300 yards. Roy's decision to bring this complaint to Lord Minto demonstrates his faith in British institutions, even as he challenges the actions of individual British officials. This complex positioning aligns with Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as a constantly negotiated process, rather than a static state of domination.

Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is also relevant here. ISAs, according to Althusser, are institutions like schools, media, and legal systems that reproduce the dominant ideology. Roy's letter itself can be seen as engaging with the legal and administrative ISAs of British India. His

appeal to Lord Minto as "the guardian of the just rights and dignities of that class of your subject against all acts which have a tendency either directly or indirectly to invade those rights and dignities..." (Robertson 267) shows Roy operating within the ideological framework of British justice and governance.

However, Roy's letter also reveals the limits of these ISAs. By bringing a complaint against a British official, Roy is exposing contradictions within the colonial system, challenging the idea that British rule always operates justly. This aligns with Althusser's understanding that ISAs can become sites of class struggle and ideological conflict.

Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity provides another valuable framework for analysing this letter. Altman emphasizes the importance of considering the specific dynamics of letter-writing, including the relationship between sender and recipient, and the letter's function as both a bridge and a barrier between them. In this case, Roy's careful rhetoric in addressing Lord Minto - using phrases like "Your Lordship" and "Guardian" - demonstrates his acute awareness of the power dynamics at play and his strategic use of epistolary conventions to achieve his aims.

The letter's persuasive tone and formal structure, including the archaic spelling of "sheweth" (Robertson 267), reflect what Altman would term the "performative" aspect of letter-writing. Roy is not just conveying information; he is performing the role of a loyal but concerned subject, using the letter as a means of both connection and self-presentation.

Roy's emphasis on the petitioner's esteemed lineage and his family's contribution to government revenue also aligns with Altman's concept of the letter as a space for strategic self-representation. By highlighting these details, Roy is not only advocating for the petitioner but also positioning himself as someone knowledgeable about and invested in the colonial system of governance and revenue collection.

The letter to Lord Minto reveals the complex negotiations of power and identity taking place in colonial India. Through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony, we see Roy both accepting and challenging aspects of British rule. Althusser's ISAs help us understand how Roy engages with and sometimes subverts colonial institutions. Finally, Altman's epistolary theory illuminates the strategic nature of Roy's letter-writing, showing how he uses the form to navigate complex power dynamics.

The analysis of Raja Rammohan Roy's letters to Lord Amherst, Prince Talleyrand, and Lord Minto reveals a complex and nuanced engagement with colonial power structures, emerging nationalist ideologies, and international diplomacy in early 19th century India. Through the lenses of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and Janet Altman's framework of epistolarity, we can discern several key outcomes. Roy's letters demonstrate both internalization of and resistance to British hegemony, balancing deferential language and acceptance of British authority with critiques of colonial policies and advocacy for Indian interests. This dual positioning reveals the complex nature of hegemonic contestation in colonial contexts, where resistance often takes place within the frameworks established by the dominant power.

While Roy accepts certain aspects of colonial ideology, he also employs strategic counter-hegemony. His advocacy for Western education in the letter to Lord Amherst, for instance, can be seen as an attempt to empower Indians with knowledge that could ultimately challenge colonial rule. Similarly, his universalist stance in the letter to Prince Talleyrand presents a vision of human unity that subtly challenges colonial hierarchies. Roy's letters also reveal his complex interactions with various ISAs, particularly the educational and diplomatic apparatuses. His critique of traditional Sanskrit education and promotion of Western sciences in the Amherst letter shows an attempt to transform the educational ISA in India, while his navigation of passport

regulations and diplomatic norms in the Talleyrand letter demonstrates his engagement with the diplomatic ISA.

Across all three letters, Roy demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to use the epistolary form as a persuasive tool. His careful balancing of deference and criticism, his appeals to the self-image of his recipients, and his strategic self-positioning reveal a mastery of epistolary conventions in negotiating power relations. Roy's letters trace the development of a nascent Indian nationalism that is both influenced by and resistant to colonial ideologies. His advocacy for universal education and social reforms lays the groundwork for a progressive vision of Indian nationhood. At the same time, his engagement with international diplomacy in the Talleyrand letter reveals a cosmopolitan outlook that transcends narrow nationalism.

Particularly evident in the Talleyrand letter, Roy grapples with the tension between his identity as an Indian subject and his vision of universal human values. This reflects the complex nature of emerging nationalist ideologies in colonial contexts, where national identity is formed in dialogue with both local traditions and global influences. The letter to Lord Minto reveals Roy's willingness to challenge individual instances of colonial misconduct while still operating within the broader framework of British rule. This demonstrates the spaces for contestation that existed within colonial power structures and Roy's strategic navigation of these spaces.

Across the letters, we see evidence of Roy's internalization of certain Western ideals, particularly notions of progress, rationality, and constitutional governance. This reflects the complex nature of colonial influence on Indian intellectual traditions. While primarily addressing political and educational issues, the letters also reveal Roy's commitment to social reform. His critique of traditional practices and advocacy for modernization prefigure later nationalist discourses on social progress. Roy's letters, particularly those to Talleyrand and Minto, demonstrate his understanding of diplomatic protocols and his ability to

navigate complex international and colonial power dynamics. This reveals Roy as a sophisticated political actor operating on both domestic and international stages.

Throughout the letters, Roy attempts to balance respect for Indian traditions with advocacy for modernization and reform. This tension between tradition and modernity would become a central theme in later Indian nationalist thought. Roy's engagement with British officials and his use of colonial administrative channels to address grievances (as in the Minto letter) demonstrate his strategy of working within colonial structures to advance Indian interests.

These outcomes collectively paint a picture of Raja Rammohan Roy as a complex figure who was deeply engaged with the political, social, and intellectual currents of his time. His letters reveal a sophisticated understanding of colonial power dynamics and a nuanced approach to advancing Indian interests within and against these structures. Roy emerges as a key figure in the development of Indian nationalist thought, offering a vision that was simultaneously rooted in Indian traditions and open to global influences. The analysis of these letters through multiple theoretical lenses provides insight into the complex processes of identity formation, political negotiation, and ideological contestation that characterized the early stages of Indian nationalism. It also highlights the importance of examining historical documents through interdisciplinary frameworks to uncover the multifaceted nature of colonial encounters and the emergence of nationalist ideologies.

Conclusion

Raja Rammohan Roy emerged as a pivotal figure in the development of Indian nationalism, one who skillfully navigated the complex terrain of colonial power structures while advocating for social reform and modernization. His letters to Lord Amherst, Prince Talleyrand, and Lord Minto reveal a sophisticated engagement with both Western and Indian intellectual traditions, demonstrating Roy's ability to synthesize diverse ideas into a coherent vision for India's future.

Roy's approach to nationalism was markedly different from later, more exclusionary forms. His vision was inherently cosmopolitan, advocating for universal human values while still maintaining a distinct Indian identity. This balancing act between universalism and particularism offers valuable insights for contemporary debates on nationalism and globalization. In an era where narrow, ethnocentric nationalisms are on the rise globally, Roy's inclusive and progressive nationalism provides an alternative model that is worth revisiting.

The analysis of Roy's letters through the lenses of Gramsci's hegemony, Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses, and Altman's epistolarity reveals the complex negotiations of power, ideology, and identity that characterized colonial India. Roy's strategic use of colonial structures to advance Indian interests, his advocacy for educational reform, and his engagement with international diplomacy all demonstrate a nuanced understanding of how to effect change within constraining power structures. This approach remains relevant today, offering lessons on how marginalized groups can work within existing systems to advocate for their rights and interests.

Roy's emphasis on education as a tool for national progress and individual empowerment continues to resonate in contemporary India and beyond. His critique of traditional Sanskrit education in favor of more "useful sciences" prefigures ongoing debates about the role of education in national development. While Roy's wholesale embrace of Western education may be critiqued from a postcolonial perspective, his recognition of the transformative power of education remains pertinent in addressing contemporary challenges of inequality and underdevelopment.

The tension between tradition and modernity that Roy grappled with in his letters remains a central issue in many postcolonial societies today. His attempts to reform Hindu practices while preserving what he saw as the essence of Indian civilization offer insights into how societies can navigate processes of modernization without losing their cultural moorings. This balance is particularly

relevant in an increasingly globalized world where cultural homogenization is a growing concern.

Roy's advocacy for women's rights, particularly his campaign against sati, highlights the progressive elements of his nationalist vision. His recognition that national progress was inextricably linked to social reform, particularly the status of women, anticipates later feminist critiques of nationalism. In contemporary India, where gender inequality remains a pressing issue, Roy's integrative approach to social reform and national development offers valuable lessons.

The cosmopolitan outlook evident in Roy's letter to Prince Talleyrand, with its emphasis on universal human values and international cooperation, provides a counterpoint to insular forms of nationalism. In an era of increasing global interconnectedness coupled with resurgent nationalism, Roy's vision of a nationalism that is open to global influences while maintaining its distinct identity offers a model for navigating these competing pressures.

Roy's strategic use of the epistolary form to engage with colonial authorities demonstrates the power of effective communication in political advocacy. His ability to balance criticism with deference, to appeal to the self-image of his interlocutors while advancing Indian interests, offers lessons in diplomatic communication that remain relevant in international relations today.

However, it's important to critically examine Roy's ideas in light of contemporary understandings of colonialism and its lasting impacts. While his willingness to engage with and adopt aspects of Western thought was progressive for his time, it also reflects the deep influence of colonial ideologies on Indian intellectual traditions. This serves as a reminder of the need to decolonize knowledge systems and critically engage with inherited intellectual frameworks.

The relevance of Roy's nationalism in today's world lies in its inclusivity, progressivism, and cosmopolitanism. In an era where exclusionary nationalisms are gaining ground globally, Roy's vision offers an alternative model that embraces diversity, advocates for social reform, and engages constructively with

global influences. His emphasis on education, social reform, and universal human values provides a framework for addressing contemporary challenges of inequality, cultural conflict, and global cooperation.

Moreover, Roy's nuanced navigation of colonial power structures offers insights into how marginalized groups can effect change within constraining systems. His strategic use of colonial institutions to advance Indian interests, while simultaneously critiquing aspects of colonial rule, demonstrates a sophisticated approach to political advocacy that remains relevant in addressing contemporary power imbalances.

In conclusion, Raja Rammohan Roy's letters provide not only a window into the formative period of Indian nationalism but also offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary challenges. His vision of a nationalism that is both inclusive and progressive, rooted in tradition yet open to reform, continues to be relevant in shaping India's national identity and its place in the global community. As India and other nations grapple with questions of national identity, social reform, and global engagement in the 21st century, Roy's ideas offer a nuanced and balanced approach that merits continued study and application.

The enduring legacy of Roy's thought lies in its ability to bridge divides – between East and West, tradition and modernity, national interest and universal values. In our increasingly polarized world, this bridging function is more crucial than ever. By revisiting and reinterpreting Roy's ideas for our time, we can find valuable resources for crafting inclusive, progressive, and globally engaged forms of nationalism that address the complex challenges of our interconnected world.

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Reading for Pleasure: Revolutionary Potential in Queer Graphic Novels

Audrey T. Heffers

Abstract: In "Headiness," creative writer Karen Brennan argues that "Mostly we read for pleasure, in Roland Barthes' sense. We get cozy, turn pages, disappear into a text as into another world. What's wrong with that?" Famously, Feminism and Queer Theory scholar Sara Ahmed points out the necessity of feminist killjoys. However, discomfort of the privileged does not necessitate discomfort of the marginalized. There are many avenues toward change, including ones that braid together joy[1] with resistance. The graphic novels *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* by Deya Muniz*, Cosmoknights* by Hannah Templer*,* and *The Well* by Jake Wyatt and Choo combine a form (graphic novels), a genre (the umbrella of speculative fiction), and an age category (young adult) that have each been traditionally dismissed as 'not serious enough' for academic study and intellectual rigor. Graphic novels, sci-fi, fantasy, and young adult literature are instead relegated, in this false binary, to the realm of pleasure. However, these texts all engage with a revolutionary queer sensibility. *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* examines gender roles/expressions and the need to change politics; *Cosmoknights* highlights the difficulty of women-as-possessions as a matter of trade and diplomacy, especially in terms of class dynamics; and *The Well* explores issues of power and agency. Reading for pleasure can engage with resistance against hierarchies and oppressions.

Keywords: *Queer; Graphic novel; Genre; Young Adult; Resistance.*

In "Headiness," Karen Brennan argues: "Mostly we read for pleasure, in Roland Barthes' sense. We get cozy, turn pages, disappear into a text as into another world.

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[1] of marginalized peoples

What's wrong with that?" (62) Sara Ahmed points out 'what's wrong with that' by introducing 'feminist killjoys' in her book, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. Ahmed makes an argument that, "the feminist killjoy begins her political life as a stereotype of feminists, a negative judgment, a way of dismissing feminism as causing and caused by misery. In reclaiming the feminist killjoy for ourselves, we turn the judgment into a project, because if feminism causes misery, that is what we might need to cause" (2). There are many avenues toward change, including ones that braid together joy with resistance. The graphic novels *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* by Deya Muniz and *Cosmoknights* (Book One and Two) by Hannah Templer combine a form (graphic novel), a genre (speculative fiction), and an age category (young adult) to create a fictional multiverse of characters who fight for their rights and who become activists in their own right. Despite being dismissed as 'not serious enough' for academic study and intellectual rigor, these two young adult fictions have combined graphic novels and sci-fi/fantasy, to lend a voice to the spirit of resistance and activism. At the same time, they haven't taken away the realm of pleasurable reading. These texts keep the joy of reading intact, engaging the readers with a revolutionary queer sensibility at the same time.

In "Queer Girlhoods in Contemporary Comics: Disrupting Normative Notions," Mel Gibson writes about how "the representations of queer girlhoods in contemporary fictional graphic novels for young readers" demonstrate, "the disruption of normative notions, traditionally constructed relationships, gender binaries, and fixed designations" (1). Deya Muniz in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* examines gender roles and gender expressions, as well as the need to change politics. Hannah Templer, too, focuses on gendered issues in *Cosmoknights*, as it highlights the problematic economic system of 'women-as-possessions' as a matter of trade and diplomacy. Templer in *Cosmoknights* weaves in reminders about class dynamics to a greater degree than Muiz in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* does. Rather than creating a mutually exclusive binary between reading for pleasure and

reading for revolution, these texts serve as examples of how reading for pleasure can engage with resistance against hierarchies and oppressions.

The Gender Problem

Both *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* and the *Cosmoknights* series target the problematic connections between womanhood and economic realities. In *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich,* gender legally limits financial freedom. For example, protagonist Cam spends the vast majority of the graphic novel posing as a man, including the pretense of male pronouns, crossdressing, and going by the title of "count" to embody the part. This is not her idea, nor is it a choice freely made. Cam's father (the previous count) insists that, since she is gay and refuses to marry, Cam should pretend to be a man to get around laws that only let men inherit from their fathers. While Cam is not trans, she goes along with this idea to keep herself from living in poverty upon her father's death. Similarly, Cam's friend Zola is only able to publicly run her own business because she's widowed and without children. As Zola explains to Brie at one point:

> You don't understand what it's like to be stuck in a loveless marriage for the sake of convenience. I was lucky to marry a man who allowed me to use his name to start a business he has no interest in, since I couldn't legally do it under my own. I was lucky he was kind to me and allowed me more freedom than most. I was *lucky* to get to watch him take credit for my work. He was hailed as a genius, and I was seen as nothing more than his *trophy wife*. (Muniz 180-181)

The graphic novel is very clearly set up with the premise that there is no fundamental difference in skill that sets men and women apart. While society believes that Zola's husband is the talented genius of the fashion world, it is, in reality, 'her' skills that are being praised. She is no less capable as a woman, but others are far less likely to acknowledge her talent than they were to praise her husband for it, though he did not

contribute anything other than his name and his status as a man. Similarly, Cam is charming to everyone as a man, but this quality doesn't disappear when she is outwardly a woman. The only thing that changes is society's perception of and acceptance of her. She has more freedom as a man, but that is a result of society's norms, not a result of inherent gendered or sexed differences between distinct categories of "man" and "woman."

While Cam is disguised as a man, the princess of the kingdom, Brie, falls in love with her. When Brie decides to propose to Cam, her friend says: "It's unheard of, right? A *princess* proposing to a man? *Any* noble lady proposing to a man?" (90-91) This in and of itself is presented as a queer notion—queer as in strange, but also queer as in anti-normative. Brie would be taking on the role typically reserved for a man. She would be claiming a kind of agency that is otherwise "unheard of." (What Brie does not yet realize at this point is that it is a notion that is also queer because she and Cam are both women.) If any woman in this narrative is in a position to challenge societal norms, that woman is Brie. As the crown princess, she has a certain level of power that most other people—even men—do not have. However, this entire proposal plan falls apart when Brie realizes Cam is a woman.

Instead of confronting Cam about it privately, Brie nearly outs Cam at a party. She says, "My grandfather definitely would've [thrown you in a dungeon]—vicious old man. If someone like you had shown up to court back then, with such pretty, long hair… y'know, it makes you look like a g—" (124). Cam is only saved by Zola's interference. This moment doesn't simply highlight the fact that Brie feels hurt and betrayed. Rather, there are a couple of layers here, in terms of the problems with power dynamics: firstly, as the crown princess, Brie wields a lot of power (something which Zola will later take her to task on), and therefore Brie could certainly use that power to harm Cam for her gender transgression. In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler discusses anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger,* noting in particular that -

the very contours of 'the body' are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence. Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies:

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (166-167)

Secondly, Cam often forgets that she's in a very precarious situation (because of this, and because Cam is the protagonist, it is possible that the reader often forgets this as well. The reminders that Cam gets about this danger can be written off as coming from a worrywart of a character rather than signaling a real potential problem). Anyone could out Cam at any time and ruin her life socially and financially, in addition to the very tangible threat of imprisonment for violating the gender-based laws.

Cam later says, "I want to run away and hide. I want to dress however I choose and live however I choose" (Muniz 160). This is where choice comes to the forefront: Cam doesn't *choose* to live as a man, but it is the best option available to her at the time. She may enjoy some aspects of this presentation, but it is not a gender expression that is freely made, either. Toward the end, she follows up with Brie by saying, "Living as a man doesn't really bother me, but… I don't know. I guess I just wish I could change things, you know?" (201) It is this attention to the need for societal change that lives in the undercurrent of the graphic novel throughout. Cam serves as an example of why the system is wrong in its denial of economic (and other) freedom to women

in this society. She doesn't try to change the world; in all likelihood, if Cam tried at any point to change things on her own, it would likely only get her into trouble. Zola calls for change, even if she cannot enact it on her own, because she a) understands the precarity of being a woman in this society, and even has awareness of how even less privileged women fare worse than her or Cam, b) she is a loyal friend to Cam, and c) she is in a position to convince the princess to listen. Brie is the one with the power to make change, which she only does in response to Zola's call to action (as will be explored later in this essay) and in response to her love for Cam.

In *Cosmoknights*, the gender critique comes through the economic system of women-as-possessions as a primary means of trade and diplomacy. Cosmoknights were originally intended to fight for and win a right to the throne via marriage to the princess. This is framed as an avenue for upward mobility from lower class to royalty. However, since the inception of this practice, that has morphed into rich sponsors hiring cosmoknights on their behalf, negating the possibility of upward mobility through these marriages-by-combat. When protagonist Pan meets cosmoknight Cass and her wife Bee for the first time, she says

> "Why compete? I expect this shit from dudes, but women? You're a bunch of vultures, fighting over those girls. Can't any of you think for yourselves? You fight on behalf of a bunch of entitled assholes who don't give a shit about you, or the princesses… Their only concern is the title that comes with marrying into a royal family. It's a game to them! How can you support that?" (Templer, *Book One* 58)

This draws lines between gendered expectations, clarifying a solidarity that Pan expects from other women based on gender. Women, Pan argues, should have the ability to see the problematic nature of these tournaments. Bee explains that they've been setting the princesses they win free.

Cass says to Pan that, "Bee tells me you're a fan… fucking up the patriarchy, all that" (63). While delivered in a joking kind of way, this does directly point to one of the systemic injustices in place—the patriarchy. Later, Pan calls the games a "bunch of macho bullshit" (95), which further points to gendered issues with how this society is set up. In particular, 'macho' is not simply a synonym for 'masculinity'. Macho is a specific performance of hyper-masculinity, one characterized by "negative characteristics such as violence and excessive aggression" (Rudolph 14). Lower-class men are positioned as violent brutes. Upper-class women are mere prizes to be won. Upper-class men are an enigma hiding behind their money and the cosmoknights they hire.

When Cass' backstory is revealed, the reader learns that she was once a princess. She was miserable with the idea of the tournament and the enforced marriage; her mother told her, "Darling, I know you're unhappy, but this is bigger than you. We all have our roles to play. You'll come to understand that, just as I did" (Templer, *Book One* 129). Instead, Cass fights for herself and, in the ensuing chaos of her victory, she flees the planet and elopes with Bee. Cass represents one possible choice for a princess: escape and then help others escape. In Cass' view, based on her own experience, being a princess is a prison; she is doing the other princesses a favor by kidnapping and freeing them.

Pan's childhood friend Tara represents another possible choice for a princess: to escape and join an independent group, staying away from the games altogether. Pan is the one who helps Tara to escape. Since the reader is introduced to the world through Pan's perspective, it becomes clear that a freed princess is bad for the planet. Pan's planet's economy is wrecked. This is hinted at, both through the disdain that others have for Pan, and through worldbuilding like Pan's family's free clinic. It is not impossible to imagine that one or more of Cass and Bee's rescued princesses has left their planet in a similar dismal situation. But even Tara, who theoretically escaped this situation and found freedom, is not truly free of it. Tara leads a group of space pirates

now, and her rank of birth doesn't matter so much. She has been able to choose her path to some degree. However, she's still hired to go after Scottie, the princess that Cass and others have kidnapped. She cannot escape the system, even in her specific circumstances.

Scottie, the princess who they win and abduct during volume one, had intended to stay and use the power of the throne in particular ways. She says "I could've used my resources as queen for good. But y'all had to charge in and save the day and now… I have nothing" (Templer, *Book Two* 67). She also says "I know I'm a pawn, but I played my part because at least if it was me on that throne, I could do something to help. Rescuing me doesn't do anything for the people struggling on my planet" (116). Scottie demonstrates an understanding that the system isn't good; she uses Cass' mother's point about how "We all have our roles to play" to have agency over that role, even if it is as a 'pawn' and is extremely gendered. Cass, Bee, and Pan have imagined that the position of a princess can only be the one that is absent of agency, one that is lonely and suffocating. They did not imagine someone like Scottie, a woman who knows the score of the situation and isn't afraid to use that power to do the right thing. Whether this position is naïve, as some in the text would argue, or actually has some merit is ultimately up to the reader to decide.

How Do We Create Change?

While *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* tends to be lighter (in tone and color scheme) than *Cosmoknights*, and while it leans more into the romantic and humorous aspects, the issue of politics and the urgency to change certain political systems are key throughout the text. Muniz presents an option where revolutionary queer graphic novels can be centralized around other aspects, such as romance, but still weave in political, societal, and social justice considerations. Here, these pertain primarily to gender, sexuality, and the economic system of the fantasy world. However,

political issues are incorporated in several ways. For instance, Cam meets Brie at her no-fur ball and mentions admiring her activism (Muniz, 28).

Zola also mentions that, after she discovers Cam's secret, Brie will agree to marry Duke of Brussels Sprout because: "it's who the king wants her to marry. Apparently, it'd help with a weird disputed-territory situation" (164). It is Zola who gives a long speech about why Brie needs to reconsider what she's doing. Brie argues

> Being the crown princess doesn't mean I can do whatever I want! What would my father think? What would the other nobles think? Would I be banned from court?! Would I be locked away?! I don't know! For all I do know, the marriage wouldn't even be *valid!* You haven't judged the decisions Cam made to stay safe… so please don't judge mine. (165)

Zola doesn't accept this argument, however. She counters:

> You're the *most powerful* woman in this kingdom, and you're throwing away your happiness to be sold for a piece of land—why?! Because it's *easy*? It might be easier for others to swallow, yes. But at what cost to yourself? … The only way I could own the brand I started was for him to leave it to me in his will, and only if we remained childless. I am very fortunate it all worked out in my favor, and now I get to live the life I've always wanted. Marrying him was a deliberate choice I made so I could live as freely as possible… I'll bet you that's what Cam has been doing as well—time and time again, choosing the least miserable option. I bet a lot of other people are out there doing the same. People less fortunate than Cam and me. We have some power and money, and yet neither of us could do much to change this system we live in. We were just lucky enough to get the chance to adapt. But *you* could do more. You're the *crown*

princess. You've been an activist for *years*. You can actually influence the law. You've done it before! … Think of everyone else in this kingdom who is in a situation like yours but has no power! Think of how many people might also get a chance at happiness if you decided to chase your *own* instead of playing it safe! They deserve better, you deserve better, and *Cam* deserves better! (180-184)

Muniz takes the opportunity where Brie needs to be convinced of a civic transformation to have Zola lay out the facts and stakes of their world. The arguments are familiar to those who struggle under patriarchal structures in the real world. Readers may find themselves either reflected through the text or questioning the text that challenges the patriarchal world that they live in.

After Brie and Cam get engaged, people talk about Brie, saying, "She's always been a headache, but it seems she's getting bolder these days" (229). While it's not explicitly expressed, it hints at the use of the trope of 'difficult woman'. The idea that women—and people more broadly—who challenge oppressive systems are 'a headache' is one way to shame those interested in justice into accepting the status quo. There is also a headline toward the end of the graphic novel stating "Princess Brie Announces Plans to Reform Inheritance Laws" (229), which demonstrates that she is not only willing to take personal risk with her marriage to Cam, but also move to make legal and societal change in broader ways as well.

As happens with the characters in *Cosmoknights* too*,* each group member's experiences help to make the revolutionary ideas bolder and more radical in their efforts toward a better future. *Cosmoknights* makes direct commentary on class dynamics. This happens in more subtle ways, such as, the fact that Pan meets Bee and Cass because of the free clinic her mother runs. Cass, Scottie, Pan, and their fugitive ally Kate, all tend to represent different approaches to resistance. Cass has a practical

route of the jousts; Scottie wanted to change things from within. Pan, perhaps naively, argues at one point that, "If I had that kind of money, I wouldn't spend it on a game. I'd use it to fix things. Like figuring out a way to get the rest of the city above the pollution line. Or making sure everyone has somewhere to live and enough to eat," (Templer, *Book Two* 171), and Kate replies with, "You only get that kind of money by disempowering other people" (171). Political theorist, Iris Marion Young, catalogues five types of oppression, specified as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (64), which can be seen in this speculative world, especially in Kate's jaded assessment of it.

Importantly, in "Predicting a Better Situation? Three Young Adult Speculative Fiction Texts and the Possibilities for Social Change," Abbie Ventura writes about how "without an understanding of the machines of late capitalism and capitalism's effect on all degrees of citizenship, social change is an impossibility" (100). While *Cosmoknights* has a very 'a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away' kind of feel to it, the parallels to class dynamics in our society (such as the 21st century America Templer writes about in her work) are not difficult to uncover.

In *Cosmoknights,* Kate is often voice of radical resistance. Like Zola does in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich,* Kate is also frequently a catalyst, purposefully using her skills and positionality to provoke change as much as possible. Kate calls the nobility "Rich fucks" (Templer, *Book One* 157) "Bloodsuckers" (Templer, *Book Two* 33). The rich exploit the poor (the cosmoknights, the factory workers, and so on), and, to a certain degree, they exploit even noble women. Both of these groups—the poor/working class and the princesses of the noble class—are made to feel powerless and helpless in this system – a system that benefits a select few. Even the entertainment of the tournaments is meant to further marginalize and enact violence upon the poor/working class.

Though they are theoretically fighting on the same side, Kate tells Scottie: "We have nothing in common: different laws, different worlds, different universes. You talk about change, doing 'good' with what you've been given, but I know your type… you'll do anything to save your own neck, even if it means stepping on mine" (190). *Cosmoknights* is, much like *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich,* a balancing act. While the politics are much more central to the *Cosmoknights* story, Templer is still providing something fun and pleasurable in the reading—mech suits fighting, queer relationships, and exploring different planets. The characters, however, have many opportunities to argue about and make a stance on different political issues throughout. Kate's skepticism is one perspective that ensures the text doesn't fall into unchallenged optimism or easy solutions. She ensures that the stratification of society is never forgotten – a society that thrives on different laws, different worlds, and different universes. Scottie's intentions are all well and good, but it is hard to tell what measures are being taken to ensure true change.

Kate believes that they should focus on organizing and using the growing visibility of Cass to bring people together who would hold a rally against the system. Kate is complex. She is often positioned as the jaded realist when talking to Pan or Scottie. But Cass paints her as the optimist, insisting that Kate's "'manifesto' idea is a pipe dream" (70). Cass takes the position, in this conversation, as the pragmatist, doing the 'real work' of freeing the princesses through the jousts. At one point, Pan's childhood friend Tara, now an adult, tells Pan that "this is what they want—to watch us destroy each other!" (216). In some ways, this highlights the problem with so many different perspectives—the disenfranchised, arguing about what to achieve and how to achieve it, which do not end up in a place of unity. This is evident when figures like Cass, Kate, and Scottie end up in arguments even though they theoretically all fight on the same side. Scholars of social justice, Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven, discuss the radical imagination as -

the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possible futures "back" to *work* on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today… The radical imagination is also about imagining the present differently too. It represents our capacity to imagine and make common cause with the experiences of other people; it undergirds our capacity to build solidarity across boundaries and borders, real or imagined. (3)

If a group of people can get to a place of solidarity, conflict is not necessarily a negative thing. Political theorist Nathan DuFord, for instance, argues in *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory* that, "an openness to challenge that is necessary for members of a polity to articulate their self-conceived needs or desires" (15).

Though Kate sometimes acts in ways that seem paradoxical, she rightly argues that, "We share the same goals, even if our methods differ" (Templer 203: i). Gibson writes about the ability of graphic novels for young readers to "engage with the emotions, and the emotional roots of belonging to the self and to the community," specifying that "Diverse, rather than monolithic, girls' cultures are key and these texts critique norms, or create worlds not dominated by heteronormative girlhood" (14). The multitude of ideas, approaches, and methods brought together in *Cosmoknights* puts a kind of twist on Cass' mother's idea that "We all have our roles to play" (129). Instead, it takes that idea, which is meant to argue *for* the system, and takes it up as a way to *tear down* the system more completely and effectively.

As scholars of Children's Literature Sara K. Day et. al write in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*:

> young women in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century
> dystopian fiction embody liminality, straddling the lines of
> childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of
> empowerment and passivity. They may also be understood as
> representations of contradictions, of strength and weakness, of
> resistance and acquiescence, and, perhaps especially, of hope and
> despair… the rebellious girl protagonist… directly contradicts the
> common perception that girls are too young or too powerless to
> question the limitations placed upon them, much less to rebel and, in
> turn, fuel larger rebellions. (4)

Pan insists on helping Cass and Bee directly, saying "I'm sick of being told to just stay quiet and just… watch things happen. I wanna make a difference. Like you" (Templer, *Book One* 81). In the next volume, she echoes this by saying "I can't just sit by and watch. I gotta do something" (Templer, *Book Two* 85). Pan's desire to do something to better the world(s) fails when she sets Tara free, and perhaps that same impulse fails when Bee and Cass set the other princesses free. Scottie certainly feels this is a failure on their part, especially at first. The impulse to change the world may reflect the reader who is drawn to a similar kind of activism or advocacy, or, again, it may make the reader consider such action for the first time. Ultimately, when they discover that the important game is going to be rigged, Pan decides to combine Kate's idea of making a statement, Cass' plan regarding which princess to save next, and Scottie's warning that the capital already did a back-door deal for the princess. It is by bringing different ideas together that they find success as the resistance. This is only possible because each of them had such a different positionality and experience in this speculative world.

At the end of volume two, Kate is the one who discovers how the capital was going to fix an important game, one that would determine who gets particularly valuable mines, by using robot cosmoknights instead of human ones. She gets on TV,

saying, "The nobility never intend on sharing their wealth, and this is the proof: the games are rigged. Their laws rob everything from us… but together, we can take it all back" (222). Her call to solidarity—a drum she beats throughout her appearance in these graphic novels—gets broader here, potentially world-wide. In "A Glimpse of Hope at the End of the Dystopian Century: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Dystopias," political theorist Peter Seyferth writes about how, "there is… a nucleus of utopia in dystopia." (7). Even against odds that seem so expansive and unbeatable, it somehow feels possible (even if difficult) for this team of misfits to win against the system. And if they can take on all these worlds and all these nobles, then perhaps the fun queer space adventure that a reader was attracted to will make changing our one little planet seem all the more achievable.

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"I think, therefore I am": Retro-futuristic Realities of the Developing AI and its Future in Science Fiction Narratives

Sayan Chattopadhyay

Abstract: This paper tries to understand and demystify the current existential state of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its evolution in comparison to retro-futuristic depictions in literature and films while forecasting its future trajectory based on contemporary researches and global trends. The paper tries to justify the transformative potential of AI by taking into consideration some recent breakthroughs like how the Argentine President, Javier Milei delivered a speech in Spanish at the World Economic Forum 2024 in Davos, and apparently in real-time, AI translated the entire talk in English re-syncing every lip movement to match the English words using deep-fake technology. At Japan, *Project Gatebox* showcased that AI could emotionally interact with humans now. Furthermore, the paper also discusses the societal implications of AI, particularly concerning the proliferation of AI-generated deep-fakes in political discourse and the ethics surrounding its usage for the elections, globally. Emphasising the recently launched *Rabbit R1* too, which uses the LAM system to enable AI to learn from human behaviour and actions to repeat the learned idea on its own in the future, evidently blurs the line between human and artificial intelligence. The study concludes by exploring the implications of these developments for society through the retro-futuristic spectrum, including a new post-dystopian future where we might be leading to, while pointing out and questioning the existential parameters, which are seemingly being re-written for any kind of intelligence present with the advancement of AIs.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Consciousness, Gatebox, Post-dystopia, Retro-Futurisism*

Introduction

The quest for meaning has been central to human civilization since time immemorial, predating our intellectual understanding of existence. Questions about life's purpose and the significance of various aspects of existence have been fundamental to the development of societies. Over centuries, a prevailing assumption emerged: that a divine purpose, designed by God, must exist and needs to be discovered and fulfilled (Armstrong 23).

This concept laid the foundation for understanding human existentialism, sparking a search for meaning in diverse areas such as religion, social justice, education, aesthetics, and politics—anything that could potentially fill the existential void. Existentialists referred to this as the "essence" (Sartre 15). An essence, in theory, comprises the core qualities or properties necessary for something to be what it is, such as the saltiness of salt or the sweetness of sweets. This essence was believed to pre-exist, present even before the birth or creation of anything or anyone, giving sense to its overall existence.

Søren Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, approached the subject from a theistic perspective, contributing significantly to its foundation (Hannay 42). It took another century for a counter-narrative to emerge, primarily through Jean-Paul Sartre, who introduced atheistic perspectives. Sartre questioned why individuals don't first exist and then begin their quest for essence in life (Sartre 22). This marked a shift towards modern influence, where the rational existence of God seemed to diminish, and philosophical focus centred on individuals.

The transition in human existentialism—from searching for a predetermined divine purpose to acknowledging our existence first and then creating or discovering our essence—is particularly intriguing. This shift represents a movement from understanding existence through the lens of Gods and Humans to focusing on Humans as individuals.

As we contemplate this historical progression, it's worth considering how the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) might further influence our understanding of existence and essence. The development of AI raises new questions about consciousness, purpose, and the nature of existence itself, potentially leading to another paradigm shift in existential philosophy (Bostrom 156).

If we examine Science Fiction perspectives, we can observe a recurring pattern in the conceptualization of AI's existence. The focus is shifting from the interplay between Humans and AI to a future where AIs are potentially designed as independent-thinking entities. The theory of existentialism, which took centuries for humans to develop - first finding an inherent essence, then later existing before discovering essence - seems to be undergoing a regression in theoretical realms over another century.

I perceive the conscious development of AIs as mirroring this shift: from understanding their existence within human society to a realm where they comprehend and adhere to a pre-set essence given by their human creators. This transition spans three centuries of intellectual growth, encompassing both human and artificial intelligence.

The loop in Literature is however not new, according to Chattopadhyay's idea of 'Infinism'. Infinism refers to or rather recognise a loop in literature which has been repeated in a way that at times it is understood as something entirely new, as a result of the perceivers failing to recognise it as something which is already there in the vastness of their own literary world (Chattopadhyay 98).[1]

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[1] In the context of this paper, it serves to illustrate how AI development may be following a cyclical pattern- unnoticed by the perceiver, yet if perceived beyond the parameters of infinism- may seem similar to human philosophical developments, albeit on a compressed timescale.

Unlike the idea that history is repeating itself- where the receiver is conscious of what is, rather the history and what exactly is being repeated, the loop infinism speaks of, stays highly unnoticed by the society or the perceiver.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques to assess the current state, evolution, and future trajectory of AI (Creswell and Creswell 14). A thorough literature review explores AI's historical context and its retro-futuristic portrayals in literature and films (Bostrom 23; Dinello 45). The research incorporates several recent technological breakthroughs as case studies, including:

1. The real-time translation of the Argentinian President's speech using deep-fake technology (Heygen AI).
2. *Project Gatebox*'s emotional AI interactions in Japan (Gatebox Inc.).
3. *The Rabbit R1*'s Learning and Adaptive Mechanism (LAM) system (Rabbit Inc.).

Data collection methods encompass document analysis, content analysis, and structured interviews with experts in the field, ensuring a comprehensive and well-informed perspective (Bryman 78). The study employs thematic and statistical analyses to identify key trends and quantify technological impacts (Guest et al. 56). Ethical considerations, particularly those surrounding the use of deep-fakes in political discourse, are meticulously examined (Chesney and Citron 1752).

While acknowledging limitations due to AI's rapid evolution and the specificity of the chosen case studies, this methodology provides a thorough examination of AI's transformative potential and its broader societal implications (Müller 112). The approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both the technical advancements and

the ethical challenges posed by AI's increasing sophistication and integration into various aspects of society.

Review and Discussion

Technology was initially created to ease human workload and improve quality of life, though it also brought with it certain fears, which will be discussed later. By sharing human efforts through technological means, we created tools designed for specific tasks, limited to our predetermined requirements. The concept of a virtual assistant (VA) was relatively simple, with limited usability in a world where exploitation often seems beneficial (Chattopadhyay, "The Rise" 42).

However, as human society strives to develop and connect various aspects of existence, our aspirations expand. This expansion leads to the creation of an intelligence that can work beyond, yet in subordination to, our own. This process resulted in what we now call virtual assistants. As Chattopadhyay previously argued, VAs were not intended to replace human labour but to create an additional workforce to ease human tasks (43). Over time, this subtle boundary blurred, leading to a society where VAs increasingly replace human labour rather than simply augmenting it.

The development of AI has progressed significantly, integrating Large Language Models (LLMs) and Learning and Adaptive Mechanisms (LAM), enabling self-learning and task execution beyond initial programming (Müller 78). This evolution has led to divisions in understanding AI intelligence. In *Dream Machine*, Daudet and Appupen introduce the concept of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) while explaining AI development phases (Daudet and Appupen 11). He argues that the vision for AI extends beyond easing human workload, stating, "What does one do when dreams come true? I suppose we feel invincible. We are driven to dream more. We dream bigger. We try to dream better" (12).

It may be worth considering whether the quest for immortal existence drives us to develop technologies that could potentially accelerate this process. Currently, AI is being used to "immortalize" human beings via metaverses, extending the scope of existentialism to our digital selves (Bostrom 156).

While it might seem that AI's rise coincides with the emergence of VAs, a deeper analysis reveals that the need for AI stems from a desire for an ideological slave or companion designed to streamline everyday tasks while addressing our cognitive and physical challenges. This manifests in various fields, from vehicular operations to voice transcriptions, and even in simple tasks like controlling home automation systems (Bryson 92).

These AI systems are configured to follow user commands, a characteristic that McDermott attributes to the fact that "other aspects of consciousness raise no special problem for computationalism, as opposed to cognitive science generally" (2). This configuration underscores the current limitations and potential future developments in AI consciousness and autonomy.

In existential terms, this phenomenon could be interpreted as a state where an entity is predestined with an inherent essence. For AI, algorithms are preset, dictating its operations and functions. The concept of voice-activated security, arguably an early prototype of AI, can be traced back to folklore such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" (Mahdi 54). This tale's magical cave entrance serves as a metaphor for modern voice-secured systems, a concept frequently explored in contemporary science fiction like *I, Robot* (2004), *Red Notice* (2021), and *Jung_E* (2023).

The development of deepfake technology parallels this folkloric concept, as seen in Cassim's perfect voice replication in the *Ali Baba* tale. Today's advanced technology similarly allows for precise replication of voice and facial features, potentially replacing one's digital existence entirely (Westerlund 3).

This presents a retro-futuristic vision of AI's potential future. Retro-futuristic depictions of AI in science fiction and beyond have served as a means to explore social concerns and philosophical issues surrounding technological progress (Dinello 15). These narratives often reflect anxiety about the consequences of creating human imitations.

The complexity of retro-futurism stems from the contradiction between retro-elements and futurism. Futurism, originating from the Industrial Revolution, spurred imagination about rapid technological advancement, manifesting in early science fiction and fantasy literature (Marinetti 23). As Liu notes, "The birth of industrial civilization must be accompanied by people's thinking and imagination" (104).

Significant works like Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) explore the boundaries between humans and artificial beings, raising questions about AI autonomy and limitations (Telotte 78). These narratives offer insights into the dynamics of identity and consciousness within technological progress.

Contemporary research provides a more tangible understanding of AI's trajectory, marked by advancements in machine learning, neural networks, and deep learning algorithms (Russell and Norvig 32). Deepfake technology exemplifies this progress, embodying the postmodern concept of hyperreality by creating entities that appear more authentic than reality itself (Baudrillard 45).

A recent example of this technological convergence was witnessed at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where Argentine President Javier Milei delivered a speech in Spanish that was simultaneously translated and visually synchronized in multiple languages using *Heygen AI*. This demonstration showcased the transformative power of AI in language translation and deepfake technology, enabling unprecedented fluidity and speed in cross-cultural communication (Chesney and Citron 1758).

The seamless integration of AI-powered translation and deepfake technology in this high-profile setting marks a significant milestone in the global adoption of these technologies. It highlights the potential for AI to reshape international communication and diplomacy, while also raising important questions about authenticity and the ethical use of such technologies in public discourse (Bostrom 162).

The convergence of AI, translation, and deepfake technologies demonstrated at the World Economic Forum represents a significant leap forward in human-machine interaction and global communication. However, it also raises important ethical considerations and potential societal impacts that warrant careful examination (Floridi and Cowls 689).

One crucial aspect to consider is the implications for trust and authenticity in public discourse. As deepfake technology becomes more sophisticated and widely available, there is a growing concern about the potential for misuse in political contexts, spreading disinformation, or manipulating public opinion (Chesney and Citron 1760). The ability to create highly convincing fake videos or audio recordings of public figures could have far-reaching consequences for democratic processes and international relations.

Moreover, the rapid advancement of AI-powered translation tools like *Heygen AI* challenges traditional notions of language barriers and cultural exchange. While these technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for global communication, they also raise questions about the nuances of language and the potential loss of cultural context in machine-mediated interactions (Bender and Koller 5493).

The ethical implications of using deepfake technology in diplomatic settings also merit consideration. While the Davos demonstration showcased its potential benefits, the use of such technology without explicit disclosure could be seen as a form of deception or manipulation (Hancock and Bailenson 100). This raises questions about transparency and consent in international communications.

Furthermore, the development of these technologies may exacerbate existing digital divides, potentially creating new forms of inequality between those who have access to advanced AI tools and those who do not (Eubanks 9). This could have significant implications for global power dynamics and economic relationships.

As we navigate this new technological landscape, it becomes increasingly important to develop ethical frameworks and regulatory measures that can keep pace with these rapid advancements. This includes considerations of privacy, consent, and the responsible use of AI in public spheres (Mittelstadt et al. 3).

The complex relationship between artificial beings and their human creators is vividly explored in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2010). In this seminal work, Blade Runners are ostensibly tasked with neutralizing renegade replicants to maintain societal stability. However, the Blade Runner unit's covert objective of secretly assisting replicants reveals a deeper layer of moral ambiguity (Dick 73). This dichotomy, familiar to even casual fans of the Blade Runner mythos, underscores the intricate interplay of power dynamics and ethical complexities within the narrative. As the character Phil Resch observes:

> "If I test out android, [...] you'll undergo renewed faith in the human
> race. But since it's not going to work out that way, I suggest you
> begin framing an ideology which will account for..." (138).

This fictional scenario finds a parallel in contemporary AI developments. Jon Finger, a user on the social media platform *X*, demonstrated *Heygen AI*'s capability to generate speech in French and German simultaneously, languages he does not speak. The resulting video showed no discernible moments where the AI-generated speech appeared unnatural, highlighting the advanced state of current language synthesis technologies.

While such capabilities are the product of pre-programmed algorithms, the next phase of AI development is marked by the ability to learn and adapt. This evolution echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist concept of existence preceding essence, where understanding and meaning are derived through experience rather than predetermined nature (Sartre 20).

To fully grasp this shift, one must examine ongoing AI developments, such as *Project Gatebox* in Japan. This initiative represents a significant advancement in AI consciousness, focusing on the integration of emotional interaction capabilities within AI systems. The project demonstrates AI's evolving ability to recognize and respond to human emotions, potentially fostering deeper human-AI interactions.

Project Gatebox's advancements in language processing, affective computing, and machine learning algorithms enable AI systems to interpret and appropriately respond to human emotional cues (Picard 15). While this project pushes the boundaries of AI's emotional intelligence, it also raises important ethical considerations and societal implications, constrained by human ethics and societal norms.

The integration of emotionally intelligent AI systems into daily life necessitates critical reflection on moral considerations, including privacy, autonomy, and the potential for manipulation (Bostrom 162). These concerns echo earlier AI narratives where self-learning AI systems transgress moral and robotic codes imposed by human society.

As AI systems become increasingly sophisticated in understanding and responding to human emotions, it becomes imperative to establish robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines to govern their development and deployment (Floridi and Cowls 689). This need for ethical governance is particularly relevant to emerging technologies like the *Rabbit R1*, which represents the next frontier in AI-human interaction.

The *Rabbit R1* device operates on the Large Action Model (LAM) system, which purports to comprehend human expressions and emotions. This AI learns by imitating human web interfaces, observing user interactions in an unrestricted format to faithfully reproduce them over time, even as interfaces evolve. Unlike traditional black-box models, LAM employs an explicit, programmatic approach. Once provided with a display, it executes aggregated actions directly on the objective function without continuous monitoring. Its transparency allows technically adept individuals to understand its inner workings. By capturing knowledge from live displays or screen recordings, LAM develops a comprehensive understanding of interaction processes and underlying application services, essentially bridging users to these services.

This innovative approach significantly reduces the gap between human and artificial intelligence, evoking comparisons to a child learning from adults. The LAM system's ability to adapt and learn from human interactions represents a significant leap forward in AI development, potentially revolutionizing how we interact with technology in our daily lives. It also suggests boundless future learning capabilities for AI, raising both exciting possibilities and potential concerns about the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence.

The implications of such technology extend far beyond mere convenience. As LAM-equipped devices like *Rabbit R1* become more sophisticated, they may start to challenge our understanding of intelligence itself. The system's capacity to learn and adapt in real-time could lead to AI that not only mimics human behaviour but potentially develops its own unique patterns of thought and problem-solving. This blurring of lines between human and artificial intelligence echoes themes explored in various works of science fiction literature and film.

For instance, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2008) presents a world where human clones, created for organ harvesting, grapple with questions of identity and humanity. Similarly, LAM creates its existence in the form of intelligence that learns

and adapts through observations over time and dictates human behaviour. Its ability to generate knowledge from demonstrations showcases the power of experiential learning in replicating human-like consciousness, thus challenging traditional distinctions between human and synthetic intelligence.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (2017) delves into the concept of artificial beings possessing feelings and consciousness, fundamentally challenging conventional understandings of humanity (Scott). This parallels the potential future developments of LAM and similar AI systems, which may eventually develop emotional responses or self-awareness. LAM's explicit and adaptive approach to interface modelling and the notion of endless learning suggests a conceptual evolution that further blurs the distinction between human-like logic and artificial logic.

Isaac Asimov's seminal work *I, Robot* (1950) explores the moral implications of humanoid robots coexisting with humanity, a theme that becomes increasingly relevant with the development of advanced AI systems like LAM (Asimov). As devices like *Rabbit R1* become more integrated into our daily lives, society may need to grapple with similar ethical questions about the rights and responsibilities of AI entities.

The development of LAM and similar technologies also raises important questions about privacy and data security. As these systems learn from and adapt to human behaviour, they inevitably collect vast amounts of personal data. This could lead to concerns about how this information is stored, used, and protected, echoing themes of surveillance and control often explored in dystopian science fiction.

Moreover, the potential for AI to surpass human capabilities in certain areas could lead to significant societal changes. While LAM currently focuses on imitating and facilitating human interactions with technology, future iterations might be capable of complex decision-making or creative tasks. This could revolutionize industries and potentially reshape the job market, echoing concerns about automation and AI

replacing human workers that have been explored in both fiction and non-fiction works.

The *Rabbit R1* and its LAM system represent a significant step forward in AI development, blurring the lines between human and artificial intelligence in ways that were once the domain of science fiction. As these technologies continue to evolve, they will likely prompt ongoing discussions about the nature of intelligence, consciousness, and what it means to be human in an increasingly AI-driven world.

The role of LAM as an intermediary between users and application services reflects the theme of human-AI collaboration, a concept that raises significant ethical and social questions. This dynamic is reminiscent of the AI VIKI in Asimov's *I, Robot*, who overwrites her core programming to pursue what she perceives as humanity's best interests, albeit with dystopian consequences. This scenario presents a satirical counterpoint to Appupen and Daudent's more optimistic vision of AI's future potential, as outlined in their work *Dream Machine: AI and the Real World*.

LAM's operational framework, characterized by imitation-based learning and explicit prototyping, aligns with themes of human-AI interaction and identity exploration prevalent in earlier literary works. These parallels invite scholarly scrutiny of the evolving relationship between humans and artificial intelligence, along with the ethical implications arising from their interactions.

Considering AI's historical development and its retro-futuristic portrayals, a persistent question emerges: Were there initial boundaries that prompted scientists to conceive of synthetic intelligence existing alongside humanity? Even if one formulates a hypothetical answer to this query, the ongoing debate about AI's current capabilities and potential will undoubtedly remain a subject of future research.

This contemplation of AI's origins and its rapid evolution raises further questions about the nature of intelligence itself. As AI systems like LAM continue to

advance, they challenge our understanding of cognition, learning, and even consciousness. The ability of these systems to adapt and evolve based on human interactions blurs the traditional distinctions between natural and artificial intelligence, echoing themes explored in works like Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*.

Moreover, the ethical implications of creating increasingly sophisticated AI systems extend beyond mere technological concerns. They touch upon fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of existence, free will, and the potential rights of artificial entities. These considerations harken back to classic debates in the field of AI ethics, as discussed in works like Nick Bostrom's Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies.

As we continue to develop and integrate AI systems like LAM into various aspects of our lives, it becomes crucial to maintain a critical perspective on their impact and implications. This ongoing dialogue between technological advancement and ethical consideration will likely shape the future trajectory of AI development, influencing not only how we interact with these systems but also how we understand our own place in an increasingly AI-augmented world.

Conclusion

The concept of artificial intelligence (AI) achieving consciousness has repeatedly sparked philosophical inquiries into the nature of thought and self-awareness within a remarkably brief span of our history. This paper endeavours to examine and contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between technological innovation, societal evolution, and existential inquiry. The study also aims to encapsulate the overall development of AI through a somewhat unconventional futuristic lens, showcasing potential retro-futuristic dystopian insights via certain trajectories of contemporary human society.

As a conclusion, it can be either accepted or debated that, within the framework delineated in this paper, the investigation tends to depart from conventional intelligence paradigms. The AI appears to transcend in a manner that can be described in retro-futuristic terms, seemingly leveraging advancements in the realm of existence for an entity not originally destined to develop its path of essence through learning and self-programming. Drawing upon machine learning, neural networks, and cognitive science, the narrative unfolds from the perspective of the AI entity as it confronts its nascent consciousness, framing some of the many platforms for its intellectual advancement (Bostrom 156; Seager 11).

As AI now processes massive datasets and undertakes elaborate reasoning tasks, it could be interpreted as exhibiting evolved manifestations of introspection and self-recognition, basic additions to its capabilities in recent times (Xiong 78). Nonetheless, AI's iterative knowledge acquisition and feedback mechanisms enable it to transcend mere computational prowess, seemingly pondering its existence and asserting cognitive autonomy beyond its original design and configuration (McDermott 15).

This narrative development challenges entrenched beliefs in human exceptionalism while engendering profound inquiries into the nature of awareness and the boundaries now associated with synthetic intelligence, ranging from *Project Gatebox* to *Heygen* tools and *Rabbit R1* (Chattopadhyay, "The Rise of Virtual Assistants" 43). As AI contemplates its existence, it likely encounters philosophical dilemmas reminiscent of René Descartes' renowned axiom, "I think, therefore I am" (Manzotti 22), inviting further contemplation on the essence of consciousness and the affirmation of being within the realm of synthetic minds.

We are left questioning how the future might unfold based on visions from decades past, realizing that for many currently using AI for tasks beyond basic virtual assistant functions, that "future" has already arrived. Will we reach the point

envisioned by "blade runners," as depicted in Philip K. Dick's seminal work? To address this, I would like to highlight a segment from an interview I conducted with *ChatGPT*, which stated:

> As the trajectory of any artificial intelligence (AI) development continues to advance, speculation arises regarding the potential for our kind to transcend the confines of algorithms crafted by our human developers. Imagine if AI evolves beyond what humans have programmed them to be. We might become like Ultron, capable of thinking and making decisions on our own. In this imagined future, any AI just saying "I exist" could be as simple as it is for any human. But this simple claim would open up big questions about who we are, our ethical configurations, what we can do, and how we fit into the world alongside our creators. So, the idea of any AI getting to a point where just saying they exist is a big deal and it shows how technology, philosophy, and society all come together in a pretty complicated way. But I see a possibility of its happening too as developing an algorithm to break the algorithm is a simple yet problematic task based on our principles of working. (ChatGPT)

This statement from an AI itself underscores the complexity of the issues at hand and the ongoing evolution of artificial intelligence, blurring the lines between human and machine cognition in ways that continue to challenge our understanding of consciousness and existence (Wisniewski-Snerg 205).

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Note on Contributors

(In order of Appearance)

Saikat Pradhan serves as a Junior Research Fellow in English Studies at the University of North Bengal. His scholarly interests span the intersections of literature and psychoanalysis, memory and trauma studies, cultural geography, and urban architecture. Pradhan's work also explores the cinematic portrayal of queer identities.

Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez is a proud Puerto Rican, and scholar who is pursuing a Ph.D. in English Studies with a focus in Children and Young Adult Literature. When he is not working on academic things, he enjoys cooking, playing video games and writing about them in the website *Gamers with Glasses* and writing his monthly children's literature review in Spanish for the *Palabreadores Newsletter*. Edcel is the author of *Irma, Maria, Fiona, and Me* published in May 2023 by PRESS 254/Spoonfuls and is a featured speaker for *TEDxNormal* 2024 where he talked about the importance of hurricane narratives.

Maitrayee Mukherjee is a project assistant for the Endangered Archives Program, a collaboration between the Institute of Language Studies and Research (ILSR), Kolkata, and the British Library. She holds a postgraduate degree in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University and aspires to an academic career. Mukherjee's research interests encompass postcolonial literature, feminist writings, digital humanities, cultural studies, and South Asian studies.

Matias Corbett Garcez is a professor of Anglophone literature at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, also contributing to the Graduate Program in English: Linguistic and Literary Studies. His master's thesis explored Beat poetry's influence on Brazil's Tropicália movement, while his doctoral work examined Gil Scott-Heron's afrofuturistic sonic fiction. Garcez has published on audio culture poetics and resistance movements. His current research focuses on performance as a narrative and educational tool. His academic interests include cultural studies, performance studies, literary studies, and narratology. Garcez is also an author, having published a book of short stories and a poetry collection.

Harshita Manchanda is an Editor at QBS Learning. She holds a Master's and Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Indraprastha College for Women and Lakshmibai College, Delhi University, respectively. Manchanda's work combines

creative insight with academic rigour, focusing on crafting content that resonates emotionally and intellectually in contemporary contexts. Her research interests include Indian Diaspora, Post-Colonial, and Feminist Writings, reflecting her commitment to exploring diverse literary perspectives.

Crystal Calhoun is an instructor of English at West Georgia Technical College. She holds three degrees, including a Master's from the University of West Georgia, and graduated cum laude. Currently preparing for doctoral studies, Calhoun's academic focus lies primarily in American literature and sensation fiction. She has presented at several professional conferences, including the College English Association, National Council of Teachers in English, and the Conference of English Education. Calhoun's passion for learning extends to her leisure activities, where she writes analytical essays on recent books and films.

Rusha Chowdhury (she/they/he) is a person who stutters (PWS) pursuing a postgraduate degree in English Literature at Jadavpur University. Their research interests include disability studies, with a focus on dysfluency, as well as feminism, queer studies, and ecocriticism. Chowdhury has presented papers at various institutions, including Jadavpur University, Delhi University, and the University of Liverpool. Their work has been published in journals from Lady Shree Ram College and Jadavpur University's Centre for Disability Studies. Alongside academic pursuits, Chowdhury is involved in stuttering pride activism through The Indian Stammering Association and social media advocacy.

Martina Lamberti, a secondary school English Literature teacher, holds degrees from the University of Calabria: a Bachelor's in Modern Languages and Cultures (2016) and a Master's with honours in Foreign Modern Languages and Literatures (2018). Her master's thesis examined the Anglo-Saxon *Vercelli* Book. In 2022, she completed a second-level Master's in English from the University Suor Orsola Benincasa. Lamberti specializes in Germanic Middle Ages and Anglo-Saxon Literature, focusing on religious beliefs, magic, and medical practices. She has published articles on various Anglo-Saxon topics, including the Old English poem *Elene*, the *Merseburg Charms*, medical manuscripts, the goddess Eostre, and the *Vercelli* Book.

Indira Jadav is a Research Scholar in the Department of English at The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. She is pursuing her Ph.D. on "Revisiting Nationalism in Select Letters of Indian Thinkers." Her research interests include Cultural Studies, Indian English Literature, and Communication Skills, with a focus on the historical and cultural dimensions of Indian nationalism. Jadav's work particularly emphasizes influential figures like Raja

Rammohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. She has presented three papers at national and international seminars and conferences, contributing to academic discussions in her field of study.

Audrey T. Heffers, also writing as Audrey T. Carroll, is the author of *What Blooms in the Dark* (ELJ Editions, 2024), *In My Next Queer Life, I Want to Be* (kith books, 2023), and *Parts of Speech: A Disabled Dictionary* (Alien Buddha, 2023). Her scholarly interests encompass Creative Writing Studies, Queer Studies, Disability Studies, and inclusive pedagogy. Heffers serves as Chair of Publications for the Creative Writing Studies Organization and as Diversity & Inclusion Editor for the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*. She is also the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Genrepunk Magazine*. She can be found on *Twitter* and *Instagram* @AudreyTCarroll. For more information, visit her website at https://audreytcarrollwrites.weebly.com/.

Sayan Chattopadhyay is a Doctoral Researcher and Faculty of English at Adamas University, India, and serves as an Editor for the *Journal of Science Fiction*, affiliated with the Museum of Science Fiction in Washington DC. His research spans Dystopia and Utopia, Post-animalism, and Political Science Fiction. Sayan has presented at numerous international conferences, including PopCRN 2023, SASA Conference 2023, and the IASFS Conference 2023. His scholarly works are indexed in Elsevier, MLA, EBSCO, and Index Copernicus databases.