ISSN 2393-9001

June 2025 | Issue 2

The Apollonian

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Open-access | Peer-reviewed

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In the Absence of Theme: Fragment, Fire, and the Force of the Literary

In a time increasingly defined by fracture and ferocity—of borders redrawn in blood, of language weaponised, of memory erased with mechanised efficiency—one may well ask what business literature has, to linger still in the shadow of such catastrophe. Yet the literary has never stood outside the violent vicissitudes of history. It has always already been part of the battlefield: as testimony, as resistance, as myth, as apparatus, as archive. The open-themed nature of this issue of *The Apollonian*—initially a source of editorial trepidation—has allowed the journal to bear witness to precisely this complexity. The essays gathered here refuse neat categorisations, much like the present moment itself. If a unifying theme does emerge, it does so not as an imposed order but as an echo of a world uncertain of its coordinates, and of a cultural imagination that continues, despite everything, to generate affect, critique, and form.

We begin with the undeniable: *the world is burning*, both metaphorically and literally. In the months preceding this editorial, wars have intensified—Russia's invasion of Ukraine grinds on with brutal cost; Gaza is reconfigured not only by bombs but by the deliberate erosion of civilisational memory; Sudan and Myanmar persist under the shadow of silenced atrocities. The rise of authoritarian populisms across continents (in India, the United States, Hungary, and beyond) coincides with intensified surveillance regimes and new modalities of digital disinformation. Climate collapse is no longer future tense; it speaks in fire seasons, in melting glaciers, in the death of coral reefs and the mass dislocation of entire communities. In the shadow of such trauma, the act of reading—or writing—may seem anaemic, even absurd. And yet, as readers and critics know too well, literature does not only survive such moments: it reconstitutes itself through them.

Recent global literary recognition gestures toward this capacity. The awarding of the 2024 International Booker Prize to Jenny Erpenbeck and translator Michael Hofmann for *Kairos*, a novel that is at once historical and intensely personal, underscores the continued significance of memory as resistance. Erpenbeck’s chronicle of a doomed love affair in East Germany becomes an allegory of ideological dissolution—where love mimics the State, and private betrayal mirrors public collapse. That such a narrative could resonate so strongly across linguistic and national boundaries speaks to the function of literature in an age that so frequently renders both memory and ideology suspect. And the winner of the 2025 International Booker Prize—Banu Mushtaq, alongside translator Deepa Bhasthi, for the luminous *The Heart Lamp*, originally written in Kannada. A richly layered exploration of women's inner lives, desire, and resistance within deeply hierarchical and patriarchal structures, the novel moves between the tender and the defiant, the lyrical and the political. Mushtaq’s prose, mediated through Bhasthi’s attentive and supple translation, gives voice to the silences imposed by gender, caste, and

religion in contemporary South India. That this work should receive international recognition is not merely a celebration of linguistic diversity, but a powerful reminder that the most intimate of narratives can carry the most far-reaching political force. Together, these two consecutive prizewinners—Erpenbeck and Mushtaq—remind us that literature continues to attend to memory, to fracture, and to the difficult work of surviving what history so often demands we forget.

Likewise, Jon Fosse's 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded "for his innovative plays and prose which give voice to the unsayable," offers another axis of reflection. Fosse's minimalism, steeped in silence and repetition, seems far removed from the clamour of contemporary crisis. Yet his work is not an escape from politics, but an invitation to rethink its very terms. In an age of algorithmic overstimulation, Fosse offers a literature of stillness—a refusal, perhaps, of the neoliberal demand for speed, productivity, and endless visibility. His aesthetics remind us that to say less is not to say nothing; indeed, the unsaid may haunt with more intensity than the hyperarticulated. The awarding of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature to Han Kang further reinforces the centrality of aesthetic restraint and ethical intensity in our literary moment. Known for her meditations on violence, grief, and the fragility of embodiment, Han Kang's oeuvre—most notably *The Vegetarian*, *Human Acts*, and *The White Book*—traverses the liminal spaces between trauma and transcendence. Her language, distilled to the point of austerity, bears the weight of histories both personal and national: the brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising, the politics of gendered violence, the impermanence of the flesh. In recognising Han, the Nobel committee signalled not only a commitment to transnational literatures but to forms of writing that resist spectacle—writing that mourns, witnesses, and withholds. Hers is a literature of quiet devastation, where the unspeakable lingers beneath the surface of each sentence. In many ways, her work stands as a rejoinder to the escalating noise of our digital and political age; it asks us instead to sit with silence, with ache, with the ethics of looking. For journals like ours—concerned with both literary innovation and cultural critique—Han Kang's global recognition is a clarion call: that formal experimentation, political urgency, and moral clarity need not exist in opposition.

What unites these writers, and indeed many of the pieces in this issue, is a profound attention to the temporal. Literature, whether realist or speculative, poetic or cinematic, continues to grapple with questions of time: how it is lived, remembered, lost, interrupted. A number of essays in this issue engage precisely with such questions, albeit through divergent modalities. If temporality and media form one pole of this issue, the other is the persistent concern with *the body*—its vulnerabilities, its excesses, its inscriptions. The body remains the site where power and affect intersect most brutally. Book reviews in this issue extend these provocations. They model the kind of slow, attentive reading that our moment so urgently needs—a counter to the reductive hot-take culture that dominates social discourse. They remind us that criticism, too, is a form of creative labour.

In assembling this issue, we have also been attentive to the politics of knowledge production. While journals like ours operate in the academic interstices—outside the formal structures of university publishing houses, yet dependent on their labour—we must still reckon with the ways in which institutional inequities shape what is written, who is read, and who is heard. The submissions reflect not only geographical and disciplinary diversity but also the differing material conditions of intellectual life. A piece written from within the Anglophone academy may wield different forms of authority than one written from its margins, yet both are part of the discursive field. This issue makes no attempt to resolve these tensions; it allows them instead to surface.

It is worth noting, too, that literature as a global practice is increasingly multilingual, even in its monolingual artefacts. Translation is not merely a technique; it is a politics, a poetics, and often a form of survival. In the age of machine translation and AI-generated text, the question of what constitutes literary style, or indeed literary authorship, becomes ever more complex. Several

contributors address such challenges obliquely, if not directly. One writer probes the aesthetics of multilingual code-switching in diasporic poetry. Another, in a speculative piece on AI and authorship, asks if the algorithm can mourn.

As editors, we remain committed to fostering such inquiry—not only in what we publish but in how we read. In this sense, an open-themed issue is not a lack but a plenitude: a space in which forms, genres, and methods collide without preordained alignment. The result is not chaos, but constellation. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the current cultural moment, it is that structure does not always precede meaning. Sometimes, meaning emerges through the debris.

To return, then, to the world with which we began: if literature offers no solution to war, no antidote to fascism, no bulwark against ecological devastation, what can it do? It can remember. It can imagine. It can warn. It can grieve. It can resist, not always in slogans or manifestos, but in nuance, in ambiguity, in formal experimentation. In that sense, literature and criticism remain necessary—not despite the world, but because of it.

We thank our contributors for their thoughtfulness, and our readers for their continued engagement. It is in the conversation between the two that meaning is made.

Subashish Bhattacharjee

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Apollonian

ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Article

Scribbled on the Streets: Mapping 'Other' Bookshops in the City of Readers and Reading, Kolkata

Anandi Kar
& Krttika B Dutta

Abstract

One of the most fundamental components of Kolkata's ethos is its literary culture. It has long been fortified as the city for readers and reading, with global renown for its strong print culture. A concentrated effort is currently being undertaken to get the tag of the city of books from UNESCO to secure an official recognition of the city's book culture. Kolkata's city space thus creates an ambience necessary for the literary culture to thrive. This paper will investigate the psychogeographic and spatial aspects of Kolkata's literary culture. It will study the city's heritage bookstores, second-hand bookshops, independent bookstores with interesting curations, rare-books-shops, and the celebrated gullies of boipara, where indigenous presses and little magazine shops are concentrated. It will investigate the clientele that these spaces attract, their nuances, and the reading practices that transform bookshops into what De Certeau calls a "practiced place." Saturated with various visual signs like hoardings and advertisements, the paper also focus on semiotic semblances between the city and a bookstore. Lastly, taking recourse to the postmodern spatial theory including Foucault's 'heterotopias,' and Edward Soja's 'thirdspace', this paper will examine these bookshops as the 'other' city spaces to shift the focus from the mainstream, well-known spaces of Kolkata to the alternate spaces since, these 'other' spaces, the little shabby bookshops despite their obscurity, mediate life in a city to a great extent. Some of these bookshops have turned into Kolkata's powerful representative spaces overflowing with rich dialectical charges.

Keywords: Postmodernist spatial turn, heterotopia, thirdspace, literary geography, urban readership.

"Few modern cities have bred so many myths as Calcutta," writes Sukanta Chaudhuri while decrypting the synergies regaling Calcutta's veins. Indeed, hailed sometimes as the city of joy and at other times, as the city of street food or of books, such topical reputations about the city dominate the spatial imagination about it. One such abiding cultural token that feeds into Kolkata's cultural ethos and is the inaugurating point of this essay, is its literary culture. Kolkata has been fortified since long as the city for readers and reading and it is renowned worldwide for its strong print culture. The city's strong inclination toward the book culture manifests in the minutiae of daily life. For instance, a typical day of an aged homemaker in the city often starts with her deriving spiritual comfort from *Geeta path (*the ritual act of reciting verses from one of the most popular Hindu religious scripts*)*, office or college goers generally begin their day by busily turning over the pages of popular vernacular newspapers, while, parents and grandparents read out excerpts from quintessential regional fairytales. This paper will try to probe into how the city's psychogeography plays a pivotal role in enabling its literary culture to thrive. However, while doing so, it will singularly focus on independent bookshops as spaces that operate in lanes and by-lanes, thereby, shifting the focus from the mainstream and well-known bookstores of the city to these less-frequented, alternate literary locations. By making use of certain postmodernist spatial theories, it will argue how crammed bookstores along footpaths where very scanty space exists, staircase-bookshops below coffee houses, and even stores situated in the midst of the busiest cloth-shopping destination, despite their obscurity, are rich dialectical sites.

The Spatial Turn: Contours and Parameters

Edward Soja observed that "one of the most important intellectual renewals of the 20th century" is its "spatial turn" (qtd. in Ikas and Wagner 49). This turn was marked especially by the pedagogical advent of the discipline of postmodern geography. The modernist-historicist tendency to place importance on the temporal continuity of time over the spatial has been dispensed with. Space is no longer *temporalized* but, rather, it is time that is *spatialized*.

While the terms 'place' and 'space' are often used interchangeably due to their etymological similarities, postmodernist critics emphasize that they are not the same. For example, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau distinguishes place as a stable, ordered entity with distributed signs, whereas space is a 'practiced place' shaped by nuanced social actions (117). This postmodernist perspective highlights how space is constructed through everyday practices Similarly, in *Post-modern Geographies*, Soja quotes Henry Lefebvre who argued that "To recognize space, recognize what 'takes place' there and what it is used for" (43). Thus, whenever a 'place' gets induced with critical imagination, it gets transformed into 'space.'

Reinstating the thrust of postmodernist readings of the city space, it has shifted from the mainstream spaces to the alternate and less-frequented spaces. This shift, to be more specific can be traced to the rising popularity of Michel Foucault's groundbreaking essay "Of Other Spaces." According to him, space is no longer inert, "dead…fixed…. undialectical" or "immobile" but gets radically invested with lots of vectors. Foucault distinguishes primarily between two types of spaces: utopias and heterotopias. Utopias present city space as neat, luxurious, uncontested, and ideologically hegemonic. In contrast, heterotopias are characterised by a distinct mark of 'otherness,' challenge fossilized discourses about the city and invigorating radical, counter-normative elements that dominant cultures tend to repress. In fact, heterotopias remain in a lop-sided relation with all the mainstream city sites "as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected" by the latter ("Of Other Spaces" 3).

Independent Bookshops as 'Other' City Spaces

That De Certeau, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, writes, "an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of particular place: a written text" and strikes a metaphorical alliance between reading and space, underpins our choice of reading independent bookshops as postmodernist city spaces. Again, just like the city as a space is visibly saturated with various signs (in any city, usually, there is an undue predominance of billboards, graffiti, etc.), a bookshop is also a space ripened with hoardings and advertisements and this paper will exploit this semiotic homology noticeably existing between the two spaces.

Independent bookshops, more particularly, can be considered as 'other' spaces because of their fecundity as the Foucauldian heterotopias. Unlike mall-based bookstores, which function as spatial utopias and reinforce hegemonic narratives, these independent bookshops-whether progressive, stylish, hip, or accessible-offer alternative spaces that amplify radical futures emerging from minority, environmental, queer, and other political movements challenging conventional knowledge/power structures. Instead of selling common popular fiction at very costly rates, these non-central sites with the aid of their statement-making curations parody the centrality of mainstream bookshops. Analyzing the spatial story of each non-central bookshop reveals them as epicenters of everyday practices, affirming their status as De Certeau's 'practiced places'. By constantly reimagining the conventional possibilities of a bookstore through material, political, and aesthetic interventions, these spaces come to embody the principles of a Sojean thirdspace.

The 'Other' Bookstores of Kolkata

Earthcare Bookshops: Located in a nook at the crossing of Middleton Street and Little Rustle Street and a five-minute walk from the Maidan metro station, this bookshop almost "lies half-hidden from the eye." The Earthcare Bookstore occupies the ground floor of its owners' home. A green courtyard separates this quiet, archaic nook from the main road's bustle, while a wobbly sign welcomes visitors inside. The red-oxide interiors and plain bookshelves in two small rooms create a rustic atmosphere. Hand-painted tree motifs adorn the wooden doors, and framed black-and-white photographs of vintage Kolkata on the walls underscore the store's aesthetic connection to the city. Unlike the mall-based stores that are extravagantly flashy, air-conditioned and install excessive lighting that strategically makes the bookshelves stand out, Earthcare's humble interiors rely on natural lighting and ventilation. The shop mainly sells environmental fictions, organic farming guide-books, books on environmental justice, adivasi rights, conservation, tree and wildlife species, ecofeminism, forestry, ecological alternatives and practical self-reliance (they also keep a handsome collection of children's books), etc. In fact, they also operate as a publishing house and have brought out several interesting titles over the last few years. Earthcare's distinctive collection brings out the beliefs and ideologies of the founders which made them establish the shop with a lot of love and hope. Staunch practitioners of sustainability, they try to recover indigenous or local traditions of caring for and living in the environment that were systematically wiped out by colonial production systems bolstered by the sole logic of profit. They also try to recover lost local legends of minority communities delinking them from macro-imaginaries. To emphasize on sustainability, the owners have cleverly incorporated little practices into their shopkeeping routine like recycling brown paper into origami pieces that are hung in threads from the roofs of the store, offering tea to customers in biodegradable clay pots instead of plastic cups offered by mainstream stores and crafting pots out of discarded light bulbs for leafy money plants. Another issue that is repeatedly tapped into by the owners is how artificial chemicals that have harmful effects are infiltrating the minutiae of our lives. Farming with the aid of toxic fertilizers and pesticides that are also detrimental to the soil quality is one way how such chemicals creep into our food chain. As an alternative, the founders perform and

advocate organic farming and sell books on it ensuring that knack for it grows among potential clients. Even organic food is sold in the bookstore premises on select weekdays. Earthcare also sells organic skincare, handmade goods bags promoting local artistries. Sometimes, the founders host gardening workshops and talks. The shop is frequented mainly by college goers (mainly students from the nearby St. Xavier's and Loreto Colleges), writers, activists, environmental academics, young researchers and tourists. Thus, Earthcare offers a radical spatial story that brings out the founders' singular commitment to environmental thinking and their urgent rendering it into praxis. Impactful influencers, the couple were mindful of a green lifestyle much before ecology became such a buzzword, contributed heavily towards environmental print activism, and set examples of ecofriendly book-keeping practices that are not otherwise undertaken by most mainstream mall-based stores with heavy carbon footprints.

***Seagull Bookstores*:** Located in an older part of Jatin Das Park area of South Kolkata, Seagull bookstores have been operating in the city since the 1980s. Founded by Mr. Naveen Kishore, an erstwhile theatre-worker and performing arts connoisseur, it stands on a quiet pavement that juts out off a busier junction. The store specializes in publication of books on performative and creative arts like painting and theatre (often off-beat, *avant-garde*, political or socially themed works), books on the scenario of Bengali queer-community building, global literature titles from across Australia, China and translations of *bhasa* literatures. Office and bookshop collated in a singular space, Seagull's interior design, time and again, bring out the team's creamy taste in arts. It is filled with quirky, stylized corners over-huddled with sprawling artworks, posters, collages and sculptures from popular and new artists. Some noteworthy collectibles are the paintings of Kolkata-based artists like Lallu Shaw, Bhaskar Goswami and the Keralite G. Reghu's sculpture. Kolkata artist. The office walls are decorated with bright, colourful posters of the cover art of some of their own publications. A democratic work culture is, again, apparent in the shop's décor. Sunandini Banerjee, editor and designer, speaking on behalf of the employees, observes, Seagull as a *space* is curated to reflect "our style, our work culture, and the core idea that Seagull is a shared space open to all." Everyone puts up anything they like, mostly, gifts from friends and souvenirs bought during travel on the walls and shelves. Unlike mainstream bookstores where they barely decorate the walls with art and keep the décor minimalist so that the focus continues to remain on the bookshelves, Seagull as a *space* is fresh, sprawling and creative. To support grassroots local theatre, the founder lets out the store as a rehearsal venue for groups. Seagull also runs a publishing school and influences interested candidates into exploring the growing area of translations.

***Golpark*:** The book colony of south Kolkata is smaller in size but not in importance than College Street. It sprawls over by lanes of the Golpark area starting from the footpath opposite to RKM and dissolving into the shopping district of Gariahat. The shops are a patchwork of tarp and benches, books arranged in a curated chaos, spine out, brightest covers on display. The clientele that frequents this place consists primarily of students of various disciplines who have to hunt down obscure books for their courses, residents who make a transit stop at Golpark to get groceries, and early teenagers who have started getting pocket money. The average cost of books is Rs 250 and the combined collection traverses genres like popular fiction, cookbooks, women's writing, international bestsellers, syllabus books, and even graphic novels especially Indian ones. Murakami's texts appear in every shop as do Kinney and Divakurni. However assuming this hub caters only to popular demand would be a misjudgement. Jutting out into the main thoroughfare from the outlier stores are piles of art and coffee table books on subjects like painting, photography, and mountaineering, to pastries, handbags and automobiles. While they belong to a higher price bracket these books are still accessible yet arcane. A conversation with a few store owners revealed art books or curatorial works

are available at a significantly affordable price at 50% to 80% lower than the printed price. The method of arranging the books emphasises colours, unique patterns, or award or nomination seals. Regular buyers seek such titles. Customers with specific tastes seek out the books they want from under heavy piles or dusty cloth covers. The arrangement of books are changed from time to time depending on whatever is trending and buyers who frequent the shops are greeted with new books everytime they visit. Books that are surplus or haven't sold for over a year are either donated, or sold to ragpickers, or to customers at a hugely discounted price, or sometimes taken home by the shopkeepers. The page quality is passable, pages are repeated, some folded, others joined and this disregard is what makes it affordable. The books breach the space of the interior of the shop and spill out into the pavement, with some of the piles reaching over a person's head. The habitual reverence associated with books is done away with as they lie visible to the eye, within easy grasp, disrupting the route of customers. Entering the space is an immersive experience with the reader being swallowed into publication. The usual labyrinthine structure of book shops is replaced with a trellis pattern like structure, moving primarily along the main road, occasionally creeping interior into the street that cuts through them. The customer enters a magic circle wherein the demands of their days are suspended and they spiral into a space where they must interact with the object of the book. The shops are interlaced with tea stalls which sometimes even share a common footpath and are engaged in an internal symbiotic system where the tea stall owner reads books in exchange of providing beverages for the book shop owners.

***Kolkata Komics*:** Located on the far end of the 3rd floor of the Techno World building in Kolkata's College Street is the tight, compact comic lovers' haven, Kolkata Komics. The customers of this store are hardcore comic fans, mostly youths deeply interested in this genre who shall brave the intensely crowded streets of Bowbazar with unregulated high-volume traffic. One of the co-owners Mr. Debasish Karmakar reported they cater to a niche clientele by storing an impressive catalogue of rare comics, out-of-print titles, or vintage comics including foreign ones. There are many other bookstores on all the floors of the Techno World building, and on both sides of the streets but none can compete with the range and pricing of Kolkata Komics. Apart from collectible editions, they store a wide range of books including but not limited to, Bengali comics, Bangladeshi ones from Dhaka, indie comics, translated works, graphic novels, funnies, and classics. Recently they have started stocking manga as well. The store is price inclusive with comics starting as low as Rs. 30- Rs. 50 and going up in tens of thousands depending on their rarity and pristineness. Their most prided collection is their own publication, *Shonka*. It is a series of dark and grim tales dealing with complex plots and mature themes for young adults. It's a curatorila decision to keep titles of independent artists for the purposes of conferring greater visibility to upcoming artists and making graphic novels easily affordable to younger clients. Publications like Mayakanon and Diamond Comics for buyers who are looking to enjoy comics inexpensively. By virtue of its range, this tiny shop has become a microcosm of the globe with its wide range of publications curated to meet to every interest. The tight space has been brilliantly utilised for stacking rows upon rows of comic books on metal shelves with widely spaced racks. All the books are placed in neat stacks of uniform sizes. The shelves line the walls and the bare bones structure of the room is lit up with a trail of posters, and watercolours of comics and anime across the world. These are placed above the billing counter and the rest of the space is full of comics arranged in a spectacularly economic way. The shelves are as high as the ceilings and the door is hand-painted with a grafitti of popular characters. The shop is a document on space utilisation, and a tale of triumph in a literal corner of the world. Kolkata Komics has transformed an unsellable location, unviable space, rarefied genre, and unmarketable population into a thriving community of Kolkata's literary culture. A journey which began with a couple of comic enthusiast has transformed into a bookshop, and the group have left their jobs to work full time for

the store. The shop is a material testament to the success of their effort and the depth of their dedication. While serving a niche audience, they have the impulse of bringing the genre to the general populace. To this end, they have started organising the coveted Kolkata Komics Karnival annually which brings under one roof a selection of comic book houses, publishers, and artists. It has a nominal entry fee of ten rupees to cover the hall rent. Karmakar and his team aspired to make comics a mainstream genre such that even parents support their children to cultivate this interest.

***Read Bengali Books*:** Read Bengali Books has the eponymous agenda of reorienting the youth with their native culture. It is situated in residential lane in Rashbehari in the street behind Charuchandra College. It is a frequent haunt of both teachers and students who seek mainly fictional narratives of varying genres. The store is a medium-sized space with two rooms connected with a passage. The remarkable thing about Read Bengali Books is that it defies all expectations. The first room is bigger in size with wood panelled shelves installed in the walls with books stacked in rows in an upright position. The space in between is empty. People can walk around, chat, browse books and even take pictures in this room. The room is fully stocked with Bangla books of all kinds. They stock big publishers like Dey's and Ananda, as well as obscure ones like BoiChitro, Loke Seva Shibir and Kakoli, which cater towards specific literary tastes like art in literature, activist literature, and historical and historiographical fiction respectively. They have Bangladeshi publications like Pranto Prokashon and Rodela Prokashoni and a robust collection of translated works with over a hundred titles. The vast and diverse catalogue of Read Bengali Books as emphasised and highlighted not by showy arrangement or glaring spotlights, but by a transformation of the bookshop into an interactive space. The shelves are named such that the reader/buyer is drawn into the literary sphere. The language used in the labels is not commonly found in titling, rather it entices the audience by asking questions or hinting at suggestions. For instance bestsellers and chapbooks are stored under the category of "Chot Joldi" (Quickly), the shelves on horror stories are named "Ratey Poro Na" (Don't Read at Night), travelogues called "Cholo Ghure Ashi" (Come Lets Travel), and the shelf on history books is stored at the end of the shop and called "Iti Itihas" (Finally, History). A passage connecting the two rooms. It is not a straight passage as one might imagine but a sideways horizontal one. Dimly lit, the passage is very differently decorated with posters and original sketches of the cityscape. It leads to the second room which is slightly cosier with the publications moving out of purely literary genres and leaning into illustrations, graphic novels, children's books and other products like quills, pens, t-shirts with prints of popular literary characters, authors, and quotes. To realise its vision of promoting Bangla literarure among the youth Read Bengali Books gives a 14% discount on select categories if a child under the age of 14 accompanies the readers. However they have the intrinsic understanding this is not enough to repopularise Bangla books en mass thus they have come up with a novel programme. Any interested reader can read a book of their choice inside the shop from their store during their working hours between 11 a.m. and 8 p.m. free of cost if they cannot afford the books. This step is a radical intervention in the book market that baffles the profit-oriented capitalist logic that thrives on the necessity of maximising sales and boosting income. Their approach has revolutionised the bookshop by making the space of the store not only affordable but also universally available, across economic backgrounds and access to cultural capital. They have altered the shop, an economic entity, to accommodate the poor and by extension the marginalised and the disenfranchised so that they can read literature for education and leisure. The second room has haphazardly placed tables and chairs where they serve beverages and snacks. The authors of this paper found another instance of a connection between books and the practice of drinking tea. Read Bengali Books. To promote vernacular literary culture they sell fountain pens and inks of Bengal-based companies like Sulekha and Gamma. Their collection includes special lines of handcrafted inks in vibrant colours like the "Firingee Kaali". Their merchandise, including bookmarks and tote

bags, is intrinsically rooted in the Bengali culture that contributes to its development and sustenance.

***Platform Bookstore*:** Kolkata literary scene remains incomplete without any mention of its *boipara* or college street which is densely congested with several heritage stores and even shack-like, small bookshops. Platform bookstore is located opposite to the famous drinks shop Paramount's in College Street. Surrounded by giants like Dhyanbindu and Dey's, this bookstore is located in a tiny counter-like space. Initially conceived as a little magazine venture, the founder, Tanmoy Koley, created his own publishing setup to bring out hardcovers apart from the timely little magazine chapbooks. They publish authors and poets from small towns who do not get to contribute in mainstream magazines which flinch before going beyond a safe canon. They also have brought out debut collections of extremely young poets from such areas by identifying quality content from their Facebook posts and blogs. Himself from a small town, Koley's editorial decisions make apparent his intentions of providing a fresh outlet to the Kolkata-dominated literary scenario while exploiting the spatial advantages offered by a spot like College Street with wholesale shops for paper and other raw materials nearby. Unlike mainstream stores with capacious storage rooms and inventories, a little-magazine turned publication house like Platform solves the storage problem by relying on print-on-demand technology. This also helps to reduce huge losses in case a book does not fare well.

Conclusion

Certain similarities among the aforementioned bookshops inevitably crop up which justify their grouping as the 'other' bookstores of Kolkata. Shops like Earthcare and Seagull function almost as boutiques committed to spreading political awareness, local, alternative artforms, radical futurities and regional knowledges. They, thus, contribute to what De Certeau calls an 'anthropological,' "poetic and mythic experience of space" (93). Apart from bookselling, they also organize workshops, talks and support small businesses which face challenges from corporate totalitarianism. Almost all the stores except the one from Golpark, make their stand-out collections (environmental fiction in case of Earthcare, graphic literature in case of Kolkata Komics, etc) their unique selling propositions. They seem to have self-fashioned personalities of their own and through their curatorial skills make powerful, representative statements. Each of these stores do not employ the strategies of mainstream, elite bookstores. The latter always prefers a database system where all data regarding their collections are flattened out in databases. For them, books are less like objects with sentimental values and more like tabular entries. They strictly keep the books ordered, in their allotted shelves. They, in fact, do not entertain any spatial experimentation that might hinder their carefully constructed disciplinary system that, again, forms their language of power. Unlike the mainstream stores who tactfully display singular copies of a book so as to create an urgency in the mind of the customer to buy it before it gets sold out, the publishing house-cum-stores keep several copies of a single book on the racks. They also do not keep ridiculously expensive leatherbound collections or special hardcover collections in their stocks. Compared to the fixed prices of books in mall-based stores, one can even bargain in a shop like Golpark's. Lastly, most of these independent bookstores are run by individuals compared to mall-based stores which, most often, are global franchises. These bookstores function as Foucauldian heterotopias of time, in which, "time never ceases to pile up" (Foucault 7). They act almost as alternative archives which challenge hegemonic narratives and definitions of nation-formation and history writing. Their radical collections, exhibiting dissident strains, ensure that the linearity and sanitization of time and history are ruptured. Foucault cited the example of a museum as a heterotopia of time which is also governed by the "idea of collecting everything" (7). A bookstore like Seagull or Read Bengali Books, indeed, seems nothing other than a collector's paradise. Again, bookstore like those in Golpark's, exploits the possibilities offered by what De Certeau described as the polemics of walking in the street. The scurrying bodies of the

walkers-cum-buyers coming from all walks of life whose "swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities," follow "the thicks and thins of an urban "text" and "they write without being able to read it" (Certeau 97, 93). They bring all sorts of possibilities out of an ordinary pavement and the "pedestrian traffic" shatters 'pretenses of the proper" places (Certeau 103). The numerous art objects in a store like Seagull, the collection of handmade goods like bags in stores like Earthcare and Read Bengali Books which contribute towards a material understanding of space and their ideological engagements with issues like sustainability (in case of Earthcare), supporting vernacular culture against the encroachment of a colonial language like English (in case of Read Bengali Books), supporting little magazine publication from profits generated by the sale of hardcovers (in case of Platform), turn these bookshops into a typically Sojean thirdspace which can be seen simultaneously as a physical and mental space that is " real and imagined, concrete and abstract." (Soja qtd. in Meskell-Brocken 243). As thirdspace, these stores aim to "actively transform" the focus and character of Kolkata's mainstream literary market. Thus, these bookshops entail several nuanced processes that actively transform a brick-and-mortar 'place' into an ideologically-driven 'space.' Lastly, this paper has contributed in identifying an affective, daily, grassroots strain emerging out of the spatial orientations of these independent bookshops. What Certeau observed as the "microbe-like, singular and plural practices" and tiny spatial stores that are characteristic of a space, facilitate an entry into the field of affect theory thereby enabling a ready intersectionality between postmodern spatial and affect studies (96). For instance, this paper argues that any discussion on the spatiality of a bookstore like Earthcare's or Read Bengali Books, demands analysis of the little practices like creating origami décor out of recyclable paper or serving tea in clay pots to customers. This is because just like affect encompasses the daily and because of its microscopic frame, eludes conventional entry points into pedagogical networks, the minute spatial practices inside these bookstores, are also often overlooked in spite of the fact that they are chiefly instrumental in converting them into dialectically charged spaces. Thus, this paper contributes in intertwining the everyday spatial tactics creating a geography of action with the affect of spatiality. Indeed, the minutiae and frequency of spatial practices affirm how space is a 'practised' place, a palimpsest of radical affects and indefinitely 'other' futurities.

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Article

Tulsi, Trauma, and Tumultuous Times: Shahidul Zahir's Use of Magical Realism to Narrate the Nation in *Life and Political Reality* and *I see the Face*

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Abstract

1970's general election of Pakistan brought forth the civil disobedience amidst people of East and West Pakistan, which was followed by the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the war that changed the geopolitical landscape of South-east Asia completely, particularly for the people of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (previously undivided Indian subcontinent). Shahidul Zahir's translated novella *Life and Political Reality* (*Jeebon o Rajnaitik Bastobabata*) and the novel *I see the Face* (*Mukher Dike Dekhi*) present a socio-political overview of pre and post 1971 war-laden Bangladesh infusing vernacular voices, surreal imagery, and nonlinear temporality to foreground the lived experiences of ordinary people caught in the trauma of war, displacement, and postcolonial disillusionment. By deploying magical realism, Zahir destabilizes dominant historical narratives and reclaims silenced voices—particularly those of the marginalized, such as women, urban poor, and political dissenters—constructing an alternative mode of history-writing. Our paper intends to examine Zahir's narrative strategies that reimagine the postcolonial nation not as a homogenous entity but as a fragmented, polyphonic space marked by contradiction, trauma, and resilience. His unique blend of magical realism emerges as a politically charged aesthetic that speaks to both historical recovery and re-visioning in the aftermath of colonial and military violence.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), alternative historiography, memory, marginality.

> "Millions of souls nineteenseventyone
> Homeless on Jessore road under grey sun
> A million are dead, the million who can
> Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan"
> (Allen Ginsberg, 1978)

> "Magical realism, in its combination of the fantastic and the real, has been producing political discourses that partake in imagining communities as 'limited, sovereign' nations with roots in 'time immemorial' derived from what are often termed 'local' or 'indigenous' myths, religions and cultures, while subverting realism that has been so much part of the post-Enlightenment empirical worldview that included nationalism." (Wen-chin Ouyang, 2006)

The works of Shahidul Zahir, including his short stories, novellas, and novels, are written under a surrealistic approach, providing a formal template to the ontology of combined and uneven development and offering such narrative structure and aesthetic strategies which represent the myriad social conflict of overlapping modes of production. The internal struggle in his novels over land is the spatial component of this dialectic, complementing the reconceptualization of historical time. Zahir's works bring forth the eccentric pronouncement of distinct Bangladeshi people and their socio-political apparatus. The vernacular language of his texts has an irreducible class context, which is constitutive of the postcolonial quest for an alternative, postcapitalist, and socialist modernity. In his narratives, we see the entrance of an aesthetic of commitment towards 'magical' realism with the dialectical imagination of Bangladeshi language and literary expression as key sites of the contradictions of social experience. Shahidul Zahir was mostly excluded in metropolitan postcolonial criticism like his predecessors but it is important to understand the oeuvres of his writings to locate the transgressions of the past and how common people transformed the urban space of a new state, Bangladesh. For this paper, we have selected two works by Zahir: the novella *Life and Political Reality* (*Jeebon o Rajnaitik Bastobabata*—originally written in 1988) and the novel *I see the Face* (*Mukher Dike Dekhi*—originally written in 2006). Both have been translated from Bengali to English by V Ramaswamy and Sharoza Nahrin and published by Harper Collins recently. These works weave the narratives across space and time, presenting a socio-political overview of pre and post 1971 war-laden Bangladesh and maintaining a complex web of interconnectivity between the major and minor characters. Our aim is to study Zahir's techniques that infused magic realism with his own practice of writing alternative history through fiction where he chooses ordinary people, mostly marginals, as his characters and their conversations among themselves as a mode of the narration.

Since the formation of Pakistan in 1947, the Western Pakistan marked the Eastern as inferior because the Muslims in the Eastern wing were considered as subordinates due to their social and cultural affiliation with the Hindu population (Meher, 2015). The number of Bengali speakers was higher in comparison to the number of Urdu speakers. Urdu was the language of the elite, used by 7% of Pakistanis only, whereas Bengali speaking population was 56% (EFSAS, 2017). During the reign of the military General Ayub Khan, the Eastern Wing suffered immeasurable losses. Political parties were not allowed to participate in the 1962 election and many politicians of East Pakistan were prevented from spreading their ideas among the masses (Hussain, 2021). After the fall of General Ayub Khan, the next in the line was Yahya Khan, who promised to restore peace and mutual understanding by holding a general election in 1970. But eventually the peace was shattered when Awami League, a dominant political party from East Pakistan won the election with majority. Following the victory of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, the leader of Awami League and his manifesto for

the development of East Pakistan, Yahya Khan announced a meeting of the national assembly would be held on 3rd March 1971. Later it was cancelled and heavy protests broke out and the call for freedom was demanded (EFSAS, 2017). Operation Searchlight took place in the night of 25th March of 1971, a planned genocide to demolish the Sheikh Mujib's party along with the seekers of independence. The Pakistani military killed around 7000 students in cold blood during one night. The military officers forced the students to dig up their own graves before murdering them. Teachers and employees of Dhaka University also lost their lives in the hands of the Pakistani military. Operation Searchlight led to a massacre of 30,000 Bengalis in a week (Bass, 2013). Almost half of the population of Dhaka fled from the city in search of safe shelters elsewhere. Following the 'black night' of 25th March, the ordinary Bengalis with no prior fight training started a resistance against those military to form a 'new state' (Jahan, 1972). But political groups based on religious values such as Jamaat-E-Islami swore allegiance to the West-Pakistani government when the liberation war of Bangladesh began (Meher, 2015). Despite being Bengalis, the political leaders and supporters of Jamaat-E-Islami collaborated with the Pakistani army in their atrocities against other Bengalis. They formed their own combatant group to help the West Pakistani military, popularly known as 'Rajakars', their primary task was to find out those nationalists who were fighting against West Pakistan and help the Pakistani military and their auxiliary forces to terminate them all (Meher, 2015). The most horrific transgression committed by the Rajakar groups was the abduction of Bengali women. During the liberation war, around 200,000 to 400,000 women became victims of rape and sexual slavery (Brownmiller, 1975). Bangladesh received continuous moral support from India and other parts of the world and following a nine month long bloodbath, Bangladesh ultimately became an independent state (Bass, 2013). In the immediate aftermath of partition, commonly attributed figures suggest around three million East Bengalis migrated to India and 864,000 migrants from India to Bangladesh (Bharadwaj, Khwaja, and Mian, 2008). Bangladesh after independence, faced a huge economical backlash due to these new immigrants and the past military exploitation. The economy of Bangladesh was demolished by the imperialistic rule which prevented industrial and agricultural development for a certain time being (EFSAS, 2017). As Che Guevara once said, "We, politely referred to as 'underdeveloped,' in truth, are colonial, semi-colonial or dependent countries"—Neo-colonial specifications impacted Bangladesh's economy after the independence of 1971 and we can still feel the elements of it translucently.

Shahidul Zaheer's two texts *Life and Political Reality* and *I see the Face* poignantly portray this bloodstained history of a new state which has been formed after a military-bureaucratic oligarchy. We find certain characters who have an acute sense of a violent memory, hence they are often alienated from their social life. Introspecting the narratives of these two works, we come across two particular characters—Abdul Mojid from *Life and Political Reality* is dealing with an idea of morality and Khoimon from *I see the Face* contesting for the survival of her son Chan Miya and her own in a changing atmosphere. The dwindling moral values of post-independent Bangladesh makes Abdul Mojid from Lakshmi bazar realize that, unlike him, people often forget the past. The ontological aesthetics of identity takes this novella to a distinct path which provides insight to contemplate the pre and post colonial socio-political milieu of Bangladesh. One day in 1985 when Abdul Mojid's sandal "lost conformity with circumstances and went *phot* and snapped," the back and forth movement of his memory dominates the narrative—the bloodied past of 1971 Liberation war, accounts of rape and abduction in accordance with the characters Momena and Mayarani spring up; the concluding part is blazoned with an advertisement implying that Abdul Mojid, being frightened, is going to sell his house and leave the *moholla* forever. The latter work, *I see the Face* is more layered than the former one, the story does not revolve around a single character, primarily there is no protagonist, we meet a plethora of characters and their hyper-realistic journeys—Chan Miya who

perhaps "had been nourished by monkey's milk as an infant," hence the society calls him 'Monkey Boy'; his mother Khoimon keeps on trying to stay alive with her son after the murder of her husband Moyna Miya during 1971 Liberation War; Mrs Zobeida Rahman, a rival of Khoimon since her childhood, often narrates the stories to her son's friend Fakhrul Akram Ledu, her son Mamun ul Hye, or Mamun whom we also encounter in a different reality in Chittagong's Satkania as a caged animal; the second Mamun, Rabbit Mamun later claims to be the real son of Mrs Zobeida Rahman—thus the novel brings forth a hyper-realistic approach where we can also witness how the post-independent Bangladesh finds its capitalist value in the advent of a globalized economy and how a prosperous child like Chan Miya tries to grab opportunities lying around here and there in the new state and ends up being a car-thief or the fearless gangster Rabbit Mamun imprisons himself inside his cage in the end. Minor characters like Julie Florence and Asmantara Hoore Jannat are being used to reflect upon the country's encounters with Christian missionaries and illegal trades during post independence.

> "We should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests." (Foucault, 1980)

To acknowledge the alternative voices that have the power to counter the hegemonic currents of historiography, Shahidul Zahir chooses magical realism over grim realism. Zahir in these two fictional works employs magical realism asserting the agencies of memory, identity, loss, and trauma and attempts to recover the ordinary voices that once underwent the brutality of those violences. As Robert Kroetsch and Linda Kenyon observe, magical realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of "living on the margins," encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems. The pithy compactness of Zahir's nonlinear narrative weaves a certain magical reality—absurd occurrences take place in the text with its obscure characters, the line between the past and the present is erased frequently, and a large group of people who provide the network for the story to progress remain independent entities empowering the tools of gossip and make-belief.

Space is a vital element in Shahidul Zahir's narrative. The novella Life *and Political Reality* is centred around the Lakshmi Bazar of Old Dhaka whereas the Ghost Lane in *I see the Face* is completely a fictitious place. Whether the places are imaginary or real, they are stuck in a timeline of violence, ravaged by the turmoil of the Liberation War. These places function as a microcosm of a society where the oppressors like Moulana Bodu, Abdul Goni, rajakars and the oppressed like Momena, Mayarani, Khoimon, Moyna Miya live side by side, the episodes of their lives are interconnected. The realist orientation of spatio-temporal relationship undergoes major revisions in the genre of magical realism that must be speculated as important shifts and reorientations (Quayson, 2020). The beauty of Zahir's magic realism lies on these spatio- temporal plains where characters lose their 'conformity' and find themselves in the trepidation of memory due to the strange occurrences. It occurs when in the very first act Abdul Mojid's sandal strap is snapped in a "melancholy afternoon" indicating his own disjointedness from reality after coming across Abdul Khayer. He finds the sky "clouded by termites" and there are "countless crows gamboling behind the fleeing termites;" he imagines the crows emerging from Abul Khayer's jobba. This imagery does not stop here hinting at the power dynamics between termites and crows, it further pushes Mojid to remember Khayer's evil father Moulana Bodu who used to smile tenderly and set crows flying in the moholla's sky. Zahir writes, "those who were still there in the moholla then had said that the meat, whose pieces Moulana Bodu flung skywards everyday, was human flesh." This is the grotesque of his magical realism, in the following scenes it becomes evident that Moulana Bodu is the man who is responsible for the rape and murder of Abdul Mojid's sister Momena. Abdul Goni and other

rajakars were sent to capture outspoken Momena under his command on 10th December, 1971. Thus dates in pre and post colonial timeline and how the characters deal with those dates, create important vantage points in the narrative regarding the question of collective memory. This is further invested in crafting the grand narrative of the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation.

Before getting caught Momena hides under the cot in their middle room, whereas Khoimon from *I see the Face* fakes her pregnancy by stuffing a bundle of rags under her clothes even after the birth of Chan Miya because Abdul Goni told her, "You finish your business" and she wonders what would Abdul Goni do once the business is over. These women are frightened to death, perhaps more frightened because of their bodies, many of them has already lost their menfolk as Khoimon cannot see her father Abdul Jalil and her husband Moyna Miya anymore after they are taken by the rajakar gang of Abdul Goni. In both literary works, the name of the rajakar gang leader remains the same. The Pakistani military afflicts ordinary citizens hand in hand with the rajakars. In this regard, Shahidul Zahir narrates an incident where people are butchered by the military, their heads are severed from the bodies, and the headless torsos are thrown into the Buriganga river, while the severed heads are buried outside the Christian cemetery. The people of Lakshmi Bazar, Nayabazar, Siddique Bazar, Patuatuli, and Narinda dig the soil outside the cemetery wall and find fifty-six skulls. He writes, "seeing the skulls arrayed over banana leaves, the people of the moholla had imagined an exquisitely woven jamdani sari, and now, it was in that jamdani sari that they saw their mothers and lover's, their daughters and daughters' daughters attired whenever they gathered during the various festivals of life." On the contrary, when the people of the moholla have been waiting a whole night, bearing their grief for those killed in a surge by the military, Moulana Bodu's son gets the opportunity to express his grief for his beloved dog that was shot accidentally. Such is the strangeness of the situations Zahir decides to write about to reflect upon how Pakistani Soldiers accord special difference to the persons like Moulana Bodu who stands beside them and propagates to betray his own countrymen during the Liberation War.

Strange occurrences become more powerful when Zahir narrates a skirmish in the moholla over the tulsi plant in *Life and Political Reality*. On a day in Monsoon 1971, Moulana Bodu declares tulsi as a 'Hindu plant' as Hindus worship it. Abdul Goni assembles six rajakars in a group and instructs them to cut down all tulsi plants. When people from the moholla form resistance and the rajakar gang fails, Moulana Bodu makes contact with the Pakistani military, hence the young lieutenant sets up an operation. While in operation, we see the soldiers' war-weary tongues coming under the spell of tulsi, their mouths chewing tulsi leaves, and them leaving behind a heap of leafless skeletons of shrubs. On hearing the comment made by Moulana Bodu that their souls have been sullied, the lieutenant interprets—after consuming the muddy leaves, the soldiers need immediate medical attention, thus the operation is dismissed and the people of the moholla get saved from the Chinese automatic rifles the soldiers were carrying. Another instance of such magic that assimilates humour can be found in *I see the Face* when Abdul Goni comes to harass Khoimon's family during the months of Liberation War. Whenever he tries to interrogate Khoimon, her worn-out anchal begins to flutter in an angry gust and Abdul Goni feels that he is caught in a rogue wind, his body feels light, and he thinks he might float away somewhere. On one particular day, the gust of wind makes him dance in a trance-state which finally makes him lay flat on the earth, amidst the dust and sand. This incident leads Goni to think that Khoimon must be flying something and when asked she answers, "I fly the flag." Shahidul Zahir's indigenous magical realism thus gets empowered by the ideas of nationalism, identity, marginality and memory. He then introduces another Mamun altering the strands of reality, this Mamun is different from the Mamun that constantly tries to win the heart of Julie Florence, this Mamun gets born in the sawdust factory when a split occurs and one Mamun comes back to his

mother collecting sawdust and the other is transported unconsciously to the house of smuggler Abdul Wodood Chowdhury. In this reality, the Mamun becomes a Rabbit, an expert sailor, a smuggler, Qutub Minar, aka Qutubuddin Aibak. Years later this Mamun, being frustrated with his life, knocks on the door of Mrs Zobeida Rahman's house in the Ghost Lane and reminds her that he went lost.

Zahir destabilizes the realism of the site by the condensed historical reenactment that transpires within it, a metaphorical representation of the process of decolonization which serves to transform the novel's regional setting into a metonymic focal point for postcolonial culture as a whole, thus 'tulsi', flying the flag, or the reappearance of a lost child does not stand as a mere element to provoke magic, but it becomes a signifier through which history and culture of a community can be understood. In postcolonial terms, this indicates an imaginative projection into the future where the fractures of colonialism heal in the 're-visioning' process that produces a "positive imaginative reconstruction of reality" (Dash, 1974). The terrific unreal punch on Tiger Niazi's face by Kader Siddiqui in Zahir's novel can also be considered as a part of this positive imagination that involves the emotions of a traumatized community. The stories continue in a back and forth style for which a reader cannot focus wholly on a character for a longer period. Displacement takes place throughout the texts and their nuances help us to understand the trauma of post 1971 Bangladesh and Zahir's use of fragmented focus on reality. The repeated use of 'perhaps' creates the dichotomy of hegemonic and alternative novel worlds, whereas the commonality of remembering extends the ways of forgetting and silencing which is reflected in the narrative style of these two texts where the marginality plays the sole role. These marginal narrators in Zahir's texts have full access to the other consciousness (surreal or hyper-real) and frequently manipulate points of view constituting a progression that moves freely in the back and forth timeline.

In Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation, the novel is the site of a "diversity of social speech types" in which a battle takes place "in discourse and among discourses to become 'the language of truth,'" a battle for which Foucault has used the term 'power knowledge'. In magical realism this battle is represented in the language of narration as an act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation. In a postcolonial context, the magical realist narrative enacts a dialectical struggle embedded within the culture's language—a tension between the 'codes of recognition' tied to the inherited language and those imagined codes that are often utopian or future-oriented, pointing toward a culture's 'original relations' with the world (Slemon, 1995). In this sense, the magical realist text, through its language of narration, mirrors the real conditions of speech and cognition as they emerge from the lived social relations of a post-colonial culture. This dynamic is exemplified in One Hundred Years of Solitude, where García Márquez systematizes such narrative reflection as a 'speaking mirror'.

These social relations are expressed by Zahir in three separate but related ways. The first involves the representation of a kind of transcendent or transformational regionalism so that the site of the text, though described in familiar and local terms, becomes a metonymy of the postcolonial culture as a whole, hence the Lakshmi Bazar and the Ghost Lane become epitomes of this regionalism, the ordinary people who are living their, their day-to-day lives, fear, suffering, trauma make the site a whole. The second is the foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath. Zahir bringing the reference of missionaries brilliantly showcases this long process of colonization. And being an author of the post-independent Bangladesh, he dramatically presents the aftermath in two ways. In *Life and Political Reality*, the protagonist leaves the moholla fearing the rising power of Moulana Bodu's Son, he is no longer able to undergo another passage of fear and helplessness for her daughter whom he

named Momena to honour his sister. However in *I See the Face*, characters like Mamun Miya, Chan Miya, Julie Florence fall apart due to the economic depression and disillusionment of a changing time. The third way of expressing social relations involves the thematic foregrounding of those gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the disjunctive language of narration. For this Zahir smartly opts for the vernacular language of the marginal—discarding the standard dialect, he writes in their voices; using the medium of gossip as a prominent tool for narration highlights the contribution of oral traditions in forming the alternative mode of historiography. Even in the translated text, V Ramaswamy celebrates Rushdie's concept of 'chutnification' by adopting Bengali/regional words into English and by keeping the original dialogues intact through the use of English phones at many places.

According to Marx, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." All texts are essentially a selective process—some parts are selectively exposed in the front while some parts are hidden in the back, yet more are dumped into the historical narrative. Both *Life and Political Reality* and *I See the Face*, thematize a specific type of post-colonial discourse involving the recuperation of silenced voices as axial to a 'positive imagined reconstruction of reality'. Both texts foreground plurality and gaps—those produced by the colonial encounter and those produced by the system of writing itself; and in both texts, marginalized presences press in toward the centre. The site of each text is a localized region that is metonymic of the postcolonial culture as a whole. And in each text, this historical study is foreshortened so that the forces operating in the real social relations of the culture are brought metaphorically into play. The metaphysical clash or double vision, inherent in colonial history and language, is recapitulated in transmuted form in both texts' oppositional language of narration and mirrored in its thematic level while narrating the alternative history of pre and post 1971 Bangladesh through the lens of magical realism.

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Article

"Random don't happen to everybody": Exploring Violence and Loss in debbie tucker green's *random* (2008)

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Abstract

This paper will critically engage with debbie tucker green's *random* (2008) and will explore both the effects of grief upon a family suffering the loss of their youngest member and the play's efficiency in providing space for acknowledging the precarity defining subaltern groups. Focus will be placed on the female character's narration of the aftereffects of her brother's murder, illustrating the personal suffering and functioning as a testimony to the violence experienced by black British identities. The interconnectedness of the non-linear structure of the narration and the unhomely atmosphere of the play further reflect the traumatic effects of suffering deadly violence, underlining the need for showing empathy and acknowledging the vulnerability of suppressed identities.

Keywords: Black British theatre, hate crime, grief, vulnerability, violence, testimony.

Contemporary Black British Theatre has been transgressing boundaries and gradually moving from the margins to the mainstream, providing narratives and performances that offer the opportunity to black identities to claim their space within a white dominated British theatre and society. Particularly, debbie tucker green's play *random* (2008) moves beyond identity politics by presenting the murder of a young black boy as both a traumatic experience for black subjects and a tragedy related to the social issue of youth violence, thereby examining the particular within a wider sociocultural context. Notably, the fact that the play foregrounds the family's grief for the loss of their son rather than the act of the murder and the particulars of the crime, illuminates the devastating effects of violence and contributes to the creation of an affective space that enhances the audience's engagement with the family's suffering. This essay will explore the impact of grief on a bereaved family and the play's efficiency in both providing a space for a subaltern group to voice their suffering and addressing the necessity of acknowledging the vulnerability of discriminated identities. Focus will be placed, firstly, on the family's process of grief as conveyed through the female character's narration that functions as a testimony for the violence experienced by black people, and secondly, on the play's non-linear narrative structure and unhomely atmosphere that reflects the traumatic effects of suffering deadly violence and underscores the need for showing empathy towards the oppressed Other.

Articulating One's Grief: Narration, Fragmentation and Silence

First and foremost, the female protagonist's narration resembles storytelling which allows her to provide the audience with a personal account of the tragic event of her brother's murder through the use of vernacular English. Misspellings and the blend of English and Caribbean dialects in Sister's speech highlight both her racial identity and her personal experience of grief. Particularly, her uninterrupted flow of speech and manic questioning of the police officers' certainty about her brother's death, "[h]ow y'know he / ent juss late? How y'know he ent with he's / spars -" (tucker green 32), reflects her difficulty in processing the reality and demonstrates her denial, one of the initial stages of grief. As bell hooks notes, rap gives black youth a "critical voice, explaining, demanding, urging" (27). Similarly, Sister's Black-British vernacular reveals her trauma and her effort to connect with the audience. The orality and emotionally charged language reveal Sister's need to externalize her distress and place the viewer in the position of the witness. Especially, her fragmented speech while describing "[t]he killer cut" that was "[j]uss- / round. / (gestures) / From the back-" (tucker green 36) discloses her difficulty of reliving the past and conveying her torment verbally. Even more, to borrow Marissia Fragkou and Lynette Goddard's words, plays create an "affective engagement through 'experiential' vocabularies" (147) and in tucker green's case, the breaking down of language and the heroine's gestures compensating for the missing words impress upon the audience the horror she witnessed. Thereupon, Sister's narration constitutes both a coping mechanism for grief and a testimony of the underrepresentation of the deadly violence against subaltern groups.

The fact that a black character is offered the opportunity to create a narrative allows this subaltern group to claim recognition for their suffering. The Sister is the one shaping the narrative and whose perspective the spectator follows throughout the play, managing to delve into the emotional world of the victim's family and witness the bitter consequences of youth violence. Her narration provides the discourse for addressing the effects of violence that transgress the private sphere, and this is amply illustrated through her reference to "a brotha / whose eyes don't stop flowin / Wet raw / with weepin" and whom the reporters do not include in the coverage of the murder case (tucker green 41). Hence, by offering an insider's perspective of the silencing of black people's suffering, Sister underlines, what Judith Butler thoroughly examined; that is, violence against subaltern groups "leaves a mark that is no mark" (Butler 36). Yet, by having agency over the representation of the aftermath of the

murder she gives voice to the suffering of the black community. By questioning the randomness of her brother's death (tucker green 49) not only does Sister reveal her distress since she fails to accept the loss, but she also employs irony, implying that for certain communities violent events are ordinary. Taking into consideration Butler's aforementioned argument about the lack of recognition of specific losses, Sister's testimony both indicates and compensates for "the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds" (Butler 35). Therefore, her narration is a means for both articulating her grief and addressing the mistreatment of black people.

Simultaneously, the fragmented speech and silences that transgress the play do not only mirror the paralyzing effects of grief but also illustrate the power of silence to convey the family's torment that cannot be easily articulated through language. Despite the fact that Sister's mourning takes place through her storytelling, the narrative highlights the inadequacy of language to convey the parents' pain, thereupon depicting the different ways individuals cope with the same traumatic experience. This is most evident when the shocked mother struggles to describe her own and her husband's inability to call their daughter, stating that she "can't dial- / husband do- / he can't say..." and eventually sending an urgent message for her to "'Come home. / Come home now.'" (tucker green 29). Hence, her fragmented discourse indicates her emotional upheaval that disorients her. According to Cathy Caruth, what haunts the traumatized individual is his inability to fully comprehend his affliction after a traumatic event (4) and, likewise, the mother is at a loss for words, struggling to verbally articulate her anguish. Similarly, the father is repeatedly "tryin to say somethin / but /... nu' un won't [come out]" and insists on leaving the phone hanging off its hook (tucker green 37, 46-7), a fact that suggests that language becomes almost redundant for him and only silence and isolation can reveal the magnitude of the impact of his son's loss on his wounded psyche. As Sara Ahmed asserts, any kind of pain, regardless of being felt, can be elusive and not represented through "speech, or forms of testimonial address" (22). Therefore, the father's silence constitutes an alternative solution for voicing his grief and, hence, the narrative does not only present the crippling effects of suffering a loss, but also sheds light on the different ways individuals speak and claim recognition for their suffering.

The playwright's note that all characters should be played by the same female actress indicates the characters' interrelation and the playwright's creativity in illustrating that another's suffering affects the one witnessing it as well. By shifting between various idiolects and tones, Sister becomes a vessel for all the other characters to take form and their experiences to be represented. The fact that often their voices are mixed as when the father's responses are delivered by Sister ("Dad says, 'It was.' / ... / Dad says, 'Yeh' too.") (tucker green 46) shows that the daughter identifies with the father's pain and can voice his weak attempts to support the mother after the identification of the body. As Butler rightly claims, when people mourn the loss of a loved one, they realize that they depend on their relationships with one another and, consequently, are "gripped and undone by these very relations" (23). Hence, on the one hand, the father's silenced voice indicates his immense grief that impedes his speech and on the other hand, the daughter's intervention suggests that, despite the personal process of coping with grief, they are present and show empathy to each other. Furthermore, this interdependence between the family members is amply demonstrated in the scene of the police's arrival when the mother and father are identified by their familial bond ("'Yes, I am his wife- / his mother- / . . . / 'Yes – I am ar husban' / their father-") (tucker green 26-7). Thereby, what is foregrounded is the acknowledgement that they are defined by one another since it is argued that grief defies any ideas of an independent individual (Butler 23) and as a result, the play illuminates the struggle of those who mourn a loss to overcome the severe rupture of their intimate relationships and regain a sense of their identity.

Black Experience, Human Experience

Keeping the above in mind, the use of generic terms rather than specific names to signify the characters' identity in combination with the focus placed on the aftereffects of the young boy's death demonstrate grief's universality and the need to acknowledge each loss as worthy of grief. Although the plot is grounded in an experience related specifically to black people, the playwright brings to the fore the institution of family, addressing a wide range of audiences beyond racially specific identities. For instance, Sister's fear that something serious happened because she knows that "[i]f Dad took sick / Mum would manage" and would not send a message to her to return home (tucker green 27) demonstrates a situation that is not racially specific, but any viewer could identify with the heroine's anxiety. To use Martin Riedelsheimer and Korbinian Stöckl's words, debbie tucker green does not portray the Other as "distant" but presents the "suffering of concrete fellow human beings" (116), therefore inviting the spectators to empathize with the black family. The play sheds light on the emotional turbulence of traumatized individuals and, even more, Sister's emotional outrage at the police for keeping her brother apart from his family at a time when he could be "callin - / for his Dad - / his Mum-" (tucker green 34), indicates the strong family ties and the need to overcome this crisis together as a family. The emphasis put on the family's misfortune and their struggle to cope with grief allows the audience to engage with "the characters' emotions and the effect of abuse, trauma and violence" (Goddard 71), thus not focusing exclusively on the family's racial identity but following an interdisciplinary approach to the play. Therefore, the playwright brings to the spotlight a family tragedy to convey the importance of recognizing the suffering of certain groups of people and ameliorating the conditions that enhance violence against them.

Furthermore, the unfolding of the plot in a non-linear way and the silencing of the initial polyphony highlight the traumatic effects of suffering a loss and allow the spectator to emotionally engage with the family's suffering. The fragmented repetitions of scenes accord with the family's turbulent psychological condition and, particularly, the double repetition by the mother and the daughter of the father's order to "let no Polices in" (tucker green 25, 30) amply demonstrates their concern about someone in the family being in serious trouble. The fact that the father's rule is referred to at different points in the play suggests both that the presence of the police signifies an ominous situation and Sister's need to ascertain that indeed her brother's death happened. Such narratives about trauma reveal, according to Caruth, "a kind of double telling", a story of both the immense violence of a situation and "the unbearable nature of its survival" (7), thus illuminating the inner turmoil of the traumatized individual. Moreover, the female character's need for someone to witness her pain becomes even more evident in her last monologue when she expresses her anger for violence, for "this cycle of shit", and describes every detail of her brother's room, trying not to "loose the strength / of his bedroom su'un. / Ever." (tucker green 49). Ahmed maintains that "it is the apparent loneliness of pain that requires it to be disclosed to a witness" (29) and, particularly, the juxtaposition between the final monologue and the polyphony of the opening scene demonstrates the devastated effects of violence upon the family as their home grew quiet and the difficulty of carrying the burden of grief in silence. Therefore, Sister's testimony allows the audience to focus on her emotional world and witness her bereavement, thus being sensitized to the violence against subaltern groups.

The transformation of a homely atmosphere into an unhomely one through the abrupt transition from the family's everyday life into a bleak reality addresses the harrowing consequences of youth violence on the family of the victim. That is, while the extensive narration of the family's routine contributes to the identification of the spectator with the family life, the murder in the middle of the play discloses the vulnerable positions of subaltern groups within society. Especially, by portraying a caring mother who worries about her son not eating enough and not taking proper care of himself because he "still tink being young- / is being… [invinsible]" (tucker green 11), the playwright

employs the theme of motherly love to create a familiar situation and cause great shock to the spectators by juxtaposing the safe space of home with the young boy's murder. bell hooks points out that a lot of postmodern writers and intellectuals of color focus on those "shared sensibilities" of people that transgress any racial, gender and other social categories, and can contribute to "the construction of empathy" (27). Therefore, by delving into a random day in the life of a black family, tucker green draws the audience's attention to common aspects of people's lives, creating a bond between them in order for the viewers to sympathize with the family when tragedy occurs. For instance, the explicit language used by Sister to refer to the wounded body of her brother, to his missing eye and severely slashed mouth that made him "look like a clown-" (tucker green 35) conveys the horror of the murder, impressing upon the audience the lack of protection of certain lives. As Goddard states, that narrative shift to "pathos" sheds light on "the 'affect' of trauma, violence and loss" (84) and, thereupon, both reveals the female protagonist's devastation for her brother's loss and creates a gloomy atmosphere that contributes further to the viewers' engagement with the family's plight, leading them to the acknowledgement of black people's struggles with hate crimes and violence.

What further creates an eerie atmosphere and marks a shift in the narrative structure is the gradual disappearance of the indication of time, reflecting the disorienting effects of grief and the violence that results to people's death. Although, it is argued that the tracking of time for the initial activities of the characters demonstrates "the mundane linearity of an ordinary day" (Goddard 85), it could also suggest that it creates an anticipation for a climactic moment, functioning as a prelusive stage for a dramatic change. Within a few hours the family's life is forever changed and while at "1 o'clock" and "1.27" Sister and Mum are engaging in their daily routines at work and at home respectively, they are later informed that their young boy was attacked at "1.30" (tucker green 19, 21, 28). Therefore, time tracking as a dramaturgical element facilitates the creation of a chronicle of the family's tragedy, dividing the play into two parts, the first one revolving around trivial matters of the characters' everyday life and the second one corresponding to the impact of the son's death on the family. Even more, the note at the beginning of the narrative that "the play is to be performed straight through without any breaks" and the lack of any time indication after Sister hears of the sad news (tucker green 2, 32) demonstrate the trauma of suffering a loss since the occurrence of death remains a reference point for the survivor of a traumatic experience; that is, it indicates a normal life before the event and a blurry present full of pain and suffering. Butler poses an interesting question about whether mourning a loss reduces people to passivity or contributes to an acknowledgement of their vulnerability and "collective responsibility" for the protection of one another (30), a viewpoint that debbie tucker green adopts. That is, by showing that time is frozen after her brother's loss since grief transcends the family's life, Sister paints a bleak image of the aftermath of violence and creates a gloomy atmosphere, thus contributing to the audience's familiarization with the devastating consequences of violence against subaltern groups.

Conclusion

With the above in mind, *random* offers a different perspective on violence against black people by addressing such an immense social issue through its impact on the private sphere, presenting the brutality of violence through the great pain inflicted upon a bereaved family. In particular, the female protagonist's testimony of the family's grief creates a contact space between her and the audience, inviting the latter to witness closely the family's process of grief and engage with the suffering of black subjects. As a result, the subaltern individual is portrayed as a familiar individual and not as an unidentifiable Other. debbie tucker green manages to bring to the spotlight issues such as hate crimes and youth violence that are still prominent in contemporary Britain and, even more, a burden for

minority groups while addressing a diverse audience by staging the play at the Royal Court Theatre. Especially, the extensive focus on the turbulent emotional world of the characters and their navigation through their trauma rather than on any explicit reference to the racial issues behind Brother's murder illustrate that the play both foregrounds and moves beyond black experience, treating violence as a wider social issue. Nevertheless, the playwright does not erase those elements that racialize the play but invests more in conveying the characters' anguish and difficulty to cope with loss and, subsequently, raises awareness of the violent reality of certain groups and criticizes the injustice and ignorance for the seemingly "random" deaths within the black and other minority community.

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Article

Understanding Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Green Ecology for a Sustainable Planet

Nilufer Ali

Abstract

Literature is not only a reflection of the society, rather it also weaves stories which lead to human realisations, awakening and incorporating corrective measures for their follies and vices. Amongst diverse issues discussed within literary texts, 'nature' has always been its greatest inspiration. The Romantic Movement was a revolt against industrialisation, as well as a revolution to preserve 'nature'. This eventually led to the rise of 'green studies' and 'ecocriticism' towards the later centuries. Both terms are used to denote a critical approach which began in the United States of America in the late 1980s and in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. Climate Change, Environmental degradation, Global Warming or the loss of Biodiversity; all lead us to focus on the importance of raising human consciousness towards preserving the only planet we have in order to survive, 'Our Earth'. This paper tends to present a study of *The Living Mountain*, by Amitav Ghosh, from an ecocritical viewpoint. Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Green Ecology will be discussed further using both fiction and non-fiction texts.

Keywords: Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Environmental Degradation, Global Warming, Green Ecology, Green Studies, Postcolonial Ecocriticism.

In addition to praising nature's beauty, Romantic writers discussed the catastrophe that nature was facing as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, and Blake have criticized humanity for its disrespect towards the natural world. Writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries used nature writing to soothe the human mind by constructing an environment that attracted readers. A text's usage of pictures of the environment and nature is a convention that emphasizes the wilderness in particular.But nowadays, studying the environment in literature is an important subject pertaining to research. In contrast to the literary world of a century ago, it expresses worries about contemporary issues including climate change, global warming, and biodiversity loss, as well as their ties with humanity and the influences they have on one another. Modern authors and critics have focused their ideas and research on how people express themselves, behave, and affect the environment. Furthermore, their pivotal area of concern is what kind of solutions to contemporary problems does literature provide. This is the advantage of nature writing in multicultural literature, which integrates the environment and society and addresses both ideas holistically.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is the most recent of the revisionist movements that has raced across the humanities which analyses literary works by utilizing knowledge from a variety of disciplines, including ecology, environmental science, and cultural studies. It looks at the representation of nature in literature, including the usage of particular animals, landscapes, and environmental imagery. The critical evaluation of how literature addresses current environmental issues including pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss is known as ecocriticism. The cultural values and ethical frameworks that impact environmental policies and mould our relationship with nature and how these depictions of nature have changed over time, reflecting shifting cultural perspectives on the environment; is one of the key concerns in ecocritical enquiry.

> “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocrtiticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” (Glotfelty, 1996)

Ecocriticism had been restricted to nature writing in the recent past. To broaden the scope of ecocriticism, nature might be understood as the study of all that makes up the environment, not simply the wilderness. Indian author Amitav Ghosh discusses the legacy of colonialism, including the consequences on the environment, homelessness, poverty among immigrants, and the government's ignorance. One of his novels, *The Hungry Tide*, depicts the lush greenery as well as flora and fauna of the Sundarbans, the largest delta in the world. The residents of this area are refugees from India and Bangladesh. Located on the eastern coast at the mouth of the Ganges River, the Sundarbans are a location where the impoverished have to deal with mortality, eviction, tidal flooding, and destruction. These folks are victims of the stormy and tidal climate in the Sundarbans and are assaulted by ferocious tigers in the tale. It is amazing to observe how Ghosh has constructed the environment, a vast transcending place where all living things and nature, with its destructive tidal power, are at odds with one another. Those who are exiled to a collection of islands where survival is a struggle produce what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "Third Space." By providing praxis to see the environment, the novel presents some significant disputes between mainstream ecocritical researchers who believe in environmental harmony and traditional conservatives. Humans and animals are both portrayed as threats to one another. The book makes a fictitious recommendation to put a stop to the mayhem in both areas. It illustrates some of the fundamental disagreements between

mainstream ecocritical academics who support a solution to balance the ecosystem that people and animals have created havoc upon. In the 1920s, contemporary perspectives on environmentalism started to take shape. Humans' modern lifestyle and their careless attitude towards environmental deterioration have been questioned by contemporary environmental studies and academics in literature. By introducing praxis to study and observe the surroundings, this enhances the worries of modern scholars and motivates them to take action to increase environmental consciousness among people (Jalais, 2010). Huggan and Tiffin consider the future in addition to the past and present—what will happen after environmentalism and post-nature, what will be done to help future generations understand the negative effects of being cut off from nature, whether a return to prehistoric knowledge is necessary, and how will this affect mainstream environmental culture?

A relatively recent development in literary criticism is ecocriticism. With a focus on American nature writing and British romanticism, particularly Henry David Thoreau, the early major works of ecocriticism in the 1990s became especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking towards more serious engagement with nonhuman nature. A greater awareness of the environmental surroundings in classic Anglo-American literature was the aim of this first wave of ecocriticism. Since then, the fundamental ecocritical gesture—a closer examination of space and land as more than a passive, neutral stage on which human action takes place—has been applied to works that are not part of the Anglo-American canon and has gradually started to meld with other literary criticism movements like post-colonialist and critical feminism, though not without some opposition. For instance, some critics have asserted that the "split between nature and culture that establishes a structurating antinomy even in the face of constitutive and intractable hybridities" is only concretized by traditional ecocriticism's emphasis on the most surface-level elements of the environment. According to others, ecocriticism "has tended to reflect the interests and concerns of countries in the North," as seen through the lens of postcolonial studies.

Therefore, how can postcolonial ecocriticism be interpreted beyond the most theoretical spheres of literary criticism? Postcolonial ecocriticism is a way of thinking that acknowledges the reclamation of space, land, and resources as an essential component of the process of peoples' liberation while also attempting to understand how top-level, elite-driven processes like (neo) colonialism, capitalism, international development, interstate alliances, or the centralization or devolution of power are connected to the spaces in which people live and act. It intentionally interprets spaces in the widest sense possible, considering both the material and spiritual environments that people engage with. Practically speaking, this postcolonial ecocriticism is more about urban areas, oil fields, river deltas, and mineral mines whose ownership and significance are still fiercely debated than it is about the beauty of flowers or trees. Writing about their lived environments is a means for many writers from the developing world to position themselves in natural settings in order to re - inhabit a landscape or place that is intrinsic to their philosophies of being in the world, to give places of profound significance unquestionable meaning (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015).

However, it is more than just a post-colonialization of ecocriticism; it is a critique of both the disrespect for the global South in ecocriticism and the disregard for nature in postcolonial theory. Although postcolonial theorists have portrayed the earth as the source of more than just basic human needs—in Fanon's words, it gives the colonized people not only bread but also human dignity—these invocations of nature hardly ever go into detail about the ecological effects of colonialism, such as the depletion of natural resources, the forced alteration of patterns of human and animal settlement, and the breakdown of traditional land-use and arrangement practices. More frequently, the concept of land is transformed into an ambiguous, abstract idea and combined with ideas of people, nation, and country. The idea that colonized and third world spaces are fundamentally different from locations like Walden Pond or Wuthering Heights, and that the process of understanding and

problematizing those spaces should reflect this difference—this exactly, is the foundation of the postcolonial variant of ecocriticism that has arisen from these critiques of traditional ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015).

The Living Mountain—An Ecocritical Fable

The Living Mountain is a brief work of literature that is full of significance and symbolism. It is the result of a dream triggered by unease about the Anthropocene and its implications, as well as anxiety about what lies ahead in the wake of our treatment of the natural world. You don't always find a book that holds your attention for the entire thirty-five pages or less. Additionally, anytime Amitav Ghosh invents something new, he rejects magic. In particular, by using remarkable metaphors, he has been able to depict the conflict between nature and humanity in a majestic manner without resorting to complex ideas or concepts that the audience will not comprehend. The main plot of this fable-like tale centers on a dream that is told about Mahaparbat, the living mountain that provides food for the trees that produce high-quality goods for the native valley people and traders who live and thrive beneath its cover.

A redemptive fable that is symbolic of our times, with all the climatic disasters affecting people worldwide. The focus is on us as a group, not on any one hero or particular character. It serves as a warning to all of us to be mindful of nature and do our part to protect it, or else it will wreak havoc on us in the days ahead. It's a story of redemption that also examines how we might rekindle our lost ties to the earth. The Anthropoi, or people, are the reason this sustainable system doesn't last long. They gradually enter the system with their sophisticated machinery to disturb the ecology and enjoy the abundance of nature, not really considering the calamity and doom that may follow. The second section of the fable bears the consequences of this commercialization and avarice, and the conclusion will undoubtedly keep you thinking for a very long time. Amitav Ghosh offers a universal tale in *The LivingMountain*. The current climate crisis and the ensuing environmental collapse are the contents of the book. The fable is

> "an unforgettable account of how humans try to utilize natural resources without understanding nature at all…The deadly combination of ignorance, aspiration, greed, and the display of false power that has led to so much of the environmental crisis that we see around us has been beautifully captured by Amitav in the brief space of a few thousand words; Devangana Dash's amazing illustrations make for a very interesting interplay between words and images…As a fable, it illustrates precisely what might go wrong if we overrule nature and exploit too many of her resources and riches. It is a very ecologically conscious story that is also wise and cautionary, making it a highly relevant and significant work of literature. Because of the way he addresses the environmental catastrophe and places it in a postcolonial context, Amitav Ghosh is quickly rising to the top of my list of favourite authors. I have only ever witnessed a very limited number of authors accomplish this. He refers to nature as a living system that we cannot control and should never try to do so when he speaks of the mountain. He uses the story as an allegory for colonialism and its effects on the natural world when he describes invaders trying to seize all of its resources." (Mitra, 2022)

Amitabh Ghosh further remarks, "*The Living Mountain* is particularly pertinent now because of the continued exploitation and misuse of natural resources, as well as the on-going pandemic and climatic crisis that are the results of our inadequate knowledge of humanity's relationship with environment. Many of the world's foremost experts on climate change and the Anthropocene requested me to participate to a collection of articles on those topics some time ago. All I could think of was a short story, and I was surprised to find that the experts thought it was excellent, maybe because it touched on a topic that is rarely discussed in our continuing global crises."

As an ecocritical story, *The Living Mountain* offers readers a unique opportunity to condemn the egregious wrongs done to the environment and promote the adoption of sustainable methods for using natural resources. Additionally, it highlights the complex relationship between humans and nature as it is depicted in the book, carefully analysing the various ways that cultural, sociological, and economic factors impact the characters' complex interactions with their surroundings. This study has attempted to explore the tangible conflicts that result from human activities, such as pollution, resource exploitation, and deforestation, and their profound effects on ecosystems and communities. This novel encourages readers to reconsider their complex relationship with the environment by emphasizing the intrinsic value of the natural world. This leads to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of ecological systems and the development of a sense of environmental stewardship.Furthermore, the study explores the characters' perceptions of nature, uncovering their cultural tendencies and the significant development of their understanding of the current ecological problem. The characters' realization of the urgent ecological problems they face and their determined attempts to address and resolve these problems are both closely examined in the analysis. In the end, our analysis suggests that *The Living Mountain* is a true expression of Ghosh's environmental concerns, presenting a powerful story that acts as a forceful plea for environmental awareness and responsibility.

On a deeper level, nevertheless, *The Living Mountain* is a message that speaks to human nature. It is evidence of the human race's ravenous hunger and its fatal repercussions. Because of this, Ghosh's fable is a testament to modern issues that demand unwavering focus and astute judgment in order to end man's catastrophic dominance over nature. As a matter of fact, the story is far more than a post-pandemic analysis of the insult to truth that we decided to overlook or, more accurately, marginalize. Quite the contrary; it demands a steadfast awareness of the ecological wrongdoing we have unwittingly incorporated into our daily lives. *The Living Mountain* thus takes the form of an existing reality that we possess from birth and continue to benefit from. Through Maansi's dream, which we still don't consider, it repeats itself in each of us. Sustainable development's epistemic core is captured in Ghosh's story. It is equally engaging for critics of development policy since it imaginatively guides its audience to investigate the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 agenda of the United Nations. It focuses specifically on Goal 15 of the charter, which states that it would "protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt the reverse land degradation and halt diversity loss" (United Nations, 2015).

For readers who enjoy futuristic fiction and ecotopian stories, *The Living Mountain* is an outstanding book. It encourages its viewers to embrace environmentally responsible methods of nourishment and preservation. This parable lays the foundation for a healthy human-nature relationship today, tomorrow, and in the future by tying the past, present, and future into a cohesive web. *The Living Mountain* imaginatively recognizes the relationship between humans and ecosystem and is a clear manifestation of Ghosh's perspectival agency. It urges the ecosystem to be revitalized and re-establishes our long-neglected bond with Mother Earth. Through a fanciful and circular story, the author bemoans the planet's tragic decline. Through this captivating tale, Ghosh captures a modern-day worldwide environmental crisis that meets the extensive outreach required for the best possible preservation of our planet.

Conclusion

There are significant similarities between post colonialism and ecocriticism as academic fields that have both studied the ways in which social realities might be changed, partly through literary and cultural critique. The foundation of both fields is the grounding of the humanities in material and

social contexts, as they emerged at the intersection of political activism and humanistic study. Postcolonial studies as a literary and cultural critique movement developed after the independence movements of former European colonies, especially those ruled by the British, such India, several African countries, and the Caribbean. Therefore, it is possible to view postcolonial literature and the literary criticism that articulated its cultural politics as a creative production intervention into social and political reality.

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Article

The Carnivalesque, the Grotesque and the Monstrous in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Published in 1981, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offered the world an alternative genealogy of post-independence India through its twisting of historical certitudes and cherished idea(l)s underpinning the political grand narratives that authored the nation into being. Focussing chiefly on the frequently mutilated yet eventually marvellous body of the novel's narrator Saleem Sinai, this paper analyzes Rushdie's alternative poetics and politics of the history of the postcolonial nation in terms of the kind of embodiment specific to Mikhail Bakhtin's theori zation of the carnivalesque. To this end, I draw upon Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body of open apertures and interrogate whether the radically unfinished nature of the grotesque does indeed offer a counter-narrative to the absolutist, homogenizing impu lses of official culture in Rushdie's novel. Taking a cue from Bakhtin's contention that 'the aesthetics of the grotesque are to a certain extent the aesthetics of the monstrous' (Bakhtin 43), I argue that the 'mongrelization of selves' so extolled by Rush die in his non-fictional writings receives an apposite fictional expression in the 'monstrous' body of Saleem Sinai on which the history of the postcolonial nation is both authored and undone.

Keywords: Rushdie, body, grotesque, carnivalesque, monster.

Born on June 19, 1947, Salman Rushdie, the British writer of international repute who can claim both India and Pakistan as part of his ancestry, has been mesmerizing readers of fiction over the past four decades with his tales of the fabulous. Arguably his most accomplished work as a novelist, *Midnight's Children* (1981) offered Rushdie's reader a mirror in which the genesis and post-independence destiny of India's tryst with freedom could be read. Focussing chiefly on its protagonist Saleem Sinai's frequently mutilated yet consistently marvellous body, this paper reads the configurations of the grotesque and the monstrous in *Midnight's Children*. To this end, Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque body, grotesque realism and the carnivalesque provides the scaffolding for my interpretation of Rushdie's novel.

I would like to begin my reading by concentrating on the symbolic complex attached to the birth of Saleem Sinai and on the one anatomical feature that marks him as a grotesque creature on his very first appearance: namely, a giant nose. In remarkable similarity to Carlos Fuentes's novel *The Campaign* (1990), where the plot is set into motion by the carnivalesque reversal of fortune in which 'a well-born white child is kidnapped and exchanged for a prostitute's black baby'(Danow 13), the freakish pair Saleem-Shiva in Rushdie's novel is initially condemned to socio-economic destinies they do not deserve by birth. For the midwife Mary Pereira, in 'her own private revolutionary act' for her communist lover Joseph, changes the name-tags of the two infants at Doctor Nalikar's hospital: thereby 'giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accordions and poverty…'(Rushdie 130). The allegorical parallel Rushdie draws between the birth of Saleem-Shiva and the birth of independent India—an idea made explicit through Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to baby Saleem which prophecies that the life of Rushdie's protagonist will 'mirror' that of the independent nation—invites a reading in terms of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque-grotesque flourishes in periods of transition and crisis in history: i.e. moments in which the old and the new, death and life are held together indissociably in Heraclitean flux. Here we remember that not only is India's passage to freedom described in Jawaharlal Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' speech as a stepping out 'from the old to the new'; the achievement of freedom through the bloodbath of partition that triggered communal riots across the country is captured in Rushdie's evocation of the eve of independence through images like the following that neatly encapsulate the simultaneity of life and death, of euphoria and trauma marking this epochal moment:

> …And in all the cities all the town all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world. [1]

We turn now to the particular way in which the birth of Saleem Sinai corresponds to Bakhtin's evocation of the 'theme…familiar to us from the Roman carnival of combined killing and childbirth [where] the killing is done by the newborn himself'. Not only does Saleem's biological mother Vanita die delivering her baby—who is, and is not, Saleem—the night Saleem is born; we are told that the thought/sight of his newborn, grotesque face causes his father Ahmed Sinai to drop a chair on his toe, shattering it consequently (Rushdie 129-30). It is tempting to find here an echo of the symbolic complex associated with King Oedipus, not least because of the tragic hero's associations with incest and the castration-complex: themes that are central to *Midnight's Children*. For just as the mutilation of Oedipus's feet foreshadows his blindness which symbolizes castration, the injuring of Ahmed Sinai's toe looks forward to his impotence[2]: to that later moment in the novel where his testicles are literally freezed because the Indian state decides to freeze his assets after independence (Rushdie 153-154). Vindicating theories of the grotesque that associates the genre as much with terror and subliminal anxiety as with the ludicrous[3], Saleem Sinai's monstrous anatomical feature thus causes his parents considerable damage: foreshadowing all the deaths and destruction he believes himself to

be responsible for, ranging from the death of his film-director uncle Hanif and grandfather Adam Aziz to the mayhem of Bangladesh's war for independence in which Saleem aids the Pakistani army in his capacity of a man-dog who sniffs out the enemies. When Saleem characterizes himself early in the novel as 'a swallower of lives' (Rushdie 4), this ability of his to wrought harm upon those around him is precisely imaged, since, as Bakhtin puts it, swallowing is the 'most ancient symbol of death and destruction' which manifests itself in Rabelais's work in the shape of the gaping mouth (Bakhtin 325). True to the spirit of the carnivalesque-grotesque world, swallowing is, however, deeply ambivalent in Rushdie's novel since it embraces a positive as well as a negative meaning. For when Saleem Sinai tells the reader of the novel that 'to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well'(Rushdie 4) or, later, 'to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world'(Rushdie 121), we encounter a conception of the body in striking congruence with Bakhtinian theory of the grotesque since, like Pantagruel's mouth in Rabelais's novel, Saleem too contains 'an inhabited universe' of people directly or indirectly involved in the history of his birth and becoming: his too is 'a body that swallows the world and is swallowed by the world'(Bakhtin 317). The interpenetration of the past and present as well as that of the familial and national history through which Saleem comes to contain the chaotic plurality of modern India is represented in the novel through the metaphor of the leak that attests to the fact that the Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque body as open and unfinished remains operative in *Midnight's Children*. 'Things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other'(Rushdie 37), says Saleem Sinai; and the fact that even after suffering so many forms of dismemberment, Padma, 'the dung lotus' who is the interlocutor for Saleem's narrative, can still leak into his 'fissured body'(Rushdie 37) attests to the fact that his capacity for dynamic give and take with the world—characteristic of Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body—outlasts his castration at the hands of the Widow. Further, as John Clement Ball points out in his Bakhtinian reading of the novel, 'leaking leads to transformation, creation and newness—to a productive impurity' (Ball 72). It is to this question of 'productive impurity' that I now wish to turn for my reading of the grotesque and the monstrous in *Midnight's Children*.

Discussing the question of the pure and impure in the context of literature, Rushdie's "In Good Faith" proffers a reading of his controversial novel *The Satanic verses* (1988) in terms that have important resonances for my interpretation of *Midnight's Children*. According to Rushdie, '*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the pure' (Rushdie "In Good Faith" 394). To read this with Rushdie as 'a migrant's eye view of the world' is to be alert to the ways in which the 'uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis' that characterises the migrant's experience gives rise to the question of purity and impurity in both *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. Migrant, exile and illegal immigrant due to the vicissitudes of tragic fate rather than voluntary choice, Saleem Sinai's destiny in *Midnight's Children* literalises the metaphor in Rushdie's self-definition as 'a bastard child of history'(Rushdie "In Good Faith" 394) since not only is he the illegitimate child of the British colonial William Methwold and the singer Wee Willie Winkie's wife Vanita but, like the rest of the midnight's children, he too is 'fathered …by history'(Rushdie 132): an idea that for Rushdie symbolises the sharing of the hopes and promises of independence by the teeming multitude of India. For Rushdie, it is only the bastard children of history who can leak 'into one another' (Rushdie "In Good Faith" 394): creating that 'productive impurity' that can challenge the 'absolutism of the pure' insisted upon by discourses of the nation-state and religion. Symptomatic of what Bakhtin calls 'catnivalistic mesalliances'[4] (Bakthin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 123), mongrelisation in *Midnight's Children* has important implications for reading the destiny of independent India and its

potential for accommodating the monstrous if we take into consideration Frederic Jameson's contention that what makes third-world texts allegorical is precisely the 'relationship between the libidinal and political components of individual and social experience' in them which is 'radically different from what obtains in the west'(Jameson 71). The homology between the sexual and the political that Jameson pursues in his reading of the trope of eating in Lu Xun's work is one that Rushdie's novel also invites for the reader interested in the construction and interrogation of the monstrous in *Midnight's Children*. According to Mark Dorrain, the monster is him in which 'multiplicity exists in unity' with 'juxtapositions [which] are unreasonable and oxymoronic' (Dorrain 313). Further, disproportionality, which for Dorrain is a sure sign of the monstrous, signifies a transgression of the law of the father since the monster triggers anxiety by not resembling his parents, which in turn makes explicit 'a lack of mastery by the father over the maternal material'(Dorrain 312-314). In *Midnight's Children*, the parental anxiety triggered by Saleem Sinai's disproportionate nose is made clear in his recollection of his enraged father's rushing into his bedroom and telling his wife: 'Look on his face! Whoever got a nose like that from sleeping?'(Rushdie 177). While at this point in the narrative Ahmed Sinai could still rationalize his anxiety by 'blaming Amina's Father' for Saleem's gargantuan feature, his fears concerning what Dorrain calls 'a lack of mastery … over the maternal material' come true once, after the mutilation of Saleem's finger, it is revealed that Saleem Sinai's blood group matches neither that of his father nor that of his mother. Tellingly, it is Saleem's nose that Ahmed Sinai fixates upon as the mark of his difference and deviance from the paternal norm: 'I should have known. Just look, where am I in that face. That nose, I should have…' (Rushdie 270). Yet, Saleem Sinai's description of his entry into the Sinai family makes clear that for Rushdie the monstrous and the impure have an essentially positive, enabling charge:

> On the ankle of a ten-chip whopper with eyes as blue as Kasmiri sky—which were also eyes as blue as Methwold's—and a nose as dramatic as a Kashmiri grandfather's—which was also the nose of a grandmother from France—she [Mary Pereira] placed this name: *Sinai* (Rushdie 130).

Corroborating Bakhtin's belief that the grotesque evidences the permeability of separate bodies and that between the body and the world, Saleem Sinai's narration of his origin displaces onto the corporeal plane the reality of postcolonial hybridity as an unexpected intermingling of the erstwhile colonizer and the colonized. Saleem's claim that the hard facts of his filial origin 'made no difference' to neither him nor his parents—once Ahmad Sinai's rage subsided—makes evident Rushdies own rejoice in mongrelisation. Significantly, on learning the truth of Saleem's origins, Padma berates him for not caring for his 'original' parents, and asks: 'you are a monster or what?'(Rushdie131). This question, echoing Dorrain's argument that the monstrous inheres in a lack of resemblance to and transgression of the paternal, receives an interesting response from Saleem. As Rachel Trousdale puts it:

> Saleem responds that the physical basis of monstrosity is meaningless. In defending himself against Padma's charge, he dismisses the notion of biologically grounded moral imperatives and argues that while children have a responsibility to their parents, it does not spring from a physical cause…Saleem agrees that it is monstrous not to love one's mother but not that motherhood is determined biologically. Echoing [Benedict] Anderson, Saleem bases the family's group identity on imagination—or, interestingly, on 'collective failure of imagination': rather than imaginary likeness, as Anderson's conationals do, Saleem's family fails to imagine unlikeness… (Trousdale 178).

To probe further the configurations of the grotesque and the monstrous in *Midnight'sChildren*, we need to look into the symbolic associations accrued by the two bodily features that in Ramram Seth's prophecy characterized the creature Amina Sinai would give birth to: nose and knees. Because

Saleem's gargantuan nose realizes the midnight's children's conference through the power of telepathy and Shiva's mighty knees signify his gift for war, it is tempting to associate the first with life-giving powers and the latter with death-dealing forces. However, a closer perusal of the novel reveals that Saleem's nose is associated as much with fertility as it is with infertility and death, while Shiva's knees, because of its embodiment of a seemingly limitless virility, come to signify the ability of the midnight's children to participate in the shaping of the postcolonial Indian future, since in spite of the various ectomies performed by the Widow on the midnight's children, Shiva's illegitimate off springs , Saleem the narrator tells us, will continue to populate India well beyond the nightmare of the Emergency. Vindicating Bakhtin's belief in the essential duality of the world of the carnivalesque-grotesque, and Rushdie's faith that the very possibility of the 'new' inheres in the mongrelisation of selves[5], *Midnight'sChildren* revels in the confounding of the self and the other. Perhaps nowhere is this troubling of boundaries more evident than in Saleem's description of the first conference of the midnight's children. Beginning with the Delhi-born beggar girl Sundari, whose 'beauty was so intense' that it not only blinded her mother and her neighbour but harmed the vision of her father so badly 'that he was unable, afterwards, to distinguish between Indians and foreign tourists, a handicap which greatly affected his earning power as a beggar'(Rushdie 226), we see in all the midnight's children a power to trouble the boundaries between subject positions that in normative discourses of the family, the nation-state and of human civilization in general, are expected to remain separate and distant: including, but not limited to, the human/animal ('a werewolf from the Nilgiri Hills') and the male/female ('…a blue-eyed child of whose original sex I [Saleem] was never certain, since by immersing herself in water he (or she)could alter it as she (or he) pleased') (Rushdie 227). Repeatedly called freaks by Saleem, these creatures test the limits of categorization by blurring the distinction between radically different subject positions as in them, to follow Geoffrey Harpham's definition of the grotesque, 'something is illegitimately in something else'(Harpham, quoted by Dorrain 313). Validating Bakhtin's contention that in grotesque realism the bourgeoise individualist ego is precisely effaced because of the grotesque body's ability to house 'multiplicity within unity'—to recall Mark Dorrain's formulation of the monstrous—Saleem Sinai's potential for hosting the midnight's children through the telepathic powers of his gargantuan nose validates Sara Cohen Sabot's argument that in the special kind of embodiment offered by the grotesque we are offered 'an image of reality that calls attention to interconnectedness and unity (the grotesque subject as *open* to the world, as intertwined with it), but that at the same time keeps intact difference, heterogeneity and multiplicity'(Cohen 60). At the level of allegory, there is an obvious parallel here to be explored with the institution of diversity, plurality and tolerance that ideologically grounded the independent, avowedly secularist nation-state of independent India. In "In Good Faith", Rushdie says that 'to be an Indian of [his] generation was also to be convinced of the vital importance of Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a secular India' (Rushdie "In Good faith" 404). According to Clare barker,

> Under Nehru's leadership, the nation-state was constructed according to 'a model committed to protecting cultural difference rather than imposing a uniform Indiannes' (Khilnani, 2003, p.167). *Midnight's Children* gives a joyful, exuberant account of the myriad emancipatory possibilities opened up, in theory, by such a tolerant, inclusive paradigm for national identity. Yet this is always tempered by the difficulties of achieving inclusivity, and the novel's final chapters, set during the Indian Emergency of 1975-7 (and written very soon afterwards), reflects the definitive closing down of the vision. (Barker 127)

While I concur with Barker's belief that 'the children's evolution from marvellous freaks to pathological deviants embodies Rushdie's critique of the nation's putative progress' (Barker 129), I do not agree that the novel's depiction of the Emergency, which for Barker 'reflects the definitive closing down of the vision' of 'unity in diversity,' marks a radical break with the earlier scenes in the

novel involving the midnight's children that celebrate 'the myriad, emancipatory possibilities opened up' by 'a tolerant, inclusive paradigm for national identity'. In "Instituting Diversity: Official Nationalism in Post-Independence India", Srirupa Roy shows how the 'unity in diversity' paradigm adopted and pursued by the Indian nation-state in the wake of independence was continuous with the 'Diversity-speak' that 'marked British attitudes toward India, both in terms of the colonial literary imagination and constitutional-legislative policy'(Roy 80), as well as with 'the discourse of anti-colonialism that was articulated by the Indian National Congress between 1885 and 1947' which was dominated by 'the view that India was a concatenated whole made up of distinct and diverse groups'(Roy 81). Further, Roy goes on to state, 'the imperial state shored up the political saliency of social diversity with the introduction of the principle of communal representation'; and for her, the very 'idea of communal representation as a means of linking the state to society owes its origins to a confluence of liberal philosophies of governance' (Roy 81). Roy does not go on to criticise the pitfalls of liberalism vis-à-vis the issue of postcolonial governance, choosing instead to 'show that, contrary to received wisdom about the homogenising impulse of state-sponsored nationalism, the Indian state embraces notions of social heterogeneity/diversity in its discourse on Indian identity'(Roy82). Yet liberal philosophies of governance that form the bedrock of the modern ideal of democracy, with its promise of freedom of speech and life-choices to individuals irrespective of their class, caste and gender, seem considerably more problematic if we take into account Ranajit Guha's persuasive unmasking of the 'historical myth invented by international liberalism—the myth that all had been well with Indian democracy until an authoritarian personality subverted it on 26 June, 1975' (Guha 40). Rejecting the liberal fiction that for the first 17 years of its independent existence, the Indian nation-state embodied the ideals of secular, pluralist democracy espoused by Jawaharlal Nehru, Guha argues that 'the post-colonial state, the product of a legal transaction between the dominant elite groups of Britain and India, found it easy to continue, even as a sovereign republic, much of what was undemocratic…in the political institutions and political culture of the raj' (Guha 41). For Guha, then, the Emergency was merely the climactic manifestation of those undemocratic forces that had always simmered beneath the liberal talk of secularism, plurality and tolerance in Indian democracy, and I would like to argue that this monstrous coupling of democracy and authoritarianism is latent in the scenes depicting the midnight's children's conference in Rushdie's novel. To substantiate this argument, we need look no further than the following passage in the novel in which we find Saleem and Shiva reflecting upon the 'idea' and the purpose of their nocturnal gatherings in diametrically opposed terms:

> So! Lissen, my father said I got born at exactly midnight also—so don't you see, that makes us joint bosses of this gang of yours! Midnight is best, agreed? So—those other kids gotta do like we tell them! There rose before my eyes the image of a second, and more potent, Evelyn Lilith Burns…dismissing this unkind notion, I explained, "that wasn't exactly my idea for the conference; I had in mind something more like a, you know, sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression.." Something resembling a violent snort echoed around the walls of my head. "That, man, that's only rubbish. What we ever going to do with a gang like that? Gangs gotta have gang bosses. You take me—"… "What's it do, your gang—does it have rules and all?" Shiva laughter in my ears … 'Yah, little rich boy: one rule. Everybody does what I say or I squeeze the shit outta them with my knees!'… (Rushdie 252).

While Saleem's idea of the meaning of the conference here echoes the Nehruvian ideal of tolerance, democracy and 'unity in diversity', Shiva the bully's penchant for authoritarianism at once looks back to the openly racist attitude of the American Evy Burns—whose spectre is evoked in the quoted passage—and forward to the days of the Emergency when Saleem and the other midnight's children (except Shiva) learn from the Widow's Hand that "the people of India…worship our lady like a god.

Indians are only capable of worshipping one God" (Rushdie 503). Flagrantly flouting the Nehruvian ideal of plurality and democracy in its evocation of the authoritarian personality, the statement of the Widow's Hand here discredits Srirupa Roy's argument that 'the Indian state embraces notions of heterogeneity/diversity in its discourse of Indian identity'. What the Widow's Hand claims does not merely deny the reality of modern India in which, according to Saleem, there are as many Gods as people; in an ironic twist, the faith espoused in 'one god' blurs the boundary between India and its monstrous twin Pakistan which is repeatedly evoked in Saleem's narrative as that monotheistic, monological 'land of the pure' where an 'an infinity of alternative realities'(Rushdie 373)—signifying the endless potential for becoming—is denied to the individual. A close look into the Pakistan chapters of the novel would be fruitful for coming to terms with the category of profanation and the joyful relativity of truth that Bakhtin deems characteristic of the carnivalesque. Such a reading, however, must begin with a careful deciphering of the symbolic associations accrued by Saleem's nose which is key to the narratives of dismemberment and transformation that punctuate his personal and familial history.

Writing of the grotesque body in his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin says:

> We are interested in the theme of the nose itself, which occurs throughout World literature in every language, as well as in abusive and degrading gesticulations. Schneegans correctly points out the grotesque character of the transformation of the human element into an animal one; the combination of the human and animal traits is…one of the most ancient grotesque forms. But the author does not grasp the meaning of the grotesque image of the nose: that it always symbolizes the phallus. (Bakhtin 316)

Bakhtin goes on to state that in works such as Rabelais', 'the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body'. Further, 'they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary' (Bakhtin 317). Bakhtin believes that the bowels and the phallus are the prime locus for the grotesque exaggeration of the body, but he concedes that 'the nose can also in a way detach itself from the body' (Bakhtin 317). While Nikolay Gogol's *The Nose* remains the supreme example in the tradition of fabulist literature of a nose literally detaching itself from a human body and living a life of its own, in *Midnights Children* Saleem Sinai's description of the monstrous growth of his nose even when all the 'expansionist forces' that had fuelled the 'heroic program of self-enlargement' of his early days had been 'driven out the rest of [his] body' (Rushdie 141, 176) fits the Bakhtinian description of the grotesque as interested in 'that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines'(Bakhtin 316). Because grotesque images of the body such as the enormous nose in Bakhtin 'are symptoms of pregnancy or procreative power'(Bakhtin 91), John Clement Ball associates Saleem's nose with the 'great hope and potential' that marked the early years of Indian independence (Ball 71). But his analysis doesn't take due notice of the fact that in Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body, enormous noses are also images of the dismemberment and uncrowning of the mock-king elected on the carnival-day (Bakhtin 328, 91). Because of the letter from Nehru that hangs over his baby head with 'a jumbo-sized baby snap with its prophetic captions'(Rushdie 139), it is tempting to read Saleem—born on the truly festive midnight of August 15, 1947—as the mock-king of the carnivalesque world depicted in *Midnight's Children*, since the intertwining of his national and personal destinies prophesied in Nehru's letter brings him close to the 'absolute monarchs in Renaissance Europe' who were 'two bodies at once: a physical body and, in its image, the collective body of the people'(Kortenaar 131). Like the mock-kings described by Bakhtin in his study of the carnivalesque, Saleem's 'crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning' (Bakhtin *Problems* 124). And because the nose is always symbolic of the phallus in Bakhtin, it is helpful to read Saleem's corporeal uncrowning and debasement in

terms of the mutilations his nose and fingers undergo: foreshadowing his eventual 'drainage from below' at the hands of the castrating Widow in the concluding section of the novel. While the association between Saleem's nose and phallus is driven home in the novel through the surgical drainage of his sinuses that severs his connection with the midnight's children and substantiates Saleem's fatalistic equation of his family name and personal destiny with 'barrenness, infertility, dust'(Rushdie 347-349), it is important to remember that the acquirement of his telepathic powers through his nose is described in a scene that is fraught with tensions pertaining to the Oedipal Complex. Trapped in a washing chest, Saleem's accidental glimpse of his mother's nakedness is simultaneous with his discovery of a new-found ability to communicate with the midnight's children. Upon discovery, Saleem is punished by his parents, yet the persistence of Saleem's incestuous desire in the novel is attested to in his perverse attachment to his aunt Pia's breasts as well as in the desire for his sister once she metamorphs into Jamila Singer: a figure who in Rushdie's novel neatly fits the Freudian definition of the tabooed object as both 'holy' and 'unclean'[6]. As Freud puts it in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex", the threat of castration that the male child is confronted with usually from women (Freud 174) forces his ego to 'turn away from the Oedipus complex'(Freud 176). Consequently,

> The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis (Freud 176-7)

Explaining 'the ego's turning away from the Oedipus complex' with the aid of the category of repression, Freud reminds us that ' If the ego has not in fact achieved much more than a repression of the complex, the latter persists in an unconscious state in the id and will later manifest its pathogenic effect' (Freud 177). It could be argued that this 'pathogenic effect' in *Midnight's Children* manifests itself through Saleem's unconscious desire to be rendered impotent for his incestuous desires[7]. Before he finally gets his wish in book three of the novel, we are already given a vivid evocation of the castration complex in Rushdie's description of the mutilation of Saleem's middle finger during the Cathedral school social (Rushdie 267-268). Freud notes that in the case of the obsessional neurotic, the 'severed finger' symbolises the threat of castration from his father[8]. 'In this respect', Freud notes, 'heredity triumphed over accidental experience; in man's prehistory it was unquestionably the father who practised castration as a punishment and who later softened it down to circumcision' (Freud, 'Anal Erotism and Castration', 86-87). While in the quoted extract Freud is providing a commentary on the hallucination of one of his patients who simultaneously 'abominated the idea of castration' and 'was prepared to accept it and console himself with feminity as a compensation' (Freud, 'Anal erotism and Castration', 85), Freud's disciple Otto Rank would later develop this association between severed finger and castration anxiety as paradigmatic of the Oedipal rivalries that characterize the myth of the hero across cultures[9]. In *Midnight's Children*, the association between severed finger and castration is perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the following scene in which Padma questions Saleem's description of himself as her lover:

> Arm extended, its hair glowing in the lamp-light, she jabbed a contemptuous index finger in the direction of my admittedly non-functional loins; a long, thick digit, rigid with jealousy, which unfortunately served only to remind me of another, long-lost finger … (Rushdie 138).

While the question of sibling incest remains eventually unresolvable in *Midnight's Children* because, as Saleem points out to Jamila Singer, 'the blood in his veins was not the blood in hers' (Rushdie 371), the questions of purity and impurity it broaches dovetails neatly with the question of the political in the chapters describing Saleem's adolescent life in the 'land of the pure'. The confounding of the sacred and the profane in these chapters hinges on Saleem's new-found olfactory ability to sniff

out other people's thoughts and emotions. But Saleem's nose, we remember, had always been an agent of the profanation Bakhtin finds characteristic of the carnivalesque: for in mistaking his new-found telepathic power as the power to receive the revelation of the archangels, Saleem had committed a typically 'carnivalistic blasphemy' of the 'sacred texts and sayings' (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123) of Islam that declare Muhammad to be the last prophet to receive the revelations from angels such as Jibreel. While Baby Saleem's blasphemy is met with a blow to his ear from his father, the 'marked preference for the impure'(Rushdie 355) that Saleem's body comes to show in Pakistan revels in the 'bodily participation in another world, the bodily awareness of another world' (Baskhtin 48) since the smells that now 'pour into' Saleem's adolescent body (Rushdie 362) make no distinction between sacred and profane: thus cocking a snook at the 'absolutism of the pure'(Rushdie, "In Good Faith", 394) that characterises the official culture of post-independence Pakistan in Rushdie's novel. The 'pungency of the gutter' that for Saleem 'seems to possess a fatally irresistible attraction' (Rushdie 364) leads him to discover Tai Bibi, the 'oldest whore in the world', whose name invites associations with the Kashmiri boatman Tai who, we remember, not only taught Saleem's grandfather that the nose is 'the place where the outside world meets the world inside you'—a formulation remarkably echoing the Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque—but also 'chose to stink' by refusing to bath or wash 'himself after answering calls of nature' (Rushdie 24). Saleem's entanglement with Tai Bibi, Tai, the latrine-cleaning girl in Pakistan's army camp as well as with all the filth and disorder—literal and figurative—that punctuate the streets of Pakistan bears out Joshua D. Esty's argument that in post-colonial literature the scatological and the dirty not only signify the subject's self-alienation (Esty 36), shame and guilt. More importantly, 'shit signifies the subject's inevitable entanglement in time and history; it works at a subtextual level to reveal the gaps between individual or existential time and the mystified temporality of the nation' (Esty 44). Even more enduring than all these associations is Saleem's connection with Padma who with her 'down-to-earthery' grounds Saleem's narration while simultaneously cooking and caring for him. Saleem's dependence on the nourishing function of Padma the 'dung lotus' bears out Bakhtin's conception that the excremental forms 'part of man's vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth'(Bakhtin 224). Early in the novel, chided by Padma's reminder that 'In [her] village there is no shame in being named for the Dung Goddess', Saleem's 'brief paean to Dung' makes explicit the excremental's associations with fertility and the everyday lives of the common folk extolled by Bakhtin:

> Dung, that fertilizes and causes the crops to grow! Dung, which is patted into thin chapatti-like cakes when still fresh and moist, and is sold to the village builders, who use it to secure and strengthen the walls of kachcha buildings made of mud! Dung, whose arrival from the nether end of the cattle goes a long way towards explaining their divine and sacred status! ... (Rushdie 29)

Because Saleem remains free of the paradoxical taint of the pure that permeates the civic and military life of Pakistan in the novel, he can question 'the indisputable and stable' (Bakhtin 48) versions of the political truths promulgated by both Indian and Pakistani governments during the war of 1965. For Bakhtin, carnivalistic thought, with its roots in the tradition of the Menippean satire, 'lives in the realm of ultimate questions, but it gives them no abstractly philosophical or religiously dogmatic resolution' (Bakhtin, *Problems* 134). Because this is the journalistic genre par excellence, in the hands of a novelist it serves to expose the gaps and omissions in official narratives of the state: unearthing, in the process, what Bakhtin calls the people's unofficial truth. This is made possible by the *joyful relativity* with which all hierarchy and power is treated in the carnival world. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's carnivalization of the novel serves precisely these functions. Because the censoring of the media's freedom in Pakistan's military state was an everyday reality in 1964-65,

Saleem's narrative works as journalistic expose of the state's truths when, on the eve of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, he reports on the reality of the Pakistan in the following terms:

> Divorce between news and reality: newspapers quoted foreign economists—PAKISTAN A MODEL FOR EMERGING NATIONS—while peasants (unreported) cursed the so called 'green revolution', claiming that most of the newly drilled water wells had been useless, poisoned, and in the wrong places any way; while editorials praised the probity of the nation's leadership, rumours, thick as flies, mentioned Swiss bank accounts and the new American motor-cars of the President's son (Rushdie 382).

Presenting the official version of the truth proffered by the nation's media alongside its unofficial, unrecorded counterpart rooted in everyday modes of folk narrative such as rumour enables Saleem to ask the 'ultimate questions' about the history of the subcontinent without reaching after 'dogmatic resolutions': enabling the carnivalization of literature Bakhtin speaks of in his theory of the novel. While Saleem's reportage concerning the growing confusion of the events surrounding the war of 1965—marked by a language constantly preferring the interrogative—lays bare the denials and falsehoods of Indian and Pakistani governments regarding their role as aggressor, his suggestion that the Indian Prime Minister and her son burned the files recording the fate of the midnight's children during the Emergency serves to bear witness to the endurance of the unofficial version of the people's truth in the memory of someone who is both spectator and participant in the carnival world dramatized in *Midnight's Children*. For Bakhtin, the dialogic nature of the carnivalesque posits a challenge to the truth of the ruling classes because it disrupts the 'stabilizing tendencies of the official monotone' (Bakhtin 433). And just as in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque-grotesque such challenge is mounted through the oppositional cogency of the body of open apertures vis-à-vis the authoritarian truths of Stalinism in his contemporary Russia, Saleem Sinai's frequently mutilated yet consistently marvellous body rewrites an alternative history of the subcontinent : a history which honours the victimized common man's awareness of his historical 'immortality linked with the body, with earthly life, accessible to a living experience' (Bakhtin 405).

Endnotes

[1] For a detailed historical account of the eve of Indian independence, see Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins' *Freedom at Midnight*, especially the chapters entitled "While the World Slept" and "'Oh Lovely Dawn of Freedom'". Rushdie's use of the image of fire as expressive of the duality of birth and death also resonates against Bakhtin's reading of the ambivalent image of fire in his theory of the carnivalesque.

[2] What prompts me to venture this reading is the fact that, according to Saleem's boastful claim, Ahmed Sinai is one of the many fathers invented by Saleem's wilful narration of his personal and familial history. In terms of the novel's postmodern, playful inversion of causality, Ahmed Sinai is *both* father and son to Saleem.

[3] See Geoffrey Harpham's "The Grotesque: First Principles" and Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957)for an elaboration of this view.

[4] By '*carnivalistic mesalliances*' Bakhtin denotes a category of 'the carnival sense of the world' in which "All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchial worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations' (Bakhtin Problems 123).

[5] As Rushdie puts it in "In Good Faith", 'Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world' (Rushdie, "In Good Faith" 394).

[6] See the second chapter of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* for a prescient analysis of this idea.

[7] Here Rushdie's take on Saleem's unconscious has a remarkable similarity to Sandor Ferenczi's analysis of 'psychosexual impotence' in which he links one of his patient's inability to perform the sexual act with the fact that 'every woman reminds him unconsciously of his

sister'(Ferenczi 24). In *Midnight's Children*, the 'incestuous fixation' Ferenczi speaks of is dramatized in the scene where we find Saleem incapable of consummating his relationship with Parvati the Witch because once he kisses her he finds 'her face changing, becoming the figure of a forbidden love; the ghostly features of Jamila Singer replaced those of the witch girl'(Rushdie 436).

[8] See Freud's "Anal Erotism and Castration" for a case study of this.

[9] See Otto Rank's The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: *A psychological exploration of Myth* (2004).

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Article

War, Identity, and the Absurd: Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* through a Lacanian Lens

Koyel Banik

Abstract

This article critically examines the fragmented human psyche in the aftermath of World War I through a comparative study of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Trial* (1925), framed by Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the Ideal, Symbolic, and Real self. The study contextualizes Kafka's works within the disillusionment and existential anxiety that defined the era. Gregor Samsa's grotesque transformation and demise is a symbolic of the fractured Ideal self, which collapses under the weight of war, leading to the emergence of a distorted Symbolic order that redefines societal values and collective identities. The study traces the evolution from Kafka's depiction of the shattered self to a confrontation with the Real, aligning with Camus' Sisyphus as an embodiment of absurdity and defiance. Here, *The Trial* is pivotal, representing an allegory of bureaucratic oppression that dissects the individual's entrapment within an impersonal Symbolic system. Kafka's personal anxieties and alienation, suggesting that both *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* manifest his psychological struggle between his Ideal self and the crushing Symbolic structures of his time. Trough observing the narratives through a Lacanian lens, revealing how both works destabilize conventional interpretations of identity by exposing the elusive nature of the Real. By integrating Lacan's triadic framework, this study tries to illuminates how Kafka's narratives not only depict his existential dread but also critique the fractured identities imposed by modernist Symbolic orders in an age defined by absurdity, despair, and the search for an unattainable Ideal.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, alienation, human condition, lacan's self-constructs, identity.

In this tumultuous and transitional time, the German-speaking insurance clerk, Franz Kafka, who despised his job, wrote texts like *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. Kafka had a genius for complicating what was already inextricably confused, and so turning it into a source of guilt. His texts are a manifestation of his own failing life and anxious and avoidant psyche. He was a product of his time, as families are a microcosm of the outer world, he struggled with his family especially with and under the authority of his father. The world of the masses started to collapse under the authority of those who held power, and in parallel to this, Kafka struggled under the authority and suppression of his father. His father was a domineering figure who disapproved of Kafka's writing, often criticised him and threatened him if he disobeyed his father.

> […] of your threats concerning the consequences of disobedience. Whenever I embarked on something that you disapproved of and you threatened me with failure, […] I lost faith in my own abilities. I became erratic, doubting. The older I grew, the more I provided you with evidence of my worthlessness;gradually, you really came, in certain respects, to be right about me. Here I must be careful not to claim that I only became like this because of you; you merely intensified what was already there, but you intensified it greatly, simply because you held so much power over me and used this power to its full extent. (Kafka, *Dearest Father*, 34)

This strained relationship is reflected in Kafka's works, which often feature characters who have conflicts with authority figures or who struggle to assert their own individuality in the face of oppressive social structures. The Modern Age's human condition was characterised by a sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and disconnection, as individuals struggled to find their place in an increasingly complex and impersonal world. Kafka's works, including *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, reflect these themes of uncertainty, anxiety, and disconnection. In Metamorphosis, the protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up one day to find himself transformed into a giant insect. This metamorphosis symbolises his alienation from society and his family, as well as his own sense of self. Similarly, in *The Trial*, Kafka explores the themes of powerlessness and uncertainty. The protagonist, Josef K., is arrested and put on trial, but he is never told what crime he has committed. He is left in a state of perpetual anxiety and confusion, reflecting the sense of powerlessness and lack of control that many individuals experienced in the Modern Age.

Death of Samsa and Birth of a War Symbol

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (Yeats, The Second Coming, first stanza)

The world of ‘Kafkaesque’ elucidates a reality where everything is seen through a dark coloured lens and the truth has no meaning at all. The centre is falling apart into a bleak and absurd ground where life is dead and death is hope. Kafka’s works are about the invalidation of their subjects, the individual characters going through immense trials to get through life and evidently failing to live it and die. The death of the individual can be physical as well as psychological. Kafka, in his seminal work *Metamorphosis,* has shown the death of an individual physically, what led to it and the results of it. The novella discusses the protagonist’s physical transformation “into a horrible vermin” (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 1) and eventually dying, hated by his beloved family. Kafka's portrayal of identity in this text is complex and nuanced, as he explores how societal expectations and external circumstances can shape a person's sense of self, and how this sense of self can be disrupted or even destroyed by uncontrollable circumstances. The novel also highlights the difficulty of communication and connection between individuals, as the transformed character Gregor Samsa in

Metamorphosis struggles to connect with others due to his altered state. Throughout the story, the reader sees Gregor struggling to come to terms with his new identity as a bug and his alienation from his family which can be considered a microcosm of the society itself.

However, there is another character whose identity undergoes significant growth, unlike the decline of Gregor, throughout the story: Gregor's sister, Grete. This paper will focus on the transformation of Grete and how an individual builds their own identity on the expense of others or how one's freedom can cost another their life, which is parallel to the backdrop of WWI, where nations gain freedom at the expense of the demise of another nation and its individuals. At the beginning of the novel, Grete is depicted as a caring and devoted sister who takes care of Gregor. She brings him food, cleans his room, and tries to communicate with him. However, as the story progresses and Gregor becomes more of a burden to the family, Grete's attitude towards him changes. She becomes increasingly resentful of having to take care of him, and her initial compassion towards him turns into cruelty.

As Grete's resentment towards Gregor grows, so does her sense of identity. She starts to assert herself more and becomes more independent. She takes charge of the household, makes decisions for the family, and takes a job to support them financially. In this way, Grete's transformation mirrors that of Gregor's, as they both undergo a metamorphosis of sorts, the only difference if Gregor's metamorphosis is physically visible and Grete's is visible through her changes in behaviour towards Gregor.

The climax of the story comes when Grete decides that they need to get rid of Gregor, and he dies as a result. This event marks the ultimate transformation in Grete's character. She has become so consumed with her own identity and her desire for independence that she is willing to sacrifice her brother's life, whom she was seen to care so deeply for at the beginning of the text, to achieve it. Grete's character in *Metamorphosis* undergoes a significant transformation throughout the story. She goes from being a caring and compassionate sister to a resentful and cruel one, and ultimately becomes an independent and self-assertive young woman. Her growth in identity is tied to her relationship with Gregor and her family, and the story is a powerful commentary on the struggle between individual identity and familial obligations and how it might be social conditioning to see one's victory through others' loss.

The Philosophical Shift from Samsa to Sisyphus

Against the backdrop of contemporary modern times, there was a plethora of philosophies around this question of existence and identity of human experience, and one of the most prominent names surrounding this school of thought is Albert Camus. His way of thinking changed throughout his life from Existentialism to Absurdism. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus elucidates this concept of the absurd. The absurd comes with the realisationthat the world is not rational: "At this point of his effort, man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus: And other essays*).

Kafka's protagonist Gregor Samsa and Camus' Sisyphus are oddly similar yet contradicting simultaneously. Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus to explore the human condition and the struggle to find meaning and purpose in a world that is often devoid of meaning. There are similarities between the character of Gregor Samsa and the figure of Sisyphus. Both are trapped in situations that are seemingly absurd and meaningless, and both are forced to confront the futility of their actions. Samsa is transformed into a giant insect without explanationation, while Sisyphus is tasked with a meaningless and never-ending task. Both characters are also forced to endure their situations alone, without the help or understanding of others.

Camus explains deeply on the absurdity or reasoning on the topic of suicide. “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest— whether the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 4). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus uses the concept of suicide as a metaphor for the human struggle to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. He argues that many people are driven to suicide because they feel that life is devoid of purpose and value. However, he also suggests that suicide is not a viable solution to the problem of existence, because it represents a failure to confront the absurdity of life and to create one's own meaning in the face of it. Camus argues that the only way to overcome the absurdity of existence is to embrace it fully, and to find meaning in the struggle itself, rather than in any ultimate outcome or goal. In *Metamorphosis*, the protagonist Gregor Samsa contemplates suicide as a way out of his transformed state, which has made him a burden to his family and left him isolated from the world. However, despite his overwhelming despair, Gregor ultimately chooses to continue living, even as a bug, because he still feels a responsibility to his family. But ultimately dies because of his family’s disgust and neglect upon him. After his death, Samsa’s father’s remark “let’s give thanks to God for that [that Gregor’s dead]” (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 94). This is ironic that the same family who have loved and admired him for his ‘utility’ to the family and how he respects and loves his family can turn against him as he fails to do provide for this family. In this way, Kafka's story explores the tension between the individual's desire for love or escape and the demands of social and familial responsibility.

Both Kafka's Metamorphosis and Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* explore themes of existentialism, absurdity, and the search for meaning in a world that can seem meaningless. However, it is important to note that the two works differ in their specific emphasis and style, and that Sisyphus and Gregor Samsa represent unique, individual experiences of the human condition. It is also important to note that while Camus gives somewhat of a positive meaning at the end of his essay as he suggests to his readers that “The struggle itself toward the heights are enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 78). But for Kafka its unironically opposite as because of Gregor’s death his family finds freedom from the shackles of being related to a bug and having the disgust of the society upon them. They also express their happiness upon his death.

After that, the three of them left the flat together, which was something they had not done for months, and took the tram out to the open country outside the town. They had the tram, filled with warm sunshine, all to themselves. Leant back comfortably on their seats, they discussed their prospects and found that on closer examination they were not at all bad-until then they had never asked each other about their work but all three had jobs which were very good and held particularly good promise for the future. The greatest improvement for the time being, of course, would be achieved quite easily by moving house; what they needed now was a flat that was smaller and cheaper than the current one which had been chosen by Gregor, one that was in a better location and, most of all, more practical. (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 99)

While both works deal with the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in an indifferent world, Camus presents a more optimistic view. He argues that, even in the face of the absurdity of life, we can find purpose and meaning through our struggle. Kafka's work, on the other hand, is more pessimistic, portraying the human condition as one of isolation and despair, with no clear path to finding meaning. In contrast to what Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that his readers and fellow humans should imagine Sisyphus happy and create meaning in the face of the absurdity of life, in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, the readers know that Gregor Samsa is dead and now one must think everyone else happy.

Metamorphosis is about invalidation, our self-invalidations, and our invalidations of others; and it does nothing, offers us nothing morally but this vision of how we do it. The narration focuses on how Gregor invalidates his family, how his family invalidates and destroys Gregor, how his sister, Grete, learns to invalidate her brother. It also compels us, as readers of this fictive mirror, to seek out the perpetrator or the victim of this invalidation and in pointing at him, her, or it, establish our own validation at others' expense. “The end of Gregor’s life marks the beginning of a new life for the rest of the family. For the maturity and prosperity of the family to occur, Gregor had to undergo complete alienation and retrogress into nothing.” (Stoops - butler university, n.p)

Unravelling the Authorial Struggles and Mental Turmoil of Kafka

Throughout his life Kafka has struggled with confinement and severe authority imposed on him. His personal diaries have been a source in enquire into his private life and psychological struggles. *The Trial* which was published posthumously by his friend Max Brod is a testimony of his private life and how deeply it affected him. After he broke off his engagement with Felice, he felt an exuberant amount of guilt within him which have led him to write *The Trial*, an absurd law system which passes judgment without clearing its courses, as he writes in his diary

> 6 June. Back from Berlin. Was tied hand and foot like a criminal. Had they sat me down in a corner bound in real chains, placed police- men in front of me, and let me look on simply like that, it could not have been worse. And that was my engagement; everybody made an effort to bring me to life, and when they couldn't, to put up with me as I was. (Kafka, *Diaries*,275)

The text starts with its protagonist Joseph K’s sudden arrest without any clarification of his crime, from the very outset the theme of the unknowable is prevalent. Josef’s arrest appears startling and aberrant, rather than a fulfilment of justice, but its most distressing aspect is its inexplicability. In *The Trial,* Kafka explores the themes of powerlessness and uncertainty. The protagonist Josef K. is arrested and put on trial, but he is never told what crime he has committed. He is left in a state of perpetual anxiety and confusion, reflecting the sense of powerlessness and lack of control that many individuals experienced in the Modern Age.

Kafka's own struggles with his father also influenced his works. His father was a domineering figure who disapproved of Kafka's writing and often criticized him. This strained relationship is reflected in Kafka's works, which often feature characters who conflict with authority figures or who struggle to assert their own individuality in the face of oppressive social structures.

> Dearest Father,
>
> You asked me recently why I claim to be afraid of you. I did not know, as usual, how to answer, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, partly because an explanation of my fear would require more details than I could even begin to make coherent in speech. And if I now try to answer in writing it will still be nowhere near complete, because even in writing my fear and its consequences raise a barrier between us and because the magnitude of material far exceeds my memory and my understanding. (Kafka, *Dearest Father* 17)

The fear of his father and his constant guilt about nor writing enough and his injustice and inability towards Felice felt like a trial to him which everyone around him keep passing judgments without knowing his psychological state or his individual wishes. All the things in his life have become a source of guilt for him except his writing.

Kafka's office was at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, where he worked as a lawyer. His job interfered with his writing ambitions, his devotion to writing interfered with his professional obligations, so the office was another source of guilt. In a draft letter found in his diary

he wrote: 'Since I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else, my job will never take possession of me, it may, however, shatter me completely, and this is by no means a remote possibility. (Kafka, *The Trial* xii)

The novel surrounds around Kafka's own guilt which he exemplifies with Joseph K and his unanswered trial for something he has not committed. This lack of transparency and accountability in the legal system creates a sense of ambiguity and powerlessness that pervades the entire novel Josef K. is arrested without being given a reason, and he spends the rest of the novel trying to figure out what he is being accused of and how to defend himself. The legal system in the novel operates according to its own inscrutable logic, with vague rules and regulations that are never explained to the defendant or the reader. This creates a sense of paranoia and helplessness in Josef K., as he feels like he is being punished for something he cannot understand or control.

Another aspect related to crime and punishment in the novel is the role of guilt and innocence. Josef K. is not sure if he is guilty or innocent of the crime he is accused of, and this uncertainty drives much of the novel's plot. At times, he feels like he might be guilty of some unknown crime, while at other times he is convinced of his innocence. This ambiguity creates a sense of tension and anxiety that builds throughout the novel, as Josef K. struggles to make sense of the legal system and his place within it. In the modern legal system, trials are often seen as the ultimate means of determining guilt or innocence, and of ensuring that justice is served. However, the very process of trial and judgment can be seen as absurd, as it often involves trying to reduce complex and multifaceted human experiences to simple categories of right and wrong, guilt and innocence.

Throughout the course of the novel various aspects of Kafka's life can be traced back to this novel. His relationships with his family, especially his father and how it left an indelible mark upon Kafka's psyche which has characterized almost all his writings. The war and his guilt surrounding his work, family and love life left his immobile to act or to become somewhat of a loner. Kafka had a reputation of someone who loved to live in isolation and existentially isolated from the world. His reputation of being a loner is proven to be correct by his personal letters to closed ones and his diary entries.

Incapable of striking up an acquaintance with anyone, incapable of tolerating an acquaintance, fundamentally full of endless astonishment when I see a group of cheerful people or indeed parents with their children; forsaken, moreover, not only here but in general, even in Prague, my 'home', and, what is more, forsaken not by people (that would not be the worst thing, I could run after them as long as I was alive), but rather by myself vis-à-vis people; I am fond of lovers but I cannot love; I am too far away, am banished (Kafka, *Diaries* 408) his personal writings are an integral part of him with which his readers may connect to what Kafka was or wanted to become. In the time of WWI, the society's destructive and very paradoxical behaviour towards it makes him question more and more the authorities the ruling system and how justice will be brought to them who deserve it. *The Trial* has many channels linked to Kafka's life and he reacted to his life and relations. His father was a successful businessman who have created wealth for his family and wants to make his the same as him.

Kafka had suffered a lot under his father's authority and was grew up afraid of him, we were so different, and in our differences such a danger to each other that, had anyone wanted to predict how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the fully-grown man, would behave towards one another, they could have presumed that you would simply trample me underfoot until nothing of me remained. (Kafka, *Dearest Father* 21) passages such as these paints the picture of Kafka's self-isolation and immense guilt around his life and personal relationships. His confusion around the authoritative system and its rules and how one can be guilty without committing any crime comes from his tumultuous relationship with his father. *The Trial* is the manifestation around this guilt

where Kafka made his protagonist Joseph K. stand trial against something he could not understand which ultimately leads to his death with the last words “like a dog” (Kafka, *The Trial* 182). The discourse around Kafka’s real life and his literary life can be traced with the its contemporary society’s falling apart because of WWI and how it affected the individuals at the time. The family structure of the modern era paralleled the outer society where the mass faced difficulties to accept the authority and in a microscopic level the individuals found it difficult to obey the familial authority which in Kafka’s case was his father.

Demystifying the symbolic self:

This article has undertaken an exploration of the impact of World War I on Franz Kafka's literary output, with a particular focus on the novels *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. By utilizing Lacan's theoretical framework of the ‘ideal,’ ‘symbolic,’ and ‘real’ self to analyse the psychological implications of trauma on the individual, and how Kafka's works reflect these experiences.

> the symbolic matrix in which the is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. […] "ideal-I” […] root- stock of secondary identifications, […] this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination […] no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan and Fink, *Écrits* 76)

The findings of the study reveal that Kafka's protagonists, Gregor Samsa and Josef K., struggled for their individuality in a destructive world which is experiencing WWI. The ideal self, representing an individual's aspirations and hopes, is unattainable in Kafka's works, as both characters struggle to achieve their goals. Gregor's transformation into a monstrous insect in *Metamorphosis* illustrates the incongruity between his ideal self and his physical appearance, highlighting the impossibility of realizing his desires. The symbolic self, which represents an individual's relationship to the external world, is portrayed in Kafka's works as arbitrary and meaningless. The absurdity of the external world, particularly in the aftermath of WWI, renders the coherence and meaning of the symbolic self-elusive. This is exemplified in *The Trial*, where Josef K. is arrested and subjected to a trial that is both arbitrary and incomprehensible, highlighting the absurdity of the external world.

Finally, the study has demonstrated how the real self, representing an individual's core identity, is in a state of constant flux in Kafka's works. The psychological impact of trauma on the self is evident in Kafka's portrayal of characters struggling to maintain a sense of identity in a world that is constantly changing. This is exemplified in *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor's transformation into an insect fundamentally alters his sense of self.

The study's application of Lacan's theoretical framework has enabled a deeper understanding of the psychological implications of trauma on the individual, particularly in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event such as WWI. Kafka's works serve as a literary lens for examining the human condition in the face of traumatic events, and the ongoing struggle to find meaning and coherence in a chaotic and unpredictable world. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on the significance of Kafka's works, and the ways in which they offer insights into the complexities of the human psyche in the aftermath of trauma.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has delved into the profound impact of World War I on Franz Kafka and his novels *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, providing a nuanced understanding of how they reflect the human condition and its psychological state. Through a qualitative research methodology

incorporating close reading, textual analysis, and the theoretical framework of Lacan's ideal, symbolic, and real self, this study has revealed the intricate psychological implications of trauma in a post-WWI society.

By closely examining Kafka's works and engaging with primary and secondary sources, this research has uncovered the struggles faced by Kafka's protagonists, Gregor Samsa and Josef K., as they navigate the complexities of their changing circumstances. The unattainable ideal self, characterized by their aspirations and desires, remains elusive and unfulfilled. The arbitrary and meaningless nature of the symbolic self is exemplified in the absurdity of their external worlds, highlighting the dissonance between individual meaning-making and the chaotic war environment. Additionally, the constant flux of the individuality underscores the challenge of maintaining a coherent sense of identity amidst the shifting realities of a traumatized society.

The application of Lacan's theoretical framework has significantly enhanced our understanding of the psychological dimensions present in Kafka's works. By analysing the dynamics of the self-constructs within the context of post-WWI society, this research has provided insights into the profound effects of war and trauma on the human psyche. It emphasizes the enduring relevance of Kafka's writings, as they continue to resonate with readers, offering a lens through which to explore universal aspects of the human condition. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between World War I, Kafka's literary output, and the human psyche. By bridging disciplines such as literature, history, and psychoanalysis, it underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in deepening our understanding of complex phenomena. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the psychological impact of trauma and shed light on the ways in which individuals navigate and comprehend their existence in the wake of societal upheaval. As we continue to grapple with the reverberations of historical traumas, Kafka's works and the insights provided by Lacan's theoretical framework remain essential in comprehending the complexities of the human psyche and the indomitable human spirit.

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The Apollonian

LITERARY TRANSLATION

Literary Translation

At the Fringe of a Conjugal Relationship

Satinath Bhaduri

Originally written as "দাম্পত্য সীমান্তে" (1963)
Translated from Bengali by Rohit Saha

Satinath Bhaduri (1906-1965) is a novelist, politician. He is also known by his literary pseudonym, Chitra Gupta, was born on 27 September 1906 at Purnia, Bihar. He obtained MA in Economics from Patna University in 1930. He became an activist, espousing the anti-colonial nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, after some years of practising law in the city of Patna in the 1930s. He went to jail from 1940–41 and from 1942–45. After Independence, Bhaduri joined the Socialist Party, having lost faith in the Congress Party. Jagari was Satinath's first novel, for which he received in 1950 the very first Rabindra Puraskar. He also wrote a travelogue, Satyi Bhraman Kahini (1951), about his experiences in Paris. His other noteworthy works include Gananayak (1948), Chitragupter File (1949), Dhondai Charita Manas (2 parts, 1949, 1951), Achin Ragini (1954), Aparichita (1954), Sangkat (1957), Alok Dristi (1964), etc. He died on 30 March 1965.

Flies swarm to the stench of a festering wound. After going to great lengths, Nibaran managed to get transferred to the Ajobpur post office. According to the data pertaining to the postal and telegram department, the largest number of parcels are returned undelivered from this post office.

Ajobpur is truly a strange place. It straddles borders — half in India, half in Nepal.People from Nepal board the train from this station; as they come to drop letters here at the post office. People from this side go to Nepal for shopping; they go there to drink as well. That truly reflects in their distinct demeanour. They cut the vegetables with a *bhojali*; they are not afraid of the police; if they spot someone from the excise department, they take them to the Paan shop with a smile on their faces. This is ideal for the postmaster.

Asima doesn't like it; but does she have a choice? Her parents have handed her over to a strange person. When she was a child, her grandmother used to tease her granddaughter. She would say, “Look girl, I will marry you to a groom who will come home drunk at night and beat you with a stick." Asima would say, "Oh! I will kick him out of the house." The prophecy of the grandmother finally bore fruit! The day after the wedding, when she came to know about her husband's alcohol addiction, she cried a lot. How can a man with such a handsome face drink alcohol!

One has to wonder how much she had to know, learn and yield in the last seven years. A woman has to inevitably learn new tricks of the trade to survive when her husband's addiction costs more than his salary.

People here call the postmaster as *master-sahib*. That's probably why he had acted like a master to his wife on the first night, with a good intention of giving her a lesson that would make her clever. He had said, ‘beware of getting acquainted with the paupers. If you need to talk, talk to the rich. Only those who possess something, has something to offer to us. Even if they didn’t bother about me, I have spent hours daily sitting in the corner of a rich household, burying my nose in the newspaper. It has come in handy in time.’

Asima instantly thought - why does someone as handsome as Lord Kartik have such gross habits? Can everyone be so cunning and calculative?

It is evident that a husband who says this on the first night will not stop at just giving verbal advice. Soon he brought Nepal Bazaar’s *Seth-ji* home and introduced him to Asima. He then asked her to boil some water for tea, and went out to the Bazaar carrying his tote-bag. He returned after a couple of hours.

When the superior comes for 'inspection', this exact arrangement is followed.

Does anyone take long to recognize the character of such a husband? The worst thing is the husband's indifference towards her. She is not particularly good looking. Probably why she is more sensitive to this. However, Nibaran returns home by eight at night, and this is her lone consolation in all this sorrow.

But what happened today?

Samir *Thakurpo* has been on the verge of leaving since 7:30. She said, “Come on, sit down! Why the rush to go home? You’re not married yet — wait until your elder brother returns, then you can leave.”

She is quite fond of chatting with Samir *Thakurpo*. He is the brother of the railway station's Mal-*babu*. He has passed his I.Com and is trying to land a job. He comes every day. He sits in the kitchen and chats with his sister-in-law.

It stuck Eight o'clock, and then nine o'clock. Nibaran is yet to return.. Asima knows that today Nibaran went out wrapped in a shawl- which means he is likely to earn some cash money today. Isn't that why he is late? Fonte is merely a six-year-old; how can he stay awake until this late at night?

After finishing dinner, everyone came to the bedroom. She kept a lid on her husband's food and kept it at a corner of her house. They again sat sharing stories and struggles with each other. Jimmy, the dog barking incessantly.

It's ten o'clock. Nibaran hasn't come. For reasons unknown, Fonte is unable to fall asleep under the *Moshari*.

'What time do you usually eat, *Thakurpo*?'

"If there's *roti* in the house, I eat it whenever I want."

"Then why are you so anxious to go?"

'No, it's late. I wonder what happened to *Dada* today?'

"Who knows! He is probably lying in a drain somewhere!"

The annoyance is evident. Everyone is aware of Nibaran's drinking habit. There's no shame acknowledging this to Samir *Thakurpo*. Lest Samir misinterprets Nibaran's motive of spending the night outside as something else, that's why Asima emphasized on the drinking aspect. If her husband spends the night outside, it is not only shameful to outsiders, but also to herself.

Suddenly, Asima realized that it was not right to talk about her father's drinking habit in front of Fonte. 'Come on, *Thakurpo*, let's go and sit there. Fonte, I hope you ain't going to get scared if we sit at the other room? I am keeping the door in the middle open.'

They opened the middle door and sat in the post office room. 'Jimmy. Why don't you keep quiet! What nuisance!'

The mental state she is in, Asima couldn't stop expressing her sorrows and consequently her tears flowing in front of such a sympathetic listener. Once it stuck eleven, she herself asked Samir to leave. Before leaving, Samir assured her, "Dada will definitely return at night. It might get twelve or one."

'Surely.'

It sounded strange to her own ears. There was no need to emphasise on that. She wanted not only to deceive Samir, but her own self. To calm herself down, she didn't turn off the light in the room before going to bed. Turning it off meant that she is certain that Nibaran would neither come nor eat today…. A mouse was making noise under the bed. The clock is ticking inside the Post Office. She was lying in the bed but her mind kept racing; and her tears soaked the pillow through the night.. Was she worth nothing more to her husband than a commodity?...

Her husband's first love was alcohol. Then money. What, if anything, came after that?

What happened to Jimmy today? He kept barking all night long.

At some point late at night, she had fallen asleep. She woke up suddenly. It wasn't morning yet. Fonte kept pushing her. There was a knock on the door. The bitterness in my heart didn't go away even after the night's sleep. The crudeness of the knock made worsened Asima's mood.

'You're awake - can't you get up and open the door! You grown up muppet!'

Her pulling his hair was so unexpected at this early morning hour that Fonte forgot to cry.

—- It is not the first time that he called her mother awake when Ramdeni's mother knocked in their door. He had never seen her mother get angry over that. *Stomp, Stomp, Stomp.* She stepped out of the *moshari* and went to open the door. There was an audible bang. That's the kind of sound you get when one opens the door in anger. Jimmy must have run out. What's that! Why did mother run into the house like that? Hope the cat didn't come. -Mother grabbed an old newspaper and pulled it out. She lifted the lid and poured the rice she had kept for her father onto the newspaper. People surely don't

put rice on the newspaper? It must be for Jimmy. Mother was furtively looking at the door. Mother is getting unnecessarily scared. She thinks Jimmy will instantly come inside and eat that rice. Jimmy has already left.

Fonte is watching everything from inside the *moshari*. The more he watches, the more surprised he becomes. He doesn't really understand what his mother is up to today.

--Mother put a handful of rice back on the plate. She spread the rice lump all over the plate once, smearing it with lentils and curry, with drumsticks on the side. Mother looked towards the door fearfully. She also looked at the *moshari* once. Okay! Mother is chewing the drumstick. At seven in the morning! Unbrushed! Is he seeing it right? No, she just pulled out the remnant of the drumstick and placed it on the plate. Mother stared toward his mosquito net.. At a time like this, he shouldn't have looked at his mother; she would have been embarrassed. Fonte looked away- towards the window. Ramdeni's mother was approaching the window.

Asima was really looking at the *moshari*. She was trying to judge, whether it was possible to guess from outside who was inside the *moshari*. No. Let it be. Still, Asima could not feel at ease. How can she handle so much in an instant . Only someone in a situation like her would know. She didn't realize that it was Ramdeni's mother knocking on the door. She thought it was Fonte's father. She couldn't be that conscious since she just woke up from her sleep. Fortunately, Ramdeni's mother never enters the bedroom.

Asima poured some water on the floor, dipped her lentils-curry—smeared hands in the glass, and washed them. Ramdeni's mother was at the door. Asima slightly lowered her eyes as she handed over the leftover utensils to her. She didn't forget to lock the bedroom door before going to the bathroom to wash her face. She didn't want to let anyone know that her husband hadn't returned home that night.

Bir Bahadur Nepali calls out from outside, "*Mai-ji*!"

Every day, Bir Bahadur takes all the letters to Nepal from this post office and distributes them door to door. He has a mail bag on his shoulder. Jimmy is wagging his tail and trying to climb on top of him. Ramdeni's mother was leaving after work. She said to Bir Bahadur, "*Master Saheb*will probably be a little late today. Still sleeping. It seems like he has had quite a long night." She mimicked drinking from a bottle and left laughing.

Asima came and stood there.

"Bir Bahadur, go around the area a little."

With a smile from the corner of his lips, gesturing through his eyes, he seemed to tell that Ramdeni's mother had gone too far; so there is no need to speak so cautiously.

"I came early on my bicycle at the Master's command. He will be there in half an hour. He will reach by foot"

Asima has no interest in knowing why was he sent early.

"Where did you meet *Master Saheb*?" She was so embarrassed that she could not make an eye-contact while asking this.

"he was in my house throughout the night….."

She feels relieved.

'All night?'

Bir Bahadur is getting impatient. He has a huge responsibility on his shoulders. He takes out a parcel from the post office and says, "I came here last night to give this to you."

'At night? What time? Why? Very urgent, isn't it?'

"If it wasn't urgent, why would I bring it so late at night? Master Saheb was drunk at the time. Could he have come?"

'But why didn't you give it at night?'

In a slightly hesitant voice, he said, "I saw you and *Malbabu*'s brother chatting inside the post office. I can't hand over the thing to you in front of outsiders. Standing in front of the post office for too long at night is in itself dangerous. So I had to leave. As soon as I went and told *Master Saheb*, he got furious at *Malbabu*'s brother. Even in that state of intoxication, he was fully conscious of worldly affairs. He shouted, "Bring me the *Bhojali*, Bir Bahadur. Bring it now! I'll murder that bastard! Oh, how he was screaming! How can someone handle him!"

A shiver ran through Asima's body. Although this feeling was much desired, she is getting the taste of a palate she was deprived of. It feels very good to hear. Why did he stop? Let him tell some more.

She acts frightened, and asks, "Is that so? Oh, god! What will happen now? What should I do then? Was he really coming with the *Bhojali*?"

Bir Bahadur wants to suppress this topic. 'No, no, don't think much about it, *Mai-ji*. How can a person who is too drunk to walk, come to kill someone with a sword! How can you even believe that!'

'No, no, Bir Bahadur. No matter how much he drinks, *Master Saheb,* never loses his consciousness. I know him well.'

'If you say so!'

Bir Bahadur is in a rush. These women! It is the gender who won't stop gossiping even if their house is on fire. He diverts the topic to the work in hand.

"Here, *Mai-ji*, take the parcel. Everything is ready. You just do the stitching and leave it. Do it Now. Don't be late at it. *Master Saheb* can reach anytime. He will fix the seals on the stitching as soon as he arrives. *Seth-ji* sent an urgent message to *Master Saheb* at ten o'clock at night. That's why we are in such a hurry."

Urgent news? Say no more. Instantly, Asima understood what the news was. And Why did Nibaran send Bir Bahadur right away? If he had been in a state to come, he would have come himself. He probably wouldn't come before the inspection officers open the post office. Asima knew how to deal with the officers. It wouldn't take even half an hour to sew the parcel.

"Fonte, come on, wear your clothes and shoes! Bir Bahadur, take Fonte out for a walk."

Asima entered the room to comb her hair and change her saree. She can prepare the tea a bit later.

But there was no more time. She had barely begun to sew the parcel when a motor car stopped in front of the post office. One small, one big. It wasn't just the inspectors. There were so many people! Postal Department officers; Excise Department officers; Police officers; Nibaran himself; Police constables. Probably they met him on the way. Her husband is in real danger. Asima has never faced such a big danger. Oh maa Kali, save me!. She cannot decide what to do out of fear. She puts the bundle of weed inside the parcel under the pile of coal. She throws the rag wrapper on top of the parcel into the open fire. Oh maa Kali, the smell of burnt clothes and rags seems to fly in the wind to the opposite side of the post office! Now it would have ideal to meet Nibaran alone. The police have surrounded the house. Slowly people have started gathering. Nibaran tells the officers that the office key is at home; he did not take it with him when he left the house; there is another door to enter the post office from inside the house; his wife and a six-year-old son are at home; and among the outsiders frequent the maid Ramdeni's mother. The police are now unwilling to let Nibaran meet his

wife. One of them came and took the post office key from Asima.

Inside the Post Office, there were two tea cups on the table. 'Where did this come from?' Nibaran exclaimed and put the two cups under the table. The officers wanted to see the records related to the parcel.

'On tomorrow's date, you have written about the parcel with this number - there is no such person with this name - it will be sent back to sender in Calcutta today. Show me that parcel.

Nibaran tried to get it out of the chest. Finally, he was forced to sheepishly admit that he couldn't find it.

Asima could hear everything from the next room. Nibaran himself was the first to speak up - someone must have stolen the parcel. He clearly remembers that he had put the parcel in the chest yesterday. He was not at home all night. Since the outside lock was not broken, the thief must have entered the house from inside.

Since getting the new revelation about her husband from Bir Bahadur, Asima's mind has been filled with a new kind of intoxication. Even in the face of impending danger, she could not snap out of the haze of intoxication. Through the open door in the middle, she has caught a glimpse of Nibaran's face. It seemed as if she could find a trace of jealousy there. It is the first recognition of her worth that she is receiving in her own backyard.

The officers entered the house to ask Asima a few questions. The pomp of her attire caught their attention.

'Has anyone entered the post office since yesterday afternoon?'

'No.'

Asima was craving to make an eye contact with her husband.

Nibaran has come up with a plan,he is trying to gesture his wife on what she needs to say.

“Women! She’s so petrified that she’s lying to us, my Lord.”

"Why would it be a lie? No one entered the room."

"No one came in, so why were there two cups of tea on the table?"

Nibaran is agitated.

'That was yesterday afternoon. You had two cups of tea back to back.'

The house was searched thoroughly. The officer simply said, "I see, you have a lot of brand new *Zaridari*, *Benarasi* sarees."

'Yes, those were gifts from the wedding.'

Apart from that, they couldn’t get anything out of Asima. Fonte was summoned next.

After eating some toffee and lozenges, he said that Samir-uncle was talking to his mother in that room last night, and his mother was crying over some drunkard. He knew that he shouldn't be mentioning the chewing of a drumstick-unbrushed. In response to the inspector's question, Ramdeni's mother said that Samir was here last night.

"Both of you, husband and wife, have to go to the police station with us. We have many more questions to ask."

The officer made Fonte sit next to him in the front of the car. Asima and Nibaran sat in the back of the van. On their way, the police also picked up Samir in the van. He sat alone on the bench on the other side. Everyone was silent. The car was moving, scattering dust on its way. Malbabu was

following the car riding a bicycle through the dust. Samir was looking outside the car. There was shade on his seat; and the sun was shining on Asima's seat. Suddenly Asima got up and sat on that bench. It seemed she wanted to escape the sun. Asima kept her eyes glued on Nibaran. Nibaran was also looking at her. He lowered his hand under the bench and gestured for his wife to sit closer to Samir without catching the attention of the police. One can easily trace Nibaran's shameless appreciation of his wife's presence of mind There was not even a trace of jealousy there.

Asima had mistaken the fantasy she wished for as truth. By now, the erroneous notion and sweet-smelling addiction had worn off. The ultimate humiliation set her head on fire.

'Why, why should I sit next to him? As if it is an Order?' Asima came and sat down next to Nibaran. Then she stood up again, holding onto the iron grating of the car partition.

"Listen, *Police-sahib*, this man stole - this thug, this drunkard. He wants to put the blame on others, by making me lie. I will tell the whole truth. I will go to jail. He and the *Seth-ji* of Nepalbazar has a syndicate with some people in Kolkata. Parcels come from Kolkata in the names of people who have never lived here. Where can you find those people here? Those parcels go back. The parcels come with silk sarees, cash, and what not!That is the wage of this drunkard. They take it out and fill the parcels with cheap Nepalese weed. The weed that costs four paisa in Nepal costs one and a half *taka* in Kolkata. The person who sends the false parcels from Kolkata gets the parcels filled with weed back. They have been doing this for a long time. To shut me up, they make me sew parcels filled with weed. Those who have so many people at their disposal, who know how to sew and save the seal, couldn't they find another person to sew with if they wanted to. They gave me a silk saree just to shut my mouth. Is that man any less of a scoundrel! He has already planned what he will do in three years. I will not hide a single word, my lord. My parents tied a stone to my neck and threw me in the Ganges to die! This marriage is a Sham! I desire to flee from this! I couldn't do that only for the sake of my son. *police-sahib*, let him stay with me in jail! Then will I tell the truth.'···

By now, Nibaran spoke up.

"See, how evil this woman is acting, sir? She wants to save her lover and put her husband in jail." There wasn't even a trace of concern on his face.

The Apollonian

BOOK REVIEWS

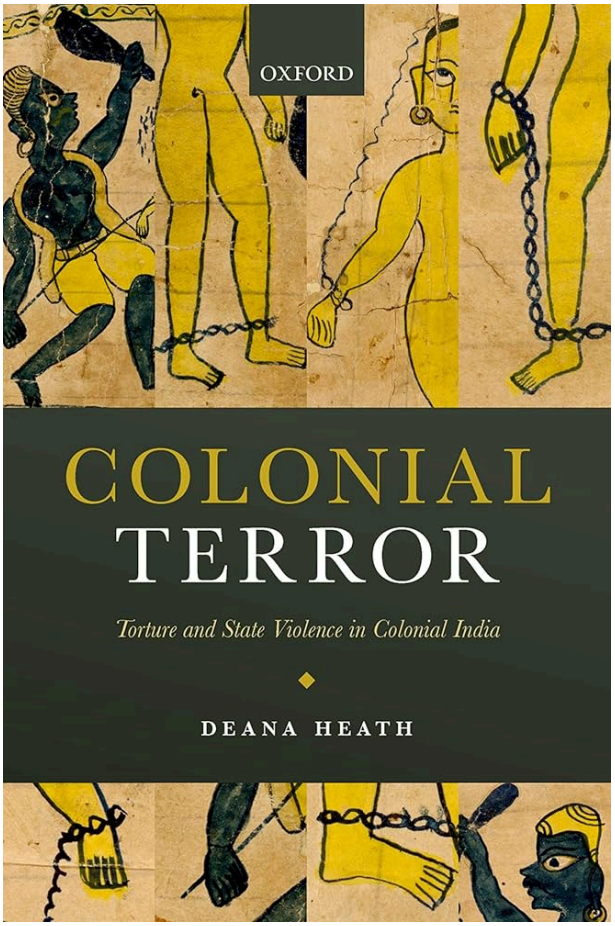
Book Review

Colonial Terror: Torture and State Violence in Colonial India: Deana Heath

Aryan Nidhi Khare

Colonial Terror, by Deana Heath provides a thorough examination of the pervasive nature of violence in the maintenance of the colonial rule in India, arguing that "extraordinary violence was a part of the ordinary operation of colonial states" (p.11). Heath challenges the reformist narrative of the colonial rule that minimises violence by presenting it as a necessary evil or the work of a few bad actors. Heath posits that colonial violence was not an aberration—rather, it was the foundation upon which the colonial project rested.

Drawing from scholars like Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Nasser Hussain, and John Comaroff, the book argues that the legal environment of the colony where there was both 'suspension of law' and the 'legalisation of the exception' provided a fertile ground for violence to flourish (p. 13). While emphasizing the role of native 'facilitators' as the actual perpetrators of violence, she argues that this violence was systematically enabled and sanctioned by both the East India Company and later the British Raj. The strength of Heath's argument lies in her ability to demonstrate how extraordinary violence became woven into the ordinary fabric of colonial administration. Drawing attention to the evidentiary norms practiced in colonial jurisprudence, she argues that the justice system's emphasis on confession and its extraction through torture made violence a fundamental tool of governance. Moreover, the wide-ranging powers granted to officials—especially at the local level, whom Judith Butler refers to as 'petty sovereigns'—combined with the practical absence of separation between executive and judicial powers, meant that Indians were subjected to 'ultra-legal but customary violence' through torture (p. 110).



Deana Heath. *Colonial Terror: Torture and State Violence in Colonial India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 234 pp.

What sets this work apart is its dual focus on both institutional systems and human experience. Heath doesn't just analyse policy documents, she examines press reports and personal accounts, bringing to life the human cost of these systematic practices. Examining the 1855 Madras Torture Commission, an event that exposed the widespread torture in the Madras Presidency. Heath argues that despite its shocking revelations, the commission failed to effect any meaningful change and instead served to justify and perpetuate the use of torture as a technology of rule in colonial India (p. 89-90). Scandals, such as the one that spurred the Madras Torture Commission, tend to produce a sense that a problem has been addressed and resolved, the transformation of torture into scandal allowed it to be effectively erased from public view (p. 179). The infamous 1909 Midnapore Conspiracy Case, which Heath analyses in detail, exemplifies this

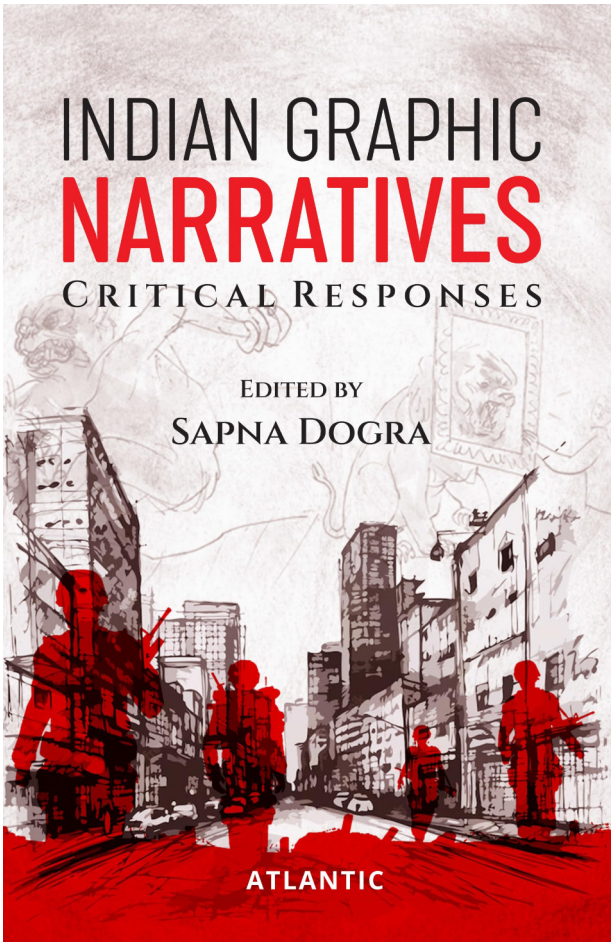
chilling dynamic. Despite compelling evidence of torture by theBengal police, the colonial regime went to great lengths to exonerate the officers and British officials involved, deploying legal manoeuvring, financial resources, and ultimately, judicial complicity to whitewash the entire affair (p. 185-88).

Heath's Colonial Terror is a scathing indictment of the colonial rule in India. By transforming itself into a state of exception, where the rule of law could be conveniently suspended in the name of maintaining order and control, the regime created a space where police torture could flourish with impunity.

Book Review

Indian Graphic Narratives Critical Responses: Sapna Dogra (Ed.)

Sreya Mukherjee



Sapna Dogra (Ed.). *Indian Graphic Narratives Critical Responses*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2024. 107 pp.

In the milieu of Indian Writing in English (IWE), the graphic narrative has emerged as a powerful medium, evolving from its humble beginnings as low-brow literature to become a platform for diverse voices and narratives. *Indian Graphic Narratives Critical Responses*(2024), edited by Sapna Dogra, presents a captivating journey through the annals of Indian graphic storytelling. In this volume, the editor has curated ten expedient chapters each of which undertakes an investigative journey into the nuances of the graphic narrative, dissecting its literary merit and cultural significance. The anthology unfolds a narrative mosaic that spans decades, showcasing the evolution of the Indian graphic novel from its inception to its contemporary manifestations. What began as a homage to India's rich mythological heritage in the pages of *Amar Chitra Katha* by Ananth Pai has blossomed into a diverse tapestry of storytelling that reflects the complexities of modern Indian society. Post-millennial graphic novels such as *Corridor (2004)*, *Kari (2008)*, *Hush (2010)*, and *Kashmir Pending (2007),* to name just a few, delve into an array of themes ranging from queer identity and urban loneliness to militancy, environmental degradation, and sexual abuse, offering readers a window into the multifaceted realities of Indian life. As the anthology navigates through these various texts, it illuminates the ways in which the Indian graphic novel has evolved as a vehicle for social commentary, cultural critique, and personal expression by giving space to voices from marginalised and disenfranchised communities. By examining the shifting thematic landscape and narrative strategies employed by contemporary graphic novelists, the volume sheds light on the medium's ability to engage with pressing societal issues and challenge prevailing norms.

Each of the ten chapters curated in this volume offers unique and astute reflections on the diverse thematic and formal complexities of graphic narratives. For instance, three distinct chapters converge to offer multifaceted insights into Amruta Patil's seminal work, *Kari* (2008). The first of the three chapters dedicated to *Kari* offers a compelling philosophical exploration of the text. Through an existentialist lens, this chapter delves deep into the intricacies of Kari's journey as a deterritorialised self, navigating through a landscape marked by cultural dislocation and geographic estrangement. It explores the protagonist's profound sense of identity crisis and self-estrangement, which reverberate throughout the narrative. The following chapter presents a captivating exploration of space as a multifaceted

expression within the narrative of *Kari*. Delving into the urban landscape of 'smog city' where the story unfolds, this chapter unveils the complexities of topophrenia by examining the social, metaphysical, and personal dimensions embedded within the spatial dynamics of the text. Central to this analysis is the protagonist's role as a flâneur, a figure whose leisurely strolls through the city invite a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations.

The final chapter on *Kari* delves into the lived experiences of individuals from the queer community and offers a critique of heteronormative culture and the problematic portrayal of queerness as deviant. By interrogating the portrayal of queerness within the text, this chapter sheds light on the challenges faced by individuals who exist outside the confines of societal norms, while also celebrating the resilience and agency of marginalised characters like Kari who refuse to be defined by others' expectations. This multidimensional approach by all the three chapters not only underscores the richness and depth of *Kari* as a text but also highlights the capacity of graphic narratives to engender diverse and nuanced critical responses. By engaging with Patil's work from various angles, the anthology demonstrates how graphic narratives serve as fertile ground for scholarly inquiry and cultural critique, offering readers a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between text, image, and meaning.

In this anthology, the diverse array of chapters encapsulates a wide spectrum of themes and critical inquiries that reflect the multifaceted nature of the Indian graphic narrative landscape. One of the chapters delves into the sensitive and often overlooked subject of psychological trauma resulting from sexual abuse, shedding light on how graphic narratives serve as a powerful medium for depicting and confronting such deeply personal experiences. In another chapter, the focus shifts towards an examination of the representation of female characters in Indian graphic narratives, tracing their evolution over time. From early depictions characterised by stereotypes and clichés to more nuanced and empowered portrayals, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the changing landscape of female representation within the medium. Moreover, two chapters in this volume stand out for their analysis of the pedagogical potential of graphic narratives, particularly in the realm of language learning within school curriculum. These chapters offer a compelling exploration of how graphic novels can serve as powerful educational tools, engaging students in immersive storytelling experiences while simultaneously enhancing their language skills. By integrating graphic narratives into the curriculum, educators can harness the visual and textual elements of the medium to foster a deeper understanding of language and literature among students. Through meticulous analysis and case studies, these chapters demonstrate the transformative impact of graphic narratives on the learning process.

The editor, Sapna Dogra, has contributed two perceptive chapters to this volume, thereby enriching its critical scope. The first chapter by Dr Dogra delves into the literary technique of anthropomorphism as employed in graphic narratives, with a particular focus on seminal works such as *Maus* (1986, 1991) and *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015). This chapter embarks on an exploration of why graphic storytellers often opt for anthropomorphic animal characters to convey complex narratives and societal critiques, as the allure and effectiveness of anthropomorphism as a narrative device is unraveled. By imbuing animal characters with human traits and emotions, graphic storytellers create a unique interspace that both captivates and distances the reader from reality. This "alienation effect" serves to heighten the reader's engagement with the narrative while also providing a critical lens through which to examine pressing societal issues. In her second chapter, Dr Dogra examines the politically charged landscape of Kashmir through the graphic novel *Kashmir Pending*(2007). This chapter seeks to unravel the complex dynamics of power and control

that characterise the Kashmir conflict. Through a detailed analysis of *Kashmir Pending*, readers are invited to confront the harsh realities faced by the people of Kashmir, grappling with the pervasive presence of state surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties. Central to this exploration is an interrogation of the disciplinary mechanisms deployed by the state to monitor and suppress dissent within the region. From mass surveillance to arbitrary detention and censorship, the chapter sheds light on the multifaceted ways in which power is wielded and contested in Kashmir.

This volume emerges as a pivotal contribution to the evolving discourse surrounding Indian graphic narratives. By curating a diverse range of critical responses, the anthology invites readers to engage with Indian graphic narratives from a multitude of perspectives, each offering unique insights and astute analyses. From existential engagements with identity to critical examinations of socio-political unrest and gender representation, the chapters within this volume traverse a wide spectrum of thematic concerns, thus presenting a panoramic view of the dynamic and multifaceted landscape of the medium. This volume serves as an invaluable resource for researchers, academicians, and enthusiasts alike, providing a comprehensive overview of the diverse voices and narratives that populate the Indian graphic narrative landscape. Whether delving into the psychological trauma of sexual abuse or unpacking the complexities of regional unrest in Kashmir, readers will find themselves immersed in a thought-provoking journey through the intricacies of Indian graphic narratives. *Indian Graphic Narratives Critical Responses* offers more than just a collection of scholarly analyses—it serves as a testament to the transformative power of graphic storytelling to challenge, inspire, and provoke critical discourse. As the medium continues to evolve and expand, this anthology stands as a beacon of insight and inspiration for anyone interested in exploring the vibrant world of Indian graphic narratives.

Book Review

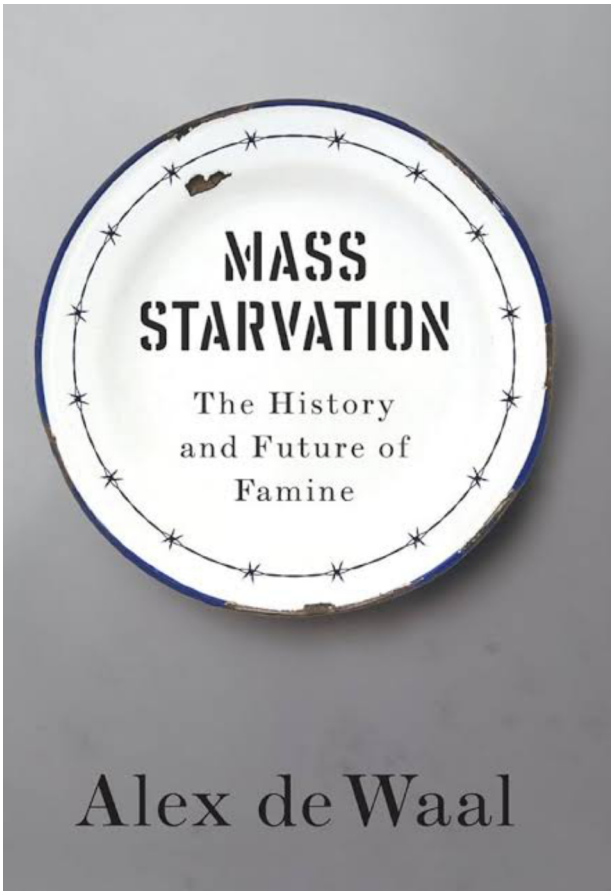
Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine: Alex de Waal

Shaifali

Alex de Waal's "Mass Starvation" is an exploration of famine as a political and ethical issue, drawing upon the author's extensive background in famine studies and humanitarian work. In this review, I will delve into the key themes and arguments presented by de Waal, examining the historical context, the multi-causal nature of famines, the role of international law, and the prospects for a famine-free future. De Waal's work is a crucial read for policymakers and scholars who are deeply involved in humanitarian work. This is not a leisurely read and may not resonate with those possessing minimal familiarity with the subject of famines.

De Waal's central thesis is that famine should be conceptualized as a form of atrocity requiring both political and legal action for its elimination. He builds upon his previous work, 'Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa,' where he explored the politicization of famine in India and the lack of a comparable response in Africa. He contended, using the 1988 famine in southern Sudan as a prominent example, that a democratic system restricted to a specific region would not avert famine in another part and could potentially exacerbate it. The author introduces the term 'famine crime' to underscore how human rights violations, including war crimes and repression, contribute to famines. He argues, 'It is at this point that the common features between famine and mass atrocity come into focus. Both are primarily political projects that consider (some) human lives expendable or worthless' (p.59).j

The book unfolds in three parts, with the first part, 'Perspectives on Famine and Starvation,' laying the groundwork. De Waal examines



Alex de Waal. *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine.* Polity Press, 2018. 260 pp.

Raphaël Lemkin's concept of genocide and its association with famines, highlighting Stalin's policy during the 1932–33 Soviet famine (Holodomor) as genocide by starvation. The author also introduces the Hunger Plan as the worst famine crime in history. (p.35) The concept which is emphasized the most is 'Malthus' Zombie' in Chapter 3. Malthus' famous tract indicates that an increase in population would lead to a great and inevitable famine. De Waal contests this and uses the term coined by Ulrich Beck calling Malthus' idea a 'zombie concept', a concept which keeps on coming up even when it has been disproved numerous times.

Chapter 4 provides a crucial historical overview of modern famines, challenging the misconception that famines are primarily an African phenomenon. The chapter traces regional distribution, noting that 50% of famines occurred in China from 1870-2010, with Africa accounting for 9.6%. De Waal

explores imperial holocausts, the extended war period from 1915-50, and post-colonial totalitarianism, providing examples such as the Armenian genocide, Stalin's famine in Ukraine, the Nazi Hunger Plan, and the Bengal Famine in 1943. He also explores post-colonial totalitarianism with famines in Cambodia, Ethiopia, north Korea. From 1986 onwards, de Waal writes that there have been no calamitous famines (one million or more deaths) and only great famines (100,000 or more excess deaths).

The second part, 'How Famines were Almost Eliminated,' examines the demographic, technological, and economic factors contributing to the reduction of famines. De Waal introduces the concept of 'Faminogenic Acts,' by David Marcus categorizing political intent and responsibility into four degrees ranging from genocidal, war to official indifference and natural disasters. He critically evaluates the role of humanitarian aid agencies, emphasizing the need for political initiative and highlighting the flaws within the humanitarian system. The author argues, 'The most fundamental criticism of the relief aid business is that its clients are not the recipients of its assistance but those who pay its bills' (p.166). He further scrutinizes the humanitarian international landscape, advocating for the urgent prohibition of famine crimes through international treaties. De Waal points out the existing legal frameworks, such as the Geneva Conventions, but underscores the lack of prosecutions for starvation crimes in specific cases. He stresses the need for political will and public outcry to effectively criminalize famine.

Part three, 'The Persistence and Return of Famines,' identifies potential famine hotspots in conflict-ridden areas of Africa and the Middle East. The chapter on climate change dismisses it as the sole cause of famines, asserting that political decisions play a pivotal role in determining whether insecurities lead to famine. De Waal employs the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC scale) to analyze food insecurity in regions like Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Darfur, and northern Nigeria. He ends the chapter withdiscussion on 'counter-humanitarianism' which is 'sinister beyond its material impacts because it legitimizes political and military conduct that is indifferent to human life or subordinates human life to other ends' (p.260).

In the final chapter, "The History and Future of Famine," de Waal seamlessly ties the book together, emphasizing that abolishing mass starvation is an ethical project requiring both political prevention of faminogenic actions and technical measures to save lives during an ongoing famine. The book concludes optimistically, asserting that mass starvation can be eradicated if society collectively decides to make it so.

De Waal's call for political and legal action resonates throughout the book, leaving readers with a profound sense of responsibility and an urgent call to address the complex interplay of factors that contribute to mass starvation. Waal's work can prompt us to consider the interconnectedness of political decisions, humanitarian efforts, and international legal frameworks in shaping the future of famine prevention. The book challenges readers to move beyond conventional narratives and actively engage in the project of eliminating mass starvation.In the author's own words, 'Mass starvation could be ended for good – if we decide that it is to be so' (p.272).

Book Review

The New Crusades: Islamophobia and the Global War on Muslims: Khaled A. Beydoun

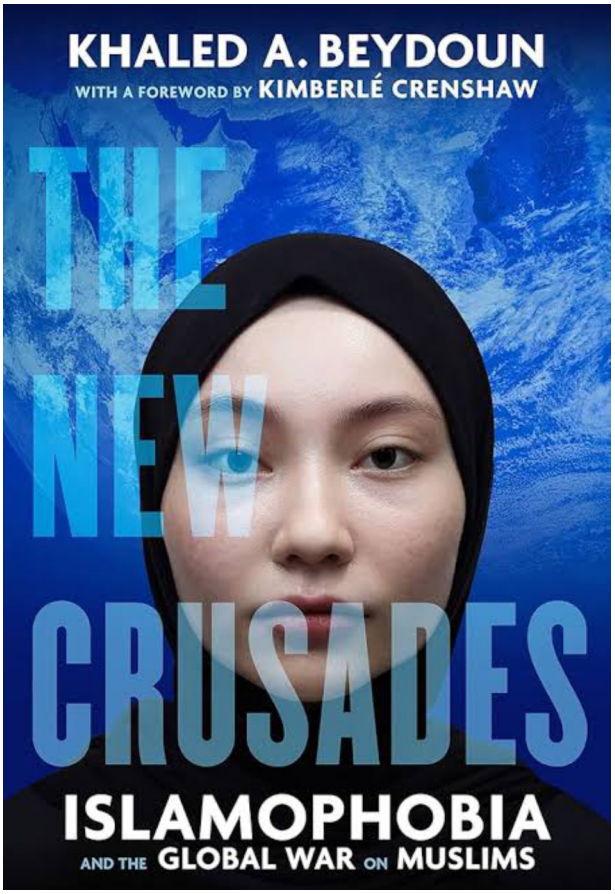
Shenaz Parween

'Islamophobia', as the term itself denotes, is the fear of Islam, a fear that has its own history and intricacies. Periodically, this fear resurfaces, and more recently, it has gained prominence in the context of *War on Terror* politics, a purported initiative by the Bush administration to combat terrorism. However, it quickly evolves into a complex global ideology with various complicacies. Although there is no lack of literature on Islamophobia, its effects, and its various nuances, Khaled A. Beydoun's *The New Crusades: Islamophobia and the Global War on Muslims* is a more contemporary and inventive contribution to the field. Unlike a dead political narrative being piled up with several anecdotal records, Beydon's work represents a shift in the understanding of Islamophobia, wherein the trajectory of multiple intersections, such as power, subordination, gender, and violence, weigh on both subjective and objective details equally.

The scope of the book is broad and provocative. Contextually set in the dystopian aftermath of the War on Terror, it presents Western Islamophobia not just as a domestic issue but rather as a "global crusade" that affects nearly every nation on the globe.

Divided into seven consecutive chapters, it takes the readers into the world of Muslims, a world where they are repeatedly pushed to the margins under the several disguises of Islamophobic dichotomies. Essentially, the combination of factual and personal information shapes the book, imbuing its pages with a fresh hue that frequently obscures the myriad divisions caused by both the inherent distance in our globe and the war on terror.

In the first chapter entitled *'Forever Turned Around'*, Beydoun's search for the crevices takes him to Wajir, a town located in southwestern Kenya. The residents of the place often face two challenges: first, the extreme heat causes them to become blind, and second, radical groups like Al-Shabaab terrorists frequently operate there, recruiting young children and exploiting their remaining lives. The chapter further explores the suffering of Somali Muslims, whether that of a child named Mohammad or of a woman like Tabassum, who are fighting singlehandedly amid one of the most arid regions of the time, while the whole world has turned a deaf ear towards their plight through labeling them with the tag of a potentialterrorist. Setting the tone of the humanitarian crisis, the very first chapter starts with the horrific act of Islamophobic surveillance, where the Wajir people, for sharing the Muslim faith, become enemies despite being victims.



Khaled A. Beydoun. *The New Crusades: Islamophobia and The Global War on Muslims.* Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023. 390 pp.

The second chapter, called '*The Terror Within,'*

attempts to find resonance between John, a veteran of the Iraq war, and Hussein, an immigrant who fled from Iraq to Detroit in order to provide a better and safer life to his kids. While the US invasion of Iraq, on the one hand, creates war veterans like John, who, like Septimus Warren from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* is torn both inside and out, on the other, it also destroys the lives of millions of Iraqis like Hussein, who have to leave their home country in order to belong and find a stable home. However, the hypocrisy lies in the fact that while the same *War on Terror* tags one a 'patriot', it targets the 'other' with the tag of a 'terrorist' for no other reason than the land they came from. The chapter continues to explore the personalized experiences of immigrant Muslims, who are often burdened with an imposed subordination amid the global fight with the *War on Terror*.

Chapter 3, *Virus and Violence* takes a sojourn in India, where the gradual upsurge of Hindutva philosophy under the Modi regime sparked the rise of Islamophobic hate crime in the majority of the nation. The war on terror serves as a gateway for Modi's Hindutva ideology, emphasizing how "Hinduism" comes to be associated with "Indian" in the same way that "white" becomes "Western." This effectively illustrates how "blood and soil" have a monopoly over "birth and naturalization" when it comes to citizenship qualifications. It also brings up the topic of post-COVID Islamophobia, or more accurately, the "Corona Jihad," in which Muslims were depicted as vectors of the COVID-19 virus. Several facets of political disputes, like the NRC, CAA, and even the Kashmir controversy, find an enigmatic expression in Beydoun's subjective as well as elaborative presentation of many Indians, like Mrinal, Ali Hussein Mir, Roya, and Yusuf.

Chapter 4, *Remembering Auschwitz,* takes one back to the horrific memories of Nazi concentration camps, this time not in Germany but in Xinjiang, China, the region known for its large Uyghur Muslim population. By drawing a parallel between an elderly Jewish woman and Abdulla, an Uyghur Muslim, one who suffered the loss of many other members of the Jewish community in the Holocaust while the other is waiting for his turn to be in the concentration camp, Beydoun explores the Chinese policy of ethnic cleansing of Uyghur Muslims inside the confines of concentration camps. The chapter also alludes to another dreadful example of ethnic cleansing, of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims, who were brutally slaughtered at the hands of Aung San Suu Kyi, a woman who once won the Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle but has later turned her back on humanist ideologies.

Chapter 5, *The French Plague,* as the title indicates, is set in France, an epicentre of the hijab controversy, where thousands of Muslim hijabi were being targeted for their modest clothing. The chapter goes into detail on the ghettoization of Muslim women's bodies and the introduction of several regulations, such as the prohibition on the headscarf, and the concept of *Laïcité* , which have their origins in the long-standing orientalist perceptions of the headscarf as a symbol of oppression and segregation. Unlike the usual Islamophobic pattern in other countries where Muslims directly become a source of fear, here in France, as Beydoun presents, Islamophobia manifests itself through incorporating gender. Generally, the structural Islamophobia manifested in France resonates with what feminist scholar Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has already mentioned: the process of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 101). This is the plague talked about in the chapter title, something that afflicts Muslim women like Ibtissam, who, despite being citizens, become immigrants in their own land, while young girls like Farah were alarmed to shed their religion in order to be legalized citizens. The chapter sums up with a reference to the Paris attacks of January 7, 2015, an attack often dubbed 'France's 9/11' that again led to French Muslims being targetedas terrorists through the policy of 'judgement by association'.

Consequently, Chapter 6, *Monsters and Martyrs,* reconstructs the age-old definitions of terrorism, where havoc is caused by white terrorists in place of the Muslim ones. It vividly recounts the murder of fifty-one devout Muslims during the gruesome mosque attacks in Christchurch in New Zealand by a white supremacist terrorist. On the one hand, Beydoun's personalized accounts attempt to immortalize those fifty-one lives who left the world without any sign, while on the other, he points out the hypocrisies of several media outlets, where Muslims can never be victims but are always terrorists.

Finally, Chapter 7, *Ablution and Abolition,* starts on a note of possibility where rulers like Jacinda Ardern, the youngest and only female Prime Minister of New Zealand in a long line of male leadership, set a new model of engagement with Muslims that presidents before her promised to do but could not deliver. To the utter satisfaction of Beydoun and his mother, Jacinda's emotional speech after the Christchurch massacre highlights a new dimension of religion that doesn't rely on exclusion but on the mode of acceptance. In the latter half of the chapter, Beydoun reinvigorates solidarity between the two most marginalized others, i.e., blacks and Muslims, through an expression of the 'Black Lives Matter'.

The concluding remarks drag on the contemporary issue of the Ukrainian war, where killing a Ukrainian is set in absolute contrast to killing an Arab. Beydoun triggers political debates regarding nationalistic war, in which people like Ukrainians become freedom fighters fighting for their nation while Muslims fighting for their rights, be they Uyghurs or Kashmiris, become terrorists.

Thus, Beydoun's attempt to traverse the realms of the unheard and unseen Muslims seems provocative, as it includes a glimpse of Muslims not only from the center but also from the farthest margins. Narration in segments, where each section recounts a new form of segregation under age-old discrimination, makes the book enriching in its content.

Though it is an authentic record exploring the situation of world-wide Muslims, there are still some areas where Beydoun seemed unaware or culturally biased. When it comes to the hijab ban in France, Beydoun's representation of hijab appears one-dimensional. In spite of his awareness of the liberating aspects of the hijab, to some extent he was quite negligent of the oppression that comes with the conservative implication of the headscarf. Again, there are some moments when Beydoun's narration may sound repetitive and, at some points, selective. However, despite having such shortcomings, Beydoun's book is unique in its strategic handling of a well-known subject matter, relying on the skillful balance between the subjective as well as the objective narration. By invoking the 'Crusades' in both the title and in the text in an accusatory manner, he also relocates the roots of modern Islamophobia to the earlier Occidentalist notion of Christian Europe's invasion of the Middle East, a war fought on with the colonial as well as imperial vision. Therefore, the voices of the Muslim victims—those trapped in the violent crucibles of state-sponsored and popular Islamophobia—are effectively conveyed in Beydoun's narrative. In short, to get a global insight on the War on Terror and its association with the anti-Islamic violence in the rest of the globe, Khaled A. Beydoun's *The New Crusades* is a must and a timely read.

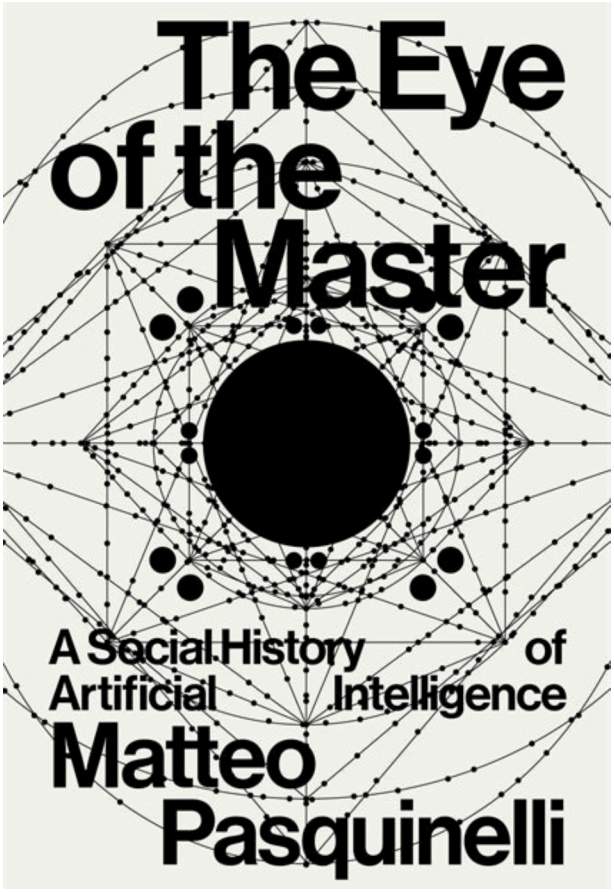
Book Review

The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence: Matteo Pasquinelli

Cameron More

In his most recent and third full-length monograph, Dr. Matteo Pasquinelli aims to demystify the uncertain and complicated impact that Machine Learning (ML) and Artificial Intelligence (AI)has had on modern society in the last few years by examining the social context in which these innovations came about. Pasquinelli has been writing about AI since the end of the 2010s, and this book represents a culmination of many years of research.Pasquinelli's goal is not to give an expanded history of AI, but to highlight salient moments in its development that clarify *what*exactly AI is. Pasquinelli's core argument is that "the overgrowth of the digital sphere and the dematerialization of human activities… [have] contributed to the aura of mystery that has been…constructed around AI" (2).

In the introduction and first chapter, Pasquinelli lays out his fundamental ideas by examining the concept of the 'algorithm,' and showing that, as 'patterns designed to execute some series of steps,' algorithms are more accurately understood as reflections of human behavior patterns in a machine-readable format, aka computer code. Over the course of the industrial age, as the economic pattern of capital became a more primary concern in the popular mind, algorithms seemed to take primacy over the real-life human patterns they were reflective of. This switching thinking has contributed to the overgrowth of digital thinking. Later in the text, Pasquinelli identifies cybernetics as the field of research in which this reversal is mostevident: "cybernetics was not a science but a school of engineering in drag—one with the self-confidence to extend its informational and computational analogies to several aspects of



Matteo Pasquinelli. *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence*. London: Verso, 2023. pp. 264.

nature and society. This book tries to clarify that, rather than designing machines like organisms, as they professed, cyberneticians ultimately envisioned organisms like machines" (152-153).An analysis of this 'cybernetic epistemology' runs through the entire text.

The rest of the book is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on historical moments that have contributed to the development of AI in the Industrial Age, with discussions of CharlesBabbage's principles of labor analysis, the origins and theory of machinery as a reification of human labor, and the general intellect in Marx's theory of capitalism. Part II discusses the technical and theoretical development of AI in the twentieth century, particularly in laboratories and research centers in the United States, the development of neural networks, connectionism as the main theory of AI, and the automation of visual labor.

A core thesis of this *social* history of AI is that machines generally reify patterns of human behavior. Pasquinelli follows Marx's analysis of machines closely in connection with Babbage's principles of labor analysis, and systematically shows that the increased division of labor in the industrial age led to a simplification of the physical motions that workers performed, which could be copied by machines (62-63). When the work of a single weaver is broken into three or four tasks, a series of machines could be invented to perform each segment of the labor process, resulting in a devaluing of human labor and increased turnover time of capital.

The earliest computers were people who would be sent long mathematical calculations for them to complete and send back or to another person in a distributed network. In this sense, the foundations for the division of factory labor, as reflected in mathematical labor, forged the later idea of a unified general computing machine with several distributed mathematical parts. This allowsPasquinelli to advance what he calls a 'knowledge theory of labor': that the first division of labor is really a division of the knowledge of the master craftsman into piecemeal segments, which were later mechanized (89-90).

The division of calculative labor is directly translated into the creation and popularity of neural networks by researchers in the twentieth century. Neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch and mathematician Walter Pitts were the first to propose the creation of a device that mimicked human neurons with nodes having a binary value, 0 or 1 (134). Soon after, Frank Rosenblatt would create a working example of this device (the Perceptron), but with a key innovation: statistical (not binary) nodes that would self-adjust as they interacted with other nodes. The self-organizing behavior of nodes as they were 'trained' on pattern recognition was a groundbreaking innovation thatbegan the long path to modern AI models like ChatGPT.

Pasquinelli's book shares a number of core themes from other recent scholarship on AI. Pasquinelli provides the historical context for Justin Joque's (2022) analysis of the statistical and probabilistic mechanisms that allow AI to do what it does. Pasquinelli's work also grounds much of the thought provoking yet abstract work on the theory of AI and algorithms (Flisfeder, 2021).Pasquinelli does not discuss the material basis for the data that AI/ML models need to train on, an account of which can be found in Philip Jones's *Work Without the Worker: Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism* (2022). Pasquinelli's book foreshadows other titles set to release in 2024 from Verso including*The Politics of Algorithmic Management* and *The Digital Fiefdom*.[1]

By the uncovering of the human origins of AI, Pasquinelli is confident that Artificial General Intelligence be seen as a product of cybernetic epistemology. In contrast to more formal arguments, like those found in Smith and Landgrebe's recent *Why Machines Will Never Rule the World*, Pasquinelli shows that our entire conceptual framework for understanding machinic 'intelligence' is backwards.[5] The core conclusion of the book, Pasquinelli writes, is that "the operative principle of AI, in fact, is not just labor automation but also the imposition of social hierarchies of manual and mental labor *through* automation" (21). From the mechanization of industrial laborer, to Hayekian neoliberal ideology, one is urged to conclude that machine learning is not about machines learning directly from the world itself, but about machines learning from embedded human social structures and labor practices.

Pasquinelli's book is an urgent work of critical scholarship that sheds light on the everyday. As more companies use AI, as more people interact with chatbots like ChatGPT on an everyday basis, it is as necessary a task as ever to understand the history and embedded biases of so-called artificial intelligence.

Endnotes

[1] Verso's upcoming releases can be found in their catalogue here: https://www.versobooks.com/pages/trade-catalogues-and-fliers.

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The Apollonian

POETRY

Three Poems

Lonav Ojha

Not every day you get a poem
sometimes it's only a lemon,
the long and sturdy kind
from the loam fields of Golaghat.

In childhood, I believed
this was the only lemon in the world,
I thought there was nowhere else to go.

Maybe, there isn't.

Now every year, I return to village a different gypsy
with more clothes and significantly fewer
reasons to live.

Mother, father and son
kaji nemu, sliced and pressed
it will never be the same
the sour on our cheeks.

I don't owe you any pets

but here take one anyway
That snout is astoundingly moist
A few months until I graduate and go
far away from your bottle-chewing days

I wonder what you make of students
always passing through doors and daybreak
half-asleep, half-radiant, listening
to someone go on about governmentality.

My grandmother used to stare down a road
till the weed took shape of a forest
and obscured the road from her morning
I could never tolerate being a student

What is in those dark, dark eyes
answering a question lost even to myself?
When did the cost of understanding become
a thing of debt, a caress by the brown length of your neck?

Estrangement

It is Tuesday.
I leave my desk and panic over to the window,
mistaking the abrupt whirr of my laptop
for rain.

AUTHORS

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ISSN 2393-9001

Volume I

Issue 2

June 2025

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies