



# Negotiations

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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**  
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**NEGOTIATIONS**  
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**AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

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## Editorial

The issue of gender as a socio-cultural trope is a much-explored one; but, it is still relevant as a site of trichotomy involving sex, gender constructions, and subjectivity. As a discipline of the social sciences, Gender Studies is invested in meaningful intersections with literature and arts that produce fresh approaches to cultural production and capital. Beginning with the various waves of feminist movements that gradually opened into gay/lesbian consciousness and masculinity studies or queer theories, the issue of gender in our socio-cultural and political matrices is an ever-evolving phenomenon. Recent trends in gender studies proffer a contest between heteronormativity as a matrix and the reality of sexual desires (dreams and fantasies) that often are transgressive or subversive. This contestation factors in the relevance of 'queer' existence and performativity. Interestingly, the idea of the queer deconstructs the notion of identity and 'category' politics that have come to rule our contemporary patterns of established and normative meaning-making ways.

Gender Studies commits to contesting the hierarchy of the legitimate and the rationale of the deviant. The celebration of personal sexual desires besides, issues related to women's liberation and the struggle for identity remain remarkable areas of negotiations within our socio-political and cultural circulations. With the rise of the Third World feminist movement, the recent trends in feminist discourses, and the politics of representation have undergone a new critical reception. With 'Gender Imaginaries' as the theme, this volume of *Negotiations* seeks to address a host of questions, and bring new approaches into the existing interpretations of gender related issues.

We are happy to bring out the 3rd Vol (March 2020) of *Negotiations: An International Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies (NIJLS)* published by the Department of English, University of North Bengal. The peer-reviewed articles published here raise a whole host of questions that confront established patterns of reception; they

critique constructivism in critical understanding and the politics of transcendence that our 'embodied' existence has come to trigger and test. We are profoundly thankful to all the contributors, reviewers, members of the advisory board, the in-house editorial team, departmental staff, and the students without whom it would not have been possible to see the volume come to life. We are thankful to the administration of the University of North Bengal for their constant support especially when the trials of the pandemic have reset our life buttons.

As for now, over to the readers.

# NEOGOTIATIONS

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**“LOOK LIKE A NORMAL JODI”: HOW QUEER IS  
SHUBH MANGAL ZYADA SAVDHAN?<sup>i</sup>**

*Niladri R. Chatterjee*

Ever since its nationwide release on 21 February 2020, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (henceforth abbreviated as SMZS) has garnered reviews that are politely supportive, the average rating being three stars. Few reviewers have considered it a cinematic masterpiece, but most agree that it is an important film because of its desire to “normalize” homosexuality. Till date the film has made over 75 crores worldwide.<sup>ii</sup> So clearly the Indian movie-goer is not averse to two men kissing each other not once but twice. The film ends with most of the characters watching the news as Section 377 is read down on 6 September 2018. By ending the narrative of the film with the reading down of Section 377, the film attempts to send out a clear message that sex between consenting adults in private is now nationally legal irrespective of the gender of the persons involved. The film tries hard not to come across as too didactic and therefore packs in as much humour as possible, even if sometimes the humour seems forced. The film does not shy away from homosexual intimacy, showing us two kisses, both of them taking place in a public place (a train and a wedding). That the two kisses are happening in public places is a marked departure from previous mainstream Indian cinematic representations of men kissing each other such as *I Am Omar* (2010), *Bombay Talkies* (2013) and *Aligarh* (2015). Also noteworthy is the film’s intelligent referencing of previous Hindi films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka* (1989), and *Sholay* (1975)<sup>iii</sup>, and by doing so, queering them.

Yet, for all its good intentions, there are ways in which the film shies away from depicting *homosexuality* in the way that heterosexuality is depicted in *Jism* (2003) or *Murder* (2004). Instead what we get is perhaps *homoromance*. By playing up love and friendship and playing down sexuality, the film may have wanted to appeal to the sentimental side of the Indian audience, but in so doing participates in the same covert patriarchal politics which energises the hashtag #loveislove when it more correctly should be #sexissex.<sup>iv</sup> The paper hopes to read the film as a sincere but unconsciously patriarchal attempt at mainstreaming the queer.

The film opens with Kartik Singh (Ayushmann Khurana) and Aman Tripathi (Jitendra Kumar) trying to sell a toothpaste inside a mall. Aman asks members of the public, “Kya aap ke toothpaste mein pyar

hae?” (Does your toothpaste have love in it?) This question may be taken a clue as to how ‘love’ is going to be foregrounded through the rest of the film. Kartik and Aman are not only selling a brand of toothpaste. They are also selling love. Love is a product that one can presumably buy in a tube of toothpaste inside a shopping mall. The film is also selling love. Just as a buyer may buy the brand of toothpaste but will also get love in it, the film is being bought into for entertainment but those watching it will also get a message of love in it. The film and the toothpaste are both products produced for a capitalist society. But whereas the ‘love’ in the toothpaste is not the emotion but an attention-grabbing way of speaking about the ingredients in the toothpaste, the ‘love’ that the film is trying to smuggle into the audience’s mind is not the love that Indian audiences have been watching since *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). The parallel between the film and the toothpaste in the film is synecdochic: the toothpaste is doing at a micro level what the film is doing at the macro level.

Soon we are introduced to the happy chaos of the Tripathi family where a wedding is imminent. It is the day of the haldi (ritual application of turmeric on the bride-to-be). Aman and Kartik help one of their friends run away from her house. In a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, the friend looks at Kartik and tells him that this is not the first time she has fallen in love. The suggestion being that she used to be in love with Kartik (and perhaps the sediment of that love still remains in her heart). The two men catch a train from Delhi to Allahabad and from there they board (in a sequence that clearly references the scene in *Dilmale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, in which the male lead, standing on the footboard of a train leaving the platform, reaches out and helps the female lead to get on the train) a train on which are Aman’s family heading to the wedding of Aman’s cousin Goggle. In this film’s reworking of the famous DDLJ scene, it is Aman who reaches out and pulls Kartik into the moving train. In boarding the train, Kartik also enters the Tripathi family, unbeknown to either him or the family. The train seems to be moving towards heterosexual matrimony (it is the Vivah Special Express and carries the number 0337!), but is in fact leading heteronormativity into a queer future.

After the two men have got out of their toothpaste-selling costumes and into travelling clothes, we notice a heart-shape design on the t-shirt that Kartik is wearing. The message is being repeated as a motif: love. This is about love. (It may be mentioned that when it seems clear that Aman will get married to a woman of his parents’ choice, Kartik’s t-shirt bears the despairing slogan: Game Over!) Amidst the celebratory marriage party chaos in the railway carriage, the two men manage to sneak out and find a secluded spot near the vestibule for some physical

intimacy. Hesitant, scared Aman gives in to Kartik's pleading and they kiss. That the film would have a kiss between Kartik and Aman is something that was advertised from 20 January onwards when the trailer was released on YouTube. The audience knew that there would be a kiss right at the venue of the wedding in front of all the guests and the bride's and groom's parties. The kiss on the train is one that the audience is not prepared for. In many ways this kiss performs a politics which is partially the politics that the much more famous kiss performs. In this case, space functions as a complex site. The entire train, bedecked with ropes of marigold, is an overt celebration of heterosexuality, because it is dedicated to transporting marriage parties. The train, therefore, is a stridently heterosexual space and a matrimonial space. For Kartik and Aman to find a few metres of space within this space to perform their love for each other, which is neither heterosexual nor destined for matrimonial sanction, is subversion. But this subversion is still a tentative one because when they kiss, they do so in the belief that no one is watching them. The film goes into dramatic high gear when unwitting Mr. Tripathi, Aman's father, catches a glimpse of the two men in a passionate kiss and reacts by vomiting.

Notwithstanding the strain that this puts between the father Tripathi and his son, Kartik determinedly dances and sings on the evening of Goggle's wedding. Towards the end of the dance sequence when father Tripathi effectively throws Kartik to the floor, the latter is helped up back on his feet by Aman in a repeat of the way he had helped Kartik board the marriage party train earlier. It is then that to the general horror of everyone present, Kartik and Aman kiss. It is Aman who initiates a kiss with Kartik this time, in a reversal of the way Kartik had initiated the kiss on the train. By situating this gestural reversal in the first half of the film, the narrative is clearly seeking to underline the reciprocity of the love between these two men.

Till this point, only Aman's father seems to be having the knowledge of his son's sexuality. Now the relationship becomes public knowledge. The template which is used subsequently is one that is familiar to popular culture: lovers against parents, and the parents in turn are metonymically the society at large. But unlike in most other narratives, the parents of Aman (Kartik is estranged from his homophobic and abusive family) are revealed as persons whose own love stories were aborted by marriage. The fact that Aman's description of love makes his mother remember the time she too had felt love for someone in the past, and his father is made to recall the time he too had planned to elope with his beloved, suddenly sprouts a connection across homophobic parents and

gay son. But this connection is not strong enough yet to overpower the homophobia that remains supposedly insurmountable.

If Kartik and Aman have an ally in Aman's family it is Goggle. Outspoken, hell-raising Goggle has known about Aman's sexuality since they were children and asks Kartik not to leave Aman behind when a friendship develops between them on the over-bridge of a railway platform. Goggle understands what it must be like to be undesirable in society. Her false left eye has marked her out as unsuitable for a handsome young man. She understands what social ostracism feels like. She does not want Aman to go through it alone as she seems destined to. Intersectional feminism checked.

The film progresses through to a rapid succession of events, involving the ritual death of Aman so that he can be 'reborn' as a marriageable young man, the planned wedding of Aman, Kartik's refusal to go quietly, Kartik standing on the rooftop, the Pride flag tied around his neck as a cape (making him a superhero born to take on and defeat the evil of homophobia), and shouting into a megaphone that Aman's father has a severe case of a dreadful disease called homophobia. As the word 'homophobia' echoes around the Tripathi courtyard and indeed across the cinema hall, one of the members of the Tripathi family makes the remark that this must a Dolby disease (Dolby bimāri lagti hae!). In writing that line into the script, the writer-director of the film accomplishes one of the many metafilmic acts in the narrative. By calling homophobia a Dolby disease, the writer and director Hitesh Kewalya makes it obvious that just as the technology of Dolby sound is not natural but is technologically produced by science, homophobia is not natural but is carefully produced by patriarchy by invoking science. The fact that as children we are taught that our sexual organs are only for reproduction and not for pleasure is an example of how biology is used by patriarchy to contain and heteronormatize the meaning and use of our genitalia. Just as Dolby technology allows us to experience sound in a more rounded, layered, multi-directional way, homophobia surrounds us in layered, multiple ways. Homophobia does not have only one channel of transmission or circulation. It is continually produced, transmitted and consumed in multiple ways simultaneously from ambient sources. What must be noted is that it is science, often abused and co-opted by patriarchy to serve its divisive agenda that is invoked by Aman when he describes love to his parents. By explaining love as a combination of chemical reactions, Aman uses science to erase the homophobic distance at which heteronormative persons keep homosexuality.

As Kartik is beaten up by Aman's father, in presence of the entire family, the soundtrack comes alive with a mash-up that references

the song “Kya Karte The Saajna” from the film *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka*. By quoting a song from a Gulshan Kumar film, SMZS accomplishes an intertextual act which ticks the box of postmodernity (through its knowing use of kitsch), and suggests to the T-Series consumer that if they had no problem feeling for the heterosexual couple in that 1989 film, they should not have any problem feeling for the homosexual couple in the 2020 film.

Aman and Kartik accomplish a task that most people think impossible: cure homophobia. Their accomplishment gives them an aura not unlike that of superheroes. The film suggests their superheroic status with characteristic postmodernist humour. When we first see them they are fighting the germs that attack our teeth and gums. At one point Kartik tells Aman that he is busy because he has to do battle with germs. As Kartik appears on the rooftop, barebodied and resplendent in a Pride flag tied around his neck as a cape, his transformation from a superhero fighting dental germs to one fighting homophobia is complete. By invoking the concept of the superhero, the film not only further underlines its pop culture credentials but also attempts to reach out to children and nip homophobia in the bud, as it were. On the two occasions that I went to watch the film, my friend and I were astonished and amused by the number of children in the audience. We speculated on the level of the parents’/guardians’ awareness of the film’s content. But if the film secretly desired a 7-to-70 age bracket as its target audience, then one can say that it has succeeded.

The film nears its conclusion as the stage is set for Aman’s wedding. As Kartik is revealed to be the ‘bride’, the police turn up to arrest the two men under Section 377. As Kartik and Aman make their seven circumventions around the fire, Kartik sings “Ye Dosti” from *Sholay* (1975). It is interesting that marriage of two men was mentioned in the context of this song ten years ago, in R. Raj Rao’s novel *Room 131*<sup>3</sup>. Whether or not the makers of SMZS were aware of the novel while making the film, the fact remains that the film accomplishes a queering of the Jay-Veeru friendship in the exact way that R. Raj Rao did ten years previously. It should also be noted that the Jay-Veeru friendship is used as a template in the film not only during the Bappi Lahiri song that plays during the closing credits, but is also mentioned by Jitendra Kumar in an interview<sup>4</sup>.

Since the wedding is happening on 5 September 2018, the Tripathi family requests the police to wait till the morning for the Supreme Court verdict. 6 September 2018 dawns. Members of the Tripathi family huddle around a tablet on which they watch as news breaks of the Supreme Court verdict that consensual sex between adults in private is no

longer a criminal offence. Celebrations all around. Kartik is accepted as a member of the Tripathi family.

As if the narrative of the film did not make it obvious enough that this is primarily about love, Bappi Lahiri appears with the main members of the cast as the closing credits start to roll. The song is “Pyar Bina Chain Kahan Re?” In so doing, the public is asked to accept (and here is the hidden contradiction of the film) homosexuality as an expression of love. It is here that the film unconsciously falls into the patriarchal trap that it seemed so anxious to avoid all along. To collapse sex with love is perhaps one of the most effective ways in which sex can be denied its own dignity. Sexuality becomes acceptable to middle-class morality only when justified as love. Therefore ‘having sex’ becomes ‘making love’. Although we are shown two kisses, we are not shown Kartik and Aman having sex or enjoying prolonged sexual pleasure in the manner that a Bipasha Basu- or an Imraan Hashmi-starrer once used to. Hindi film industry seems to have turned its back on sex and gone back to celebrating love. This turn may be a strategy of containment, the colonization of sex by love. So, this film about homosexuality effectively becomes about the homoromantic.

And yet, it is not as though sexuality is erased completely. But instead of it operating on its own terms and getting a certain amount of screen time, it is articulated and quickly shut down. This happens twice in the film. On the first occasion, when Aman has an animated conversation with his parents about his love for Kartik, he says that when he saw Kartik “Meri badi ho gayi thi” (Mine got big). His parents look scandalized. He quickly reads their minds and corrects them, “Ankhon ki putli badi ho gayi thi” (My pupils were enlarged!). This writing in of sex and immediately erasing it by invoking love accomplishes the classic deconstructive act. Sex is written and then a line drawn over it, crossing it out. But this crossing out does not render the word invisible. Under the line, the word remains. But society stipulates that the word should be crossed out. If sex is to remain in our “civilized” society, it must remain as a palimpsest, under the word love, written over, crossed out, barely hidden, but hidden nonetheless. The second instance is the scene when Kartik falls face down unable to bear the beating of Aman’s father anymore. His last words before passing out are, in English: “My sexuality is my sexuality. It is none of your sexuality.” The word ‘sexuality’ finally appears and when it does it appears three times in two consecutive sentences. The word has been repressed so long that it even replaces the word presumably meant by Kartik in the second sentence: “It is none of your business.” After which he does not speak for long and at one point is also presumed dead.

This message is pushed out even on the instagram accounts of Ayushmann Khurana, who in one photograph wears the t-shirt that bears the covertly patriarchal message “Love is Love.” What is forgotten is that Section 377 is not against any kind of love. It was expressly against certain sexual acts. These sexual acts may be expressions of love, but they need not be. By hijacking the Supreme Court verdict and turning it into a verdict that allowed some people to *love*, what the media has successfully done is demean sexuality just when it should have been celebrated. *Shubb Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* means well. But however well-meaning these supposedly liberal products of popular culture may be, they must always be subjected to queer feminist scrutiny lest these products turn out to be unsuspecting carriers of the virus of patriarchy.

## Notes:

1. This paper was greatly helped by discussions with Kaustav Manna, especially his drawing my attention to the use of the song “Kya Karte The Saajna” from the film *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka*.
2. According to *The Telegraph* T2, 19 March 2020, (p. 6.7) out of the thirteen films released in the first quarter of 2020, apart from *Baaghi* and *Tanaji*, *Subb Mangal Zyada Sabdhan* has grossed the highest at the Box Office. Made on a budget of 40 crores, it made 80 crores. *Tanaji*, made on a budget of 150 crores, made 370 crores. *Baaghi* earned 130 crores.
3. In R. Raj Rao’s novel *Hostel Room 131* (Penguin, 2010), Siddharth introduces Sudhir to the homoerotic men who shun the company of women. ...The lovers speak of eating and drinking together, living and dying together, for life. ...Isn’t this kind of domestic arrangement we call marriage?” (p. 93)
4. In an interview to *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2020. P. 14. Jitendra Kumar answered the question “How did you create this amazing chemistry?”, by saying, “The director told us that it should look like a normal *Jodi*. People love Jay and Veeru or Munnabhai and Circuit...people love these pairs, right? They love them because they are good friends. He told us, “*Romance and sexuality hum baad mein dekkenge*, first they should look like good friends’. It was easier to create that chemistry of friendship and bonding.”

**ONTOLOGY AND LIMINALITY: TONI MORRISON'S  
*BELOVED* AS DISCOURSE IN PLURISIGNIFICATION**

*Aparajita Hazra*

Jean Baudrillard made out post modernism as a riot of 'disparate fragmentary experiences and images that constantly bombard the individual ...' thereby rather obscuring the discourse of connectivity in a historiographic form. Frederic Jameson, Francis Fukuyama and the like, too, believe that postmodern culture, and therefore, literature has a rather spatial or flattened out concept of history where fragmentary images of the past are recycled into a semblance of history that has no real insight into the episteme of a historical context.

Yet, Linda Hutcheon, Clifford Geerts, Kobena Mercer and other New Historicists emphasize on the spatial and temporal rooting of a given text in the periphery of a contextual framework that is historical per se.

History of course then cannot be skirted around. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the novel at the focal spotlight of my dissertation is a novel flowering out of a past that is equally horrendous and intriguing into a future that is hopeful in its promises through a present, torrid with the energy of flux. Toni Morrison in a *Times* Interview on Jan 21, 1998 said "I'm interested in the way in which the past affects the present and I think that if we understand a good deal more about history, we automatically understand a great more about contemporary life." (Time)

Taking her at her word, one would suspend her novel, *Beloved* at a juncture swivelling between the past and the future.

Talking about the past, the novel would insistently rake up the issue of Blackness and slavery, as the chief characters of the novel spend their life negotiating memories of horrendous days in the past when they had to spend beastly days as slaves.

*Beloved*, brought out in 1987, came well after the History of Blackness crossed the vicissitudes of the Harlem Renaissance or the 'Flowering of Negro Literature' as James Weldon Johnson would have it and the uprise of the likes of Aime Cesaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas, standing up valiantly for Negritude. *Beloved* brings up the insidious impacts of the institution of slavery through a fictional framework spanning a handful of characters grappling with the

shrivelling memories of their days in bondage. Sethe with the ‘chokecherry tree’ on her back—the infamous mark of cowhide on her skin, Paul D with his ‘rusted tobacco tin’ of a heart, Baby Suggs with her attempt to wash out the evil of the past with her ‘holiness’—all flounder in a sea of bewilderment trying to figure out ways to negotiate the past.

Toni Morrison, in an interview with Susanna Rustin in *The Guardian*, Saturday issue, on 1st Nov, 2008, said that “the emphasis placed by critics on race has meant other aspects of the writing to have received less attention.” (Rustin) Again in yet another interview with Bonnie Angelo on *Time*, May 22, 1989 issue, Morrison stated clearly that “the book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about the anonymous people called slaves, what they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another.... I was trying to make it a personal experience.” (Angelo)

The point I am trying to make, then, is that, placing her book on a scale of historiography and judging it there from would be to peer at the book through a blinkered lens of blackness and negritude that would threaten to choke down issues that were more basic, instinctual, human, psychological and as Morrison says, ‘personal’ in nature—independent whatsoever of ‘blackness.’

*Beloved* is a piece of fiction that sets out its storyline in fragmented narratives that reflect life in pieces like a mirror shattered to smithereens, thereby reflecting a postmodern perspective through a schema that moves away from the teleological metanarrative mode. *Beloved* is and is not about slavery. The storyline is set, not at the time when the characters – Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs – battle the unspeakable horrors of slavery at Sweet Home but after it. Sweet Home during and after Mr. Garner’s time only features in flashbacks. It constitutes the past in the temporal framework of the novel. The book, dwelling in the present, finds the characters trying to come out of it — either by confronting it or by forgetting it. Morrison in an interview with Susanna Rustin said, “... The pressure was not to remember it (the history of slavery) but to get over it. So when I was writing *Beloved*, part of the architecture was forgetting it.” (Rustin)

So, it was about this ‘getting over’ and ‘forgetting’ that *Beloved* was all about. Forgetting is a complex psychological process – especially if it necessitates a face off with a horrendous past. *Beloved*, named ironically after the little baby who turns poltergeist a short while down in the novel, in essence pivots around Sethe – or rather her labyrinthal psychosomatic meanderings as she tries to come to terms with her ‘past,’

her cross – to be able to look forward to a more liveable ‘future’. The novel centres on the ‘present’.

In an age when we swear by our Oprah Winfreys, Danny Glovers, Morgan Freemans, Carl Lewises, Dizzy Gillespies and Harry Belafontes, it does seem a wee bit difficult to actually visualize and empathize with what it could have been for a black community to be born without a specific, personalized identity. Sethe, in *Beloved* never knew her father. Her mother – her ‘ma’am’ was singled out by the mark of a crossed circle branded below her breast – ‘burnt right into the skin’ (*Beloved* 72). ‘I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead’ (72) says Sethe’s mother – indicating that she, known by her mark was only one in a group with no individual name to honour her. Sethe herself later on got the infamous ‘chokecherry tree’ on her back – a hieroglyphic of shame and sorrow and a despicable telltale reminder of her horrendous past stamped on her by the cowhide of the schoolmaster. Paul D – named alphabetically – only stands as one in a series as does Sixo who probably was the sixth one in a series – reft of individual names to identify them – no better than animals in a herd. – The names are lost – irrevocably lost. Morrison once remarked in an interview with Thomas LeClair: ‘If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name. That’s a huge psychological scar.’ (LeClair)

It is this psychological crisis – the crisis of being swept along in life without a proper name to identify them with their ‘family’ – the angst to ‘belong’—that is what *Beloved* is all about. The characters in *Beloved* keep trying to figure out their identity in various ways. Baby Suggs rejects the slave name that was given to her on her bill-of-sale, Jenny Whitlow—to adopt the rather droll Baby Suggs. None of the names identified her back to her ‘family’. Yet ‘Baby Suggs’ at least signified a whiff of freedom and love that her husband afforded her before being swallowed into the whirlpool of slave trade. Stamp Paid stepped away from his slave name Joshua to call himself by a name that in itself declared all his debts to the world cleared thereby making him a free man. The names in *Beloved* are only clues to ownership with no trace of origin, hence, identity. Seethe rummages her life for her identity. Martin Heidegger, building up his theory of ontology on the thesis of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, speaks of the ontological need of human beings to reach out to what he calls the ‘Dasein’ – etymologically combining ‘ex’ or in German (Da=there + sein = being) connoting the core entity of any being. It is through a wrench of angst that a human being searches for his Dasein – his identity.

Essence is prior to existence, as Sartre would say. The human psyche has to come to terms with what the psychoanalysts would call his 'subjective identity'. Therefore a search, a quest for an identity, to formulate the 'essence' that forms the core of being or in Heidegger's terms the quintessence of the Dasein is forever afoot. Identity shapes itself through a number of decisive factors like nationality, religion, colour, race, parentage, profession and the like. Yet, that only fleshes out what we would call the 'objective identity' in contrary to 'subjective identity' which reflects what an individual sees himself as. Conflicts are inevitable, then, if the subjective identity finds itself at odds with the objective identity. After a dubious period of straddling fences, it necessitates a changeover. In identity negotiation, the individual is faced with the challenge of stepping out of the chrysalis of what was hitherto known as his identity in the world outside (objective identity) to reach out for the identity he dreams of (subjective identity).

Sethe in *Beloved* was born into slavehood. Her ma'am could never be there for her. She was nursed by a nanny as her own mother was working away in the fields with her nose to the grindstone – too busy or too tired to be there for her children. So Sethe had to be there for her children. She needed this history of filial severance to stop. She had to be there for her children – she had 'milk for them all' – she needed to get it to them. She needed her children to grow up the way she couldn't – free to live and love.

Erik H. Erikson analyses the psycho-social biases of the human behavioral patterns in *Childhood and Society* (1950). According to the Eriksonian Theory a human being, whatever spatio-temporal perspective he belongs to, has to traverse through life in eight specific psycho – social developmental phases, each of which pivots round a definitive crisis. The first five stages centre on infancy to adolescence – hence we shall leave them out in defining the adult Sethe. A study of the sixth, seventh and eighth stages would provide a very clear insight into the psychobiological tumults that kept tearing Sethe apart in her inexorable search for who she was.

According to Erikson the sixth stage of development faces a person with the crisis of 'intimacy versus isolation.' This stage tests a person's ability to love – the capability to form lasting and intimate relationships. A person who fails to clear this crisis often ends up in isolation. Sethe as *Beloved* first opens on her, was cloistered in a segregated isolation where 124, Bluestone Road with its 'hainting' was her sequestered cocoon. She had moved away from community or rather community had moved away from her because of Baby Suggs's exuberant show of excess. Baby Suggs, who set great store on 'knowing where to

step,' outstepped her own boundaries for once, and lost her community – a community that cannot stand the excess of 'having' in the face of their own legacy of 'not having' the money, freedom, identity—all that slavery took away from them. Paul D walked into Sethe's life with his rusted tobacco tin of memories, and with a presence that let women open up and cry, affording Sethe a chance to get over her crisis and make a crossover from isolation to intimacy. Community, too opens up, with the arrival of Paul D, on the day the threesome of Sethe, Paul and Denver walk to and back from the carnival – their shadows holding hands. Intimacy shows up in the horizon.

Yet this is where Sethe confronts the next crisis in her life in what Erikson would call the seventh stage in her developmental quest for identity – the crisis of 'generativity versus self-absorption.' Erikson describes this as the "need for individuals to overcome selfish, self-centred concerns and to take an active interest in helping and guiding the next generation." Just as Sethe began to find love – which one has to admit is a rather 'self centred' interest, her motherly instincts were challenged by the forceful assertion of motherhood and its duties in the form of Beloved. Significantly enough, Beloved materialized before Sethe, just as she was returning from the carnival, basking gingerly in the furtive hope of a life for herself. Sethe, as she reaches home, finds Beloved perched on a 'stump not far from the steps of 124' (60). 'And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity.... There was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now' (61). Beloved was born again – metaphorically, spiritually – to remind Sethe of her 'generativity' as opposed to her new found 'self-absorption.' Conflict rises again. Sethe had to decide between the two. She had to choose. Like all 'choices' – ontologically speaking – this one too came with its share of angst. Sethe chose to play mother to the hilt – generativity won the war against self-absorption. The process of inching Paul D away began. Event after event found Sethe at an ultimate point where her anxiety to explain to Beloved why she had killed her, and her eagerness 'to make up for the handsaw' (295) allowed Beloved to prey on her – "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (295). It was this parasitic, incubal 'haunting' on Sethe's existence that was feeding on 'her final crisis, i.e., 'integrity versus despair' at the last and eighth stage of the Eriksonian developmental theory. .... People look back and ask, "Did my life have any meaning?"—"Did my being here really matter?" (344). Sethe had no answer. But Denver had. Community had. Coming together at a juncture of crisis, Denver comes of age, finds her own individuality and merges

into community ending eighteen years of excommunication, thereby reversing the process of isolation versus intimacy, for Sethe.

Community exorcised Beloved out of Sethe's life – allowing her a second chance away from isolation towards intimacy – both social and personal, away from generativity towards self-absorption, away from despair towards integrity. Paul D returns: “Sethe ..... me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” (322) “you your best thing Sethe. You are” he reassures – reasserting her lost identity. ‘Me? Me?’ – says Sethe as she finally finds herself – not through the bounden duties of motherhood, but in her own solipsistic ‘self’ – her ‘me-ness’—to use the vocabulary of another Morrison creation Nel, in *Sula*—the me-ness that had lost itself first in its slavery to the ironically named Sweet Home and then its slavery to motherhood.

In fact, all of Sethe's life, she had been escaping in search of a place which would afford her the freedom to love as ‘thickly’ as she wished to. Even while at Sweet Home at Mr. Garner's time, she tried to create a vraisemblance of love around her by bringing in salsify to the kitchen because she had “to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it...”(21). Even then she was escaping reality to lull herself into the peace of nympholepsy. Yet it took no time for Halle's words to sink in: “It don't mother, Sethe. What then say is the same. Loud or soft.” So she escaped – in search of a more liveable place – a home of her own – a place to love in – to live in, unlike her mother who had migrated from her Africa to an unliveable plantation only to lose the freedom to love even her own child. Paul D runs away from sweet Home to Cincinnati and then finally, meanders into 124, in search of a ‘life’ there. Sethe's sons Howard and Buglar too run away – from the ‘haunting’ of a house ridden by ‘rememories’ in search of some place better. Denver invents a sanctorum for herself in the clearing where seclusion created a semblance of a place made liveable by the suspension of time, place and community. She escapes there. Beloved too escapes – from the grave of the forgetful past to 124 to rake up memories, ask questions and demand answers with vengeance.

Yet all said and done, Beloved was only an extension of Sethe's guilt – an exteriorization of her past. Twice born – once from the womb and again from the depths of the mind, Beloved fitted into place to maintain the trademark haunting of 124. First Baby Suggs was gone and then Beloved, Sethe and Denver remained after Paul D was gone. The threesome – symbolized metaphorically through a pair and a half of ice skates – melt borders. Identities merge so much so that she began losing

her own selfhood. Sethe did not mind – as she thought that she couldn't just do enough to make up for what she did to her child – when she slit her throat with a handsaw. Based on the nerve-racking real life incident of Margaret Garner who killed one of her children and tried to kill the others to allow them an escape from slavery, Sethe's filicide offered Morrison scope enough to ponder over the justification of the incident. In an interview to Don Swaim on September 15, 1987, Morrison said that Sethe's filicide "was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it .... It was the only thing to do, but it was the wrong thing to do." Right is wrong then and wrong is right – the foul is fair and the fair foul in a world, set asunder by the dementing unjustness of slave tradition. (Swaim)

Sethe knew this. All along her life Sethe had been swept off her feet by powerful feelings – feelings of yearning for her mother when she was a child – a craving for 'belonging' when she came into Sweet Home – a yearning for love when she married Halle and had children – the longing to be a good mother – to engulf her children in the love she had for all of them – symbolized and equated in her mind by the 'milk she had for all of them' – the love she needed to take to them – and finally the overwhelming sense of anxiety to steer her brood away from the ruthless institution of slavery – insane aggression when she found herself cornered with her worst fears coming true – the resultant sway of emotion that made her prefer death for her children than a lifetime of humiliation – and finally the engulfing sense of remorse – the huge psychomachia of knowing what she thought to be practically correct was morally, horribly wrong. She was a mother with all her love. Yet she killed her own child.

So she decided to atone. She gave in to Beloved's machinations. By letting herself be 'eaten up' by Beloved, she was paying back. She was paying for her killing of Beloved by letting Beloved kill her. She was trying to be another 'Stamp Paid' – paying off her dues.

Once reborn, Beloved follows a very specific course of infancy – the infancy of the little two year old she was when she was hacked to death by her mother – an infancy that can be traced psychoanalytically by Freudian steps that could trail clues to her final vengeance. According to Freud, every individual crosses certain stages in the course of his or her psycho – sexual development. Each stage, states Freud, revolves round a certain libido or instinctual force that drives and energises the id – or the innermost compartment of the human psychology. These libidos focus on certain parts of the human body in its quest for pleasure of fulfillment. Too little or for that matter too much of gratification on that

account amounts to abnormality which often in turn, results in strange kinds of ‘fixations’.

According to Freud, the first stage of psychological development would be the initial ‘oral stage’ where the ‘psychic energy’ centres round the mouth. This stage lasts until we are about eighteen months old. The pleasure principle stems from eating, sucking or even ogling. Significantly, when Beloved appears with her full grown body, her mental age still hovered round when she was killed by Sethe eighteen years ago. She still behaved like an infant. No wonder then her libidos fed on sweets and she focused all her being on watching Sethe smiling at her : “she was about to smile at me when the men without skin took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea.... She was getting ready to smile at me ... and she left me there with no face or hers.” (253) She compensates for the lost smile with sucking or all the sugar she can lay her hands on.

As days went by, Beloved’s psychosexual advancement saw changes. According to Freud, humans in the age of two to three, go through the anal stage where the libido concentrates on the anal zone through processes of psychosocial elimination corroborating with pleasure principles. This is the age when children normally receive toilet training from parents. Failure to adapt would result in the beginning of an indisciplined and chaotic personality. With Beloved, this stage proved to be uncontrolled and wanton, signalling the forthcoming confusion in her relationship to Sethe: Four days she slept ..... Denver tended her... She rinsed the sheets secretly.... She boiled the underwear and soaked it in bluing ....”(64) Beloved’s chaotic self manifested itself through the erratic bedwetting or the errant sexual behavior with Paul D in the outhouse, before bursting forth into the cacophony of riotous thoughts and desires voiced in a staccato of sentences in the first person toward the end of the book. Beloved’s libido races into a fixation on her mother that borders on what Melanie Klein would call the ‘pre-oedipal’ obsession in her Object Relations Theory in psychoanalysis. According to Klein, a pre-oedipal infant’s being is suffused with a range of conflicting but very strong emotions and dependence on its parent – especially the mother figure. The infant then ‘projects’ its feelings and emotions into the external agent – in all likelihood – the mother, transforming the agent into a ‘fantasy object’ or ‘imago’ (Klein 87).The imago is then introjected back into the infant consciousness, giving rise to a personalized identity of the infant in relation to its mother – or whoever is the ‘imago’. Beloved appears with all her conflicting emotions of vengeance warring with very strong dependence on Sethe, symbolically visualised in Denver’s sighting of the white clad arm around

Sethe's waist, or Beloved's caressing of Sethe's neck in the clearing, which startlingly ends up in an attempt at asphyxiation. Beloved's dependence on Sethe manifests in the need to see Sethe smile at her, the need to be physically close to her, to follow her around so much so that Beloved even walks down to meet Sethe on her way back from work, in her eagerness to see and be with her. This parasitic, familiar-like proximity is projected into Sethe who, when she transforms into the imago, introjects the feeling of close togetherness – often deadly too, back.

The incubus of dependence grows – and Sethe let it—as a weird way to make up for her act of aberration in the past. The incubus feeds on Sethe and waxes big as Sethe wanes. It is here then that community steps in. Morrison once stated in interview with Bonnie Angelo that “two parents can't raise a child any more than one— you need a whole community – everybody to raise a child... the little nuclear family is a paradigm that .... isolates people into little units – people need a larger unit” (Angelo).

Denver in *Beloved* grew up cloistered and sequestered into a shy, rather abnormal girl who had problems in reaching out into the world, hence all of whose internal energy was directed at tending to and nursing Beloved. Strangely enough, Beloved's excess shoved Denver out into the arms of community. Community received her back. Denver grew up, she came to terms with the world outside – the real world that is not the haunted little space called 124, Bluestone Road. It takes all the strength of community to prise Sethe's individualized entity – her identity away from her dangerously consuming, confused image as the 'errant but atoning mother of Beloved.' The community song at the end of the book is an interesting reversal symphony of Baby Suggs's 'holy' song – to save Sethe's soul by encouraging what Baby Suggs encouraged – self love. The community mothers, epiphanising the ancient maternal figure that had once surfaced in Baby Suggs, who had carried 'her great heart to the clearing' – to tell everybody to 'love' their own flesh: “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.” Baby Suggs struggled to deliver her Black community from the clutches of slavery to the whites – if not physical then mental as well.

Sethe too, learnt. She discovers her 'me-ness'. She learnt to live. She learnt to understand that she herself is her 'best thing'.

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## RABINDRANATH TAGORE, HIS FICTION, AND HIS FEMINISM: SOME EXAMPLES

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The fictional works by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) (including his dance-dramas or 'nrityanatyas') usually cover a wide range of topics: especially love, devotion, social discrimination, anti-imperial struggle, and facets of human relationships. However, many of the 21st-century publications critically focusing on Tagore's oeuvre – for example, the James Sterba-edited *Controversies in Feminism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), the P.C. Hogan and Lalita Pandit-edited *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), the Ranjana Harish and V. B. Harishankar-edited *Shakti: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Women's Empowerment in India* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004), R. K. Dhawan's *Feminism and Recent Indian Literature – Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2008), the Malashri Lal-edited *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translations* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015), the Chandrava Chakraborty and Sneha Kar Chaudhury-edited *Tagore's Idea of New Woman* (New Delhi: Sage, 2017) – are increasingly bringing in the feminist perspectives. This is quite natural and understandable – especially when it is an incontrovertible fact that a sizeable-number of Tagore's fictional publications (short-stories and novels) like *Athithi* ('The Guest', 1895), *Chokher Bali* ('A Grain of Sand'; 1901), *Streer Patra* ('The Wife's Letter', 1914), and *Aparichita* ('The Unknown Woman', 1916), and the three critically-lauded *nrityanatyas* – *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1938), and *Shyama* (1939) have very powerful, strong, and resilient female characters who reveal themselves through their individualism.

What the present paper proposes to do is to: first, historically analyse Tagore's conception of gender and gender-empowerment; and, second, re-read how ten of the more well-known Tagorean females – *Mriganayanee* (*Kankal*, 1892), *Mrinmoyee* (*Samapti*, 1893), *Giribala* (*Manbhanjan*, 1895), *Charulata* (*Nastoneer*, 1901), *Binodini* (*Chokher Bali*), *Mrinal* (*Strir Patra*), *Kalyani* (*Aparichita*, 1916), *Chitrangada* (*Chitrangada*), *Chandalika* (*Chandalika*), and *Shyama* (*Shyama*) assert their femininity and 'independence' within the short fictional spaces through either strong beliefs and individualism or radical thinking and practices.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in an aristocratic family (with roots in Jessore and Burdwan). His family-members were Brahma Hindus, with strong views in favour of the equality and socio-cultural liberation of women (Gupta 96). Influenced by the teachings of the Upanishads, the Brahmos believed in the supreme feminine powers, and understandably Tagore's maturing mind was deeply influenced by what he learned of the feminine. Moreover, he was under the direct influence of some strong-willed female family-members who were to later leave indelible marks on the cultural history of the whole of Bengal (Ray 7) (Mukherjee 28). The first was his mother, Sarada Tagore (1830-75), who was the mother of fifteen children by her husband Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) and yet found time to learn and discuss. Krishna Kripalani writes,

“[...] [T]he hunger for a mother's [that is, Sarada Tagore's] affection, never appeased in childhood, was to survive in the son as a recurring longing for feminine affection and care. Its haunting echoes can be heard in the exquisite child-poems Rabindranath Tagore wrote in the peak of his manhood, some of which were later published in English translation as *The Crescent Moon*. In some of his short stories and novels the mother's love has been delineated with such wealth of tenderness as to make one wonder whether the author was not partially satisfying his own unappeased hunger” (28).

By the time Tagore had lost his mother and was moulding into a sensitive writer, his family had become deeply involved in the 'proceedings' and 'activities' of the Bengal Renaissance. Two of the more important features of this (19th -century to early-20th-century) 'movement' was the effort by the male 'members' to get their female counterparts and acquaintances to write and publish, and the publication of journals and magazines in which were printed several critically-acclaimed female essays and articles (Classe 133). Rabindranath Tagore encouraged the females to write, and even sponsored them. His elder sister, Swarnakumari Ghosal (1855-1932), became one of the prominent female novelists of Bengal, and participated in the anti-imperial activities of the Indian National Congress. Rabindranath was directly connected to the Sakhi Samiti, which was founded by his influential didi in 1896 (Kumar 42), and this also contributed to moulding of his different ideas regarding femininity.

In Kadambari Tagore (1858-84), the wife of his elder-brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925), Rabindranath found an ideal companion and critic. Rabindranath arranged for the education of

Kadambari, and thereafter always showed drafts of his compositions to her for comments and suggestions. Kadambari gave insightful reviews, and is known to have inspired Rabindranath to write many of his poems and short-stories.

In 1883, Rabindranath Tagore was married to Bhabatarini Roy Choudhury (c. 1872-1902). Rabindranath's re-naming of his wife as 'Mrinalini' is supposed to have something to do with his naming Annapurna Turkhadekar (1858-91, the second daughter of the physician-social-reformer Atmaram Turkhadekar, 1823-98, who was Rabindranath's 1878-79 love interest) as 'Nalini'<sup>1</sup>. Annapurna Turkhadekar was senior to Rabindranath by three years, and yet her visits to England, her ease with English, and her vivacious and direct-speaking-nature attracted Rabindranath to her. In November 1880, Turkhadekar married Harold Littledale (b. 1853), a Scottish college-lecturer in History, and migrated to Edinburgh, but Rabindranath fondly remembered her in his writings. Mrinalini Devi, who studied English at Loreto House, was well-conversant with English and Sanskrit literatures, and translated parts of The Mahabharata and the Upanishads. She acted in her husband's plays, and when Rabindranath established the brahmacharya-school at Santiniketan in 1902, she sold most of her jewellery for the funding. The other women of artistic and epistemic excellence who directly influenced Rabindranath's writings included the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) (whom Tagore re-named as 'Bijoya'); Preeti Adhikary (Lady Ranu Mukherjee) (1906-2000), a patron of arts; the Spanish-born poet Zenobia Camprubi Aymar (1887-1956), and Pratima Chattopadhyay (1893-1969), a painter and the wife of Rabindranath's son Rathindranath Tagore (1888-1961). Tagore's three daughters – Madhurilata (1886-1918), Renuka (1890-1904), and Mira (1892-1962) – also shaped his thoughts and approach to women. Other than the feminine influence, Tagore also thought of initiating females to dance, and defied societal bindings to initiate the female students in dancing at his Santiniketan ashrama under the guise of 'sangetik bayam'. It is, therefore, natural that his oeuvre would be replete with strong female characters.

There are some controversies regarding Tagore's professed feminism too. Quoting Sati Chatterjee, an article in *The Telegraph* (Kolkata, 20 March 2014) publishes:

“In April 1933, [...] [Rabindranath Tagore] had written to Ramananda Chattopadhyay how the social structure in the West had been disturbed by women going out of home and becoming economically independent. ‘He was for the division of labour — man going out and

earning, and women spending judiciously while looking after the affairs at home'. In another letter in 1910 to Labanyalekha Chakraborty, he talks of his hopes that his new daughter-in-law Pratima, a remarried widow, would administer a loving, healing touch to the family, that she would be "above all but beneath everybody" and he would see "a benign motherhood" in her. He was alive to the brutal injustice and inequities in the system. The stories in *Galpaguchchha* (1900) revolve around women in vulnerable social positions"<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, to reiterate, I have identified ten female characters from Tagore's novels, short-stories, and dance-dramas, who have been given high places in the gamut of Bengali literary criticism for their assertion – directly or indirectly – of strong femininity. They are: Mrigonoyonee (Kankal), Mrinmoyee (Samapti), Giribala (Manbhanjan), Charulata (Nastoneer), Binodini (Chokher Bali), Mrinal (Streer Patra), Kalyani (Aparichita), Chitrangada (Chitrangada), Chandalika (Chandalika), and Shyama (Shyama).

In 1892, Tagore published the ghost-story "Kankal" ("Skeleton"), with a strong – though narcissist – female-character, Mrigonoyonee. William Radice might have noticed the presence of 'humour' and 'irony' in such supernatural stories<sup>3</sup>, but I personally feel that stories like "Kankal" deals with the extent to which a self-satisfying, strong-willed woman can go. In the story, Mrigonoyonee narrates the story of her death to a stranger – how she, as a widow, lived for some time with her brother, and thereafter, how she killed herself and a physician (with whom she had fallen in love) to prevent him from marrying someone else. I think that Tagore also wants to explore, in this short-story, how sorrowfully widows of his times lived under numerous societal restrictions. He probably wants to indicate the strength of will a woman would need to break the shackles. The 'skeleton' Tagore talks about might be the skeleton of the female-abusing patriarchal society of his times, and he develops his female protagonists as individualistic and charming enough to challenge different chauvinistic 'shackles'. It is a pity that Mrigonoyonee has to kill herself to satisfy her love.

Second on my list – and chronologically arranged – is Mrinmoyee of "Samapti", a short-story published in 1893. In Tagore's narrative, Mrinmoyee is a flamboyant young woman who, once again, is bound by patriarchal restrictions. When she is married off to an educated gentleman (Apurbo), she does not reciprocate her husband's appreciation or love or his desires. She is resentful of her rather-forced marriage, but Mrinmoyee (the 'soil-made' – alluding to her humble

status) starts to change once her husband goes to Kolkata to complete another educational degree. The same Mrinmoyee, who refused to accompany Apurbo to Kolkata because of her friend Rakhai, warms up to Apurbo when he returns. I think that Mrinmoyee, though she submits herself to patriarchal norms at the end of the story, dares to choose her husband according to her wishes and her time. This freedom of choice was unheard of in Tagore's times.

Third on my list is Giribala of "Maanbhanjan" ("The Appeasement of Fury"), a short-story which Tagore published in 1895. In Tagore's story, she is shown as a lonely housewife whose husband (Gopinath Seal of a house of landlords) beats her up, takes her jewellery and elopes with his lover, the theatre-actress Labango. While spying on her husband, Giribala herself falls in love with theatre and theatricalities. After Gopinath's betrayal, Giribala does not lament about her fate. She, rather, re-incarnates herself as Mandira Devi, an actress of a successful play. Labango returns with Gopinath to learn about the actress who has replaced her, and both are left stunned. While Gopinath is enraged as he still feels he holds authority over her as she is still his wife or 'property', Labango is resentful of having left her flourishing career for a man. Giribala shows that women need not depend on the men in their lives and that they can achieve their own success. Bhaskar Chattopadhyay writes,

"Tagore's story is a timeless tale of a woman's emancipation, a bold ode to the notion of womanhood and a beautiful story of how fate and destiny turn the wheels of fortune for all of us. At the same time, it also explores the frailty of relationships and talks about the dangers of vanity"<sup>4</sup>.

Charulata of *Nastanirh*, a novella published in 1901, is fourth on my list of strong Tagorean female characters. Charulata is a lonely housewife – neglected by her liberal-minded but self-centred husband Bhupati – who falls in love with his brother-in-law, Amal. She initially finds it difficult to stay idle at home and expresses interest in learning music. In fact, Charulata does not have an affair consciously, but is innocently drawn to the attention she receives from her teacher, brother-in-law, and friend. Through Charulata and her divided affections and mental turmoils, Rabindranath Tagore explores the concept of women making choices and giving vent to their desires. Tagore courageously shows how Bhupati's busy schedule is the root cause of Charulata's loneliness and in her brother-in-law Amal, she finds creativity and the desire to dream.

Binodini of *Chokher Bali*, a novel Tagore published in 1903,

comes fifth on my list. A widow herself, Binodini rejects the patriarchal norms applied to the Bengali widows as she involves herself in an extramarital affair with Mahendra, nurses conflicting feelings towards Mahendra's friend and adopted-brother Behari, and shares a problematic relationship with Ashalata, Mahendra's wife. Binodini does not accept her fate with resignation, and does not give up her sexual desires. Rather, she uses her smartness, beauty, and education to make her own presence felt in her society. Though she retires to a women's shelter at the conclusion of the story, she has striven a lot in order to uplift the condition of the widows, which exceptionalises her as a Tagorean female character.

Mrinal of *Streer Patra* ('The Wife's Letter'), published in 1914, is the sixth on my list. In the story, Mrinal, married for fifteen years, is shown to be a progressive woman who dares to leave the house of her regressive husband and in-laws. The story is told in epistolary form where the 'rebellious' wife writes a letter to her husband regarding her subordination. Unlike Mrinal's elder sister-in-law who unquestionably accepts the patriarchal system, and the poor orphaned Bindu who is forced to commit suicide, Mrinal's education does not allow her to do the same. Starting with a common humble addressing note 'Sricharankamaleshu' ('at your lotus-like feet') she ends up addressing herself as 'Charanatalashraychhinna' ('separated from your lotus-like feet') – a sarcastically used word, which actually signifies a rejection for all those so called relationships she left behind. In between, she opens up her box of feminist realisations vexed by some incidents fall out inside her very own household. Standing on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, she finally declares that she would never allow herself to be confined and codified by the patriarchal societal norms. Rather, she wishes to begin a life of freedom and self-respect for which she never realised an urge before.

Kalyani of *Aparichita* ('The Woman Unknown') (1916) is the seventh strong Tagorean female character on my list. Kalyani's father, Shambhunath Babu, who is rich and has educated his daughter, fixes her marriage to Anupam, a postgraduate, but who would marry his bride for a hefty dowry. When Anupam's maternal-uncle humiliates Shambhunath Babu on the marriage-day over the suspected 'purity' of the gold-ornaments, the enraged and self-respecting bride's father breaks off his daughter's marriage. To a gluttonous patriarchal society which always hankers after dowry from the bride's parents, Kalyani is an 'unfamiliar' woman who chooses celibacy/spinsterhood over humiliation. She also registers her resentment against the British imperialism. This exceptionalises Kalyani's character to my interpretation.

On my list – chronologically arranged – are also the three female protagonists of Tagore’s dance-dramas: Chitrangada, Chandalika, and Shyama. Going against the usual patriarchal norms, Chitrangada, in the 1936-nritya-natya of the same name, dares to choose Arjuna, and expresses her sexual desire quite openly while trying to impress him. She is also a woman with uncommon military prowess, and thus is perhaps one of the stronger female characters Tagore ever produced. Refusing to be cowed down by male and so-called ‘upper-caste’-parochialism, Chandalika rebels against the deplorable practice of untouchability, and later uses her mother’s magical prowess to hold the Buddhist monk, Ananda, back in order to receive continuous support for her struggles against a casteist, patriarchal society. Shyama, the beautiful and efficient courtesan in Tagore’s 1939-nritya-natya is another strong female character who chooses the foreign-merchant Bajrasen as her lover, and easily sacrifices Uttiya to win her love-life with Bajrasen. Though Bajrasen deserts her rather arbitrarily at the end of the dance-drama, she does not, for once, is shown to regret her decision regarding Bajrasen.

It should be admitted here that as many works have been written disclaiming Rabindranath Tagore as a feminist as have been published in favour of his ‘feministic bent of mind’. I am sure that some papers questioning Tagore’s concept of gender, would be read here. However, what I have tried to do here is to simply re-read some of the female characters from Tagore’s literary world to explore how they have made their femininity felt across the society. Tagore might not be a feminist to many critics; but his female-characters definitely are.

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**THE MONSTER IN CONFINEMENT: THE INTERSEX IN  
MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE  
FIRE*.**

*Partha Sarathi Gupta*

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is one of those rare dramatic attempts in Indian Literature which elevates the intersex as a valid subject of literary representation. Barbara J. King in her paper "What does it Mean to be Intersex?" (2015) argues that the term "intersex" ought to be acknowledged in the parlance of Third Gender Studies, in preference to the old word "hermaphrodite" which once suggested bodies which encompass both male and female genitals. The word "transgender" too is no more preferred by theorists of the intersex on account of its discursive fluidity. The following definition opens up new vistas of scholarship in the field:

In the area of 1 in 2000 people are born intersex. These individuals may have mixed genitalia, meaning some combination of ovaries and testes. This comes about either because ovarian and testicular tissue grow together in the same organ or because "male side" and a "female side" develop in the body. Other intersex individuals may have genetically inherited chromosomal abnormalities such as congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which may result in masculinization of the genitals in people born with XX chromosomes, or androgen insensitivity syndrome, when the body doesn't respond to testosterone and a person has XY chromosomes and feminized genitalia. (King)

King's definition problematizes the artist's semiotic attempts to represent characters born intersex in literary works, as it opens the Pandora's box of anxieties pertaining to sexualized bodies, compulsory gender configurations and identities which refuse to bend and budge in mainstream discourses of culture. Nevertheless, Mahesh Dattani in his pathbreaking production *Seven Steps Around the Fire* addresses issues of intersexed bodies, and the binaries of beauty and bestiality accorded to intersexed individuals in modern India. Despite a pronounced literary heritage going back to ancient Indian mythology and episodes in the Mahabharata celebrating the presence and function of the intersex, modern Indian literature has rarely subjectivized them in literary

representations. Dattani's play, with its whodunnit structure, revolves round a criminal investigative inquiry into an alleged murder of a eunuch Kamala by her/his erstwhile peer Anarkali, who is in prison when the play begins *in media res*. Anarkali is confined to a male prison and is subject to untold physical harassment by the other rogue inmates who molest and bully her/him. The Superintendent of Police in the Mumbai cell she/he is confined in, along with his juniors, subject Anarkali, the *hijra* to continuous anatomical glare and scrutiny as she/he is first bestialized and then gradually dehumanized, until she is academically resuscitated by Uma, the wife of the S.P who dedicates herself to writing a Ph.D thesis on intersexed individuals.

The first section of this study attempts to revisit notions of anatomy, sexuality, subjecthood and other identificatory norms to locate the exact site of the intersex in the domain of discourse, in the light of Foucault and Judith Butler. The second section reads into the internal procedures of exclusion which control and delimit literature and popular culture as discourses which carefully bypass representations of the intersex. Both sections have been engaged upon in the light of a close reading of Mahesh Dattani's play. Foucault's critiquing of the "hermaphrodite" prejudice in one of his 1975-76 lectures titled *Abnormal* analysing the representation of "hermaphrodite" as a category of "monster" since the end of the eighteenth century (62) may open up the beast debate. The following extracts from Foucault's 22 January 1975 lecture on the prejudiced notion of the hermaphrodite as a monster may throw significant light on the evolution of the beast debate. Foucault observes: "The monster is problematic, challenging both the medical and the judicial system. It is around the monster that the entire problematic of abnormality is set out in the period from 1820 to 1830..." (62). He then goes on to historicize the hermaphrodite conundrum:

No doubt this should be examined more closely, but broadly speaking, we can accept, or at least people will tell you, that from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, and until at least the start of the seventeenth century, hermaphrodites were considered to be monsters and were executed, burnt at the stake and their ashes thrown to the winds....Very soon afterward a different type of jurisprudence appears...from the seventeenth century at least, a hermaphrodite was not convicted just for being a hermaphrodite. Individuals recognized as hermaphrodites were asked to choose their sex, and to conduct themselves accordingly, especially by wearing clothes. They were subject to

criminal law and could be convicted for sodomy only if they made use of their additional sex. (67)

For Foucault the hermaphrodite is deemed no better than a monster as he/she defies our categories of understanding our institutions - be they civil, scientific, religious or judicial.

The hermaphrodite calls the law into question and disables it, for, as monsters, with their exceptional physicality, they jam up the juridical machinery that regulates social institutions such as marriage laws, the baptismal canon and laws of succession and inheritance. The human monster thus according to Foucault combines the impossible and unalterable. For him, the monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table. (63). Hence, the hermaphrodite is the appropriate model of the transgressed being: "one did not know whether to treat him/her as a boy or a girl, whether or not he/she should be allowed to marry" (65). The Foucauldian monster thus is not just a transgressor; a criminal too. A perusal of Anne Grandjean's trial in 1765, as recorded and analyzed by Foucault would explain why hermaphrodites were incriminated. As a criminal, his/her monstrosity then has nothing to do with being a hermaphrodite, but rather, that she/he, despite registering her/his gender as 'she', loved other women, and not men, hence transgressing the limits set by compulsory heterosexuality. According to Foucault this is exactly why social institutions collectively conspired to incriminate him/her.

Locating case studies of such incriminations in literature or popular culture is not an easy task as such subjects are still tabooed in the discourses of literature and popular culture. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (first broadcast as a radio play and then staged in 1999) is one of the very rare theatrical attempts to offer a critique of the institution of social justice in modern India in this regard. The play opens in the interiors of the office of the Superintendent of Police where Uma, a research scholar and the wife of the S.P, waits to be escorted to the cell where Anarkali, the *hijra* is locked up for the alleged murder of another *hijra* Kamla. Munswamy, the police constable who escorts Uma, desperately attempts to dissuade her from visiting Anarkali, addressing her/him as "it", a blatant signifier of dehumanization. When Uma asks Munswamy, 'Will she talk to me?' he replies: She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (Dattani 238). As Munswamy tries to dissuade the lady from a "respectable family" from seeing the *hijra*, Uma has already pushed her way through to the cell of Anarkali. Later that night she enquires of her husband, "Why did they put her in a male prison?" Suresh replies "They are as strong as horses." Later he rebuffs

her when she tries to explain that she could never have murdered Kamla who was almost a sister to her: "What's that you said? Sister! There is no such thing for them. ...They are all just castrated degenerated men. They fought like dogs everyday, that Anarkali" (238). We may note here how the *hijra* is being continuously denied subjecthood and is repeatedly being referred to in animal terms. He/she hence becomes a *monster* jamming up the juridical machinery which regulates social institutions. A close analysis of only the first scene of the play would throw much light on the issue. The play begins with the sound of Sanskrit chants appropriate to a Hindu wedding that fades into the sound of fire and flames engulfing a scream. The murder of the *bride* Kamla has been committed and symbolically the hermaphrodite has been denied the social institution of marriage. When Uma expresses her interest to study the case of Kamla's murder allegedly by Anarkali, Munswamy dissuades her on the grounds that there are other more socially acceptable crimes for study than that of the crime of the *hijra*: "There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother...Madam, once again I request you to take up some other case. Look at this man. He cut off his wife's nose. He will give you an interesting story" (Dattani 234-235). The institution of justice recognizes the vilest of gender related crimes, including dowry murders and even the cutting off a woman's nose by her husband but displays a strange aversion towards the crime perpetrated by a *hijra*. His/her criminality too is marginalized in juridical discourses. Anarkali is locked up in a male prison nevertheless to gratify the perverse lusts of male prisoners. Although Dattani's play is primarily a critique of the social responses to the intersex community in India, he nevertheless deconstructs the hegemonies of gender constructions in the process. As the story progresses, it gets exposed that Anarkali has been falsely accused of Kamla's murder; that Kamla had been a pretty eunuch, in love with Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister, and had already got married to him in a temple according to Hindu rites. The priest had not recognized the identity of the erstwhile 'bride'- an intersex, excluded from the institution of marriage. The minister was left with no other option but to eliminate Kamla (the bride) so as to avoid a family embarrassment, and therefore hastily arranges a suitable bride for his son Subbu, who is thus compelled to part ways with the object of his affection. But at the wedding—attended of course by the *hijras* who sing and dance at weddings and births---Subbu commits suicide, and the truth behind the suicide is hushed up with the arrest of Kamla's '*hijra*' mate Anarkali. Kamla's story thus exposes the desire of the intersex to be assimilated into the mainstream traditions of culture, which unfortunately is sadly denied to them. The play is about the struggle of

numerous Kamlas invisible in our society fighting for existence, for recognition as human beings. Kamla, like many “hermaphrodites” in India is a *castrated man* who belongs to neither sex. Such individuals who are anatomical exceptions are generally ghettoized in tabooed localities of the underbellies of towns and cities, and due to their inferior social status, often are compelled to take up begging and prostitution for a living. Dattani, however avoids going into the intricacies of their gendered identities, choosing to expose how their ‘presence’ or symbolic absence is controlled and regulated by the politics of *compulsory heterosexuality* in our society. At the centre of the murder-mystery in the play lies a photograph – a polaroid picture of the minister’s son Subbu garlanding his beautiful bride Kamla. This photograph may not simply be read in terms of its fictional significance in juxtaposition with some other photographs recovered from Kamla’s trunk in her closet as Champa rummages through them to help Uma, the researcher. When Champa opens the rusty tin case containing Kamla’s belonging in the cramped *hijra* quarters, an old photograph draws Uma’s attention as she exclaims, “Who is this beautiful young man?” (260). Champa explains that the beautiful man had been Kamla before she decided to become woman. Dattani may be critiqued for having consciously or unconsciously eschewed overt references to the erstwhile beautiful man’s cosmetic transformation into a beautiful woman, fit enough to marry her lover Subbu – a practice which has conventionally allowed the intersexed “beast” or “monster” to switch over to the realm of “beauty” by cosmetic practices approved by patriarchy. We may recall Foucault’s reminder here of the “different type jurisprudence” (67) which emerged in the eighteenth century, offering the hermaphrodite the choice to opt for their dominant sex and “to conduct themselves accordingly, especially by wearing appropriate clothes” (67). The modern Indian *hijra* of the twentieth century (in the context of Dattani’s play) perhaps is still confined to the same prison-house of “appropriateness” in terms of conduct and sartorial appropriation. Kamla was only practicing the same norm in order to augment his feminine beauty for the sake of social acceptance. But that acceptance was never to come, and the rude jolt of his original “monstrosity” estranges him forever from the realm of institutions. The monster is debarred from the institution of marriage primarily because of “its” inability to participate and function as a reproductive agent to further the cause of civilization. Citing the case of “the Rouen hermaphrodite” from 1614-1615 (68) – concerning an individual who was baptized as Marie Lemarcis, Foucault reports how Lemarcis was sentenced to be hung and then burned and her ashes to be scattered in the wind, not because she gradually became man, wore

men's clothes, but because she married a widow who was already mother of three children:

There was a denunciation. Marie Lemarcis , who had taken the name of Martin Lemarcis, came before the court and the first judges called for a medical examination by a doctor, an apothecary, and two surgeons. They found no sign of virility...The verdict of the Rouan court is interesting because it releases the woman, orders her to wear woman's clothes, and prohibits her from living with anyone of either sex, "on pain of death." So there is a ban on all sexual relations but no conviction for the fact of being a hermaphrodite or for the nature of hermaphroditism. Nor is there a conviction for having lived with a woman, even though it seems that the hermaphrodite's dominant sex was that of a woman. (68)

The verdict is thus clear on the social, moral, juridical and conjugal injunctions of the intersex's claim to space. These are some of the discursive limitations and bondages imposed upon the intersex bequeathed to culture since ages. Other discursive limitations exist in the realm of art and literature too.

Literary and performative texts have always been subjected to discursive limitations when it came to articulations of transsexuality. Literature too, according to Foucault is *discourse* and the procedures of exclusion and prohibition operate as much in literature as in other discourses. And when it comes to the inclusion of sexuality in literature, the grid tightens doubly. In other words, the procedures of exclusion and prohibition operate twice as much strong here, for among the domains in which exclusion and prohibition get applied, sexuality and politics are the most vulnerable, as Foucault explains in his lecture *The Order of Discourse*. The problem multiplies with the entry of the intersex into the domain of literature and the discourse of art, for he/she is officially and technically debarred, excluded and prohibited from the matrix of *heterosexuality*, denied even the status of a human subject. In other words, the intersex's eligibility to enter the domain of any form of discourse, including literature, would be subject to conditions that sanction his/her role. In India, apart from the Bollywood song and dance rituals during wedding ceremonies and births accompanied by stylized clapping of hands and obscene clowning, eliciting mirth and cat-calls from viewers, the intersex has never really found voice or representation as subjects in literature and popular culture, barring a few exceptional cases. At least in the West there is the exceptional case of the nineteenth century French

hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin who has inspired some very rare literary productions and theoretical postulations in the twentieth century. In America, Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Middlesex* in 2003, and earlier, Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* have all been inspired by Barbin's *Memoirs*. The tell-all autobiography is titled *Herculine Barbin: The Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*, discovered and published by Foucault in 1980. The work was published initially in 1872 by Dr Auguste Tardieu – a forensic scientist who received the manuscript from a Dr Regnier, who reported Barbine's suicide in 1868. Foucault, first in 1976 and later in 1980 in the English translation, introduced the memoir along with a dossier of documents relating to Herculine's case which later, the gender theorist Judith Butler amplifies upon. Herculine Barbine was born as Alexina in 1838. Brought up as a female, Alexina led a confused life, growing up, having misgivings about her body, and developing close sexual relations with girls. It was in 1860 that a doctor examined her and determined that she was male. Hence, she took on the name of Abel and decided to live as a man, after trying as long as possible to reconcile with the truth of her differences from other women. She eventually committed suicide perhaps on account of alienation and on being socially misunderstood. The memoirs have been presented as a death-bed confession, the text adopting certain tropes of modern autobiography. It appears certain that Barbin must have had a close acquaintance with Rousseau's *Confessions*. The narrator of the text proclaims his/her sincerity and attempts to communicate a sentimental truth from a position of exile, sexual and social. He/she in the narrative acknowledges his/her lack of literary ability-- the inability to wield the pen skillfully to assume a place among the literary 'greats', among the *canons*. According to Judith Butler, Barbin's literary anxiety over sexual identity acts as a metaphor of his /her anxiety over sexual identity, the anxiety resulting out of Barbin's inability to assume a place in the regime of *true sex* and hence in the regime of discourse. From this anxiety might have emanated what may be called a possible *écriture intersex*, corresponding to what Helene Cixous would call *écriture feminine*. But tragically, such *écriture* remains in the realm of theoretical fantasy. For Barbin, the production of oral and written confessions concerning his/her intersexuality serves only to facilitate society's disciplinary gaze which decrees the parameters of acceptable bodily morphology, eventually driving her/him to bodily annihilation in suicide. In Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*, the fictional character of the narrator Cal has been inspired by Barbin and his /her scientifically and historically verified accounts. Such attempts are rare in literature.

To conclude, although Dattani's sincerity in the representation of the marginality of the hermaphrodite in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

cannot be doubted, at best the play offers a critique of the phallogocentric universe. The play is an objective attempt at stripping the hypocrisies of the juridical and educational institutions which, at the most, recognize the ‘case’ of the hermaphrodite as an aberration, fit to be the topic of a thesis for theoretical research, but refuse to grant him/her subjecthood. Fighting a lost battle, the *hijra* Anarkali in *Seven Steps* spews venom through the use of bawdy slangs disrupting the sanctity of phallogocentric language, the sanctity of ‘family relations’ and above all, the matrix of heterosexuality. His/her diatribe targeted at Munswamy, the agent of the juridical machinery, can be cited as reference. When Anarkali casually addresses him as *brother* and ask for a cigarette, Munswamy rejects the call: “Shut up. And don’t call me brother”, Anarkali. being denied even a casual kinship, retorts by disrupting the code of sanctified filial relations. “If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a cigarette for a fuck no? (Dattani 240).

Language for the intersex, therefore, becomes a site of violence, for through the disruption of decorum in language, he/she cries foul against the order of sexuality and patriarchy. The violence embedded in the language of Anarkali and Champa marks out the territorial injunctions laid down upon the intersex and resists at the same time the juridioco-biological space allotted to them. Foucault observes that the “monster” itself is a signifier of that space which is both extreme and rare – the limit of aberration, the extreme point at which the law is overturned, combining the impossible and the forbidden. From that position of the extreme periphery, the “monster” uses the power of disruptive language to create anxiety, trapping the law while breaching it.

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**OF CONTAGIOUS DISEASE AND EMIGRATED  
PROSTITUTES: 'GULZAR' CHANDERNAGORE IN  
SELECT 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BENGALI CHAP BOOKS**

*Antara Mukherjee*

In 1864 British rule in India necessitated the application of The Cantonment Act on prostitutes imprisoned within the cantonments in late nineteenth century Calcutta. The act was directed to protect the health of British soldiers who were visiting prostitute quarters and contracting venereal diseases from them. By this Act it was decided that separate brothel would be constructed for the British soldiers within the cantonments. This measure which was apparently taken for the safety of the British soldiers was actually directed to control the prostitutes through surveillance by the colonial masters. Hence a section of the prostitutes was imprisoned in the cantonments. Prostitutes employed for the soldiers would be registered and special care would be taken for their regular medical check up. For this purpose young, healthy and beautiful girls were brought from nearby suburbs and villages. Lest they want to return to their relatives, they were entrapped in the Lock Hospitals which were built for their treatments within the cantonments. This was a significant moment of transition of the profession of prostitution from being a sinful trade in the pre-colonial past to a criminal act in the colonial present. Colonial rule, as Sumanta Banerjee notes in *Dangerous Outcast: Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (2000), converted the so called sinners into criminals, and altered the profession from its 'socio-religious interpretation' (*Dangerous Outcast* 143) to a 'colonial socio-legal codification' (143). Actually, whoring in pre-colonial societies, Sumanta Banerjee has aptly pointed out, was a 'sin' where the prostitutes, though branded as sinners, were grudgingly accepted as a part of society. But to the colonial rulers, the profession of prostitution was considered as a crime, and so must be controlled. In other words, prostitutes were dangerous since they threatened the Empire by making inroads into it through its soldiers. In this sense, the 'docile' bodies of the colonised 'other' had the capacities to exert an uncontrollable threat to the imperial operations. So controlling those bodies by disciplining them medically was the only way by which they could be transformed and used. Elleke Boehmer, in "Transfiguring : Colonial body into postcolonial narrative (1993)", opines that colonised subject's body has been the object of the coloniser's fascination and repulsion and in effect possession: "the sublimated fascinations with the strange" justifies the domination of the

other as untamed and raw, and “open to mastery, available for use” (269). Hence, to use the bodies of the colonised subject, it became essential to tame them medically to negate any possibility of exerting an unpredictable threat to a systematic mode of social system, neutralizing thereby the threat to the prevailing social system and legitimising colonial rule.

Yet the Cantonment Act was failing in its aims, for the soldiers were moving out of their cantonments and consorting with other prostitutes and were getting inflicted. So the authorities decided to extend their operation beyond the cantonments and impose control over all those prostitutes who were plying their trade outside the cantonments. Thus they implemented a new law called the Indian Contagious Diseases Act on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1868. This brought the entire profession under strict state supervision and surveillance. By this act, it became compulsory for all prostitutes to undergo medical examinations in Lock Hospitals along with registration. Only a fit certificate from the authorities would permit them to ply their trade. This dreaded act was known as ‘Choddo Ain’, ‘Choddo’ or fourteen, derived from the number of the Legislation Act XIV. The act was the brain child of Dr. C. Fabre-Tonnerre, Health Officer in Calcutta. In his article “Stick Bodmaesh Jobdo”, *Bangalir Bottola [Bottola of the Bengalis]* (2013), Surajit Sen describes the method of operation of the Act:

Ei Ain e bola chilo je sorkari doctor beshyaparai camp korbe, beshyara thanay registry koraben ebong sei registration number onujayi tader deke porikkha kora hobe. Jander shorire siphylis er lokkhon pawa jabe tanderke sorkari haspatale rekhe chikitsa korano hobe ebong sustho hole tader chere dewa hobe. Ei jonyo british sorkar kolkatay joruri bhittite kotoguli hanspatal khulechilo, Dr. Locke onushorone jegulor nam chilo Lock Hanspatal. Proshongoto Dr. Lock e ei ain tir prostab rakhen sorkarer kache.

[It was mandated in this law that the Government doctors would camp in the land of the harlots, the prostitutes would register their names in the police station and they would be called for examination. Those persons whose bodies betray symptoms of Siphylis would be admitted to the hospital and their treatments would begin right there. Gradually as they restore to health, they would be allowed to leave. For this reason the British Government opened up a handful of hospitals on emergency errand, after the name of Dr.

Lock which were known as Locke Hospitals. Incidentally it was Dr. Lock who took the initiation of proposing the establishment of this law to the government]. (377)

The police left no stone unturned to torture, threaten and abuse the prostitutes under the garb of this law. Sumanta Banerjee in *Asbruto Kanthoswar [The Unheard Voice]* (2002) opines: “Jor kore dhore niye jawa, daktari porikkhar name doihik obomanona o utpiron, rehai pabar jonyo utkoch prodan – ityadi nana hoirani sojhyo korte hoi dehopojibinider [“The prostitutes were forcibly dragged against their will, molested and abused in the name of medical scrutiny; in their desperate attempts to escape the undesirable captivity the prostitutes often bribed the police yet the prostitutes had to bear with several other humiliating harassment”] (122)”. Thus the docile bodies were subjected to torture; they were used and transformed. Confinement at Lock Hospital meant loss of income for a long period, which by extension, meant lack of food and essentials for dependants at home. Out of the hospital, many of them became unemployed, for they are now replaced by new prostitutes who had come in their place during their prolonged absence from the trade. Resultantly some of them, as Adrish Biswas, in his ‘Introduction’ to volume 2 of *Battalar Boi: Unish Shotoker Dushprapyo Kuriti Boi [Books of Bottola : Twenty Rare Books of Nineteenth Century]* (2011) points out, some fell sick, some committed suicide and some ran away to French-ruled Chandernagore : “police theke purush daktar sokolei emon nirmom o nisthur achoron korten je porikkha koranor jontronar bhoie bohu beshya Kolkata sohor chere paliye gyalo. Oneke gyalo forasi swashonadhin Chondonnogorer penetite sekhane british ain chole na [“The prostitutes were subjected to such inhuman and unbearable torture both by police and by male doctors that in fear of medical examination many ran away from Calcutta to French-ruled Chandernagore where British measures were not applicable...”] (18)”. In fact, in order to save themselves from oppression and unemployment, many fled from British-ruled Calcutta to nearby districts like Hooghly and Burdwan as well as to distant lands like Kashi, Vrindavan, Gaya, Mathura. In an interview to Adrish Biswas and Mou Bhattacharya, Pradeep Basu has interpreted this phenomenon as an instance of ‘typical colonial biopolitics’ (*Bangalir Bottola* 32). ‘Colonial biopolitics’ refers to a shrewd mechanism of power that attempted to consolidate the imperial authority by utilising political power to regulate and control the bodily autonomy of the oppressed colonized subject. However, the very fact that they could escape from British-ruled Calcutta to either distant lands or to non-British territory deserves critical re-exploration of the phenomenon which Dr Basu calls ‘typical colonial biopolitics’.

It must be noted that colonial Calcutta became a dreadful place for the 'obhodro' or disgraced 'other' not only for the Act, but also for lack of sympathetic support from the genteel society. Deep seated prejudice against the prostitutes could not be overpowered by western education and so the 'bhadra samaj' failed to recognize prostitution "as any other professional community working within a commercial set up... and so deserves support when threatened by legal measures" (*Dangerous Outcast* 152). Rather, some amongst the 'bhadralok' voiced against the eradication of the prostitutes from respectable localities or 'bhadra pallis' and appealed for dumping them to the peripheral part of the city; in this regard one may recall Sri Kaliprassana Sinha's, who led 'Vidyotsahini Sabha', appeal to the colonial administration, published in the newspaper 'Sangbad Prabhakar' on 19/11/1856, to issue orders to move the prostitutes from the city centre in to some marginalised, ghettoized locale of the city; the 'bhadra mahilas', accustomed to traditional norms of female submission to male dictates in social behavior, failed to recognize the male responsibility in it. The situation became complicated, for many bhadralok who had links with the prostitutes, on a regular basis, either directly, as customers, or indirectly, as their doctors, house owners, lawyers, pundits etc, now came under the scanner, for it became compulsory for them to get registered. The act became a double edged sword – 'babus' could not decide what to do. If they get registered, they would risk their family pride and prestige, for they could no longer keep their dark deeds a secret, and, if they do not do so, they could no longer enjoy hedonistic pleasures. While some really came under the legal dagger, economically privileged 'babus' either rented or constructed a second home, outside Calcutta to keep their mistresses. Quite interestingly, this arrangement opened up a new avenue for the prostitutes and gave them courage to thwart their physical and psychological confinements. In her article "Inscriptions and body maps", published in *Feminine/Masculine Representations* (1991), Elizabeth Grosz argues that "if the body is the strategic target of systems of codification" (64), there is also a possibility of "a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways (64)". Thus the confined bodies of the colonised contests their stereotyping and insists on self-representations. Self-representation was the only alternative left for them because, as 'obhodro' or 'disgraced women', they were turned down both by the 'bhadralok' and by 'bhadra mahilas' of the time

It is interesting to note that a large number of prostitutes immigrated to colonial Chandernagore, not only because it was a favourite weekend gateway of the 'babus' and Europeans, outside Calcutta, but it also provided them a much needed space within the

mainstream of a colonised society, something that colonial Calcutta could not allow. Incidentally, long stretches of this tiny colonial town in the north of River Ganges of this waterfront town – from Sorshepara to Laxmiganj area – specifically speaking, were known for its brothels. With the implementation of the Indian Contagious Disease Act in 1868, and its resultant emigration of a large number of prostitutes from Calcutta, Chandernagore witnessed a mushrooming of prostitute quarters, in another part of the town, towards the south, in Hatkhola, Beshohata and Gondalpara. Known for multiple garden houses of Zamindars (for instance, Khans of Mankundu and Gopal Mukherjee of Gondalpara), this part of the town also had residences of native elites like the Srimanis and the Rakshits. Unlike Calcutta, affluent localities did not object to their settlements; rather they provided a fertile ground for the mushrooming of their trade. This area was also close to the waterfront, on the eastern part, where European settlements grew, and where all the pleasure habitats - pubs, hotels and brothels - were located since the eighteenth century. Incidentally, as a part of the French colonial project, colonial Chandernagore was fragmented into *la ville blanche* or the white town and *la ville noire* or the black town. White town, as Kanchana Mukhopadhyay notes, had abundant European structures - “*Topiwala Mahal*’ with many *Pakka Bari* or brick built houses near the *ghats* and the neighbouring area” (Original emphasis; 62). In fact beautification of the areas in *la ville blanche* was prioritized over *la ville noire* and, resultantly, *la ville blanche* had an urban, elitist character in contrast to *la ville noire* which continued to retain its rural, mass character. In *Chandannagorer Sonkhipto Itibas [A Short History of Chandannagar]* (2007) Biswanath Bandyopadhyaya notes: “Sada onchole chilo prachurjo o paka barir somaroho. Dock O bondorer kormobyasto jogot. Gacher shari ola somantoral rastar bahar. Poyopronali, nacher adda o shunrikhana aar kaloonchole chilo anka banka rasta, jongol, doba, nana fanka rasta, khorer ghor, ja dekhe gram bole mone hoto... [“While ville blanche was noted for its beautiful buildings, shipping dock, port, good drainage system, boulevard, brothels and pubs, the condition of the ville noire was deplorable with improper roads, jungles, deserted streets, thatched cottages and ditches”] (32)”. Adrian Carton in *Mixed-Race and Modernity in Colonial India: Changing concepts of hybridity across empires* (2012) echoes the same: “These colour-coded classifications seem self-evident enough where the spatial politics of imperial power were grafted into the urban landscape resulting in the construction of two divergent worlds (63)”. Even though this crude Manichean division between white and black town signified a racialized demarcation based on colour, this division, in the context of cultural difference in eighteenth – nineteenth century India, acquired a symbolic meaning of power. Small wonder that in *la ville blanche* elites, who had

access and entitlements to the privileges of whiteness by dint of their wealth and class position, resided along with the Europeans. Naturally therefore, the wealthy class frequented the newly developed hotels and pubs where exclusive variety of French wines like cognac, champagne and claret were readily available. Moreover, it is this economic power that gave access to neo elites from Calcutta to enjoy the swanky night life at *la ville blanche*. Revolutionary Sachindranath Sanyal, hiding at Chandernagore, recalls in his memoir *Bandi Jivan [A Life of Captivity]* (1922) about the availability of high quality French wine in hotels: “Oi hotelete shonibar-robibar Kolkata theke soukhin o dhoni lokeder podarpon hoi. Ekhane khub sohoje o sarombore suradebir aradhona kora hoi. Kenona Kolkatar chaite ekhane dokkhina onek kom [“On Saturdays and Sundays neo-elites from Calcutta step in that hotel. In this place the Goddess of Wine is worshipped easefully with grandeur. Because compared to Calcutta the expense is less here”] (qtd. in *Chandernagore: Bibidha Prasanga* 23-24)”. Imported yet low-priced French wine attracted the ‘babus’ from Calcutta, excited to spend their weekends at Chandernagore. Fascination for French wine was well complemented with famed brothels at colonial Chandrenagore. Thus white town of Chandernagore emerged as a pleasurable weekend destination both for the Europeans as well as for the native elites, particularly the ‘babus’ from Calcutta since the colonial times. Thus the prostitutes settled quite comfortably in the white town and continued to ply their trade unhindered by any social or cultural obstacles.

Interestingly enough, the swanky night life of Chandernagore along with the whole episode of the torture, plight, escape and re-homing of the prostitutes find significant mention in contemporary chapbooks, cheap Bengali books, brought out by Calcutta’s small printing presses of ‘Bot-tola’, and written by neo-literate people of humble origins, these books, known as ‘Bot-tola Sahitya’, voiced the unheard voices of the prostitutes, chronicled the entire episode of ‘Choddo Ain’ and its historical impact, apart from shedding light to many such neglected and marginalised topics. Incidentally speaking, ‘Bot-tola’, as Sukumar Sen has noted in “Bottalar Basati”, *Bottalar Chapa O Chabi [The Writings and Paintings of Bot-tola]* (2014) was the area adjacent to Sovabazar Balakhana, where upon a cemented pavement around the trunk of a sprawling banyan (‘bot’) tree, an old market for local books thrived:

...Shovabazar Balkhala onchole ekta boro bonospoti chilo. Sei botgacher shan bandhano tolay tokhon kar purobasider onek kaj cholto. Bose bisram newa hoto. Adda deoa hoto. Ganbajna hoto. Boier poshra o bosto.

Onuman hoi ei boi chilo Biswanath Deb er chapa. Inie bottola onchole ebong sekaler uttor Kolkatay prothom chapa khana khulechilo.

[There was a large Bot/Banyan tree in the vicinity of Shovabazaar Balkhala in Kolkata. Townsfolk used to sit on the cemented platform surrounding the huge tree and busied themselves in multiple worldly chores. They would rest there. They would idle away hours in gossips. There was music and performance. Even this became a place for the bazaar of books. It is likely that these books were published by Biswanath Deb. He was the man who started a printing press in the neighbourhood locale of the Banyan tree and eventually in North Kolkata”]. (53)

Sumanta Banerjee, in *Unish Shotoker Kolkata O Saraswatir Itor Sontan [Nineteenth Century Calcutta and the uncultured wards of Saraswati]* (2013) notes that ‘Bot-tola Sahitya’ and ‘Sonagaji’ or ‘Sonagachi’, Kolkata’s red light area (“Sonagaji O Bot-tola: Dui Jomojer Kahini”/ “Sonagaji and Bottola : A tale of Twins”) could be called as twins for they share the same habitat, Chitpur. Infact, ‘Sonagachi’ is derived from ‘Sonagazi’, a Muslim religious preacher, Sona Gazi or Gazi Sonauallah Shah Chisti Rahmatutulla who came from Iran and settled down in North Calcutta. The literatures of ‘Bot-tola’, aptly pointed out by Hardik Brata Biswas in “The obscene modern and the pornographic family: adventures in Bangla pornography (2013)”, published in *The Sexual History of the Global South : Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, edited by Sasrika Wieranga & Horacio Savori, were of varied themes and genres— ‘naksha’ (satirical prose), ‘prahashan’ (farce), ‘keccha’ (scandals), ‘guptokotha’ (mysteries), popular sex periodicals, and erotica apart from other topics like murder, mystery, natural science, etc. He also opines that these genres irked the taste buds of the Bengali bhadrakalok, whose sensibility was cast in Victorian morality and tradition in opposition to the babu. Notorious for their lurid presentation of sexuality, ‘Bot-tola’ books annoyed the refined sensibility of the genteel society. But these books challenged the elitist bias of mainstream 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, subverted the upper class culture and registered the socio historical winds of change that were blowing in British ruled Bengal. Naturally enough, the implementation and effect of ‘Choddo Ain’ provided a ready material for the ‘Bot-tola’ authors who documented how the disgraced other undermined ‘typical colonial biopolitics’ and registered their protest against the same. In doing so, they nevertheless refused to excuse their

elite brethren whose prejudiced, deaf ears could not hear the plight of the disgraced women.

In *Beshya Bibaran Natak* [*A Play about the Annals of the Prostitute*] (1868) Bot-tola author Tarinicharan Das takes a 'babu', Sumati's husband, Gyan, not a prostitute, to task for his illicit ways. However, Sumati, the programmed wife, is not spared either for camouflaging her husband's venereal disease: "Jogodisher kripay gunomoyee daktar mashi hoite gopone jatona nibaron hoilo prokash hoile grinate obhimane amar pran bidirno hoito.. ["By the blessings of Lord Jagadish I could secretly procure medicines from the lady doctor to cure you of your venereal disease...had it been brought out in the open, I would have died of shame...."] (Das 175)". The otherwise subdued, faithful wife who is unable to detect the vulnerability of her nurtured home, ironically, scorns at the prostitutes as 'kolonkkini' or tainted women. These lines express the poignant condition of Bengali 'bhadra mohilas' who were capable enough to find means of curing infected husbands but were incapacitated to deter them from visiting brothels. This text speaks volume of the massive extent to which 'Bhadra mahilas' have internalised the ambivalence of their 'Bhadra lok'. Written by Prankrishna Dutta in 1869, *Bodmaesh Jobdo* [*The Taming of the Profligate*], which begins the night before the implementation of 'Choddo Ain' and continues after its implementation so that the author can present the mental anxiety of and necessary measures taken by its sufferers, takes the issue a step further and focuses on the politics of representation. 'Bodmaesh' is an implied snobbish, upper class tag given to describe someone's wicked nature, and in this text it seems to be applied to prostitutes as home-wreckers and to the ignominy attached with their trade. When such a trade is controlled by the British administration through 'Choddo Ain', they are evidently tamed or 'jobdo'. With the progression of the text, however, Dutta's satirical vein finds its best outlet as one slowly but steadily tracks down the actual 'bodmaesh'. Clearly Dutta's sympathies are with the helpless victims of colonial policies and, therefore, he gnaws at the fixed customers or 'babus' of the prostitutes who illegally satisfy their lust in the darkness of the night, the real 'bodmaesh'. Like Tarinicharan Das, Prankrishna Dutta also mocks the Bengali neo-elites by calling them 'bodmaesh' who are now tamed by the Act or "Bodmaesh Jobdo Ain"/ "Law for the Profligate" (186), for it became mandatory to register their names along with the prostitutes. They are cut to size as fear of exposure looms large over. Prankrishna Dutta brilliantly expresses the nervous rankings of the inner soul of the 'Bhradralok' caught in between the Act and illegal desires: "Buk fete jay hai mukh tola bhar/Registery korilei hooibe amar/ Na korile bondho hobe beshyaloye jawa /Bish somo bodh hobe boshonter hawa / Bot-tola hoibek nimtola somo/ Nimtola bhala

ebe bodh hoi momo[“My heart bursts open, my face unable to rise /Registry seems ineluctable/ Unless the brothel-door remains padlocked forever/ Vernal breeze would then sting like venom /Bottola would become synonymous with Neemtola/Even Nimtola would appear as a better place than Bottola...”] (Dutta 185)”. Oscillating between pleasure and problem, they cannot decide their *modus oporendi* and so wait anxiously with worried foreheads. These lines beautifully express the Hamletian dilemma of the frequenters of the brothels who were served with such a sermon that they can neither ignore nor can digest.

If their affluent status gave the babus an opportunity to make separate arrangement at nearby Chandernagore, it also opened an alternative employment possibility for the prostitutes in a French-ruled colony. Thus one notes in these ‘Bot-tola’ texts, a plethora of reference to ‘Farash danga’ or the land / ‘dongi’ of the French/‘farash’, popular nomenclature for colonial Chandernagore. Colonial Chandernagore, incidentally speaking, was easily accessible from Calcutta through both railways and waterways. Thus Aghor Chandra Ghosh’s Narrative poem, *Panchali Kamolkoli: Choddo Ain [A Poem about a Lotus Bud: Act XIV]*, 1871, particularly mentions how both ‘babus’, from Calcutta, fearing registration, and public women came to settle down at colonial Chandernagore. Ghosh writes about the carefree and comfortable set up of the babus: “Abar kono kono dhoni, or moddhye jinni dhoni,/ Bhalobashay songe loye jay/ Bole cholo Fareshdangay, hase hal thakbo mojay,/ E behale teka holo day [“...And some amongst the rich/took their keeps with supposed love/saying let us go to Fareshdanga, to live in utmost pleasure/ since living here has become problematic”] (82)”. He also mentions the public women who did not lag behind to accompany them: “Keu ba chore koler gadi, foreshdangay kocche bari, / Keu ba giye khali bari khunjiche/ Keu ba chore noukay, nukiye fareshdangay jaai,/bhalobashay bhorsa diye koto/ bole ki korbere dhon, upai to aar nai ekhon, / Upai hocche Fareshdangay joto [“While some searched for empty houses/Some came by boat secretly/Holding on to the promises of love/Believing that there is little luck left for them there/All prospect of physical intimacy lay in Fareshdanga solely”] (81)”. The anonymous author of another ‘Bot-tola’ text, *Baboba Choddo Ain [Kudos to Act XIV]*, 1869, dealing with this historical shift confirm this: “Kahar kahar upapati mahadoy grostho hoiya kormo porityag purbok uppatni digoge loiya foras dangay keho ba Hooghly Srirampore, keho ba Bordhoman rakhiya asiyachen. Ebong pronoy pashe eirup boddho hoiyachen je tahadiger tattabodhaner jonyo keho keho proti soptahe, keho keho dui tin dibos pore, keho ba protidin louho marge gomon koriya thaken [“Overwhelmed by love, some of the honourable keepers abandoned their regular duties for maintaining their keeps at Farashdanga or

Hooghly Serampore, or to Burdwan. Babus became so obsessed with the upkeep of their mistresses that some of them visited their keeps every week, some went to see them at regular intervals of two or three days, some even boarded trains everyday to visit them”] (qtd in *Asbruto Kontbosnor* 125)”. The desire for Farashdanga as a prospective trading zone is stressed in *Beshya Bibaran Natak* where a prostitute suggests her colleagues to flee from coercive colonial biopolitics of colonial administration that is denting their business prospects: “Anubhabe bojhah gyallo, premer / bajar mochke galo, khatbenako chhal/ chaturi. soilo soi sabey miley, chal jai/polaiye, Faesh dangaye bash kori [“It seems like the time for the fete of flames has come to an end/the film of pretence and guile fades past/Oh my bossom-mates let us flee/ to Farash danga and nestled there”] (173)”. Tied down by the ‘Repressive State Apparatuses’, the speaker-prostitute gives a clarion call to her colleagues for self-assertion. So the Narrator in *Panchali Kamolkoli* decides to abandon a claustrophobic Calcutta and declares: “E rajjye te bash ar hobe na [“It is impossible to stay in this state any longer”] (77)”.

As Sumanta Banerjee has rightly pointed out that French administration at Chandernagore did not impose any such Act, Chandernagore witnessed massive immigration of prostitutes from Calcutta in 1868-1869. In this connection, one must also note that despite being away from the winds of enlightened Western education, uneducated marginals of Calcutta were perceptive enough to have a ‘knowledge’ of a place outside the purview of British laws. Thus settling down in colonial Chandernagore was a decisive step to outsmart the ‘typical colonial biopolitics’ directed to medically discipline the body of the colonised. However, critiquing the ‘Bot-tola’ texts further would bring to light how the emigrated prostitutes contested ‘typical colonial biopolitics’ in Chandernagore by counter-strategic self-representation. Representation of the self was possible in the permissive French ambience, free from Hindu religious coercion. Surajit Sen in his article “Stick Bodmaish Jobdo” observes that “Chandannagore er adi sanskriti rokkhonshil chilo emon bola jaayna, karon ekhane brahmonyo onushashon chilona [“Traditionally Chandannagore didn’t adhere to strict Brahminical practises and so it’s cultural ambience was quite lenient”](388)”. This absence of orthodox Brahminical order was complemented with the presence of a large number of Vaishnavites in Chandernagore. Majority of Bengali working class of Chandernagore came from the labouring agricultural and artisan class like ‘kaibarta’ (fishermen and peasants), ‘tanti’ (weavers), ‘dhopa’ (washermen), ‘goala’ (milkmen), and ‘chutor’ (carpenters). These communities were inclined towards Vaishnavism which allowed a more permissive and liberal lifestyle than the strict Brahminical order that ruled Calcutta Bengali

society. As the 'Bot-tola' text affirms, the prostitutes sometimes took shelter under the garb of another religion, as disguised Vaishnavis, and explicitly expressed their preference for Lord Krishna over Goddess Kali. In *Beshya Bibaran Natak*, a widow-turned prostitute claims: "Tagiya kalir naam krishno ke bojibo/ krishnopreme premi hoye soda sukhe robo/ hoibo shomon joyi krishno naam gune/ Krishno bole par hobo e bhobo toofane/ ghore ghore mege khabo bole krishno hore/ kar saddhyo ke amare dhorite na pare ["Disowning the Goddess kali I would take on venerating Lord Krishna /Turning into a devotee of the Lord of Love I would reside in the realm of bliss /The power of chanting the name of the Lord Krishna would leave the Master of Death bemused/ 'Krishna' be the barque to sail through the turmoiled sea of life/In the name of 'Hare-Krishna' I would knock for alms door to door/This was life would be beyond the grasp of trouble, trial and time"] (Das 177)". This intense urge to adopt Vaishnavism is not only an expression of protest against the rigidity of Hinduism but is also a pointer to their suppressed desire to lead a free life, away from Hindu orthodoxy. *Beshya Bibaran Natak* ends with a prayer of a Hindu prostitute to return to earthly form as a non-Hindu – "Hindu kule monushyo nahik ekjon/ hindu dhormo miche matro bujhinu ekhon ["Now I realize the religion of Hinduism /is nothing but a sham, a make-believe"] (Das 179)". The rigid caste and class divisions of Hindu religion are taken to task by this hapless victim as she further criticises the hypocrisy of the Hindus: "Gopone sokoli kore thake hindugono / gopone koriya karjo sadhu hoye rono ["In the clandestine way the Hindus do every possible thing/ their life of an ascetic takes sinuous rills through the covert caves"] (Das 180)". Their disguise is a subversion of the hierarchical snobbery of the Hindu religion as well as a protest against socio-religious orthodoxies which are no less obnoxious than administrative intervention in the practice of their trade.

Resistance to 'typical colonial biopolitics' and their counter-strategic self-representation in Chandernagore are best expressed in their destabilisation of the colonial binaries of white town and black town. Chandernagore's white town with its distinctly European characteristics erased the indigenous life styles, replaced them by that of the settler's, establishing thereby, the prerogatives of the settler nation. Apart from assimilating the indigenous elites into commercial activities, French colonizers, as already mentioned, encouraged tax-free French wine in pubs, hotels and full-fledged brothels to function. French colonial masters thus amalgamated indigenous elites into a hedonistic, relaxed, submissive socio-cultural life-style and therefore attempted to curb ideologically any possibility of violent uprising. This was a well thought off French colonial project of maintaining spatial binary in colonial Chandernagore.

However, the abundant mushrooming of brothels along the southern part of the Ganges in the white town brought significant changes to the colonial project. The ‘dangerous outcast’ of Calcutta begin to co-exist with respectable localities in the white town, and became a part of the main stream of French-ruled society. As Ghosh’s poem records, the immigrant prostitutes catered to the pleasure quotient of a large cross section of the society, irrespective of the spatial binary: “Anache kanache ranr, ranrmoye sob/ Fareshdangay joto chonrader barilo utsob/Alhade atkhana joto ki buro ki chonra/kankurfata hoye uthlo chilo joto gonra [“Prostitutes invaded every nook and corner/of Fareshdanga, youth were ecstatic/ aged feasted on similar pleasures/so did the rigid populace...”] (83)”. Unlike Calcutta, there was no need to oust them from ‘bhadra pallis’ of Chandernagore. As new prostitute quarters sprang up near Hatkhola and Gondolpara, in south Chandernagore, night life of the colonial town got a boost. In *Bodmaesh Jobdo* the author indicates how the economy of the town improved, for rent of a house in Chandernagore rocketed from ten rupees to fifty rupees per month. Thus ‘Choddo Ain’ converted Chandernagore from a sleepy little town into a grand epicenter of whoring: “Chandannagore guljar hoiya uthilo [“Chandannagar became ‘gulzar’”] (189)”. According to *Feroz-ul-Lughat (Jame)* by Maulvi Ferozuddin, Persian word ‘zar’ in ‘gulzar’ refers to a ‘place’ (745) of ‘gul’ or flower (1106). As beautiful and appealing roses, their relocation made the colonial town no less than a garden of flower or ‘gulzar’. In this sense, they were redeemed from being ‘dangerous outcasts’ of Calcutta to the most coveted and sought-after heartthrob of the colonial town. Colonial Chandernagore, therefore, provided them a much needed social space, a place in the mainstream society, something that they could never dream of in Calcutta. Moreover, the word ‘zar’ also refers to a King or ‘Badshah’ or a towering personality. In this sense, the emigrated prostitutes vicariously tasted a legal privilege, for their *babus* in Chandernagore had the free reign to enjoy the privileges of the white by dint of their class position. Whatever could be the interpretation, one could gauge the role reversal of the emigrant prostitutes in Chandernagore under ‘Choddo Ain’.

Moreover, varied customers, with diff class, colour and cultural backgrounds, converted the brothels into ‘contact zone’ of socio-cultural exchange. In “Arts of the Contact Zone” (1991), Mary Louis Pratt explains ‘contact zone’ in *Imperial Eyes* as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across globe today (4)”. Contact zones are thus “spaces of colonial encounters”, or rather colonial frontiers, where people, “geographically and historically

separated come into contact and establish on going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict(6)". Bottola text *Panchali Komalkoli* brilliantly highlight how brothels as contact zones attracted men from diverse class and cultural background: "Gouranga shoron kore shikoye tule jhuli /ranrer bari unkijhunki macchee kulikuli/Ekhonete nobyo babu achen tatha jara,/Dibyore chul firaye bahar diye tara,/ Pokete phele panch paisha, churut gunje mukhe,/ Ranrey'r bari eyarkiti macchee mano sukhe ["The neo-rich 'babus' living there, curling up their locks in a swanky style, /with five paisas in their pockets and cigars stuck in their mouths, /are carousing at will in the houses of these whores..."] (*Beshyaprar Panchti Durlabh Songrobo* 83)". Not mere the neo-rich but these quarters were also frequented by the labouring class like potters, weavers, carpenters: "Aat paishar mojur jara khajur chataye thakey,/Khat palonke khasha bichanaye succhey lakhey lakhey ["Labourers who earn eight paisa and sleep on coarse mats made of palm-leaves,/are now in hordes moving over for a chance of sleeping/comfortably on bedsteads and couches, in the house of the prostitutes"] (83)". Devoid of class and cultural biases, the prostitutes had no caste prejudices. They welcomed Muslim boatmen to their quarters. These boatmen, carrying passengers or goods across Hugli river from East Bengal, often stopped at Chandernagore and disguised themselves as Hindus to have a good time. Aghor Chandra Ghosh pertinently includes them in his poem and says that Muslim boatmen, disguised as Hindus are spending nights at Fareshdanga. These encounters are, indeed, fraught with racial and cultural conflicts as their disguised identities as Vaishnavites or as housewives bear out the point. However, the different clientele of the brothels is symbolic of the fact that when it comes to whoring, colonial binary at Chandernagore was quite relaxed towards the later part of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the immigrant prostitutes became instrumental in disrupting and displacing the hegemonic divide of the colonial culture in the white town. The hybrid nature of the customers undermines the formation of any essentialist cultural identity at the brothels. On the contrary, the varied customers at the brothels and garden houses create a 'contact zone' of interaction in colonial Chandernagore, where cultural homogeneity is overshadowed by continuous cultural negotiations, a negotiated in-betweenness, despite power imbalance. In this sense, brothels become an intercultural contact zone, a 'gulzar', a hybridist garden of prostitute and their varied customers. This poem thus becomes a valuable document which registers the destabilisation of colour-coded classification of the colonial town.

What differentiates the 'Bot-tola' farces from the 'Bot-tola' narrative poem is the absence of the voice of the prostitute in the latter. This is probably because unlike the underlying note of sadness in the farces, the narrative poem ends with an optimistic, mythical vision of the return of prostitutes to Calcutta after the abolition of 'Choddo Ain'. Almost like *dues ex machina*, the poet brings down the Hindu God of love, Madan Deb, from Heaven to Calcutta maidan. After touring Calcutta, when Madan Deb finally comes to 'Sonagachi' he is aggrieved to find the empty corridors: "Shunitechhi Choddo Ain asiyache bole/ bas chari porobase jacche sob chole ["Deserting home for Choddo Ain/ Everyone has flocked to a distant land"] (100)". Resultantly, he decides to bring back his followers to their 'original homelands' and appoints 'basantoraj'/Cuckoo bird to carry out his mission: "Cholo sobe Fareshdanga Kashi Brindabon/ Prayag Mathura Gaya Dwaraka bhuvan/ Bardhaman Tribeni Hooghly Srirampore/ cholo giya dekhi keba geche kotodur ["Let us go and track the prostitutes/who have emigrated from Calcutta to different places /like Serampore, Hooghly, Burdwan Chandernagore..."] (100)". Stuck by the arrows of Cupid, prostitutes return to 'Sonagachi' and the poet concludes "guti guti sobe elo, sohor gulzar holo, ... ["...the prostitutes came back to Calcutta/ and the city became 'gulzar'..."] (101)". The emigration of prostitutes, as the 'Bot-tola' poet envisions it, had made Calcutta a barren land devoid of its appealing flowers. The empty streets of 'Sonagachi' speak volume of its aridity. He, therefore, hopes that Calcutta can only get its hue back by their homecoming. After making Chandernagore 'gulzar', the prostitutes return to Calcutta to make the city 'gulzar'. This 'Bot-tola' text thus relocates the prostitutes from the peripheral Chandernagore to central Calcutta, from where they had been decentred both by the British administration and by the Bengali elites. To dismiss this vision simply as mythic would be to undermine its epiphanic nature. 'Chodda Ain' was finally withdrawn by the British government in 1888 after the intervention by British feminist Josephine Butler who led Ladies' National Association and also by the efforts taken by Christian Missionaries and few sympathetic Brahma reformers like Shibnath Shastri (*Atmacharit*, pp 122-23 & 134-36) and Nilmani Chakravarty (*Atmajeebansmriti*, pp 17-18). Due to all these interventions Calcutta was gradually converted from a dreaded land to a 'gulzar'. Thus the ending of the poem is epiphanic in nature.

It must be pointed out that no attempts were taken to integrate the prostitutes into respectable / 'bhadra' society of Calcutta. The measures, rather, ignored their individual capacities to exercise a rational control over their own lives. Contrastively, in Chandernagore, as the 'Bot-tola' texts affirm, they created a counter-discourse of self-

representation and therefore could assert their choice. Their capacities to construct another, better grand centre helped them to lead a life free from the strict Brahminical order at Calcutta. Most astonishingly, their rehabilitated ‘contact zones’ challenged the colonial policy of spatial fragmentation of Chandernagore. However, the most unique thing that could be deduced from these ‘Bot-tola’ Literatures is their refusal to be a passive receptor of a “typical colonial biopolitics”, by using a coercive administrative measure of one colonial settlement to challenge colonial policies of social fragmentation of another colonial settlement. The historical emigration of prostitutes thus was a conscious unsettling of the master’s house with the master’s tool.

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**TALE OF A RUPTURED FRAME: YEARNING FOR PAST  
AS IMAGINED FUTURE IN *KAPOOR AND SONS***

*Subham Amin*

In *On Photograph*, Susan Sontag has observed, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.” (2). Such observation renders a curious expansion in the dimension of photograph as a medium. Instead of defining it as a narcissistic tool to derive pleasure of self-assertion, Sontag went further to conceive it as a discourse to disseminate values pertaining to one’s ideology. In fact, photograph appears to be a potent medium to do so by virtue of its illusion of reality. As Sontag has commented: “Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out.” (2). Thus, photograph, far from being real, renders a highly stylized and sophisticated version of reality, shaped by the artist.

The tradition of family photograph in India originates in the colonial period. The pre-colonial period exhibits the fashion of commissioning self-portrait in the royal families and feudal lords. Such paintings consisted of the portraits of individuals rather than families with a few exceptions. They demonstrate physical, stylistic and attitudinal attributes in conformity with the norms of the class and gender of the subjects. The photograph has problematized the attributes associated with portrait paintings by combining the components of heteronormativity such as heterosexual monogamy as the formative ideology behind the formation of the primary social unit, that is, family. Indian middle class, nurtured by the colonial education of the Victorian mode, has appropriated the ideas of heteronormativity within its framework of the extended family. The desire to promote the narcissism of lineage is manifested in the aspiration to be photographed along with the predecessors and successors in order to demonstrate the continuity of the values upheld by them. The photograph, however, represents family as an illusory domain restraining and disciplining the pre-colonial Indian affinity with polygamy. It symbolizes a repressive realm in which sexuality is carefully restrained, polygamy pushed out and familial harmony achieved at the cost of individuality. The display of individual pride in portraits gets transformed in the collective snobbery of succession and lineage. The photograph becomes a combined emblem of a glorious past, pleasurable present and future aspirations of a family,

which seeks to assert itself to the world outside. As Susan Sontag has observed

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness.... Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery. As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family—and, often, is all that remains of it. (5-6)

As in Europe, so in India, the advent of photography corresponds to the deconstruction of the traditional expanded family of India, as well as the gradual formation of nuclear families in cities and towns. The consolidation of colonial economy consisting of industry and service sector compelled the urban and semi urban middle class youths to migrate to cities to work in merchant firms leaving their families in hometowns. Such migration resulted in the disintegration of the customary joint families and the emergence of nuclear families. The desire of the Indian middle class to be photographed in the form of extended family, therefore, renders nostalgia for a fleeting tradition on the one hand, and at the same time implies expression of conformity with the heteronormative values imported from the West. For them, family photograph represents family as a utopic space of perfection and order, which is vulnerable to subversion and disruption due to occasional intrusion of non-heteronormative influences.

Family has always been hailed in Indian tradition as a sacred institution to hold the dominant patriarchal structure since the later Vedic age. In *Smriti*, the discourse on social and behavioural norms has held family as a symbol of order and a popular trope of ideal mode of living. Such valorisation of family and familial norms may be attributed to the role of the former as the origin as well as microcosmic representation of the state, which, in turn, is the macrocosmic expansion of the family to control the masses by the master class. *Manu Smriti*<sup>1</sup> the standardized manual of the post-Vedic Hindu society, has stipulated its norms with a vision to construct family as an institution to manipulate as

well as regulate the social, cultural, moral as well as the sexual behaviours of the individual. In fact, family, in *Smriti Shastra*, has been projected as the space to discipline the unruly desires of the non-normative individuals. Family, thus, appears to be the desired and idealized utopia of the Indian society that celebrate patriarchy.

*Kapoor & Sons (Since 1921)* directed by Shakun Batra and released in 2016 manifests the desperate endeavour of an Indian middle class family to create a utopic image of a perfect, harmonious, extended family through a family photograph with caption *Kapoor & Sons (Since 1921)*. The caption acquires significance by virtue of its linguistic affinity as well as cultural association with the tagline of a renowned brand of Indian textiles on the one hand, while it smacks of the fragrance of the era of the great Kapoors, the nostalgic classical age of Bollywood on the other. The implied association becomes explicit with the obsession of the old grandfather with bathing image of the actress Mandakini in the film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), a classic production by R. K. Films.

The film is set in an isolated house situated in the outskirts of the town. With picturesque Nilgiri in the background, lush green valley and misty atmosphere, the quaint house becomes an idyllic space appropriate to construct a utopia of perfection and order. The house, by virtue of its solitude, seems to be immune to disruption until it falls apart from within. The narrative begins with the trivial camouflage of death by the old grandfather, who desperately tried to have the attention of his elder son Harsh, a bank employee turned unsuccessful businessperson and his daughter-in-law Sunita, an aspired to be entrepreneur homemaker. In spite of its comic effects, the act of feigning death imparts a note of pathos, which culminates into the actual cardiac arrest of the old man. The narrative sets in motion following the return of Rahul and Arjun, the sons of Harsh and Sunita from abroad and Sashi, the younger brother of Harsh with his family on the insistence of the old father. On their return, the old man, a retired army officer, expressed his final wishes to be buried (in spite of being a Hindu) in the graveyard along with the members of his former regiment and to have a complete family photograph with the caption *Kapoor and Sons (Since 1921)*. The wishes cumulatively render the nostalgia for the extended family as well as a desire to assert the patriarchal lineages, army and family. The two institutions symbolize the desired patriarchal spaces formed on the principles of discipline, perfection and order, identified by Foucault as the essential components of 'scientia sexualis'.<sup>2</sup>

Such a utopian dream of perfect extended family could hardly be sustained as it implies suppression as well as elimination of subversive desires hovering beneath the façade of normativity. The polygamy of

Harsh, the unyielding ego of Sunita, inconsistency of Arjun, homosexuality and plagiarism of Rahul, nonchalance of Sashi and even the sexual fantasy of the old grandfather, cumulatively contribute to the disruption. The progression of the plot only renders gradual unfolding of hypocrisy and duality embedded in the characters.

The idea of family based on heterosexual monogamy and holy matrimonial bond seems to be disrupted by the ruptured bond between Harsh and Sunita. The 'ideal' husband Harsh barred Sunita to start a business of her own in spite of his own inability to succeed in entrepreneurship. Moreover, his extramarital relationship with his former colleague Anu renders a deviation from the stipulated sexual codes upon which the social institution 'family' is formed. The separate beds and argument over the flawed water pipe symbolize the excess of spite in their relationship leading to the final catastrophe on the birthday of the old father. While the first generation old man was capable of saving the marriage in spite of his sexual fancies and polygamous inclinations, perhaps because of his subdued wife, his infidel son could not. The death of Harsh appears to be a literal event of the end of the marital bond between him and Sunita, who actually parted long before his death.

The subversion of familial bond in the film is not merely limited to its projection of a ruptured marital bond, but in the subversion of heteronormativity itself. The narrative not only betrays the expectation of the audience by incorporating homosexuality in a baffling manner, but also has reduced hypermasculinity into a mere caricature. In fact, the most shocking discovery befalls when Rahul, the most eligible bachelor with a good fortune and the heartthrob of women turns out to be a gay. Such a discovery has also ruptured the façade of succession and lineage as the 'perfect baccha' of Sunita becomes imperfect and even incapable to continue the lineage. Moreover, his exposed plagiarism of the plot of the yet unpublished novel of Arjun uncovered the hypocrisy of the claim of perfection and order of the family. The premise of heteronormativity and stipulated gender roles has further been contested by the independent mind of Tia. Her candid behaviour with strangers, fondness for parties and even excitement about bodybuilding competition and Arjun's playful fiddling with a female bra have been celebrated. Bubl, the muscleman and symbol of hypermasculinity has been reduced to a mere caricature.

The utopian dream of the old grandfather to cherish the nostalgia of an extended family constructed in the family photograph gets shattered on his birthday party, when the ruptured bond between members of his family has been exposed culminating into a catastrophic end. The birthday party appears to be a cornucopia of disruptions of

relationships at multiple levels. The episode not only uncovers the shattered marital bond between Harsh and Sunita, but also renders the extent of bitterness and hatred in the relationship between Rahul and Arjun. Such disruptions, however, have been anticipated by the chitchat between the grandfather and his neighbours on the table. The ending scene of the episode with deserted space, scattered furniture, and moaning symbolize a failed feast, an unfinished ritual of togetherness.

The ending of the film presents the final endeavour of the old grandfather to unite his fragmented family in his long cherished family photograph. The photograph was taken with a cut out image of his dead son to endow it with an entirety. However, like the cut out image of Mandakini to fulfil his sexual fancy, the cut out image of Harsh serves as an emblem of wish fulfilment. Instead of wholeness, it only evokes a deep sense of nostalgia, a futile yearning for something, which has already been lost. Susan Sontag has aptly commented: “Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos.... A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists.” (11)

#### Notes:

1. See for detailed discussion Chapter 8 of *Manusmriti*. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Manu\_Smriti\_Sanskrit\_Text\_With\_English\_T%20(1).pdf
2. See for a detailed discussion Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. Volume I. London. Penguin. 1998. PP. 53-73.

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**TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT: ENGAGING WITH THE  
MEAT-PRINCIPLE IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN***

*Kausbani Mondal*

“... you are what you eat, to eat a vegetable is to become a vegetable, and by extension, to become womanlike.” (Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*)

Being a vegetarian and behaving vegetarian and becoming vegetarian are caught in a plexus of discrimination as against a meat-centric cultural-sexual ethos in Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian* (2007, trans. 2015). Yeong-hye, an ordinary, unremarkable, unattractive, yet dutiful wife, goes through a shocking transformation – from giving up meat and becoming a vegetarian to giving up food altogether and psychosomatically identifying herself with plants thereby challenging a deep rooted carno-phallogocentric society. Won-Chung Kim, following on Jacques Derrida, describes the “complex theoretical interplay between meat and sexuality in the concept carno-phallogocentrism, which he defines partially as an “interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth” (2). Therefore, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat in such an androcratic society is itself an act of resistance, resilience and revolt. She stands at the intersection of a capitalist and patriarchal society where her voice is barely given a space and her journey is narrated in three parts by her husband, her brother-in-law and her sister. Their narratives reveal not only the discrimination, violence, aggression, perpetration, and exclusion faced by her but also her desire to be a tree. *The Vegetarian* is the story of her unfinished quest, a story of her ‘becoming’ a body without organs driven by psychosis, schizophrenia, anemia, insomnia and anorexia. On that note Magdalena Zolkos's observations are pertinent:

Because of the central motifs of bodily transgression and self-abnegation...Yeong-hye [is compared] to Frantz Kafka's Gregor Samsa or the hunger artist. Just as the hunger artist seeks seclusion from human sociality in the space of his vacuous interiority, so does Yeong-hye sequester herself from the gaze of others in her visions of animal carnage and in her arboreal impersonations. However, while the hunger artist withdraws into a space of inwardness in order to draw the crowd's attention to his own negative novelty,

Yeong-hye retreats from the human world to merge with the vegetal one. (102)

In contra-distinction to the other-human domain where the herbi-carnivore power tool does not work, there is a strong masculine, rather, fleshly culture that informs the human world. This brings us before the disturbing dialectic between carnism [a term coined by psychologist Melanie Joy that refers to the “invisible belief system (or ideology) that propagates meat consumption as a given natural thing to do, the way the things have always been and will always be” (Potts, 19)] and patriarchy. Yeong-hye’s body becomes the site for violence and this violence in a way also speaks about a narrative of antagonism against veganism. Her transformation begins after she sees a dream:

*A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down...there’s no end to meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin...what had I done? Pushed that raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. (Kang 12, italics in the original)*

When she stops eating meat and embraces vegetarianism her increasingly odd behavior becomes noticeable as she loses weight and practically stops sleeping altogether. Her refusal to wear a bra and eat meat at a dinner party makes her an outsider. She is raped by her husband when his physical desires go unsatisfied for a long period:

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor...it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully...After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again. (Kang 30-31)

It is surprising that her entire family becomes complicit in feeding her meat forcefully. Her father struck her in the face, held her mouth open and forced a lump of meat inside. Yeong-hye howled like an animal and spat out the meat, then picked up a fruit knife and slit her own wrist. Her father’s forcing meat into her mouth is a violent act of violation of sanctity of one’s body-borders and psycho-aesthetic preferences and predilections. The pedagogic discourse of eating, ingestion and gastronomy fall on the line with Yeong-hye’s lack of compliance. Although vegetarianism is also an ideology but it fails to be forceful enough to be considered as a counter hegemonic discourse. Vegetarianism exists but not without the pedagogic threats of domination.

Meat is significant; meat strengthens; meat is libidinous; meat is masculine. This owes a lineage from a cannibalist culture where ‘feeding’ on the other is also about being fed upon. Cannibalism denotes strength, physicality, energy and principle of devouring. This brings with it the responsibility to ‘kill’ and, hence, overpower the other to help oneself. A subtle power discourse works through such operative machine as every flesh one draws out does not come without resistance. Trees don’t resist; grasses are trampled; even unbarking a tree meets with no opposition. But ‘consuming meat’ whether cannibalistically or consumptively comes with power-flexing, auto-hegemonization and subjection and subjugation of the other. This informs a system of empowerment where meat-making, meat-consuming and meat-delivering discriminate the vegetarian, the non-fleshly, and the non-carnal. So Annie Potts rightly quotes Melanie Joy saying that “[this] particular type of ideology [is] a violent ideology, because it is literally organized around physical violence. [If] we were to remove the violence from the system – to stop killing animals – the system would cease to exist. Meat cannot be procured without slaughter.” (19) Potts observes:

If carnism is the ideology, then ‘meat culture’ is all the tangible and practical forms through which the ideology is expressed and lived. Meat culture therefore encompasses the representations and discourses, practices and behaviours, diets and tastes that generate shared beliefs about, perspectives on, and experiences of meat. (19-20).

The prevalence of this culture and the shared approval of its perpetuation make carnism a mobile praxial cultural choice. Carol Adams in her groundbreaking book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* argues that “the recurrent interaction between the entrenched misogyny in present-day society and its fixation with masculinity and meat-eating can be seen as key factors in the continued exploitation of women as meat and domestic ‘slaves’ in many cultures, which often associate virility with meat-eating and regard women as flesh to be consumed and abused.” (Ferreira 148). So the word ‘vegetable’ has a derogatory undertone almost synonymous with passivity, a polite submission to any animalistic dominance. This valuational difference between meat and non meat translates into the devouring-devoured dialectic that traditionally informs gender relations. It is the devouring that builds a masculinity to its establishment; the devoured stands placid, subjugated under the rigorous determinative dominance of the supposedly masculine. Hence, Yeong Hye’s meat-shy status, her meat revulsive disposition, disambiguates her social position vis-à-vis her sexual identity.

Food is not about cooked and raw (following on Levi-Strauss); food is all about harnessing and hunting the substance for acquirement and control. Eating is again a power-plexus that hedges on physical superiority and resistance-defying domination. The ‘manly’ is in the flesh, the wo-manly in the non-flesh – the colour red genders and sunders the green. In fact, the injunction of green has come through limiting parameters of health, hygiene, religion and non-availability. However, the liberty and naturalness of the red is more in line with how man ‘hunted’ (the woman did not) to partake of the strength and sustenance of some other’s flesh. This fleshization has informed a socio-cultural and eco-sexual discourse within a diachronicity whose ramifications are clearly felt in Yeong-hye’s dissociation from ‘meat’ and hence, flesh, and, hence, psycho-physical belligerence.

Yeong-hye is haunted by the lives she has consumed:

*The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. it's lodged permanently these days. Even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away. Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. (Kang 49, italics in the original)*

She gives up eating altogether, destroying her organs in the process where ‘her stomach acid is eating away at her stomach’ (150) but Yeong-hye sees this differently:

They say my insides have all atrophied...I'm not an animal anymore...I don't need to eat, I can live without it. All I need is sunlight. (153-4)

She also says,

I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food... I need water. (148)

No wonder we are in the midst of a violent urge to trans-form, the seething, near self annihilating desire to transmute. I read here a violence that unhinges one's being into a violent process of becoming which, however, heuristically and operatively have its own grammatology.

How violent is this otherisation? Does 'becoming plant' become a discourse? Yeong-hye's self-transcendence which is a kind of 'letting out of the animal into the plant' risks being challenged as a discourse: are seeking sunlight and staying inverted with legs held apart like a tree mere processes to become something that is telic?

Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands ... so I dug down into the earth. On and on ... I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs; I spread them wide... (148)

So this becoming-plant syndrome strikes me as discursive embedded in certain motors of transformation – like relinquishing of flesh, clothes, and then the very act of eating – which, again, is an aspiration to transhumanise. Transhumanism here is not about extending the realms of being human or going beyond human; it is more about the reduction of being human, the violent extenuation of being the human as animal, the extinction of the flesh to emerge in the bark. This in plant philosophy is called the debarking: the diminishment of being what you are to allow the overtaking of what you aspire to be.

Yeong-hye's standing before the refrigerator is clearly about contemplating the affordances that one's transubstantiation needs.:

Around her, the kitchen floor was covered with plastic bags and airtight containers ... Beef for shabu-shabu, belly pork, two sides of black beef shin, some squid in a vacuum-packed bag, sliced eel... dried croaker... unopened packs of frozen dumplings and endless bundles of unidentified stuff dragged from the depths of the fridge. (9)

The Nietzschean movement here is deeply processual in that becoming plant is not just about unveiling but a clear progression that is self-willed, that is a will to power and transform and overcome what one requires to emerge from Yeong Hye's debilitating extant predicament. She is a trajectory in motion. The denial to eat is a case in point. It is for me less about self-obliteration and more about the animal metaphor of 'eating': do plants in general "eat"? How does one eat sunlight, air, minerals and water? Does that mean eating needs to morph into assimilation and contact, processes that are not overtly physical and alimentary? What human ontology understands as eating disorder in Yeong Hye is indeed the self-annihilation to plantise.

“This deep urge on Yeong-hye’s part to identify with plants and to attain what [Michael] Marder has called an ontophytological state, ‘without projecting its own rationality upon the idealized plant’, can be constructed as a capitulation to the pressures of the patriarchal world that in many ways conflates woman and nature as entities to be conquered and subjugated. Conversely, Yeong-hye’s impulse to become a tree can be seen not as a defeat and surrender but as a strategic action to circumvent a capitalist and patriarchal logic of domination and exploitation of women and nature.” (Ferreira 149).

The meat denying and green surrendering self of Yeong-hye builds a rationality that is unique to itself. Her meat revolting state does not stay green welcoming for long, as she reframes her bio-ontology through two broadly defined parameters of eating and non-eating. This is neither partnership with meat nor non meat, for eating involves killing and killing is a way of inflicting defeat and building a hegemonic overpowerment. The question remains that her vegetal transformation in the end owes to meat defiance or an espousal of a philosophy that promotes non-hierarchicalism. What this means is that eating as an act is only possible when humans become plants and plants become animals and animals become humans. The philosophy of eating resists hierarchical topology and promotes an egalitarianism of preference, indulgence and praxis. What kind of vegetal love then Yeong-hye projects if bra denial, carnal intercourse and flesh gastronomy empower her for a separate biopower? The question at the other end remains as to what makes her a plant, how does she become a plant. Does her plant point of view explain the patriarchy of meat centrism or does it become a green hegemony fought for and developed against a meat dominance? The argument becomes complex because being plant and being no meat is another form of dominance which one should not be candid enough to interpret as anti-patriarchy. This complicates the tenor of her life decision as she gets webbed into a consciousness of being vegetal without being plant centric. This vegetality defies not merely meat but the whole act and metaphor of eating. Giving up on eating is giving up on a system of existence whose (im)possibility is intriguing and intricate. The novel promotes a vegetality that is flat ontology; it is being-state, a relinquishment of any form of consumption, and a submission to non-appropriative ways of thinking. Meat matters as much as non-meat but only to make possible a being-state that is outside patriarchal forms of life-thinking and matrices of dominance and power that rule every sphere of life and life-world.

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**HOW WOMEN REMEMBER: TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE  
VIETNAM WAR BY DANG THUY TRAM AND DUONG  
THU HUONG**

*Kritika Chettri*

The Vietnam War, which is often referred to as the “War of Resistance against American Aggression” (Hunt XX), is remarkable for having been won by a poor third world nation. The war that began in around 1955 and lasted till 1975, between north Vietnam, and American forces in the south of Vietnam, displayed the strength and resilience of the tiny nation that had managed to fight off the French imperialists and Chinese aggressors before the Americans arrived (Hunt 37-41). What is even more intriguing is the fact that women formed a formidable section of the Vietnamese forces, with Michael Hunt’s account pitting the number of female participation at 1.5 million (123). Turner and Thanh, in their collection of testimonies from female veterans, state, “Any accounting of the American War in Vietnam that leaves out Vietnamese women tell only half the story (19).” One can hardly look for an adequate and justifiable representation among the hordes of literature and art produced in America about their version of the Vietnam War, and yet, theirs is the image that dominates. Thus it becomes essential to investigate the narratives by the female participants of the war. For this purpose, I chose to read the diary by Dang Thuy Tram titled *Last Night I Dreamt of Peace* (2006), and a novel by Duong Thu Huong called *Novel Without a Name* (1995), in an effort to examine how women remember, recollect, and record their experience of the war. The larger aim will be to question official historiography and reading practices, through an exploration of the idea of a ‘personal’ as demarcated by these texts. As Dang’s work is a diary and Duong’s a novel, this paper will chart out the evolution of a ‘personal’ memory whose existence comes fraught with the challenges presented by the form of the diary and the novel.

**Post War Vietnam and its Memorialisation Practices**

Commemoration is an important word in the field of memory studies as attested by works like Paul Connerton’s iconic, *How Societies Remember* (1989). In the second chapter on “commemorative memory” Connerton explains how commemorative memory works through the re-enactment of rituals and myths on a periodic basis, which then becomes a means for the state to assert that “history is not a play of contingent forces” (42). If commemorative memory is deployed by the powers that

be, to create and sustain a certain favourable narrative, then what would be the place of a 'personal memory' within such a system? Of course, some like Halbwachs' would argue, that all memory is in fact social in nature. Halbwachs' whole thesis in *The Collective Memory* is premised on the notion that every memory is social, for our memories are not only supplemented by others, but their presence in a social setting guarantees their reliance on factors outside the individual (23). On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur's *Memory History and Forgetting*, makes a claim for the validity of personal memory. Ricoeur also engages with Halbwachs' idea of collective memory but soon claims that "The starting point of the entire analysis cannot be erased by its conclusion: it was in the personal act of recollection that the mark of the social was initially sought and then found. This act of recollection is in each case ours" (123). This primacy given to memory beyond the imagination, the narrative, even individual identities, for Ricoeur goes on to affirm that memory is most liable to be abused when it is connected with issues of identity, public commemoration and so on (43). If memory in the form of 'pure memory' is seen as something outside the scope of the imagination, outside even narrative, then one is led to ask as to what constitutes this 'pure memory.' Ricoeur claims that memory belongs to the "world of experience' in contrast to the 'worlds of fantasy,' of irreality" (49). Experience is what gives validity to the idea of a 'pure memory.' This experience is also something personal, as Ricoeur demonstrates through his studies of the tradition of inwardness from Augustine to Husserl (21-44). If there is something pure, personal, and sacred to oneself, then narrative (written or oral), containing both the inscribed and our methods of reading the inscribed, provides the only glimmer into the hitherto inaccessible of one's experiences. This paper aims to read Dang's diary and Duong's novel, with all their narrative inconsistencies and limitations, to reclaim the idea of a 'personal memory' which can stand as a site of resistance for the powers that be.

Dang Thuy Tram was a twenty five year old female doctor from north Vietnam who went to serve in the war that sought to liberate the south of Vietnam from American control in 1968. While providing medical aid to the guerrilla forces, Dang maintains a diary, recording her day to day experiences. She dies in 1970, during the course of the war, while her diaries are recovered and published much later in 2005. The recovery of her diaries is a story of triumph in itself. They were discovered and translated by an erstwhile American soldier, Fred Whitehurst. They were published in Hanoi in 2005, becoming an instant bestseller, and even inspiring a documentary (FitzGerald 521-551). Frances FitzGerald explains the immense popularity of the diary in the "Introduction" to her diaries:

The diaries struck a particular chord among young readers. Two-thirds of all Vietnamese were born after 1975, and for them the war was ancient history, and a history that was taught in a dry, stylised fashion. Other war diaries had been published, but, like textbooks, they spoke mainly of heroism and great victories. Thuy's diaries broke the mould. Here was a brave, idealistic young woman, but one with vulnerabilities and self-doubts: a romantic in spite of all her discipline. (551)

If the diaries were able to attract the young, then the government was quick to appropriate the memory of Dang Thuy Tram, who had become something of a 'folk hero' in FitzGerald's word (560). Memorialisation requires a physical manifestation. Therefore, a hospital, a library, and a memorial were built in Tram's honour, so she could be celebrated as a Vietnamese icon. Moreover, the Vietnamese general, Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the resistance from 1940s till the fall of Saigon in 1975, and Prime Minister of the new regime like Phan van Khai, claimed to have read the diary (Mc Neill). On the other hand, female veterans who survived the war to interpret it, like Duong Thu Houg, through her work, *Novel Without a Name*, have been constantly hounded by the Communist regime for her criticism of the party and its revolutionary past, while her fiction faces strict censorship in Vietnam ("Duong Thu Huong- Viet Nam").

The answer for such differential treatment demands a foray into the post war economic reforms of the communist regime. On the face of it, Dang's diary, an account of a young doctor who dies for the sake of the cause, provides a life and death narrative that fits easily into the sacrificial rhetoric of a revolutionary past endorsed by the state. This revolutionary past harps on the strength of the Vietnamese nation that was able to defeat not only the French colonialists, but also the mighty American imperialists. Sections of Dang's account is laced with such charged party propaganda, "I must mend all the wounds of our nation. The Americans are upon us like blood -thirsty devils, stealthily sinking their fangs into our bodies. Only when we have chased them all out of Vietnam will our blood stop pouring into the earth" (Dang 47-48).

Hue-Tam Ho Tai provides an explanation for the need of the state to engage in such valorisation of the past. He claims that the Doi Moi economic reforms which opened the country for free trade and the engagement in global economy "seemed to undermine the very rationale for war and revolution" (Hue-Tam 180). This, supplemented with the lack of effective rehabilitation of the veterans by the state, added to the feeling of betrayal. A post war perspective of disillusionment emerged

which went on to breed anti-war sentiments, as explicated in Huang's novel.

### **Is There Anything Personal about a Dairy?**

To the Vietnamese readers of Dang's life, the story did not end with the last chapter of her diary, where Dang expresses disappointment at being betrayed by her comrades. She believes they have left her to die. In reality, Dang was not betrayed by her comrades. They did return with supplies, and Dang was killed by the American troops (FitzGerald 515-516). So in order to 'know' about the person of Dang, the diary had to be read along with the events from her real life, in a continuation of sorts. Such a reading practice instantly created a public persona for Dang as the sacrificial war heroine. If the diary is 'public' in the manner in which Dang's story has been appropriated, then what is the nature of the 'personal' that it carves out for itself.

Taking cue from Ricouer, "personal memory," implies an individual's "world of experience" (*Memory History Forgetting* 49). The form of a dairy happens to be an elaboration on the idea of a personal memory. Does personal memory have to do with a narration of one's own selfhood? Does recounting personal memory also have to do with recounting and fashioning one's own self? Traditional western theories like George Gusford's seminal essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" locates the autobiography at a particular moment in the history of European civilisation, when the curiosity set out by the Copernican revolution regarding the outside world, was also extended to man's inner being. So autobiography becomes nothing, but the individual seen "in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been" (Gusford 44). On the other hand, a critique of Gusford, from feminist and post colonial quarters, makes the claim, that a self is always to be understood in relation to others. Susan Stanford Friedman, and Mary G Mason in their respective works, describe how lives are relational and interconnected, which is what women's autobiographies expound. Sweet Wong's study of Native American autobiographies reflects upon how their lives are connected to a sense of community.

If personal memory is linked to an elaboration of selfhood, then Dang's diary engages with both ideas of the self— one formed through this performance of an exploration of interiority, and the other that believes in the interconnectedness of all lives. Therefore, Dang turns into a chronicler, a witness, providing a record of the lives of young men and women whom she encounters in the field. While the idea about interconnected lives seems to arrive as an antidote to the self centred

approach to writing and reading diaries, this interconnection brings in its own set of complications. It creates a deep rooted consciousness in Dang about her gendered identity of being a single woman at the war front. She hastily reverts to referring to her male patients as brothers, and writes about how they love her like a sister, while glorifying such a relationship, "It is strange, but there really is no other love like this affection, like the love between brother and sister, the true care in the family of the Revolution" (Dang 70). She writes about a young patient called Nghia, whose condition stirs her sympathy, "I wanted to hold him in my hands and touch him, but I could not because everyone would misunderstand our true emotions and regard for each other" (93).

Turner and Thanh's testimonial records provide an account of the gender dynamics in Vietnamese society before and after the war. They write about the tradition of warrior women in Vietnamese society which preceded the arrival of the Americans. During the war against the French, the legend of the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu, who incited resistance against Chinese authorities, was invoked. At the same time, new heroines were created like the peasant girl, Nguyen Thi Hung. They write about how these narratives were co-opted to fit into the patriarchal ideal. For instance, the resistance of the Trung sisters was seen as not out of their own will but in order to save their husband. They also mention the establishment of a Vietnamese statue of a woman with a gun over her soldier and a baby in her arms near Huan Kiem lake. Fighting women were no extraordinary creatures but they did have an extraordinary duty to perform. As they state, they had to be "tough as nails in war and gently maternal at home (Turner and Thanh 36, 26, 27, 28, 5)."

Dang is deeply conscious of her role as a doctor looking after the Vietcong troops, which fits her into the maternal ideal. She accepts this maternal role and even glorifies it by calling it the highest duty she can perform for the revolution. Moving beyond her professional role, the narrative is filled with Dang expressing her care and concern for the lives of the soldiers that she encounters. She writes about a young soldier called Thuan, and regrets the fact that he has no family to look after him. She proclaims, "When he comes home alone except for his shadow, I would like to warm his life with affection." At the same time she also sees herself as "a soldier in this struggle." She lives in foxholes, digs graves for the dead, and maintains a stoic resilience throughout the bombings, thus exclaiming, "I am the same as the young men leaving for the front lines of war who go through the explosive sounds of bomb and fire (Dang 15, 23, 94, 70)."

Dang's subscription to the "fighting mother" ideal exposes other identities that are submerged within the narrative. Hue-Tam Ho Tie states that the nature of guerrilla warfare is such that it blurs all distinctions between public and private, military and civilian, male and female (175). However Cynthia Enloe goes on to claim that there is no such thing as gender neutrality in the military, and the presence of women does not alter the masculinist code within which the military operates (qtd. in Joberg and Via 6). This seems to hold true even for guerrilla warfare as the women not only had to fight like men, but constantly subscribe to their patriarchal objectification.

This awareness of one's gendered position during the war, leads to Dang constantly reprimanding herself in the following fashion:

Why do I feel immensely sad when everybody departs?  
I cannot say. In fact, I very much regret that I cannot attend the meeting because I would have been able to hear, understand, and see many precious things, advantageous for my progress . . . Oh Thuy! Oh, this girl full of affection. Your eyes should not fill with tears, even if they are distilled from sadness. You should smile as though you always had a smile on your lips. Don't let someone find a sigh behind that smile. Twenty- five years old already, be steady and mature with that age.  
(Dang 66-68)

More than half of the diary is about Dang counselling herself in the following manner. Thus, even within the personal form of the diary, the personal is a space that needs to be contested for. Selfhood emerges as a contestation between the two selves of Dang— a public one that toes the party line, and a private one, who desires to express the feelings of hope, frustrations and disillusionments that she experiences at the front. This pattern, where she expresses her hopes, frustrations and disappointments, while quickly reprimanding herself for the same, makes her an ideal of Vietnamese womanhood for the communist regime who would encourage such reprimand, while exposing the constraints governing the lives of women at the front.

### **The Reality of Female Veterans in Post War Vietnam**

Perhaps it became important to celebrate a dead female hero of the war, as post war Vietnam hardly had a place for these female veterans. Dang's diary already pre-empted this, as a large section of her account is devoted to the loneliness and longing she feels for her lover M, from whom she has been separated. The idea of lovers who have been separated by the war, establishes Dang as the perfect romantic

heroine, while also laying out the possibility that had she not succumbed to the war, then the love story would have probably have been successful. In reality, loneliness and social ostracism became the common fate for female veterans after the war. Turner and Thanh's account chronicles in elaborate details the lack of rehabilitation for female veterans in post war Vietnamese society. In a society celebrating the cult of motherhood, women were supposed to put down their weapons and get back to their traditional role of setting up families. However, many female veterans were unable to find husbands, had to marry old men, could not give birth or lived with fear of having deformed bodies. The pressure of motherhood led many women to have relationships that were termed as illicit in Vietnamese society, leading to their ostracism (Turner and Thanh 154–157).

### **Making the War Personal**

In this context, it becomes essential to read the work of Duong Thu Huong, who was a war veteran herself. Duong's *Novel Without a Name*, though published in 1995, is based during the war when it is nearing its end in the 1970s. It is perhaps noteworthy that as a female veteran, Duong chooses to write a novel, and not the more popular form of the memoir. If the idea of fictionality provides a shield to Duong's interpretation of the war, then her background as a female veteran, serves to complicate matters. It chooses to read Duong's novel for its factual validity, leading to its censorship. The novel betrays a strong anti-war perspective which feels betrayed by the Communist regime and its post war policies. As Duong states, "They don't see the loss of human rights in daily life. The essential interest of Doi Moi is money; it is not the beginning of democratization (qtd in "Duong Thu Huong"). There is no glorious victory at the end, as the novel ends in the midst of war time itself. Duong focuses on the losses of the war as her narrator devotes large parts of the text to the relationships that have disintegrated due to the war. If her background as a female veteran is enough to censure Duong's novel, then it also indirectly grants it the legitimacy of history.

War is a public event that seeks consensus in our private spheres. War stories, as Lynne Hanley has asserted, traditionally render the exploits of men at the front as the only kind of narrative worth telling. Hanley is referring here to white male narratives. She calls for stories to be heard about the experience of women and civilians who are absent from these narratives even while being embroiled within it (Hanley 40).

The novel has traditionally been viewed as an exponent of the private sphere that nevertheless plays an important role in shaping up a

public sphere (Habermas 51). Habermas writes about the active creation of a bourgeois private sphere through the idea of a “patriarchal conjugal family” (46). In Duong’s novel, we see the impact of the war on its private sphere— family, and on the relationship between men and women. The relationship between men and women is depicted through three standard tropes— the comrade in arms, the sacrificial mother, and the lover. Women in combat do not inhabit much of the text but when they do appear, they find a distinct appearance. The narrative begins with Quan, a male narrator, witnessing a bunch of female corpses who have been raped and left to rot in the jungle. A matter of fact tone is adopted by Quan to describe the bodies. Although the narrative begins with this scene, but it doesn’t gain the importance of an event in Quan’s eyes, as he goes on to narrate the accidental killing of a fellow soldier by Luoy (Duong 24–25). The women’s corpses set the theme of death and decay that infiltrate the narrative. Women, valued as the giver of life in Vietnamese culture, now become emissaries of death, with their own death counting for nothing at all.

Soon after, Quan sets out on his mission to rescue Bien, his childhood friend and fellow soldier, and meets another female comrade whose job is to keep a record of the corpses and their belongings. She is described as a sexual predator who pounces on Quan at night as he seeks shelter under her roof. He is repulsed by her ugliness and rejects her by saying that he doesn’t want to add to her troubles by impregnating her in the middle of a jungle. She replies that she wouldn’t mind that ordeal too. This episode not only speaks of the solitude of women condemned to the war front, but the desire to mother a child even outside marriage, displays the plight of female veterans who had to resort to various means in order to fulfill their role of motherhood in post war Vietnam. Nevertheless she is no victim, but an assertive woman who mocks Quan as she tells him, “You call us she- soldiers, don’t you? What a bunch of bastards . . . (Duong 44).”

Female comrades do not mingle with the men and do not share any camaraderie with them in Duong’s novel. V. Spike Peterson writes about how the military operates on a strict code of hyper masculinity (23). This hyper masculinity is based on a strong adherence to the concept of hyper sexuality and heteronormativity. As one of the soldiers, Huc, tells him after a hunt, “Eat up. We have a rule here: During meals you only talk about food and sex. It’s forbidden to talk about anything else” (Duong 178). After a good meal procured from a hunt, Quan states, “After dinner we took turns telling dirty stories. If you couldn’t think of one, you’d get pummeled” (188). Duong’s narrative presents the stereotypical image of ‘men at war’ as Quan constantly recounts his

relationship with other male soldiers before and after the war. In this heteronormative space, the narrator informs us that the soldiers begin to tease Huc, a male soldier, for falling in love with Quan. However, the focus is on the affection and care demonstrated by the soldiers for one another which ascertains that it is the men who care for each other in the absence of the female, thus taking on the maternal role assigned to women.

The single women in Quan's village are depicted in terms of their relationship to the young soldier. They provide the means for male camaraderie and are portrayed by Quan as fitting into a nostalgic image of the pastoral. However this pastoral image soon gets disrupted as Quan exposes the gender constraints that infiltrate this society. He narrates his teenage love affair with a village girl called Hue, who awaits his return when Quan gets enlisted. When he does return from the front many years later, Hue has been ostracized from the community for getting pregnant before marriage. She lives on her own in the middle of a field on the outskirts of the village. Hue has been depicted as the ultimate victim in need of Quan's love and sympathy which he dutifully provides. The author makes it certain that her sympathies lie firmly with young Hue while she does not abstain from painting her male protagonist in a negative light when he feels the desire to strike her at one point.

While the novel depicts the private world of men and women in wartime Vietnam, it also envisions alternative systems for Vietnamese society. Quan writes elaborate eulogies to his long deceased mother. His mother is depicted as the perfect sacrificial victim who is ill treated by her husband once he returns from freeing the country against the French colonialists. Hue-Tam Ho Tie writes about the "cult of motherhood" in Vietnamese society and its endorsement by the government which passed a bill in 1994 to award the status of "heroic mother" to women who had lost at least three children in the war. He states that the father has always been an "unreliable" figure in Vietnamese society being away most of the time (Hue Tam 177). Duong too valorizes the ideal of motherhood by depicting Quan's mother as the sacrificial victim who succumbs to her husband's jealousy once he returns from the war against the French invaders. Though operating within the familiar mother-son trope, here it is the child who mourns for the mother. Quan feels that things would be otherwise if his mother were around for she would not have let his younger brother participate in the war, getting killed in combat. He blames his father for forcing the party rhetoric onto his poor brother. The mother, thus offers an alternative system for Quan.

Quan narrates the life of his friend Bien's parents which offer an alternative model of relationship between men and women. He states that the other village women are jealous of Madame Buu for she has been given great freedom and respect by her husband, "The fact that she was still there, drinking with her husband, while in every other house in the village a woman's place was in the kitchen. That alone was enough to feel resentment" (Duong 130). Quan does not feel resentment but he is amazed and intrigued by this relationship especially since it is contrary to the one he had seen in his own home.

Duong's use of a male narrator bonding with other male soldiers, mourning the loss of that camaraderie makes it seem as a traditional war narrative about the exploits of men at the front. However the concern of this male narrator is intimately related to relationships with his male comrades, to women, as he goes on to delve on the impact of the war on these individual lives. Quan provides care to his fellow comrades, becomes a witness to the women in the war zone, and demands sympathy for the plight of women back home. Therefore, the purpose of introducing this male narrator is not only to interrogate relationships, but also to mend them. Though pitted as an anti-war novel that mourns the loss of youth and its idealism, it also does an important work of asking the men to be sympathetic to the women folk.

Such engagement with the private sphere brings the private world of men and women to the forefront, opening it up for criticism that runs deep into the heart of Vietnamese society and its gender norms even before the war. Feelings of nostalgia, gloom, and desolation that mark the text, needed to be suppressed in the official memorialising of the war. Conversely, it is by not discounting Duong's own guerrilla past, by reading her life as a veteran into the novel, that we are able to extract the workings of personal memory in her novel. It is thus, that we see the full range of the evolution of the personal— a story that is not merely representative, but also utopic and enmeshed in the realm of emotions evoked by the war.

### **Conclusion**

The personal emerges as a space that the women have to wrestle for. Suppressed in Dang's diary, a form that is ironically meant to indulge the personal, and finding free reign in Duong's novel, only to have the shield of functionality stripped away, due to a biographical reading, a cost that Duong has to pay for in her real life. Yet, this essay has tried to demonstrate how the diary of Dang and the novel of Duong, negotiate a 'personal,' which has the potential to challenge the myth of a single story,

thereby attuning to the polyphony of any historical event, including the war in Vietnam.

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**“BODY, IT’S YOU WHO ARE THE SOUL”: GENDER,  
SUBVERSION AND UNDERWORLD IN THE SELECTED  
WORKS OF ELIAS PETROPOULOS**

*Soumyadip Ghosh*

Anti-poetry is a poetic movement that attempts to destabilize normative rules and conventions of traditional poetry. This kind of poetic genre is distinguished by its intention to communicate as directly as prose. Leslie Bethell has defined Anti-poetry as, “a questioning of the value of poetry and the inflated egos of poets from within the poems (Bethell 281).” But Anti-poetry cannot be defined in a single sentence. Instead, Anti-poetry eludes any clear definition because this kind of poetry is an incessant quest for the source of uncontaminated poetic expression which does not fit into any rigidity of systematized-order. In fact, unveiling the intersections of word and image Anti-poetry offers a unification of randomly chosen objects and words. Hence, one need not be an erudite or scholastic in order to appreciate Anti-poetry. Rather this type of poetry, composed through ordinary languages, is meant for the ordinary people. An anti-poet usually begins the poem with a subtle refusal of responsibility for the shocking impact it creates on its readers. The anti-poet’s caustic apology for any aggravation sets the tone of parodied self-criticism which they maintain throughout the rest of the poem. In fact, the anti-poet is always engaged in a combat to free the language from its metaphorical associations, to make its vocabulary a simplified one and make poetry an efficient tool for liberated literary expression.

An anti-poet like Elias Petropoulos replaces the sentimentality or exoticism of lyrics by a language which is much colloquial and direct. This is where as an anti-poet he transforms poetry into anti-poetry. He makes the transformation possible because he feels obliged to express the quotidian ideas of existing life in a language which is direct. Elias Petropoulos (1928 - 2003), a self-described ‘urban anthropologist’, wrote on the issues of Greek life that had never been seriously studied before. He was imprisoned thrice during the Junta (1967-1974) and produced a disruptive and ‘of-humorous’ literary oeuvre that invites extreme reactions from his readers. The themes of Elias Petropoulos’s writings includes portrayal of subcultures, denunciation of the chauvinistic ideas, slangs, music of homosexuals, drug users, and criminals- all in a skeptical manner. At the core of his anti-poetry lies humour and Petropoulos, like a true an anti-poet, continuously communicates any profound theoretical

statement with the most comical and derisive assertions. Petropoulos, a proponent of direct speech in poetry, sees himself as a committed enemy to any jargon that interprets themes in pompous manners. Instead, he believes his poetic technique has to assume the voice of his critics and then a reply to them from the aspects of an anti-poet. The replies are often ironic and cynical, for he believes his critics' take on anti-poetry is a flawed one. He also admits that any defect in anti-poetry, as pointed out by critics, is intentional, because the very defect distinguishes his works from the ossified notion of poetry. Edith Grossman rightly says, "The alleged defects of anti-poetry are actually its virtues." (Grossman 56).

While treating a well celebrated theme like gender in his poetry, Elias Petropoulos delineates a sharp contrast with the fixed endings, forms and age old emotions that conventional poetry might offer to critique the issues of gender. Instead, Petropoulos feels that the inconclusiveness of anti-poetry is an anti-doctrinal position that an anti-poet always shares with its readers. The language of Petropoulos's works is not noble, his poetic appeal is not exemplary, and his anti-poetic tone is not at all amiably philosophical. His writing, instead, is devoid of lyricism. His anti-poetry does not convince the readers yet it communicates to its readers as directly as possible so that the readers become a part of its journey. The charges labelled against anti-poetry are, in fact, no more than a wistful defence of a particular poetic tradition which falls sharply in a banal emotion that expresses but does not serve to the feeling of ordinary readers. Petropoulos never questions the authenticity of the emotions of traditional poetry but disapproves the language in which they are usually articulated.

Elias Petropoulos creates a new language and vocabulary for poetry which are pivotal for any development of communication. They not only provoke creative venture but also withdraw themselves from any hyperbolic pronouncement. Regarding the poetic stance of Petropoulos Edith Grossman comments, "He achieves the necessary comic distance from his exaggerated position by establishing a sense of disparity and incongruity between the statements he is making and the language he uses for making them." (Grossman 59). The cliché of prosaic words subvert their take on the value of anti-poetry. Petropoulos consistently attempts to disorient his readers' poetic sense and sensibilities. The readers' ultimate acceptance of the linguistic and emotional contradictions in anti-poetry is the poetic purpose of Petropoulos.

Elias Petropoulos destroys the old phrases and begins a profound prelude to a new poetic mode. He records the harsh reality around him and replaces the old order and names of things with much straight

forward language. He communicates to his readers most directly and for this, if the language requires to be revised, he is obliged to do so. Petropoulos, believes that this new tradition of poetry is a spirit of anti-lyricism. Radical in nature, it is the anti-poetic stance. He used colloquial language, unexpected slangs and cant on themselves to undercut the hyperbolic ego that a poet attaches with himself while composing a poem. The conspicuous prosaic words used by him undermine his poetic pomposity. Works of Elias Petropoulos compel the readers to accept the corrosive juxtaposition of various modes of language and peculiar examples of linguistic innovation as the inevitable facts of the anti-poetry.

Unlike a traditional poet, an anti-poet's role is not only to simply write of the reality that surrounds him but also to reconstruct the vocabulary of poetry, if that is required for making the communication more plausible and direct. In anti-poetry, language has no rigid relationship with the objects it defines. In short, language is a system, a tradition of the construed world, but if someone feels the necessity, the system and its tradition can be disjoined. This restructuring of the traditional connection between the language and its referents appears to be the sole purpose of an anti-poet. Instead of making a decoupled dictionary, Elias Petropoulos searches for a deep sense of relationship between language and experience. Petropoulos, as an anti-poet, shows fidelity only to the quotidian language which he practices most consistently. This notion of language in anti-poetry is directly opposed to the elite concept of poetry which may be said to be rather an obscure discourse far away from the speech of common people. The objective detachment of the artist from any preoccupied idea and his complete identification with the mass is the major thrust of Petropoulos's works.

During the dictatorship of the colonels in Greece, Elias Petropoulos was convicted thrice for 'pornography' reasons. He was convicted for his anthology of Greek underworld songs, *Rebetika Tragboudia* in 1969, for his poem 'Body' in 1972 and for the dictionary of Greek homosexual slangs, *Kaliarda*. The 'Rebetika' that stands for country music, Black 'blues' and Black spirituals, was an existing oral cultural heritage in Greece. In his 'Introduction' to *Rebetika-Songs of the Old Greek Underworld*, Petropoulos himself declared that these songs were long detested by the upper strata of Grecian society. In fact, the songs, as interpreted by Petropoulos, contained themes of hashish, prison life, drug addiction, prostitution and overt sexual obsession. These songs must have miserably failed to constitute any particular discursive stance towards modern Grecian society. Rather, the songs express the melancholy of a class of people who are endlessly chained to the lowest class of the society. For Petropoulos, 'pornography' convic-

tion was a direct result of his use of hashish themes in his *Rebetika-Songs of the Old Greek Underworld*. In fact, it is this pervasive interest for the truth about the underworld and hashish subjects that provoked Petropoulos to come up with dictions, styles and language which are anti-poetic. A close reading of Elias Petropoulos's 'Introduction' to the *Songs* offers a great amount of information about this loathed social group. Further, the judges objected particularly to one line in the poem **'Body'**: "I forget even the fatherland when I see a young naked female body." (Qtd. in Taylor 10). An article of *Der Spiegel* magazine of the 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1973 brings up the close connection existing between sexual morality and politics of contemporary Greece. In fact, **'Body'** is an anti-poem that offers a direct communication with its readers. The unorthodox structure, diction, straightforwardness, unornamented language and radical choice of theme of the poem never escapes the reader's eyes:

Let's face it: a naked woman is a sad sight.

Unfortunately I have not become demented yet.

Art has its own code of morality.

Beauty is the legality of nature.

Confronted with a woman's naked body small children are awed and nice delicate men are shocked

A woman's naked body compels a discussion of personality.

(Translated by Nikos Germanacos, Qtd. in Taylor 11)

Petropoulos randomly reflects his rebellious motives in his work *Kaliarda*. He never hesitated to use terms in this works for which he was arrested. A strong objection to this work was concerned with the term 'U. S Embassy' which stands for the public toilets in Omonia square, a meeting place for homosexuals. Elias Petropoulos is bold and relentless enough to establish his idea of gender without any showcase of metaphor or other rhetorical ornaments. He never hesitates to utter: "I hope you cruise for a chicken and find the fuzz!" (Translated by Steve Demakopoulos, Qtd. in Taylor 12)

The anti-poetic nature of Elias Petropoulos is reflected in his work *The Good Thief's Manual*. Besides 'pornography conviction', he was also accused of attacking the Greek judiciary system and Greek Orthodox Church and its clergy. In **"Lesson 34"**, his unapologetic prosaic language readily denounces the traditional solemnity of the customs of the church while describing the way the prisoners respond to the prison rule which states that they have to attend the church services, "Prisoners

call the church the priest shop...Prisoners never listen to the psalmodies...Prisoner's don't have the money to buy candles. Some prisoners attend the mass in pyjamas and slippers. This is considered to be quite stylish..." (Qtd. in Taylor 15). The **"Lesson 37"** rings with his idea of prison homosexuality in which religious images and symbols are dealt with sexual implications. The work is replete with hard hitting black humour which allows him to speak: "Cigarette burnings, as a torture, probably don't go back any farther than the cigarette itself..." (Qtd. in Taylor 16). The poetic weapons of Petropoulos in treating the issues of gender and sexuality are humour, parody and sarcasm. Indeed, Elias Petropoulos shows that to speak about gender is nowhere restricted but to speak about gender in and with poetry and with humour is loathsome. Elias Petropoulos' language, slanderous and seditious in nature, shows the rude aspects of gender in Greek underworld society and it questions the fact which so long remained ignored. Black humour, an Anti-poet's common tool to demystify the ossified notion of poetry, is extensively used by Elias Petropoulos in *The Good Thief's Manual*. For example, in **"Lesson 21"**, he writes "The Torturer boils two eggs well. As soon as they are boiling hot, he thrusts them up under the armpits of the Tortured suspect, who squirms convulsively. After the Torture, the Torturer peels the eggs and eats them..." (Qtd. in Taylor 16). The true weapons of Elias Petropoulos for revealing the truth behind the judiciary nexus are humour, sarcasm and parody. In an anti-poetic manner Elias Petropoulos asserts in **"Lesson 26"**: "I doubt if the notion of Crime exists for Minerals, Plants, or Animals. According to our legislative wise men, only Man commits a crime." (Qtd. in Taylor 18).

Through his work Elias Petropoulos questions any haughty pre-conception on gender. Petropoulos practices in his works a quotidian language with coarse words. In his works we descend into an un-metaphorical world of sexuality. The works of Petropoulos always remain as anti-romantic and anti-establishment propaganda which raise questions on issues about which we still feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in this twenty-first century. In **'The Bordello'**, he unambiguously says, "We cannot formulate a definition of prostitution because we are not able to perceive clearly what happens, exactly, between the prostitute and her client..." (Qtd. in Taylor 19). Truly, the laconic and precise style of Petropoulos brings the reader close to the reality. In works such as *Kaliarda* or 'Body', gender presentation, gender identification and sexuality are comprehensively put together to evoke a serious parody which is based on ironic disparities between symbols and their referents. His radical choice of subjects, gender being a prominent one among them, makes the reader contemptuous towards the poetic protagonist and the reading process of his haunting lines involves no cathartic quality.

Petropoulos' language and gesture in his treatment of the issues of gender and sexuality may be banal or even comic, yet they show a deeply felt battle against restrictions of human condition. The language of anti-poetry, as practised by Petropoulos creates the psychic separation between the protagonist of the poem and its observer.

In spite of offering a photographic realism, the works of Elias Petropoulos are, by no means, documents on sociology. What makes Petropoulos an anti-poet is his ever present humour which always holds him up to reality. The humour used by the poet allows him to take a poetic stance which is objective and detached from any particular association. Calling the works of Petropoulos 'pornographic' will mean overlooking the presentation of crude reality of Greek underworld subculture. If he is seditious and subversive, it is due to his clarity, humour and unrefined language. Petropoulos tears the cloak of our preconception on gender with his untiring search for truth.

The fundamental difference between traditional notion of poetry and anti-poetry lies in the treatment of language. Anti-poetry suggests, quoting Grossman, "...every poetic thesis (defect) has its anti-poetic anti-thesis (Virtue)." (Grossman 90). The objective of anti-poetry is to split the poetic appendages such as metaphors, vocabulary, diction, imagery, to simplify the poetic language. Anti-poetry is seen as a result of the mutual understanding between the anti-poet and the readers. In spite of having contempt and contradictions at his heart, Elias Petropoulos argues for the constant renovation and renewal of the poetic tools. He opposes any belletrist decorum and favours the unornamented poetic language.

Any theoretical speculation on anti-poetry is moderated through a characteristic irony which is found in almost all serious assertions on the value of anti-poetry. Petropoulos establishes cynically formal relations with the readers yet he constantly invites them to participate in the adventure of anti-poetry. He not only condemns the ossified notion of poetry for its elitism, irrelevance and failure to communicate to the reader but also takes pleasure in sarcastically highlighting its all probable defects. Moreover, he vehemently directs his barbs of irony against his own inflated poetic pomposity and undermines his proclamations of domineering of poetic theory with incongruous language. The critics of Elias Petropoulos are mocked in such a way that apparent condemnation is turned into a perfect defence of his poetry. Therefore, the thrust of the poet lies in his determination to provoke the reader until he shares the responses of the poet to human existence. He understands this to be the ultimate objective of poetry and believes that only the quotidian spoken

language, devoid of any metaphorical overtones or anachronism, can sufficiently communicate to achieve that objective.

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**REVISITING AND RELOCATING TAGORE'S ROLE AS  
A BENGALI INTELLECTUAL IN THE CONTEXT OF  
POSTCOLONIAL ARCHIVISATION**

*Agnibha Maity*

The question of the subaltern subject formation haunted the grand narrative of the Postcolonial archive, from the very beginning of the Postcolonial discourse. While discussing the genealogy of subaltern identity, in a recent interview, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak professed that subaltern could speak. But, what she meant in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” was that the elite class did not allow the subaltern to complete their speech act, which never really permitted subject formation of the concerned class. Hence, Subaltern was left far from being heard.<sup>1</sup> Texts such as *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, was a part of the grand project which aimed formation and preservation of Bengali and Nationalist identity. This figure of *Thakurmā*, can be equated with a Derridean Absence in the entire text, whose voice, speech act and private space were supplemented and violated by the Archons of newly formed Swadeshi Literature. In spite of being the stalwart figure of Modernity, Rabindranath Tagore could not entrust an “educated *Bhadramahilā* to perform the sacred task of retelling the *Rupkatha*. Although, Tagore emphatically praised Dakshinaranjan for engraving (or burying — the literal translation of the word *Putiyāchilēm*, which Tagore used) Grandmother’s spoken words to those of printed letters, “no scene of speaking” of *Thakurmā* could arise in the discursive domain.<sup>2</sup> The lacuna of her speech erupts and therefore, disrupts the semantics of the narrative with the untranslatable utterances such as “Haun Maun Khaun,” simultaneously also destabilizing the archeion of Bengali intellectuals. This article, by no means attempts to defame Tagore and his unmatched contribution, rather tries to analyse Tagore by his own standardization of “*Sthāna-kāla-pātrabīcāra*” to contextualise him, in order to point out the microscopic yet salient gaps in his own pioneering vision.

The construction of the ‘other’ necessitates the annihilation of subjectivity of the subaltern. The lacuna of the voice of the gendered subaltern or marginalized figure from the literary compendium left no space for the nationalists, except the deliberate misrecognition of *Thakurmā*. In order to fulfil the gigantic ambitious project of identifying the *Lōkāyata* (or *deśāja*) peripheral characters, nationalist writers required

much time to trace, the carefully constructed historiography of the Subaltern. They concurrently had to fasten the paradoxes of time-knot or *samaygranthi*, which left India dwelling with multiple centuries at the same time. To use Marx's terminology, the unresolved question, thus, so far deals with the problem of leaving out the 'stagism', before corresponding to universal suffrage and political modernity. By provincializing Europe and assimilating Western liberal concepts such as 'nation,' 'history,' 'civilization,' Indian elite intelligentsia aspired to proclaim the national heritage without even possessing sufficient cognitive relationship with the marginalized. To justify the need of significant depiction, the quest for recognition resulted into a hurried or sometimes completely fabricated romantic imaginary portrayal of the 'other.' One can, for once, view this as an evidence for the semantic and structural differences to those of the hastily constructed subaltern voices before and after the nationalist project of conjoining the dots of history had begun. To trace the genealogy of *thākurmā*, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar could only refer to his personal nostalgic acquaintance with his grandmothers rather than employing a minute systematic investigation. Furthermore, even an invasion into the private space of the very human *thākurmā*, for this historical project of archivisation seems to be absent.

Bengali modernity tried to "assimilate modern thoughts and modern arts into her inner life without any loss of what she had long possessed" (Sarkar 348). Tagore, despite his enormously critical and radical endeavours, towards bringing equality in the truest sense, failed to acknowledge and appreciate newer ideas of anglicized feminism. Tagore held onto the very idea that, "Women are the oldest in human civilization" (R. Tagore, Kalantar 353) and "women belong to the bygone period" (R. Tagore, Kalantar 353) for a considerable amount of time. An instance of such event can be found in his vehement opposition of an essay by Krishnabhamini devi, titled 'Educated Women' in *Samayika sahitya samalocana*. It can be further elucidated by quoting a few lines from the aforementioned essay: "Nature has made a lady housewife with special duties and corresponding instincts" (R. Tagore, Sāmayika Sāhitya Samālōcanā 638) and "Earning money by entering man's work is not a woman's job" (R. Tagore, Sāmayika Sāhitya Samālōcanā 639).

The Poet confessed, "The large amount of irrationality that is found in women is not a sign of stupidity." Undoubtedly, when it comes to the question of rewriting the requisite cultural and philosophical history of India, Tagore trusted Kshitimohan Sen. If we connect with the former sense of trust, although Tagore claimed to have ascertained the

responsibility of collecting and retelling the Tales of *thakurmā* to an educated lady, he couldn't entrust her entirely, unfortunately. According to Abanindranath Tagore, it was Mrinalini Devi, the poet's wife, as she "gathered many folk-fairy tales." Abanindranath writes, "Aunt used to write these down in an exercise book, in which there were many good fairytales. It was from that exercise book of hers from which my story *Kheerer Putul* was taken." (A. Tagore, Abanindra Rachanabali 21) History didn't account for his forgotten notebook as an archive, because it was not made part of any scholarly compendium for failing to flair erudite. Tagore, perhaps, simply failed to evade the episteme or hegemony of Bengali Modernity. Soudamini Devi, elder sister of our beloved poet, though not a prolific writer, as Swarnakumari Devi, could write decent prose and poetic pieces, as many of them got published in contemporary reputed periodicals such as *Tattvobodhini Patrika* and *Bamabodhini*. Soon after Maharshi Debendranath Tagore deceased, Soudamini wrote *Pritismriti*, in memoriam of her father, which has been subjected to as much critical examination and revision by none other than Tagore himself. As a result of which, the text lost its currency and finally, when it was published it bore the poet's name. This classical example of palimpsest definitely did not obtain much attention until recent feminist intervention.

Unequivocally, when it comes to the question of the archival task of cultural preservation, Tagore's contribution is among the most phenomenal. Tagore himself assembled and edited almost eighty one vernacular rhymes in different dialects. But, Tagore failed to attribute modernity and agency to the impoverished villagers, who remained as a part of his nostalgia vividly manifested in many contemporary essays, starting from Bhudeb Mukhopaddhay to Dakhsinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. Tagore writes in *Palligrāme*, "I started to contemplate about the ignorant, illiterate peasants, whom in theory I despise as unsophisticated barbarians, but in reality, embrace them as my own relatives" (R. Tagore, Panchabhut 43). With hindsight, borrowed from Gramsci's term, Tagore was indeed a 'permanent persuader' of Modernism, yet, he could not do away with his own reservations. This ongoing process of abstraction left permanent gaps in the field of recording multitudinous voices in the archive. Also, this essay must address the birth of the new reader, which was essentially male and urbanised in contemporary Bengal. Moreover, it is not very astonishing that the countless essays which were being written were only to evoke nationalist consciousness (or sentiment) in the mindset of these gentle and formally educated new readers (*shantipriyo shanto chele*). In the preface of *Loksahitya*, Tagore explains his purpose, "for the some time now, I have been trying to collect all the feminine folk-verses (*meyeli chora*) that

are commonly known in Bengali language as lullaby for boys (*chelebbulano*)” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 6). In the foreword of another collection named *Meyeli brata* by Aghornath Chattopadhyay, Tagore corresponds,

By virtue of an affectionate inclination towards the *antahpur*—the nectar-vessel [*sudhābhāṅḍār*] of the society—I had decided to collect these legends, nurtured since the beginning of time in the gentle hearts and honeyed voices of our mothers, grandmothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. (Chattopadhyay ii)

As soon as he went on to elaborate the process of collecting these verses, we can witness a massive dearth of conversation (*Kathōpakathan*) with any *Antahpurabāsinī*, while collecting these verses. Tagore depends solely on his memory. “It is impossible for me to detach my childhood memory from the taste that I derive from these rhymes,” (R. Tagore, Loko sahitya 6) and hesitated as he senses, “How will that affectionate, sweet and simple voice, emanate from a man's pen?” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 9) Tagore worries, “all these ignorant house wives are being subjected to some kind of oppression when they compare these unpolished feminine verses with that of *Ātāghānt bāndhā sādhubhāsaṣā*, (structured pure form of chaste language) as if the bride of the house is being dragged to the altar and cross-examined” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 10). The same praxis of *ghor* and *bābir* allegory pervaded through every documentation of the early twentieth-century Bengal.

The major axis of my theoretical interpretation is based on Derrida's notion of archive, which contradicts the Foucauldian conception scintillatingly. To Foucault, Archive is “the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Foucault 129). Whereas, Derrida traces back the etymology of the word ‘Archive’ in his seminal book *Archive Fever*. To him,

‘Archive’ is not solely a discursive domain or a field of law, rather a place, a home (Greek word *arke* means domicile, address) where the interpretation and categorization of the knowledge supervene. “There where men and gods command, there where the authority, social order are exercised in this place from which order is given” (Derrida 9).

To supplement, the archons are the interpreters and they are responsible to account for/ testify the documents. To contextualize with Bengali Modernity, liability and authority of texts and documentation were strictly reserved with the exclusive Bengali Intelligentsia and the newly formed class referred with formal English education. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida discusses the “Archival Violence” which took place at the

home of the *Arkbons*, suffusing all the archives while structuring the ideology for the body politics. This essay, by no means, attempts to demean the mammoth role of Dinesh Chandra Sen, Keshav Chandra Sen or Rabindranath Tagore. It is rather an effort to measure the silences along the road, as Spivak says, “attempting to recover a (sexually) subaltern subject [...] lost in an Institutional textuality at the archaic origin” (Spivak 303). Despite all the endeavours which were made to educate the women of the society, literature and the historical documents of 19th Century fail to take account of and testify the female voices, independent of the male authority. “The Nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here” (Chatterjee 257). Among the innumerable examples, Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amāra jīban*, the first Autobiography written by a woman in India and the first ever, in Bengali language, serves as an evidence to support my argument. Jyotirindranath Tagore wrote a “preface” for the second edition of Rassundari Devi's autobiography along with Dinesh Chandra Sen. She was praised for being an “ideal, pious and religious Indian lady,” whose work stood as an exemplary piece of art and reiterates the ideology of classical Hinduism, recounting how women eliminated their urges of material and physical longing. But on the contrary, the book stands as an account for a series of heart wrenching experiences which she endures through her lifetime. In her own words, she refers to herself as “the caged bird who has been denied freedom and liberation” (*Piñjarēte pākhibandī jālēbandī min*) (Rassundari Devi 21). Perhaps all the major figures of Bengal Renaissance, in one way or the other, have been involved in their exercise of silencing a gendered subaltern subject, knowingly or unknowingly. Tagore in the same manner, only paid attention to “how they spoke, and less frequently through accounts of what they said” (Visweswaran 90).

Tagore indeed made sincere attempt to reconstruct the consciousness of a defeated nation. In *Sāmañyika sāhitya samālōchanā*, while critiquing the role of Sahitya Parishad, poet writes, “its purpose should be deciphering the ancient scriptures and to interpret the meaning of the obsolete old words. One should also keep an eye on the collection of folklore, proverb, and Kabigāna of popular poets such as Haruthakur, Ram Basu” (Tagore, *Sāmañyika Sāhitya Samālōchanā* 656). Tagore understood the grave significance of the vernacular languages, dialects, rural practices and rituals, which were elemental in weaving the new cultural consciousness, which was predominantly composed and guarded by the agents of Bengali Intellectuals. However, the discursive paradigmatic shift in the domain of knowledge introduced the idea of judgement and comparison (*Bibēcanā* and *Tulanā*). A reasonable, new *Bhadralōk* or sophisticated man, capable of distinguishing between

imagination (*Kalpna*) and rationality, declared these folktales as obsolete and uncivilized yet passionately used them to form the political rhetoric with much national and Bengali pride. Our present view and analogy of the Bengali intellectual class are not only erroneous but anachronistic too. Collectivity of the Bengali community and the identity was cleverly formed by gerrymandering and fragmented identities, at this certain point of historical juncture. Indisputably, nationalism did play a major role in this venture of collecting folk verses, since Grimms' fairy tales published in 1812, made it fashionable and popular to construct national identity around these narratives in Germany and Italy. Swadeshi Movement played a catalytic role in this literary movement of Bengal. In his introduction to *thākurmār Jhuli* (1907), Tagore cries, "Is there anything more Swadeshi than this *thākurmār jhuli*?" (Majumdar 6) The Poet laments, "But alas, in recent times, even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairy tales from the west have become almost the sole recourse of our boys... But, where are our princesses, our magical speaking-bird" (Majumdar 6) Abanindranath not only wrote *Kbeerer Putul*, but also illustrated *Bengal Fairy Tales* by F. B. Bradley-Birtin in 1920. Following the lead of Tagore, who thought *Swadeshi Sahitya* would function as 'the live umbilical cord,' one can find series of such anthologies alike, which include Jogendranath Sarkar's *Princess Lass' Rhymes* (1899, 1902) and Mahesh Chunder Dutt's *Folklore in Bengal* (1893), Ram Satya Mukherjee's *Indian Folk Lore* (1904), Dinesh Chandra Sen's two crucial book *Folk literature of Bengal* (1920), and two noteworthy volumes of *The Legends of Bengal* (1930) by Charu Chandra Guha, an associate of Gandhi.

This essay, thus, so far tried to crack the integument of this project of modernization which, nonetheless, failed to bring justice to the question of dreadful "epistemic violence" done to the subaltern voices up to the contemporary times. Since, we are left with no vestiges of these private accounts, "the impossibility of fully recovering the experience of the enslaved and the emancipated" (Hartman 10) leaves us with no recourse of resuscitation but the idea of 'Critical Fabulation', a tool to 'narrate a certain impossibility' (Hartman and Wilderson 184). Bhuvanewari Devi, as in Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" chose to hang herself while she was on her menstruation to serve it as an answer to the noxious questions which were raised about her character. But her statement couldn't make any archival impact since, it runs "the risk of reinforcing the authority of these documents" even if we "try to use them for contrary purposes" (Hartman 10). So, the question Mitra Majumdar posed, "who took the painting brush? *lāl tuktuke sōnārhātē kēniyēbētuli*" (Majumdar 11), left us unanswered since Tagore revealed no name and little or no space was left for the *thākuramā*

to speak. It urges for more critical attention as Hartman questions “if it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive?” (Hartman 7)

#### Notes:

1. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “!EXCLUSIVA! Entrevista a Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (part 1).” YouTube. Uploaded by Uchile Indigena, 23 Nov. 2016. Youtube [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_OX2y4vuMs&t=49s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_OX2y4vuMs&t=49s)
2. See Tagore's introduction to *Thākurmār Jhuli. Hirak Jayanti Sanskaran*, by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh, 1994), pp.10

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NEGOTIATIONS 3, MARCH 2020

**EXPLORING THE CONCEPTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL  
COLONIZATION AND “INTERIOR COLONIZATION”:  
REPRESENTING THE SUBALTERN WOMEN IN BUCHI  
EMECHETA’S *DOUBLE YOKE***

*Pintu Karak*

One of the most distinguished female writers to emerge from Post-colonial Nigeria, Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta candidly portrays the miserable condition of women in male dominated Nigerian society. Through her fictions such as *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Double Yoke* (1982) and *The Family* (1989), Emecheta deals with serious issues like sexual politics, racial prejudice, clash between tradition and modernity, subordination of women in Nigerian society. Emecheta is a pioneer in upholding an authentic, authoritative and unadulterated female perspective in contemporary African literature. A leading female voice in contemporary African literature, Emecheta is “praised for her engaging, compassionate rendering of African women, motherhood, and the impact of Westernization in postcolonial Nigeria.” (qtd. in Hunter 4) The present paper tends to buttress on ‘interior colonization’ – a term used by Kate Millet in *Sexual politics* (1970) – of women characters, the double yoke of tradition and modernity that they have to undergo in Emecheta’s self-reflexive novel *Double Yoke* (1982).

In her famous book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millett has pointed out that the “the relationship between the sexes was one of “dominance and subordination”. This power relationship was institutionalized ... it was a form of “interior colonization,” a kind of oppression “sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification” (qtd. in Maggie Doherty web). In Emecheta’s bildungsroman *Double Yoke* women characters suffer from, as Millett has termed in *Sexual Politics*, ‘interior colonization.’ They have been grossly misrepresented and underrepresented. They have been treated (mistreated) as subalterns. Subaltern Studies is a branch of history that tends to focus on the history of the neglected and marginalised sects of the society. The term ‘Subaltern Studies’ originates from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s prison writings which were later collected in *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929 to 1935) referring to those persons or groups of lower rank and station who are marginalised because of class, gender, race, religion and ethnicity. In her *magnum opus*, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985)

Spivak chalks out the pathetic condition of the subaltern women who are silenced by the dominant voice of patriarchy. As Spivak notes:

... as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (qtd. in Nelson and Grossberg 287)

She further admits that “subaltern as female exists as the unrepresentable in discourse, a shadowy figure on its margins. Any attempt to retrieve her voice will disfigure her speech” (qtd. in McLeod 193). Thus Spivak deals with, as Christopher J. Lee points out in *Subaltern Studies and African Studies* (2005), the “problem of “woman as subaltern” not merely in terms of political subjugation, but also in textual terms of linguistic and discursive erasure: women had no voice within colonial texts and, by extension, hegemonic Western accounts of South Asian history”(Lee 4).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Fanon explores how blacks suffer from inferiority complex and aspire to be whites. Fanon also points out the psychological effect of colonialism on the colonised. According to Fanon violence is an integral part of colonialism. In the reviewed work of Anna Johnston’s *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (2003) Mark Knight explores how Johnston is “interested in the relationship between missionary writing and discourses of gender, class and race” (Knight 364). Contact with the missionaries not only changed the life-styles of the natives, it also re-defined and re-shaped the colonial culture. School was the most fruitful medium through which the minds of the Africans were to be penetrated. In *A History of the Church in Africa* (2004), Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed state that “school should not be elitist and thus a divisive factor in the social body”(Sundkler and Steed 250). But in the novel *Double Yoke* (1983), proper education stumbles in the hands of its perpetrators. *Double Yoke* which was originally intended to be entitled *Prostitution: Nigerian Style* is set on a campus of a Nigerian university in the 1980s. The novel reiterates the aspect of psychological colonization. It tells the story of a female undergraduate Nko and her educated lover Ete Kamba at the University of Calabar where “even in the supposedly most enlightened context within Nigerian society, young, educated females are also subjugated to male domination, and Nko is made to plea for female emancipation on her university’s campus just as Nnu Ego would have done in her village” (Grau 1). The novel is actually a meta-narrative as Ete writes his assignment that the new lecturer Miss Bulewao has given him to work out in his creative writing class – “What type of Nigeria would I like to

see?" (7). Ete writes from his masculine point of view. He decides that he would object to the abject injustice meted out to him and his girlfriend Nko by Professor Ikot. He would write against the maltreatment the students, especially the female ones, receive from the Professors in the university campuses:

He would write and tell the outside world that masses in the university campuses are oppressed. That on campuses like Malabor, four, five or even six students sometimes have to share a room, whilst young and sometimes unmarried senior lecturers have three bedroom houses and flats. That not being satisfied with that, they sometimes did steal their girl friends. Just like Professor Ikot had done to his Nko. (12)

Thus Ete Kamba harbours a grievance against Professor Ikot. "The primary concern of the novel," as Florence Stratton endorses in her illuminating book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, "is to highlight a dialogue on gender as one of the defining features of the contemporary literary tradition" (Stratton 127).

In *Sexual Politics*, Millett talks about, as Gloria Steinem observes, "the politics of male dominance, of owning women's bodies as the means of reproduction...." [qtd. in *Kate Millett, Ground-Breaking Feminist Writer, Is Dead* at 82 (2017) web]. Like all other male protagonists in Emecheta's novels, Ete is a champion of male-contrived value system. One of his burdens is to marry an innocent yet educated modern African woman who would be a virgin – a woman with "no little secrets" and "easy to understand":

A very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. But her education must be a little less than his own, otherwise they would start talking on the same level. (26)

Ete's mother is the epitome of womanhood – the type that never questions. He wishes that his future wife would be like his mother. He does not want to be dictated by a woman and therefore craves for a woman below his standard for he knows that his privileged status as a male would be threatened:

His mother, to him, had been the epitome of womanhood, the type whose price was above the biblical rubies. The type who took pride not in herself but in her man. The type who would always obey her

man, no matter what, even if he commanded her to walk through fire, the type that never questioned. (37)

Thus as a male member he wants to subjugate her future wife. He finds such a possibility in Nko when he meets her at Arit's party. Subsequently Ete leads Nko to the corner of his house and fulfils his sexual desire. But even after the sexual encounter, Ete is not sure whether Nko is a virgin. Ete's dream of marrying "an educated virgin" (54) is, as it were, shattered to pieces as he does not find drops of blood arising out of their sexual encounter and therefore he rants:

...What Christian girl would let herself be disvirgined by the wall? If you were a virgin, which I'm sure you were not, –I went to check –you see, so I know. There was not a drop of blood. You are a prostitute, a whore, and you keep putting on this air of innocence as if you were something else. A whore, a shameless prostitute! (57)

Thus even though Ete uses Nko to satisfy his sexual gratification, he accuses her of being a prostitute. To overcome his mental turmoil, he visits the religious leader Professor Elder Ikot who instead of giving him reassurance taunts him for choosing Nko as his girlfriend. It is to be noted that though Ete is not the virginal hero, he desires an educated virgin.

"One of the myths which Emecheta debunks in *Double Yoke* is the myth of (male) masculinity. She uses the new African females who are encumbered by tradition and at the same time are expected to carry the burden of acquiring suitable education", asserts Ezenwa- Ohaeto in "Replacing Myth with Myth: The Feminist Streak in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*" (Ohaeto 158) included in Marie Umeh's *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* (1996). Ete's girlfriend Nko is under double yoke as she wants to be an academician as well as an obedient wife. Nko's ambition in life is to get a good husband and to help her family. She tells her mother: "Oh mother, I want to have both worlds, I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet nice and obedient wife, the type you all want me to be" (94). Thus Nko is in the 'female quandary' (qtd. in Khan and Ghosh 174) and it is through Nko the novelist "explores the no-win situation that young African women face as they balance career and higher education with the strictures of tradition" (Khan and Ghosh 174). Actually Nko suffers from, to use a term from Kate Millet, 'interior colonization'. (qtd. in Khan and Ghosh) In *Sexual Politics*, Millet observes how women are forced to accept their subordinate status in the society. In *Kate Millet, Ground-Breaking Feminist Writer, Is Dead at 82*, published in 2017 Parul Sehgal and Neil Genzlinger

point out how “From depictions of the sexes in literature, she examined how women were socialized to accept, even defend, their lower status in society, a process she called “interior colonization.”” (Sehgal and Genzlinger web) Voices of women are thus choked by the institution of patriarchy. Nko’s mother is repressed by the prevailing power structure as she acknowledges, “We had to keep quiet, because we did not know many of the things our men knew.” (94) Thus both – Nko and her mother – have slavish allegiance to tradition. Nancy Topping Bazin points out in “Feminist Perspectives in African Fiction: Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head” (1986), “Because of their patriarchal socialization, mostly by their own mothers, they too see life from a male perspective and often accept value system and rules which follow from that” (39). Professor Ikot decides to supervise Nko’s work and very soon Professor’s evil intentions are overt to her. It is her dream of getting a good degree and establishment in life that urges her to move forward. She is well aware of the fact that “Women like her were being presented with a kind of double yoke. She was now expected to carry the two yokes and to come out smiling at the end.” (109) In order to pursue her academic goal, she is forced to accompany Professor Ikot to Kwa Falls. On their way to Kwa Falls Prof. Ikot casts looks of triumph at Nko and he seems to say “if you don’t let me sleep with you at any time I feel like it, you don’t get your degree” (139). Nko never feels so cheap as she is before Professor Ikot and there is no question of turning back. At the Falls Nko is sexually exploited by Professor Ikot. After the fatal episode at Falls, she rushes towards her room and cries in agony. She apologises in front of her lover – “it’s over Ete Kamba. I have lost my innocence. Please don’t ask me to explain. It is over.” (142) Thus Nko is not only physically stigmatized but also psychologically disrupted.

According to Millett, “[H]owever muted its appearance may be, sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power” (qtd. in Doherty web). The incident, better to say, the accident in Kwa Falls brings about a sea change in her life. Realising that there is no turning back, she demands a reward in terms of a good degree. Nko’s “head was held high, like a proud criminal condemned and determined to go the gallows without begging for mercy or wallowing in self pity” (148). She decides that she will not abort the baby she is carrying in her womb and wants to give birth to a baby out of wedlock. Actually she goes against tradition and wants to prove to the world that she can look after her own child. She wants to persuade her education simultaneously keeping in mind that education is the only gateway to her emancipation from subjugation. Helen C. Chukwuma pertinently observes in “Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta”

(1989) – “She wants to succeed in life as a woman desirable in her own right and as a qualified educated woman, financially capable of looking after her aspirations” (7). Her lover Ete Kamba feels that the shy village girl that he has met a few years ago has now become a sophisticated young woman. He wishes Nko has not come to this university. Thus Ete “tries to resolve the problem of ‘the new woman’ by shaping her character and plotting her story so as to reserve the position of dominance for himself” (Stratton 128).

Nko is the single female student in the creative writing class of Miss Bulewao – the most esteemed female writer in Nigeria and maybe the whole of Africa. Dearth of women students as well as female lecturers is to be seen in the university campus of Calabar. In the university it is not only the female students but also the female lecturers like Dr. Madam Edet who does not fully exert their selves. Instead, they let their male counterparts lead themselves. A highly educated woman like Dr. Madam Edet is more proud of her title as Mrs than Dr. and likes to play the role of the “gentle, the innocent, the religious, the ideally approved woman” (104). Professor Ikot’s wife is ‘busy’ giving birth to babies almost every year. Like Nko, other women characters are thus victims of cultural dislocation and psychological exploitation. The novelist exposes the ‘double colonization’ of women, to use a term from Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford’s *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women’s Writing* (1986). The only difference between Nko and other women is that whereas other women are mute sufferers, Nko resists against psychological oppression.

In “Unpopular Opinions: Some African Women Writers” (1985), Petersen expresses that “Education, which is a passport to the middle-class life, a life to which Buchi Emecheta’s characters aspire, plays an increasingly larger role in her authorship, and in *Double Yoke* she confronts directly the prejudices surrounding the educated woman in Nigeria. *Double Yoke* is a blast, aimed at Nigerian men” (117). Ete feels disgusted with himself for he has taken Miss Bulewao, a woman, as her role model. Thus even an educated woman, if seen from the male gaze, appears to be a subaltern –an object of contempt and derision. An independent woman is not welcome to Nigeria. If a woman becomes independent, men will call her a feminist. Mrs Nwaizu, Nko’s roommate is right when she beautifully sums up the dilemma of women – “Here feminism means everything the society says is bad in women. Independence, outspokenness, immorality, all the ills you can think of” (104). A mature woman that she is, Mrs Nwaizu inspires Nko not to leave the university– “You are a nice girl. If you become promiscuous, which you are not, our men made you so” (156). Nko also harbours the

same thought that if she is to be called a prostitute; it is because of the two men – Ete and Ikot. Nko's roommates warn her of evil person like Professor Ikot and come to the realization that it is easy to use one's brain power than bottom power. Actually a man like Ete exposes the double standards of the society in that they want educated women to marry as well as search for a simple village girl. Florence Stratton reiterates in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*:

Promoting a derogatory image of women, Ete's narrative valorizes the Manichean allegory of gender. Untroubled by the double standards he employs, Ete portrays Nko as the moral antithesis of his virtuous (though not so virginal) hero, himself. Representing himself as the innocent victim of female perfidy, he fixes her in the status of prostitute. (Stratton 129)

Thus the novel deals with the concept of psychological colonization. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon talks about "colonial alienation" as a psychological issue. The motive of colonialism is basically exploitation. Both – the male as well the female protagonists – suffer from dislocation, dispossession and disorientation. Fanon is thus concerned about the negative impact of psychological colonization. But there is not only psychological exploitation, there is also resistance against 'interior colonization' or what Ashis Nandy points out in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) the psychological resistance of colonialism. Nko's revolt against Professor Ikot after the Kwa Falls incident shows her courage and determination to slough off the cocoon of tradition. She understands that she has nothing to lose and if she does not come back from her subaltern status the so-called cankers of the society would completely uproot her and ravage her status in the society. At the end of the novel it is the new professor Miss Bulewao who polishes Ete's ideology and gives it a new direction. She coaxes him to ponder over their relationship and pleads him to accept Nko as his future wife, 'the New African Woman'. Now it is up to a traditional man like Ete to accept a modern woman – 'the New African Woman'.

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