Jabberwock

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Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College for Women

About

This journal contains essays written by the students in the Department of English at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.

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Editorial

We joined *Jabberwock* in our first year as assistant editors, and since then, for better or worse, we have stuck together till the very end. We have watched our treasured Journal grow each year, and are honoured to have had a chance to contribute. It has been a year since Swara and Sapna handed over the reins to us, and now we say our last goodbyes.

It has been an interesting experience, to say the very least. It was nice to have people who were as enthusiastic as us – the assistant editors who were always willing and never refused any amount of work. The sub editors who worked with our insane deadlines and always managed to put their best foot forward. Sanna Jain, in particular, has made noteworthy contributions to this Journal, most spectacular of which is this cover. She also headed our talented Design Team who worked day and night (quite literally!) to get this Journal out on time. To all of you, thank you for joining our ranks this year.

Jabberwock has managed to reach the heights it has owing to the unwavering support and guidance of Dr. Madhu Grover to whom we would like to dedicate the Journal. Under her supervision, we have coursed through tough deadlines, conflicts and innumerable dilemmas. We must also mention by name Mr. Jonathan Varghese Koshy who has always encouraged us. We would also like to express our gratitude to Ms. Dipti Nath, the Teacher-in-Charge of the Department of English, and the Department Union for giving us the freedom and support we needed to operate well. We must thank our beloved faculty of the Department of English who have in turns inspired and invigorated us, and most importantly, taught us everything that made the journal possible. The journal stands as a tribute to all that we have learnt in these three short years. We would like to thank Dr. Suman Sharma and the college administration for their vital support. Lastly, we would like to express our gratitude towards the student body who are the contributors and the readers of the Journal.

The students in The Department of English write delicious papers throughout the year, and here we offer you a slice. We are proud of the diversity this year's journal has managed to achieve – we have research papers analysing not just texts, paintings and movies, but also, for the first time, photography.

The issue you, dear reader, hold in your hands consists of 10 papers on various subjects, many of them pertaining to contemporary issues and popular culture. In times like these, the importance of criticality cannot be underestimated. A kind of topical writing that has, gratifyingly, become the norm in *Jabberwock*. We hope this continues.

Without further ado, we present to you, *Jabberwock 2017*!

Signing off,
Aishwarya Kali
Namita Gupta
Priyanka Kali
(Editors-in-Chief, Year 2016-17)

Contents

Through the Looking-Glass[1] of the Viewfinder

Anuja Dasgupta

Over the past two centuries, the camera has performed various functions, from capturing the objectivity of a moment as a record of history, to carrying out thoroughly conceptualized image-making exercises. However, while composing the desired frame, the photographer's views of reality are imposed on it, thereby making the photograph an instrument of control. This paper scrutinizes this to demonstrate the varied techniques of documenting and enquiring into reality through the medium of photography, while simultaneously analyzing the extent to which what seems to be real is represented through it. Exploring the narrative style of different photographers, this paper looks into the nature of photographic verisimilitude, and the artist's obligation to lend it to the work produced.

Ever since the photographic enterprise was properly established, people have been growing up on a diet of images. Along with implanting itself in the viewer's mind, a photograph directly reports the photographer's reality. These images, in turn, control the viewer's perception, conditioning one to see the world in a certain way. It therefore becomes imperative to scrutinize such a ubiquitously influential practice as photography.

The building of the "camera obscura" (meaning, "darkened room" in Latin) marked the beginning of photography. As light passes through a small hole in a dark room, an inverted image of the scene in front of it is produced on the wall opposite to the opening. "Photography is so perverse, you know. You need darkness to see light, pictures are negative, things are upside down", says Abelardo Morell[2] (1948-) in *The Genius of Photography* (2007), while discussing the optical phenomenon. The operation of light in photography is indeed astounding, in the manner that it emerges as a play with opposites. Not only does a dark room project a well-lit image, but even when a photograph is developed, the tones are reversed to form a negative, which is finally used to get multiple positives.

The photographic negative reverses what is actually captured – dark components of the image turn light and vice-versa. This negative can be printed on different surfaces with various chemicals to produce a final print of the photograph. The first successful photographic print that captured people was a daguerreotype[3] by Louis Daguerre (1787-1851). It was a picture of a busy street, however, only the man getting his shoes shined and the shoe-shiner could be captured in the long exposure of over 10 minutes.

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[1] Through the Looking-Glass (1871) by Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) is the sequel to his novel Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) about Alice's journey as a pawn to the other side of the looking-glass to become a Queen. Her curiosity to know what lies beyond the mirror propels her journey towards Queenhood. Alice's attempt to decipher the world can be seen as the photographic voyage; a photographer's attempt to explore and document the reality that he/she inhabits.

[2] "Fixing The Shadows." The Genius of Photography. BBC Fours, 2007. DVD.

[3] Invented in 1839 by Louis Daguerre, the daguerreotype process developed a photograph made on a silver surface sensitize with iodine exposure to mercury vapour.
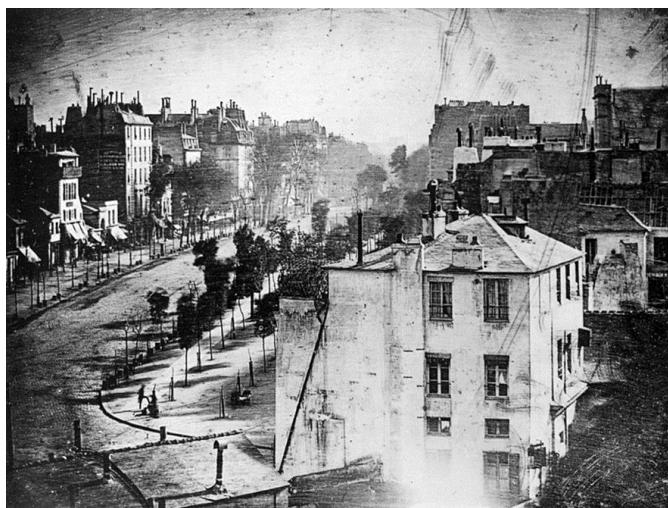
Fig. 1. Daguerre, Louis. *Boulevard du Temple*, 1839.

About five decades later, George Eastman (1854-1932) launched his easy-to-use Kodak camera: a simple box camera which revolutionized photography. It came with the famous slogan, "You press the button, we do the rest."[4] But, by making that "press" so easy, Eastman paved the way for a drastic development in the field of photography.

The photographic possibility of creating accurate records made photography what it is now. Capturing images during war was a regular act as the handy camera became a tool to preserve the moment lived by the photographer. Those images are now treated as authentic pieces of history, as they put the slaughter of war on display.

Fig. 2. Capa, Robert. *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death*, 1936.

Robert Capa (1913-1954), one of the most renowned war photographers, captured the death of a Spanish Civil War soldier in 1936. Although Capa talked about his presence at the death of this soldier with the camera above his head, the authenticity of this photograph has been questioned because of its incredible timing.

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[4] Appendix 1. The company promised to manage the shipping, developing, printing as well as reloading of film.

Photography supports as well as contests reality in a remarkable way. On looking at the photograph (Fig. 3.) clicked by Cindy Sherman (1954-), one would easily assume that it is an image of an upper-class lady or an actress, considering the attire and the cinematographic setting. However, it is from a series of 69 self-portraits in which Sherman enacts female clichés of the century.

Fig. 3. Sherman, Cindy. From *Untitled Film Stills*[5], 1977-80.

Capa's image from what he witnessed in the Spanish Civil War and Sherman's photograph of herself with makeup, dressing and proper staging demonstrate the versatile nature of the photographic pursuit. The photographer does not merely record reality as seen by him/her, but also produces traces of reality. This questionable distance between the reality of the photographer and that of what is photographed becomes instrumental in the deployment of photographs, as photography has evolved into the most compelling form of storytelling.

George Bernard Shaw's statement (1856-1950), "I would exchange every painting of Christ for one snapshot" (qtd. in Linfield 15), speaks volumes about the powerful nature of photographs as visual evidence. Before photography was invented, events were recorded in the written form or represented by other visual media. These other forms are interpretations of what the artist sees or thinks of, but photography, although similar in nature, is a little more transparent. The immediacy of photography, the physical presence of the artist during the point-blank documentation of reality is what makes one trust a photograph.

Undoubtedly, photography guarantees more visual accuracy than any other visual form of representation, thereby making it a more credible witness of reality. However, the difference between reality and the way it is portrayed must also be discerned. Photographers create their own narrative style by reconstructing what they see. In doing so, they impose their preferences, making it a personal vision with a discriminate choice of closing the shutter at a particular moment. Hence, a certain kind of individuality creeps into the medium of photography, as each photograph takes the visual form of a decision taken by the

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[5] Appendix 2. More photographs from the series depicting Sherman's extraordinary self-portraiture.

photographer.

Inasmuch as a photograph represents the very desire of the artist to represent something, it proves how photography is much more than objective reporting. "Photography, to me, is a form of placing that person you photograph on a pedestal. Now, it is imperative, that the pedestal be the right size"[6], claims Tony Voccaro (1922-). It is humanly impossible to portray the full frame of the reality a photographer witnesses, for which the image produced is far removed from it, as it results in an image of the image that he/she sees or chooses to see. Consequently, the art of photography turns into a conscious propaganda that endorses the individual view of the artist.

Photography facilitates construction of ideas and complicates it at the same time. Being a concrete, reflective way of seeing, every image turns out to be full of implications. With advanced technology at the disposal of most photographers, manipulative mechanisms are used to distort what is captured. While a few forms of manipulation like fixing scratches on film or modifications for desired representation of the subject by the party in charge[7] (Fig. 4.) are somewhat necessary, it usually changes, to an extent, the nature of the photograph originally taken. The strategies involved in the seemingly straight visual reportage may also embody insidious qualities that the audience is blind to.

Fig. 4. Silvy, Camille. *River Scene, France*, 1858. (print: 1860s)

Camille Silvy (1834-1910) employed intricate doctoring in achieving this photograph (Fig. 4.). Combining two exposures into one with a bit of brushwork, he achieved an added sky to produce an extremely aesthetically pleasing image.

As far as staging in photography is considered, Gregory Crewdson (1962-) comes into the scene as the exemplar of detailed composition.

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[6] "We Are Family", *The Genius of Photography*. Four, 2007. Voccaro talks about his portraits, before describing how he captured Somerset Maugham.

Fig. 5. Crewdson, Gregory. From *Brief Encounter*, filmed over a decade, beginning in 2000.

This photograph was orchestrated over the course of 11 days with a production team that combined multiple exposures to come up with the final image. Crewdson explains his pursuit of a story – "I work with a production crew that all come out of film. We work with cinematic lighting but we are only after creating one single perfect moment."[8]

The photographic frame opens up a plethora of theatrical possibilities, as evidently seen in the works of Roger Ballen (1950-):

Fig. 6. Ballen, Roger. "Five Hands", *Asylum of the Birds*. 2006.

Shot in a suburb in Johannesburg, Ballen plays with fiction and reality as he combines various forms of visual

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[7] "In 1934 (Aleksandr) Rodchenko was commissioned by the State Publishing House OGIZ to design a commemorative album entitled 'Ten years of Uzbekistan' celebrating a decade of Soviet rule in that state… But in 1937, at the height of the Great Purges, Stalin ordered a major overhaul of the Uzbek leadership and many heads rolled. Many party bosses photographed in 'Ten years of Uzbekistan' had been liquidated. The album suddenly became illegal literature. Using thick black Indian ink Rodchenko set about defacing his own work." From "Ten years of Uzbekistan: a commemoration / by Ken Campbell and David King", *Yale Center for British Art.*.

[8] "Snap Judgements", *The Genius of Photography*. BBC Four, 2007.

art. The photobook *Delhi Photo Festival 2015* states:

> After 2000, Ballen found his subjects closer to home in Johannesburg – again mostly marginalized white people who collaborated with him in *Outland* and *Shadow Chamber* to create powerful psychodramas. This line between fantasy and reality becomes even more blurred in his most recent series, *Asylum of the Birds* where Ballen creates elaborate sets using drawings, paintings and sculptural objects to heighten the bizarre and complex narratives. The human characters recede as their disembodied parts interact with creatures of the animal kingdom, dolls etc. In this series, Ballen manages to integrate drawing and photography in a highly original and inimitable way.

(226)

The composition of a photograph, as well as its subsequent developing ensures the delivery of the photographer's intention to the viewer. This may be argued by bringing in the concept of documentary photography which is considered to be an honest form of storytelling because of its close association with reality. Be that as it may, the photographer draws forth the viewer's interpretation along the lines of the particular light in which the subject is framed, and in doing so, makes his/her registration of reality control all possible ways of understanding the photograph produced.

As an art form, photography pushes the artist to frame a subject that can project itself onto another medium in the most favourable fashion. The well-intentioned composition of an image exposes an imperialistic desire to grasp something in the inexorable freezing of time that would ratify the photographer's view. Photography possesses an immense authority as a form of visual art that allows a photograph to chronicle the artist's ideology.

Undeniably, the language of photography is universal – it brings together *The Family of Man*[9]. Susan Sontag (1933-2004), in her collection of essays titled *On Photography*, asserts that photography "gives us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images." (1) This creation of a ready photo-series in our mind gives way to an almost instinctive reliance on photographs as they become unquestioned narratives. For this reason, the act of making of a photograph demands to be probed, as photographs ultimately become mute documents with kaleidoscopic meanings.

> Photography is a system of visual editing. At bottom, it is a matter of surrounding with a frame a portion of one's cone of vision, while standing in the right place at the right time. Like chess, or writing, it is a matter of choosing from among given possibilities, but in the case of photography the number of possibilities is not finite but infinite.

(qtd. in Sontag 150)

The apt phrase "visual editing" used by John Szarkowski (1925-2007) for photography, encompasses its entire role as a medium of representation. The photograph is "the mirror with a memory"[10], one that reflects[11] the visible world indirectly and helps its audience encounter this reflection. Reality, which every artist aims to

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[9] The largest photo exhibition till date, curated by Edward Steichen (1879-1973), *The Family of Man* (1955) is a collection of 503 photos by 273 artists from 68 countries. It depicts the image of human life spanning across continents portraying all that men go through – love, separation, war and joy. Images by photographers such as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lange, Robert Doisneau, August Sander and Ansel Adams, among others, were displayed in a spectacular manner. The exhibition was a public declaration of peace through the photographic medium.

[10] Jerry Spagnoli (1956-) recalls what a daguerreotype was called in the nineteenth-century in "Fixing The Shadows." The Genius of Photography. BBC Four, 2007.

[11] Reference to the idea of the mirror which takes the colour of the thing that it reflects, in "Imitation and the Mirror" from M.H. Abram's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953).

depict, exists through subjective interpretation (Spagnoli). A simulation of this reality as perceived by the artwork produced, thus, becomes the reality for its audience to consume.

Fig. 7. Knox, Alan, *Schengland*. 2014.

This fascinating image by Alan Knox (1965-) strikes one as a simple photograph at first, but a closer look provides the answers to the questions that cloud the viewer's mind instantly. *Schengland* appropriates Google Street View images from the eastern Schengen border, and superimposes them on the Anglo-Scottish border, seeking a broader, trans-national understanding of the situation of European borders.

The visual language of photography keeps open multiple avenues for photographers. It is not just about the frame that encloses an image, but also about the story that is told beyond the frame. The photographer, like any other artist, is not under the obligation to deliver the truth – he/she has the aesthetic freedom of exploration in the field. The looking-glass world of the photograph can show the idiosyncrasies that lie beneath the deceptive world of appearances. Although, considering the everyday consumption of a huge number of images, the artist's role in conveying a version of reality becomes crucial.

> The photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there", on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality.
>
> (Barthes 115)

Photographic techniques have evolved over time, but the abundance of opportunities the form of art provides remains more or less the same – there was a darkroom before as is now, along with a Lightroom[12] that permits the creator of an image to overexpose or underexpose reality. Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple* captured a mere slice of reality, as the Paris street he confronted had more than just a bootblack with his client; Capa's image revolved around the question of genuineness, although it captured a feeling of war; Sherman's

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[12] Adobe Photoshop Lightroom is an image-editing program developed by Adobe which, apart from being a simple converter of RAW files, gives users numerous options with which their photograph can be tweaked.

self-portraiture was an attempt to recreate reality in an unusual way; Silvy's *River Scene* was achieved through sophisticated manipulation; Crewdson's photograph had undergone multiple exposures; Ballen's *Asylum of the Birds*, and Knox's *Schengland* turned out to be metanarratives that combine different visual techniques.

As Sontag very rightly declares, "Today everything exists to end in a photograph" (19); photography is emerging as the supreme medium that engages with reality in exploring as well as exposing it. The pentaprism/pentamirror in the viewfinder of a camera inverts the image back to what the eyes behind the lens see. The developed photograph is a fraction of the astronomical actuality that the photographer is faced with. When a photograph receives an audience, it acts as a testimony of a lived reality, which is then stowed in their mind. The pushing of the shutter therefore, becomes like the pulling of the pin on a grenade, as both leave marks that impact their witnesses.

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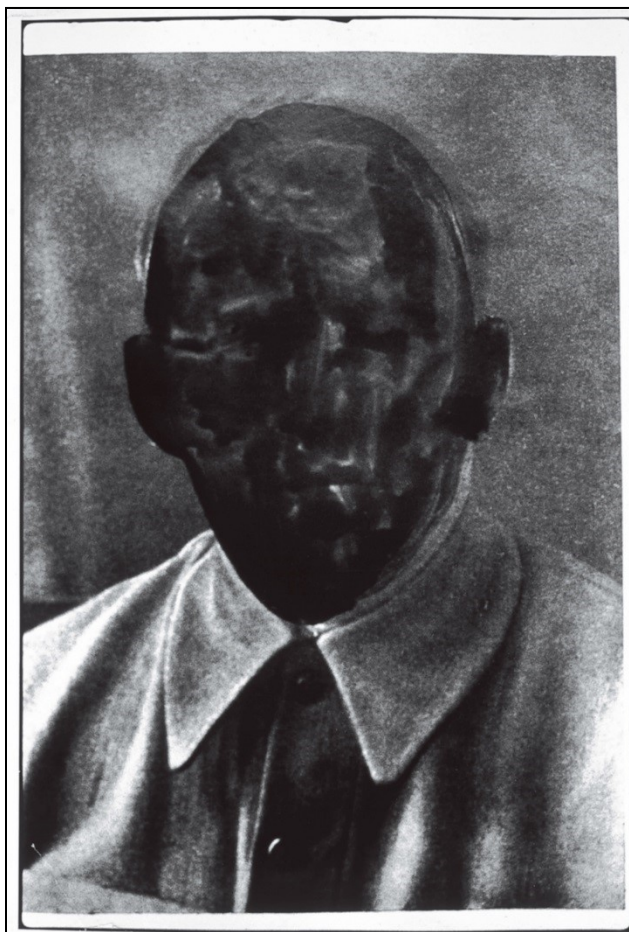
Appendix 1

First marketing slogan by Kodak, 1889. "The World of Photo Ads", *Better Photography*. 14 July 2014. Web. 31 Oct 2016.

Appendix 2

Sherman, Cindy. From *Untitled Film Stills*, 1977-80.*TATE*. Web. 1 Nov 2016.

Appendix 3

Rodchenko, Aleksandr. From *Ten Years of Uzbekistan*, 1934 (defaced in 1937). *TATE*. Web. 1 Nov 2016.

The Colonial Dismantling of the Matrilineal Nayar *Tharavadu*

Swathi Gangadharan

In this paper, Swathi explores how the processes of colonialism changed the nature of power relations within Malabar Nayar families from generational to gendered. Using the Malayalam novel, *Indulekha* (1889) by O Chandu Menon as the site of her analysis, she examines the implications of these changes for the status of women within the matrilineal *tharavadu* (homestead-cum-familial unit). Through her analysis, Swathi shows the irony of Menon crediting English education with empowering Nayar women in navigating their household's increasingly patriarchal spaces (which are continuously battled by the protagonist Indulekha in the novel), when it was the colonial establishment that introduced this education that was responsible for these diminished spaces in the first place. Education here is colonial ideology by another name.

T he pre-colonial matrilineal *tharavadu* (homestead-cum-familial unit) of the Malabar Nayars in Kerala was an egalitarian household, a strikingly peculiar phenomenon when contrasted with established Hindu customs in other parts of India. The colonial period, however, decisively transformed this kinship system, stripping it of its acceptability, and then its legality, by fashioning the passionate support of a section of English-educated Nayars. The tensions in the *tharavadu,* throughout the nineteenth century, were molded by colonial interference, and paradoxically, were also sought to be relieved via tools of the colonial state – the most important of which were law and education. The trajectory of this can be traced historically, and is further reflected tellingly in the first novel to be published in the Malayalam language, *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon (1847-99).

Although ostensibly a simplistic love story, the characters in *Indulekha* were explicitly meant to be representations of the warring factions within the nineteenth century *tharavadu*, and the complexities of the discourse that is produced through them is understood here in conjunction with historian G. Arunima's detailed study of Malabar matriliny. In *Indulekha*, Menon holds that English education enabled Nayar women to navigate the then increasingly patriarchal, diminished spaces of the matrilineal *tharavadu*, while G. Arunima presents solid historical research to prove that these shrunken spaces were a direct consequence of the meddling of that very colonial establishment that had introduced this English education in the first place. A dyadic reading comprising both writers makes it apparent that the disintegration of the Malabar matrilineal system was an instantiation of the insidious ideological interpellation that was the purpose of colonial education in India, an idea that informs the thesis of Gauri Viswanathan's essay "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India" (1989).

In theory, the *tharavadu* consisted of kin traced through the female line. Members – male and female – held joint rights to the family property, though only women could inherit and bestow it. Women were central to the setting up of a *tharavadu*, and descent and inheritance were traced through them; but in the pre-colonial period, this did not translate to them being simply placeholders in the transactions of men. Importantly, decision-making power within the *tharavadu* was more a "generational privilege than a gendered right" (Arunima 18). Hence, it was the older generation that was vested with authority – including both men

and women.

Matriliny, for the British, was an aberrant practice, different not only from their own patrilineal world, but also from the rest of India. Late nineteenth century anthropological and ethnographic debates regarding human social evolution, in fact, deliberated "whether patrilineal kinship evolved out of matrilineal systems, relegating matriliny to a less developed status in the scale of human development" (Arunima 2). Their attempt to negotiate with this in law and governance resulted in the development of a system that recalls very closely what Gauri Viswanathan notes about the divergent attitudes of the British Government towards the subjects of the Empire, in the "Orientalist" and "Anglicist" phases (Viswanathan 6-11).

One aspect of this Orientalism, according to her, involved the granting of sufficient space for local customs and practices to exist, born out of the 'benevolence' of the ruling class and a wish to understand or "penetrate" (Viswanathan 5) the minds of the subject. The Anglicists, on the other hand, were keen on promoting "English principles of government and jurisprudence", free of "corrupting influences from the native society" (Viswanathan 8). However, Viswanathan does not set these up as binaries, but rather as "points along a continuum of attitudes towards the manner and form of native governance" (Viswanathan 7). These contrary colonial attitudes are present *simultaneously*, in seemingly irreconcilable form in the Company administration of Malabar, reflected in an attempt to distinguish between "custom" and "law".

On the one hand, in an Orientalist vein, the British did not wish to intrude into the domestic affairs of the Nayars, ostensibly protecting the local customs, but on the other, in the Anglicist mode, they wanted to standardize a uniform code for administration based on English laws. They posited a 'solution' by privileging Brahminical Sanskrit texts along with the English legal system to evolve an Anglo-Hindu 'law', while non-Brahmin texts and groups were regarded as bearers of 'custom', inferior to 'law' (Arunima 16). This suited the patrilineal Nambuthiri Brahmins of Malabar, with whom the matrilineal Nayars had long been involved in a tussle for power and land. Theirs was now the normative framework to which the Nayars' practices became subordinate, bringing them in line with the patrilineal sensibilities of both the Brahmins and the British. Thus, "Nayar matrilineal practices were increasingly inflected by Nambuthiri patrilineal opinion, especially in matters relating to *tharavadu* organization, property, marriage and inheritance" (Arunima 17). In practice, local courts were more agreeable to admitting customary variations, and the higher courts were more inflexible, allowing Anglo-Indian legal principles to dominate. The greatest irony in this was that these changes were fed to the matrilineal peoples with the claim that the British were actually restoring their own 'ancient customs'.

For the East India Company, administration of these powerful, land-owning *tharavadus* still proved a rough terrain to grapple with. There were no undisputed heads of the *tharavadus* with any sort of exclusive decision-making power. Often, and bafflingly so for the patrilineal Englishmen, it was the older women who managed the Nayar *tharavadus*. Company officials 'resolved' this problem in the first half of the nineteenth century by vesting legal authority in the eldest male in the household, making him the sole supervisor of its economy and responsible for making revenue payments (Arunima 35-36). By the 1870s, the High Court had decreed that only a man could possess the authority to manage social as well as material relationships within

the *tharavadu*.

The oldest uncle of the *tharavadu*, called the *karanavan*, who had hitherto not enjoyed any special privileges beyond what his age prescribed for him, now was vested with the added privilege of his gender. He now became the single most powerful authority in the *tharavadu* and the guardian of its every member, in what was a distinct departure from the extant matrilineal custom, circumscribing even the rights of the mother over her child. The colonial state further redefined the matrilineal *tharavadu* as being an indivisible property, not only taking away the rights of its members to their individual shares and rendering them completely dependent on the *karanavan*'s whims, but also nullifying the special entitlements that adult women often had in the form of *stridhana*, or gifts from husbands/lovers/their natal home that gave them sources of revenue independent of the *tharavadu*. These were now determined as being part of the family property, and hence, coming under the preserve of the *karanavan*, whose increasing powers had become so all-consuming that popular fiction acknowledged the latter half of the nineteenth century as the 'age of the *karanavans*' or *karanavanmarudekalam* (Arunima 94). This was the charged atmosphere that birthed *Indulekha* in 1889.

The colonial courts at this time became a regular battleground for family disputes over property, pitting the younger members of the *tharavadu* against their *karanavan*, with one noticeable pattern – the law (read, English judges) consistently and determinedly ruling against the women. This is perfectly exemplified by an 1855 judgment of the Calicut High Court wherein the judge, William Holloway, decreed that it would be a "violent interference" on the part of the court to "allow a precedent for women" to head households, as there was "insufficient proof to determine the authority of a female over a male" (qtd. in Arunima 96). This, in the land where matrilineal families had held sway so decisively once! To sum the situation up, "While older women increasingly were fighting a losing battle to maintain their legal rights to manage property, younger ones were facing the steady preference given to their male counterparts in legal disputes." (Arunima 19). Women, who had so far been involved in the "social production" of the *tharavadu*, were now gradually contained within simply its "sexual reproduction" (Arunima 53).

The antagonist of Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* is unsurprisingly the *karanavan,* Panchu Menon, who after an argument with the hero, Madhavan, refuses to marry off his beloved granddaughter, Indulekha, to him. In the preface to *Indulekha*'s first edition, Menon writes of Panchu Menon, that he is "old, ignorant, self-willed" and is moreover representative of the type of *karanavar* found "not unfrequently (sic)" in Malabar *tharavadus*. The plot deals with how Indulekha quietly resists the *karanavan*'s will, managing to get her happy ending despite all odds. However, in the preface, Menon clearly credits the ending to Indulekha's English education. It empowered her to exercise that (relative) freedom that her being a Nayar woman gave her to begin with. There is no acknowledgment from Menon of the fact that the *karanavan* would not have had these exalted powers if not for colonial meddling in the first place.

Matrilineal custom indeed vested Nayar women with a certain degree of autonomy. Although 'polyandry' was considered a part of this, there is hardly any evidence of this in actual practice. What Arunima finds instead is serial monogamy, wherein a Nayar man/woman had more than one relationship during their

lifetime (12). Post-marriage, women continued to live with their *tharavadus*, as opposed to the cutting off of affective and economic ties with their natal homes, as happens in the case of women in patrilineal families. Earlier, Nayar women could move away from the natal home and set up new branches of the *tharavadu*, if they so desired after marriage, and they would still be entitled to their ancestral property, giving them some agency in choosing their partner. After the colonial intervention, the *karanavan* could render them penniless and completely dependent on their husband if the match was made without his approval (Arunima 100).

Another Nayar custom was the practice of *sambandham*, marriage alliances that Nayar women entered into with other Nayar men or with Nambuthiri Brahmins. A Commission set up specifically to review the marriage practice of the matrilineal Nayars deemed it 'primitive' because the relationships were easily dissoluble by either party. The absence of long-standing monogamous relationships became a "relic of early barbarism" that Malabar had yet to 'evolve' out of (Arunima 133). In a victory for the ideological workings of state-sponsored English education, this Commission was born out of a demand from within the Nayar community itself in the 1880s as young, educated Nayar men took up the mantle of reform, arguing against the 'immorality' of Nayar practices, especially the 'barbarity' inherent in polygamy and hypergamy. They demanded a new community "based on monogamous marriage and conjugal co-residence" (Arunima 22).

Conservatives within the community, meanwhile, considered *sambandhams* to be as sacrosanct as any marriage. They saw the demand for reform as a "shameless attack on the religious and customary basis" of matrilineal succession and descent. (Arunima 136) It was of paramount importance for them to establish that the matrimonial practices of the Nayars had the same solemnity and sanctity as other Hindu marriage relationships. Chandu Menon came from this camp, and argued that the High Court judgment that deemed *sambandhams* as concubinages was part of a ploy of the Nambuthiri Brahmins to besmirch the Nayars and undermine the chastity of Nayar women. (Arunima 137) And yet, his position is not so simply articulated in *Indulekha*.

Indulekha's secondary antagonist is Suri Nambuthiripad, a Brahmin, who Panchu Menon wants Indulekha to marry on account of his great wealth and social status. However, he is revealed to be not only a lecherous old man, but also a buffoon. Chandu Menon's preface again notes that this particular "rich and influential Nambudiripad" represents the "rich, licentious, profligate, unsteady Nambudiripad so often found in Malabar" (Menon xxiii). Nambuthiripad is rebuffed by Indulekha, and is frightened almost of her 'English-ness' when he finds that far from winning her over, he cannot even keep pace with her verbal dexterity. To save face, he leaves the *tharavadu* taking with him as his bride a hapless girl of thirteen, Kalliani Kutti, after having made sure she was not 'English-educated' first!

Menon's defense of the Nayar *sambandham* involved a curious paradox. While he justified non-interference in the Nayar practice of sanctioned polygamy on the grounds of "oriental notions of morality", he also sought to prove that Nayar women were in fact monogamous, and hence, virtuous (Arunima 137). The eponymous heroine of his novel, *Indulekha*, speaks passionately when faced with Madhavan's complaint that the Nayar men suffered "untold misery from the freedom and opportunities" which the woman of Malabar

abused to play "fast and loose" with them, and torment them (Menon 40). She retorts, "To say that a woman makes light of the marriage tie, is tantamount to saying that she is immoral. Did you then mean that all or most of the women in this Land of Palms are immoral?" (Menon 41) On the easy, stigma-less divorces in *sambandhams*, she says, "There are some disreputable women who avail themselves incontinently of their prerogative, but the prerogative in itself is one of our most valuable institutions… if the right is exercised, not with vicious intent but on just and proper occasion, it affords women the most ample and needful means of protection" (42). She locates the fault not in the practice, but only the wrongful application of it, as Menon himself did. At the same time, he makes constancy the defining trait of Indulekha, and weaves the tale so that her fidelity to Madhavan stands all kinds of tests, unwavering. Chandu Menon's defense of matrilineal marriage custom and sympathy towards Nayar women becomes difficult to stomach, however, when he attributes all of Indulekha's progressive impulses to her English education.

It is quite clear that Company officials had intervened to decisively tilt the scales against the women of the *tharavadus* and wean away their freedoms. Yet, Chandu Menon writes, quite uncritically, in the preface to his novel, "My narrative of the love and courtship of Madhavan is intended to show to the young ladies of Malabar how happy they can be if they have the freedom to choose their partners… " (Menon xxi) This freedom, he explicates, comes from the English education bestowed on Indulekha, who, "possessing in addition to her natural personal charms and intellectual culture, a knowledge of the English language" would be able to conduct herself effectively "in matters of supreme interest to her, such as the choosing of a partner in life" (Menon xx). Thus, an English education, according to Menon, was meant to enable the Nayar woman to wriggle out of the predicament that Englishmen had placed her in.

In this, one can find resonances of Gauri Viswanathan's theory on English education explained in her aforementioned essay. The aim of the British in introducing Western education in India, she wrote, was the "moral improvement of the subjects without having to worry about the possible danger of inculcating radical ideas that would upset the British presence in India" (Viswanathan 18). What Chandu Menon is countering here is the charge of immorality leveled against the *sambandham* by tapping into the idea of romantic, moral, monogamous and constant love that he traces to an English education. The 'liberal' morality of the English so completely replaced the customary morality of his community that he genuinely seemed to believe that the "English have always adhered staunchly to the principle of universal liberty, and have on countless occasions upheld that principle greatly to the benefit of mankind" (Menon 195).

The very ideological purpose (of willing accession to British superiority) recognized by Viswanathan, in the introduction of 'secular' English education in India, is held up by Menon as an example of the British intention to raise Indian people from servility by imparting to them their own knowledge and education (Menon 344). Madhavan goes on to make it even clearer that Menon had internalized the narrative of superiority of the British and had become an apologist for colonialism through these words – "Hence it must be clear even to a child, that their design throughout has been to make us as worthy a part of the Empire as they are themselves" (Menon 344). No capitulation can surely be as absolute as this.

After the actual end of the story, Chandu Menon has a few more things to make explicit in additional paragraphs filled with his fervor for the necessity of this education. He notes that even if Panchu Menon had not yielded to her wishes as he finally did at the end, Indulekha would nevertheless have "refused to forsake the man on whom her heart was fixed and accept the suitor he selected" (Menon 368). In crediting her with agency and imputing it, ridiculously, to those very institutions which so limited the woman's place in the *tharavadu*, he makes the comparison between the pre-colonial and the contemporary age all the more startling. He is here recalling the earlier state of affairs in which the Nayar woman did have the economic agency in the *tharavadu* to effect this, all on her own.

The lack of English education is what had led to Kalliani Kutti being handed over to the Nambuthiripad, "just as if she had been a kitten" (Menon 368). Only through education in the English language can women "grasp the truth that you are of the same creation as man, that you are as free agents as men, that women are not the slaves of men", for he was of the opinion that "in the present day, no study is so productive of moral and mental excellency as is the study of English." (Menon 369). The more-successful-than -not lived experience of matriliny in Malabar found itself thus sidelined.

The Nayars' demands eventually culminated in the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 that sought to codify the *sambandhams,* which were seen as concubinages by the colonial State, and bring it under the ambit of other legally recognized Hindu marriages. The bill had a clause that allowed a man's wife and children to inherit his property. Further, self-acquired 'private' property of young professionals would not revert to the household, as was the case in other patrilineal arrangements. Colonial legal and educational dictates had, insidiously, over the course of a century, influenced matrilineal cultural practice to turn towards the patriarchal normative.

Colonial intervention created the problems that later colonial intervention sought to erase. Between that first intervention and the last, there was a steady slew of events that aimed to 'correct' the deviancy of a matrilineal kinship system so it could be brought back into the fold of the 'standard' that was the patrilineal, easily-governable to the colonial mind and easily-understandable to the English one. Women's voices found no utterance in this narrative – just the way Victorian England probably liked it.

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Reflections in the *Black Mirror*

Namita Gupta

The British Science Fiction television show, *Black Mirror*, asks some very pertinent questions about technology, power and the nature of our very own existence in a world that is becoming exceedingly dependent on gadgets. This paper attempts to define Science Fiction and analyse these questions by looking closely at the first two seasons of *Black Mirror*. It will also delve into the contemporary concerns over the dangers of technological progress, and the necessity of exercising caution while engaging with technology.

"Y ou are my creator, but I am your master; Obey!" (Shelley 162), the Creature threatens his creator, Victor Frankenstein. Herein lies the core of the concerns raised in most Science Fiction works: how do we control the destructive potential of scientific inventions? Do we even fully understand the implications of an invention that has the power to alter the very nature of human existence? In this technological age where we are so dependent on our gadgets, who is in-charge – machines or humans? Does the possibility of any negative outcome necessarily mean we ought to limit our scientific zeal? Can we as humans ever stop questioning? And so on. These are the questions which the paper aims to reflect upon through its analysis of a British science fiction television show, *Black Mirror* (2011-present)[1], created by Charlie Brooker. It will study the definitions of the genre of Science Fiction before going into the contemporary concerns about the dangers of technological progress, and finally consider the six tales of *Black Mirror*.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) which concerned itself with the implications of the technological advancements taking place during the Industrial Revolution, laid the roots of a new genre of literature called the "Science Fiction"[2]. The term was coined by William Wilson in 1851. The idea of the sublime[3] in the Gothic tradition could be seen as a response to the new horizons being explored by the scientific revolutions. When SF first emerged, it was concerned with the imaginary, in contrast to the known world. It was a post-Romantic phenomenon which re-evaluated the human relationship to culture and metaphysics. SF's broad range of content – from realistic to highly imaginative – makes any narrow definition impossible. In this scenario, it can be understood as a narrative which is based in a fictive world, that is, in some way, more scientifically evolved than ours – be it a space opera, an alternate reality or a vision of a possible future. Robert A. Heinlein rejects the term "science fiction" in favour of "Speculative Fiction" which he defines as:

> …speculative fictions in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content, but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate – and often very tightly reasoned-speculation about the possibilities of the real world.
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> (qtd. in Bereit 896)

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[1] For my analysis, I will focus on the first 2 seasons. Each season, following an anthology format, comprises of 3 episodes – each with a different storyline, but a common theme that weaves them together. So the six episodes under investigation are: "The National Anthem", "Fifteen Million Merits", "Entire History of You", "Be Right Back", "White Bear", and "The Waldo Moment".

[2] Referred to as "SF" from this point onwards.

[3] Kant; it is vision that induces overwhelming awe as well as terror.

Furthermore, a SF critic, Gwyneth Jones feels that SF isn't just limited to featuring advanced technology, it is a scientific, that is, objective and rigorous study of a claim in a controlled environment. In other words, it is not the 'truth' that is important to SF; it is the scientific method, the logical working through of a particular premise (qtd. in Roberts 9-11). The genre saw a heightened interest in the twentieth century – a time of numerous scientific inventions and disasters alike – with authors like Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, etc. coming into the scene. Hugo Gernsback's magazine, *Amazing Stories* (launched in 1926) played a pivotal role in this movement. He traced Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells from the later nineteenth century as the "real prophets" of the genre, and hence, worked to fashion the genre as it is now dominantly understood – it is primarily concerned with negotiating with the ill-effects of technology on our daily lives and addressing the quite horrifying possibilities of a dystopian future it may enable (Bould and Vint 6).

SF's foray into the cinematic world was initially a purely commercial enterprise – film-makers wished to bank on the success of SF already in print. Hence emerged movies like *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *The Devil-Doll* (1936). SF on screen in recent years is, according to critics, disappearing as a 'pure' discrete category; it is slowly diffusing into contemporary culture. Trends in SF now focus on increasing paranoia about infiltrators, rising apocalyptic visions, global capitalism and commodity culture, corporate dominated dystopias, dissolution of the United Kingdom into revolutions and so on (Bould and Vint 182-5). *Doctor Who*, for instance, a contemporary SF show is fraught with a sense of aftermath. (The show becomes increasingly interesting because of its ability to mutate to reflect on contemporary issues.)

SF reflects very crucial questions about science that have troubled philosophers since the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the eighteenth century[4]. The twentieth century witnessed a growing focus on the impact of technology. Monumental inventions such as the X-ray, weapons and machinery (especially the nuclear bomb) raised moral questions about science and the limits of human understanding. More recently, Lord Martin Rees expressed his concerns in a lecture at Oxford Martin School[5]. According to him, these questions about science have become paramount in the 21st century as human beings now possess the ability to determine the biosphere's space and even change other human beings. He focussed on the rapid speed with which technology is advancing, and posits that it may be "the final century" for human beings, not in existential terms, but as the dominant species. Artificial Intelligence (AI) with its "generalised deep learning" will, one day, surpass humans who cannot cope with it (Rees). Stephen Hawking also expressed similar concerns, "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete, and would be superseded" (Qtd. in Stockley).

But this predicted evolutionary inevitability of AI surpassing the human race as the dominant species on the planet – occupying the top rung of the Darwinian evolutionary ladder – is not Charlie Brooker's primary concern in *Black Mirror*. Science also works itself into the social fabric and creates political,

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[4] For instance, Luddite Movement of 1818 sought to oppose the mechanization of the textile industry. The word "Luddite" later expanded to describe any person who was wary of technological progress, based on ethical grounds and its uncertain effects on the society as a whole.

[5] Founded in 2005, the school is concerned with determining the role of science in the society. It is interested in combating global threats such as economic inequality, climate change, disease etc.

sociological as well as economic conditions that need to be tackled with. Bruno Latour, a leading figure in science studies maintained that science and politics could not be separated; they could only be understood in terms of "shifting rhizomatic networks of connection and the building of collectives" (qtd. in Bould and Vint, 4). In the sector of employment, there has existed a competition between man and machines; it was present as a rival to physical labour in the twentieth century, but has moved on since as now computers threaten the ambit of intellectual work.

Modern society's relationship with its technology doesn't need any elaboration. Internet defines our lives in ways we are not even aware of – it has managed to intrude into every sphere of our existence. We live oblivious to technology's ubiquitous influence as it has become so familiar to us; at the same time, however, we remain "estranged" from it "because we don't really know how it works, or what the boffins are about to invent next" (Roberts 147). Social media can spread rumours and panic at the speed of light (as is seen in "The National Anthem" (2011). Moreover, as is widely known now, information once made available on the internet cannot be taken down; advanced GPS technology can track anybody's location within seconds – thus, there is a sense of a lack of privacy and a state of constant paranoia that defines the condition of the human race in the twenty-first century.

Charlie Brooker, in an attempt to put back on television what was the essence of shows like *The Twilight Zone*, which portray the dark side – sociological, economical as well as biological – of the technological advances that have come to define the 21st century, created the show *Black Mirror*. It is a scathing satire about present-day society, examining its increasing dependence on gadgets, the fading morality and the overall sense of alienation and fragmentation (in a – quite paradoxically – globalised world). Erin Whitney of Huffington Post described the show as "It's basically Kurt Vonnegut's *Welcome to the Monkey House* short stories repurposed in the modern day with our culture's obsession with technology" (Whitney). An average episode (like a Greek tragedy), moves from establishment of a character (*prologue*) to the tragic events (*parados*), and finally the uncomfortable conclusion (*exodus*). The show is "not didactic like *Aesop's Fable*, it is a series of movies" (Brooker, "A Cynical Chat") which "actively unsettles people" (Brooker, "Charlie Brooker Explains"). Although the setting is usually futuristic, the show's truly horrifying power lies in its applicability. It seems like a look merely fifteen minutes into our future if we are clumsy. However, it is not a pessimistic show. Brooker described the show "like a box of dark chocolates… an assortment". It is a show that's "worried about 'today'… the way the world has changed… [with people now just] staring at a rectangle" (Brooker, "Charlie Brooker Explains").

The title of the show lies at the centre of our understanding of the theme. Our gadgets – televisions, mobiles, computers, laptops – when switched off turn into "black mirrors" reflecting a darkened version of our reality. Such is the core of the show: a darkened version of our time. Moreover, a blackened mirror is used for purposes of privacy – to keep hidden the secrets – the often violent and dangerous impulses that threaten our daily existence. The beginning of each episode 'loads' with the title displayed on a 'black mirror', before the 'black mirror' literally cracks. This cracked screen symbolises the secrets that are about to be revealed in each episode. Image on the screen is distorted as we move along the episode into a dystopia. In each episode,

Brooker summons forth "digital ghosts" that release "uncanny futures" from behind the cracks that show how the spell of technology has rendered us powerless and entangled (Wright).

Fig 1. The title screen of *Black Mirror*[6]

The series dissects the way people interact with the media and how it continues to degrade us in different ways. One of the points of concern is the rising importance of internet in our lives ever since its origin in the 1960s. Since the '80s, the internet has been widely used in the world of academia and the '90s witnessed its transition into its modern form. It has, first and foremost, changed the way information is disseminated in the modern world. "The National Anthem" portrays a crisis that is aggravated beyond proportions due to its public nature. England is abuzz with the news of the kidnapping of "Facebook Princess"[7]. The ransom video is unconventionally uploaded on YouTube, and within 9 minutes gets thousands of views and starts trending on Twitter. With ambitious reporters and the public pressurising each moment, the situation whirls out of control – the press is forced to break the DA-Notice[8], and contingency plans are compromised. As the Prime Minister is forced to give in to the unknown kidnapper by simultaneous public and political pressures, it is discovered that the princess was released thirty minutes prior but no one had noticed – the entire nation was fixated on the television screen instead. The kidnapper is revealed to be a small artist who commits suicide at the end, creating what is hailed a year later as "the first greatest artwork of the twenty-first century".

It reveals the dangers the internet can pose in critical situations, revealing sensitive information and compromising matters of national security. The political party, to maintain its reputation, threatens PM Michael Callow into submitting. The man is trapped in a game of power and greed within the organisation. Hinted here is the callous nature of politicians who are willing to compromise individuals lives in their quest for power. In the fickle 'public opinion', the response to the situation alters with the slightest provocation – the PM's image vacillates between that of a victim and a villain. Finally, the PM is seen a year later, more successful than ever in his political career. His personal life however, is in disarray – his choices have alienated him from his family and he is a broken man. The episode, Brooker says, shows the "lack of

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[6] http://taylorholmes.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Black-Mirror-Logo.png
[7] She is, we are informed, the first Royal to accept a marriage proposal on *Facebook*.
[8] Defence Advisory Notice (DA-Notice) is an official request to news editors not to publish or broadcast items on specified subjects for reasons of national security, used in UK.

perceived control" in the postmodern age. (Brooker, "Charlie Brooker Explains").

The episode "Be Right Back" investigates the claim that our social media profiles are accurate reflections of ourselves. It exposes the fraudulent nature of the identities we create for ourselves. In our occupation with our virtual avatars, we lose track of our real selves and the reality around us. Ash is a young man who obsessively checks his social media pages on his mobile, uploading statuses and photographs. He dies in a car crash, presumably due to this obsessive habit, leaving behind his distraught wife, Martha. Faced with the sudden loss, she agrees to buy a clone of her recently deceased husband. The manufacturer claims to be able to recreate the character of the deceased accurately through the social media profiles of the person; they record every word and every photo uploaded on the internet for this purpose. The clone looks like a flattering version of Ash since, "the photos we keep [or, upload on the internet] tend to be flattering"; we see that virtual avatars make possible extreme self-fashioning. Martha soon finds out that the clone lacks many of Ash's traits, and is but a poor replica. The duplicate is finally seen residing in the attic, and there he remains with the photographs of the dead relatives as a constant living (literally) reminder of the pain[9]. Unable to get rid of him, Martha has to live on finally under the constant shadow of her dead husband, instead of moving on with her life. The episode, then, also becomes a subtle study of the nature of grief.

Another episode, "Entire History of You" examines a world where Facebook seems to reside in our mind. A chip implanted behind the ear called a "grain", records every moment and allows the user to replay them and even project them onto larger screens. People are able to review their actions and relive past memories. While such a technology sounds quite promising, Brooker is quick to show the downside. This technology enables the pessimistic nature of a man to take control of his life, leaving him a distraught person in the end. He obsessively reviews his job interview convincing himself that it went badly. He becomes suspicious of the relationship between his best friend and his wife; jealousy and obsession ultimately lead to a final breakdown. He is, by the end, literally "blocked"[10] by his wife, and then violently removes the grain. A random guest at a party he attends, reveals that the memories the grain shows are coloured by our perspectives and can often be misleading. She has, therefore, removed the grain. Though dismissed by the characters, the viewer cannot shake away the declaration as easily as one realises the potential of the illusionary 'objectivity' the grain promises. The world which plays memories for entertainment at dinner-parties has no illusions of privacy.

The problem, according to the series, is not technology itself; it is the hidden impulses that the direct nature of technology highlights. In other words, the veil of civilisation that reins in man's more bestial instincts is ripped apart in the technological age, resulting in a universe like one depicted in "White Bear". It is a clear indictment of the voyeurism and apathy that define the internet age. It also lays bare the cruelty of the justice system which often becomes as brutal as the crime. A woman, prosecuted for her involvement in filming the

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[9] In one of the earlier scenes of the episode, Ash comments on how his mother shifted all the photographs of his dead father and brother to the attic to deal with the pain.

[10] The technology allows users to block people out of their lives. The blocked person can neither see nor hear the user, instead has a hazy blur in the spot.

murder of a little girl, faces the wrath of the public. In a simulated reality, she is forced to go through an experience similar to the girl's again and again. The truly shocking aspect of the bizarre punishment is the fact that it is put on as a show for public entertainment. Her world is an amusement park, tickets are sold and the visitors become the torturers, meting out 'justice'. Brooker doesn't condone her heinous crimes, but rather attempts to show the viciousness of public trials and the media that covers them.

The capacity for violence and the greed of the capitalist world become the driving force behind an episode like "The Waldo Moment". The frustration with the deceit and corruption of the political world comes out as well. What is now in front of us is a vulgar unthinking youth led by hollow individuals, or in the extreme world of "The Waldo Moment", a cartoon character who is crass and irreverent towards all power. To boost ratings, producers enter Waldo, a cartoon character into the local elections. The twist comes when Waldo's vulgarity is taken as honesty, a kind otherwise lacking in the current political system. The other politicians in the race are either corrupt or ill-equipped for the position. Waldo's popularity rises due to the politicians' apathy to real issues that trouble the masses and the deep distrust of the masses towards these politicians. However, as his competitor points out, Waldo merely lives in rhetoric – he doesn't engage and has nothing to contribute to debates; he is not "preaching any revolution". The relevance of the episode, especially in in today's political scenario, is very alarming.

The voice-over artist behind Waldo is a failed comedian, Jamie Salter, who sinks into a depression as he watches his creation whirl out of his hands as the producers and other people join in to exploit the power of Waldo. Using the figure of Waldo, they are able to feed ideas to the public. Towards the end as Jamie realises the hollowness of his cartoon, he leaves the controllers and ask the same public to destroy the screen. The next person, however, who takes the controller is able to, with a command, start a riot amongst a seemingly upper-middle class audience. The last shot shows a dictatorial regime across the globe with Waldo (and through it a small group of people) controlling the masses. It is an Orwellian[11] universe where dissent is not tolerated.

The worlds *Black Mirror* portrays are powered by Capitalism and consumer culture, exacerbated by technology. Jean-Francois Lyotard analysed the importance of knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) with respect to the increasing amount of importance given to information and the changing nature of knowledge with the rise of Capitalism. Knowledge, in order to adapt, is converted into "quantities of information" through privatisation in order to increase profits. It ceases to be an end in itself, rather becoming a way for nations to show their domination. The gap between the rich and the poor, the developed and the developing nations grows wider as the former completely dominates and oppresses the other. Commercialisation of knowledge and "ideology of communication transparency" encourages an opinion of state as being "opaque and noise" – observed evidently in "The Waldo Moment". In this "computerization of society", knowledge serves as an "information commodity" and is implicated in the system of commercial exchange of commodities. (Lyotard)

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[11] Reference here is to the novel, *1984* by George Orwell published in 1948. It depicts a dictatorial empire with elusive Big Brother in complete control of the country. People have been hegemonized through an ideology and constant surveillance ensures its perpetuation.

All these concerns are strung together and amplified in the episode, "Fifteen Million Merits" which is the most dystopian in its vision. In this world, knowledge is controlled entirely by an unknown authority and exercised through a highly commercialised system, present through television programmes. The world itself is a highly structured society where work is 'gamified'[12] and quantified. Although the society is completely based on green energy, there are indicators of a post-apocalyptic world where fruits are grown in petri-dishes. Information is transmitted through television programs with pornographic and violent content – all geared to promote the established order. People are surrounded by screens to the point of suffocation. The walls, the mirrors etc. everything has been converted into a personalised monitor which doesn't allow you take your eyes off the screen at any moment. Vision of a person is constantly disrupted by advertisements – mainly pornographic – and a monetary fine is imposed on skipping these. A talent hunt reality TV show appears to be the only escape from the life of drudgery of these people.

Their lives are marked by monotony and a complete sense of isolation. The protagonist finds himself desperately searching for something 'real' as he goes through the motions decided by an absentee authoritarian power. There is no real tangible object for the people – they sweat on the bikes only to satisfy their desires for companionship and warmth by purchasing "stuff that isn't even there". There are rigid class distinctions, with the colour of the clothes as indicators. Yellow denotes a person of the lowest class, grey of the middle and white are the rich producers of knowledge. The society values fitness[13] and obesity is mocked as an indicator of "lemons", or the working class draped in yellow. Video games which require you to shoot people dressed in yellow further strengthen hierarchies and class antagonism.

Hot Shot, the reality show, inspires false hopes of a better future, and oppression is obfuscated through an intricate working of ideologies through television. Brooker comments on how the people while cycling are unknowingly "powering the screens that's keeping them dumb" (Brooker, "Charlie Brooker Explains"). Television and media function as significant educators of the masses, especially for young children.

> A recent Centre for Urban Education study found that adolescents think that television gives illustrations of life which they considered relevant to themselves… About one-third of those in the study said they found television helpful with their schoolwork and their homework, but even these could not be specific about how they had been helped, although a good number felt that "TV explained current events more than their teachers" and that they preferred specific actors, newscasters, or comedians to be their teachers.
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> (Qtd. in Ferretti)

Ferretti cites the above-stated study to illustrate how television affects the minds of adolescents and plays a monumental role in their understanding of the system. Raymond Williams observed that this one-way communication of television taught its viewers not to question – images can't be slowed down nor speakers interrogated (Morris 35). Moreover, many people take cues from advertisements and it is the media which decides what the important issues are in a society. Adorno, in an essay, posits that television culture creates a homogenous mass of people. Through its claim of reflecting reality, it actually reflects a superficial reality. It

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[12] Gamification is the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts.
[13] Primary labour of the middle class is cycling.

is able to change and define people according to the whims of the ruling class (Adorno). There is a blind faith amongst the public about what is shown on television. For instance, viewers, Morris notes, accept "rapid simulations of scientific proof notes" of commercials from people who they *know* are not scientists; they interpret the content to fit their realities (Morris 36).

Bing, short for Bingham, is able to sense the complete superficiality of their existence and stands quite apart from the people around him who are busy immersed in the virtual – their virtual avatars are, more or less, their dominant reality – except one woman who seems to continually attempt to connect to Bing, only to be looked over by the alienated hero. In his search for the ideal, the real and the transcendent, he is attracted to Abby Khan. With an angelic voice and a naïve fresh outlook, she is the Romantic spirit of beauty incarnate. She sings a song passed down to her through generations and creates penguins out of paper bags containing their food – the only real thing in their universe. The paper penguin is taken away daily by the cleaners as the people aren't allowed any 'real' possessions.

Abby's song emphasises the power of emotions and threatens to shake the very foundation of this cold and mechanical order. So, she is tricked and co-opted into the system through compliance[14]. Bing witnesses the entire exchange and finally, in the climactic scene of episode delivers a heart-wrenching rant on the stage with the entire world as his audience:

> I haven't got a speech; I didn't plan words… I just knew… I wanted you to listen; to really listen, not just pull a face like you're listening, like you do the rest of the time. A face like you're feeling instead of processing… and la-di-da we sing and dance and tumble around and all you see up here, it's not people… it's all fodder. And the faker the fodder is the more you love it because… fake fodder is all that we can stomach — actually not quite all. Real pain, real viciousness that we can take… Cause we're so out of our minds with desperation we don't know any better… [B]uying shit. That's how we speak to each other… I have a dream? The peak of our dreams is a new hat for our doppelganger, a hat that doesn't exist… when you find any wonder [something beautiful and real] whatsoever you dole it out in meagre portions, and only then till it's augmented and packaged and pumped through ten thousand pre-assigned filters, till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride day-in, day-out — going where? Powering what? All tiny cells in tiny screens and bigger cells in bigger screens…

<div align="right">(Brooker and Huq)</div>

And like he predicts, he has to ultimately sell out to the order, and his speech that managed to move a few is repackaged into a TV show to suppress any further revolt that might occur. The ending of the show remains ambiguous as Bing becomes a part of the "white" producers of knowledge. His visibly animated view of the forest from his underground cell is exchanged for a view of the forest which the viewers are left uncertain whether is real or not. How far has his condition improved? There remains a possibility of him still being on one of the middle rungs of the social ladder, while the true power-wielders occupy an invisible spot.

Most TV satires implicate their audiences in the satire by striking parallels. *Black Mirror*, however, goes a step further to employ a curious technique; at the end of every episode, the screen turns dark into a

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[14] She literally drinks "liquid compliance" before going on in front of the judges of Hot Shot, the reality show that decides the future of people.

'black mirror' that reflects the viewer's face. Technology at the same time provides an 'escape' from the oppressing reality – the virtual world obfuscates the awful issues threatening to dismantle all sense of securities. We are confronted with a world where the virtual has become more 'real' than the real. There is no communication between the people in this dark world, leading to further isolation and alienation. The world of *Black Mirror* is seemingly bleak and lonely. *Doctor Who*, a contemporary famous SF show, however has a much more optimistic view. According to it, the passionate energy sustains in the end – there are apocalyptic situations which are ultimately resolved through an emotional response by the hero sculpted in the Romantic tradition. According to Craig Ferguson, "It's all about the triumph of intellect and romance over brute force and cynicism… And if there's any hope for us in this giant explosion in which we inhabit then surely that's it" (Qtd. in Ewalt). Lyotard went on to criticise the "inhuman" forces of science for their dehumanising effect which invariably accompany human progress. At the same time, he recognises that these forces open up our horizons to more than a simple definition of human beings (Woodward).

The question that now emerges is whether there is any figment of hope in these six worlds presented to us. The artist who unveils the dire state of affairs (albeit in a crooked way) in "The National Anthem"; the young woman at the margins who attempts to interact with Bing and is equally disgusted with the on-goings; the "grain-less" party guest who warns others about the memories; the friend who recommends the cloning software's virtual services, but never advises Martha to get a physical clone; and the young comedian Jamie himself who is destroyed in his opposition to Waldo – all represent the very faint glimmers of hope and of caution employed while engaging with technology.

Scientific endeavour is invariably filled with dangers; scientists can never predict all possible repercussions and applications. Each invention has benign as well as dangerous consequences. It then becomes imperative to exercise caution and allow our ignorance to be eradicated, rather than hide it. One cannot stop the process of science for it is also the process of evolution and progress (Rees). As Frankenstein ends,

> Did you not call this a glorious expedition? And wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror, because at every new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited, because danger and death surrounded it, and these you were brave to overcome. [So] it [was] an honourable undertaking.

(Shelley 207)

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Tentative Transformation(s): Gender Performativity and Gender Fluidity in *Transparent*

Aishwarya Kali

This paper explores Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" as it plays out in the web television series, *Transparent* (2014). After an analysis of the complexities of any performance of gender and the stereotypes it wittingly and unwittingly reinforces, the paper concludes by exploring the radical potential of gender fluidity and the "gender borders".

J udith Butler, in her 1990 text *Gender Trouble,* considers gender as "a corporeal style" or an "act" which is intentional and performative. "Performative", according to her, suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning. In her alternative theorization of gender, Judith Butler argues that as far as identity is concerned, coherence is desired. The specific coherence that she is talking about is of gender identity. To achieve and maintain this coherence, gender is performed through various acts, gestures, words and desires. To this end, Butler states, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality." This imitation exposes that the idea of a gender core is a fabrication (190).

Cross-dressing is often the first step individuals with gender dysphoria seek. It is perhaps the simplest yet most powerful step to liberation that trans individuals take. In popular culture, such as in films like *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Mr. Bean's Holiday,* cross-dressing is usually introduced as a source of humour, in these instances, its subversive potential is not focused on. That said, this trend may be changing with films like *The Danish Girl* gaining critical and relative popular notice.

This paper aims to analyse how gender is exposed as facile in acts of cross-dressing and gender negotiation in *Transparent,* a television series about a 68-year-old man who comes out as a trans woman, that started streaming on Amazon in 2014. Its creator Jill Soloway based this on her own experience with her father, Carrie Soloway (previously Harry Soloway). She has made a concerted effort to represent trans issues with some amount of nuance in her show. To this end, she has cast trans actors and has trans writers on her writing staff. *Transparent* has been described as a "stealth masterpiece" and "a TV series that makes revolutionary art seem both irresistible and inevitable" (Nussbaum) because of its unprecedentedly radical explorations of gender and sexuality. The transition of Mort (a retired Political Science professor), *Transparent*'s transgender protagonist, to Maura will be charted in conjunction with, firstly, Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity and how it is explored in *Transparent*, followed by how Mort/Maura displays gender fluidity. Finally, in conclusion, the in-between or the "gender borders" that Maura ultimately occupies will be examined.

In the case of trans individuals, performing gender can sometimes result in falling into gender stereotypes. Take, for instance, the account from 1955 of the stripper, Hedy Jo Star, who in her memoir, *"I Changed My Sex!"* writes – "I wanted the sensual feel of lingerie against my skin, I wanted to brighten my

face with cosmetics. I wanted a strong man to protect me." (qtd. in Stone 5). It is perhaps fair to say that in 1955 in America, this was the proprietary feminine position. Sandy Stone thinks that such accounts reinforced gender binaries and left no room for gender fluidity. Even Butler says, "Indeed, the performance (of gender) is affected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame…" (191).

In one of the scenes in the episode titled "The Wilderness", Maura's trans friend, Davina, is shown helping her with clip-ons and hair extensions. After that, she goes on to give her a few more tips about how to look more like a woman. She teaches her to look and behave like a woman. She tells her to sit with her knees together – "Can we close up shop here a little bit? The knees – your male privilege is leaking all over the place." Yet again demonstrating just how much gender is about posture, she goes on to say – "and you don't have to slouch, keep yourself up – it's called femininity." This is coming from someone who, in her own words, is "a 53-year-old, ex-prostitute, HIV positive woman with a dick". "Let me fix your walk," says Davina. But Maura is initially resistant. Perhaps this entire exercise has shown just how unformed her femininity is. This is self-fashioning, with a little help. It is interesting to note that most early gender dysphoria clinics also took on the additional role of "grooming schools" or "charm schools" because most often the staff of these clinics found that most men who tried to present themselves as women did not always behave like them. (Stone 8) This brings us back to Butler's argument that if we are to believe Simone de Beauvoir when she says "One is not born, but becomes a woman," (qtd. in Menon 69) then it follows that everyone has to *learn* how to be a man or a woman.

In a series of flashbacks, Mort's first moments as Maura are shown. He checks into a hotel with Mark, a man he met at the bookstore, who also cross-dresses. After checking in, they both put on their dresses and other vestiges of femininity. Mark tells him, "No one has seen me but me." "You're beautiful," Maura says in response. He takes a turn and gives Mort his hand, and then he says, "I'm Marcy." To which Mort says, "I'm Daphne Sparkles." Mark makes a face to express his disapproval of the name. He deems it "stripper-y" and says that Mort needs a more elegant name, after some thought he anoints him Maura. Then they walk down to the restaurant. In the hallway they encounter a man, and are subject, perhaps for the first time, to the male gaze. They think they'll be exposed for the perpetrators that they are. Instead, Maura manages to ask him where the ice machine is, and then after walking past him, breaks into a run and starts giggling. In the restaurant, they read about the cross-dressing camp, Camilla. A waitress brings their food, and says, "Two Caesar salads, *ladies*" (emphasis mine). They seem almost giddy with excitement at what they have pulled off. Butler says in reference to drag, "Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary" (187).

In another flashback in episode 8, Mort manages to go to cross-dressing camp and for a while he finally feels free and happy. In one scene, he is seen cycling with his friend down a street in full regalia – dress, wig, makeup, accessories and heels. They are going to the phone-booth to call their respective families and to produce their "alibis" as neither of them has told their families the truth. Mark makes the call first. In this

moment, there is an interesting and noticeable change in his body language. He stands with his legs further apart. He holds himself differently and his voice becomes lower pitched as he talks to his wife. In that moment, he unwittingly reveals how gender is quite literally a posture. On the phone with his wife, he is a man, while still being dressed in a short denim dress, blond wig and heels. The most cutting irony is that as he is talking to his son, he advises him to "man up". It bears repeating that he says this while being 'woman-ed up'. This scene seems to reinforce the following statement made by Butler, "…drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space, and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). Apart from demonstrating gender performativity, this particular scene also powerfully counters ideas of gender binaries. This, according to Kate Bornstein, is the kind of in-betweenness that puts the being of gendered identity into question (Butler xii).

Mort is discomfited by the ease with which Mark negotiates his various roles. He is further mortified when he hears of a man who was kicked out of camp for taking hormones. In the scene where the many campers are discussing this outcast, they conclude by raising their glasses and drinking to "We may be cross-dressers but we are men! We are men! We are men in skirts! Cheers!" And while Mort silently drinks to that, he is hardly accepting that assertion. To quote Emily Nussbaum, "High on the joy of being seen, Mort recognizes the truth: he's not a man with a kink but a woman." Sandy Stone writes, "The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that constitutes success, is to "pass" … to be accepted as a natural member of that gender." (12) While Stone doesn't say as much, there is a suggestion that the act of passing is linked to the performance of gender. By this definition, Maura passes and doesn't pass in equal measure.

In the fifth episode of season one of *Transparent*, Maura's son, Josh, sees his father as a woman for the first time. Maura has been "outed" to Josh by his youngest, Ali. In her earlier attempts to come out to Josh, she lost her nerve. When Josh finally sees his father as Maura, he says, "They [his sisters, Ali and Sarah] made it seem like you were walking around town with a dress or whatever. But you look completely normal, except your ponytail is longer." Maura is dressed in a shirt and a long skirt. Her hair is in a stringy pony. This look can be described as midway between her more feminine Maura attire and her former drab dad clothes. Her voice which is airier around his daughters, is now flatter; she is not wearing makeup. There is a concerted effort to not aggravate her son. But when Josh, desperately hoping that this is just a kink, says, "Whatever people wanna do behind closed doors… that's their business, you know." Maura stares pointedly at him, and opens her ponytail; he, then, looks noticeably uncomfortable. On his way to the bathroom (which is in Maura's bedroom), Josh finds in open display all of Maura's paraphernalia of womanhood – wigs, makeup, nail polishes, brushes, etc. To quote Butler, "The effect of gender is produced through the *stylization of the body* and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the *illusion* of an abiding gendered self." (191, emphasis mine) Later in the same episode, Maura runs into an old acquaintance, who tries to flirt with another trans woman she is dining with. When the man finally notices Maura, he is at first bewildered, and then starts laughing. He asks, "what is all this?" And so, Maura nonchalantly takes apart her recent femininity – "this is a necklace, this is a – I guess you'd call it a wrap, these are rings…" She is challenged by this man and her son because they are confronted

and perhaps discomfited by her *performance* of gender.

It can be argued that she perhaps tones down her performance of gender around certain men who knew her as a man. It can also be argued that perhaps some men that Maura encounters aren't entirely convinced by her performance. The male gaze might be unusual for her. Jan Morris (previously James Morris) expresses in her memoir, *Conundrum* (1974), how unusual it is "when I walk out into the street I feel consciously ready for the world's appraisal, in a way that I never felt as a man." (qtd. in Stone 5) Throughout the three seasons, she is referred to again and again as "sir". The same is not true for all men, though. In season 2, Josh's illegitimate son with his childhood babysitter, Colton, comes to stay with him in Los Angeles. Colton's adoptive parents then come to evaluate his living quarters all the way from Oberlin Park, Kansas. While they are there, Maura drops in unannounced to look for old family photo albums. Colton's father is quick to assume that this woman must be Colton's "mee-maw". Later in the same season, Maura's ex-wife's new lover asks her when she chances upon them in the elevator of his daughter's apartment, "So, how do you gals know each other?" Maura performs gender differently before different people. However, more generally, it is fair to say that she performs her femininity differently in front of women and men, with varying degrees of success.

However, not every performance of gender goes off without a hitch. In episode 6, Maura performs in a talent show in the LGBT centre called "Trans Got Talent". She sings a duet with her friend, Davina. All three of her children are in attendance. During the performance, however, they break into fits of laughter. It could be the shock of seeing their father singing in a dress, makeup and wig. It could also be the fact that all three of them very recently had taken some medical marijuana. But all three Pfefferman children have left before the performance is even over, and the hurt is plain on Maura's face. But could their laughter signify something else? "The loss of the sense of "the normal"," Butler states, "can be its own occasion for laughter especially when "the normal", "the original" is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that nobody can embody." (189) Perhaps, there is no other fitting response to such utter destabilization. When he (shown in a flashback) finally reveals himself in a dress, wig, makeup and heels to his wife, Shelly, he hopes and even pleads for acceptance. She reacts much like her children will, years later – she laughs. Laughter seems to be a common response of the Pffermans to shock. But once Shelly stops laughing, she admits that she cannot deal with that anymore and they separate.

In the first episode, Mort tries but fails to come out to his three grown-up children. "They're so selfish," he later tells his support group at the LGBT centre, where he is dressed in a bright flow-y dress, wearing makeup and hair extensions. In the presence of his children, he is dressed in his predictable and 'drab dad clothes' and he has his hair tied in a stringy ponytail. Once they leave, he changes into a colourful maxi and unwinds his thinning hair as he reads a magazine. But he leaves his watch and socks on. He often switches between Mort and Maura but in this scene, he is symbolically both as he wears some of Mort's (socks and watch) and some of Maura's (the maxi) things. He is comfortable, and since he is alone, he is not performing either genders.

Maura is most distinctly in the twilight zone as we see her, in season two, lying in bed. She takes to

wearing more feminine nightwear, and as time passes, the way she holds herself, behaves and talks changes. But without the hair, makeup, padding and heels, she is most tentative. She looks both like a man and a woman. She has undergone no reconstructive surgery. She still looks very much the same. Her transition is a source of disorientation to everyone around her. How her children talk of her is telling of the middle ground she occupies – "my father is a woman", "mom's good, dad's a woman" and so on.

Another strange moment of opposing dualities is the first time he tries coming out to Josh. One moment, he is dressed up in a tie-dye dress with a thick bead necklace and much more voluminous hair-extensions, and seems calm and confident. However, as soon as Josh pulls up to his driveway, he loses his nerve and runs into his room as Josh enters the house. He is gone for a while, as Josh roots about the boxes in his living room and when he does emerge he is back in his 'drab dad clothes' and has even managed to pull out his extensions. In this way, in the first few episodes he seems to be shape shifting between Maura and Mort and demonstrates almost chameleon-like gender fluidity.

In the fourth episode, he finally comes out to his younger daughter, Ali. She is high at the time, but still articulates the confusion as, "Daddy, oh my god, what am I supposed to call you now?" So, she calls him "moppa". Later in the episode as she relays this to her sister, Sarah, she says, "I actually renamed him – Moppa. Like momma and papa – moppa." This becomes a term of endearment which also indicates his state of in-betweenness. He resides in what most trans theorists call "the gender borders" which can be explained as "… a position which is nowhere, which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse." (Stone 11)

In season 2, transamory is explored at some length. At the end of episode 2, Maura goes to a nightclub with her trans friends. They are approached by some men and then take to the dance floor. Maura does not join them and sits nursing her drink at their table. When they insist again, she gets up and after dancing half-heartedly with them for a bit, she turns to look at herself in the mirror wall, she continues to dance with one hand on this wall. She, in a sense, dances with herself. But the way she looks at herself, she seems to be assessing how desirable she may seem as a 69-year-old recently trans woman. In this simple act, she seems to be again acknowledging her in-between status: in between genders, in between lovers and so on.

Later in the season, Davina's lover, Sal, advises Maura on the kind of reconstructive surgery she should get. Almost as if he is rattling off items on a menu, he says:

> What are you thinking about facial feminization wise? Well, I'm thinkin' maybe lower that hairline, maybe some cheek implants, fat transfer, you know? Maybe a forehead reconstruction? Maybe a little… maybe a facelift? (pause) If I might? 500 ccs in the titty area. Nothing too big 'cause that's not you, you know?

Which raises the question – is that what constitutes femininity? Is that what Maura needs?

In the beginning of season three, gender confirmation surgery seems imminent for Maura. Episode three of season three opens with Maura in a doctor's chamber, and they are discussing reconstructive surgery. The doctor clicks on a screen with Maura's image on it and describes what can be done, "We're going to do a little trim along the jaw-line there and then we do a little liposuction around the neck…" On the screen appears the

face of the woman Mort perhaps always wanted to be, and she is excited. On her seventieth birthday, she announces that she wants to "begin transitioning medically" and she tells her family that she no longer wants to be called moppa, but mom. Maura's desire for coherence drives her to what is, at times, suggested to be a risky surgical procedure.

The term "coherence" has been used quite a few times prior to this in a specific way, and now deserves further elucidation. To explain and establish the idea of cultural coherence, Butler quotes from Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*:

> Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.
> (178)

Butler re-describes the "untidiness" referred to above as a "region of cultural unruliness and disorder" (178). She further cites Douglas who uses the body as model for a "bounded system" (177) and suggests that the boundaries of the body are precarious.

She then turns to Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection in *Powers of Horror*. The abject represents that which has been expelled from the body as excrement and therefore becomes the "other". The construction of the abject as the "not-me" establishes the boundaries of the body. Butler sums it up as, "And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compels its differentiation from the abject. Hence, "inner" and "outer" constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject." The same can be said about male and female or any other oppositional binaries, in the sense that they are constructed on the basis of social norms.

However, by the end of the season Maura learns, to her dismay, that she is not fit to go under such large doses of anesthesia as would be required in a reconstructive surgery of such a scale. She is even advised to not take her hormonal medication. In the final episode of season three, all the Pfeffermans go on a cruise. Aboard the ship, Maura wanders into a shop. She purchases a unisex outfit, which is a pair of printed pants and a matching jacket ("Is this what they call 'athleisure' wear?"). Ali finds her dressed in her new clothes and standing on deck and Maura tells her of her loss. She used to wear form-fitting underwear and other kinds of feminine clothing that made her appear shapelier. That may have felt fine when it was a temporary step on her way to final coherence. But now, when that door has been firmly shut, she wants to get rid of such vestiges of femininity. She puts them in a bag and contemplates submerging them in the ocean. And so, Ali says a prayer:

> Ali: Face the ocean and raise your arms… Great Mystery! Goddess! Let us mark this moment to say goodbye… to these tight, terrible Spanx!
>
> Maura: Goodbye tight, terrible Spanx!
>
> Ali: Deliver us from feeling… bunched up in the ass
>
> Maura: … Dayenu

Ali: and restricted and confined… *let us just be!*

(Maura laughs)

(emphasis mine)

Maura does not achieve coherence but she is no longer "restricted and confined" to conforming to ideas of feminine beauty, she can "just be", undefined and perhaps, for the time, unhappy.

The audience might share some of Maura's disappointment at this outcome. However, there is radical potential to her state. Sandy Stone, in what is considered to be the founding text of transgender studies, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', sees the culturally coherent gendered body as "medically constituted textual violence" (13), and goes on to say:

> In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries.
> (13)

Maura finds herself in the same place as the protagonist of Leslie Fineberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). In this novel, the protagonist, Jess, moves from the butch to transsexual, only to find the transition from male to female equally unfulfilling. Finally, she refuses to identify as a woman and instead she chooses to occupy a middle ground, identifying simply as a 'he-she'. Maura, of course, has no say in her final state of incoherence. She wanted to be a medically constituted female. Instead, she ends up further complicating what it might mean to be a woman (or a man).

Gloria Anzaldua in her "Theory of the Mestiza" (1987) anticipates what Stone (quoted earlier) says:

> There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halfs are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other.

Butler, however, suggests the impossibility of ever really inhabiting a gender, when she states in her conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, "And yet this failure to become "real" and to embody "the natural" is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable." (200)

Stone in "The *Empire* Strikes Back: The Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1990) exhorts trans individuals to forego "passing" as the gender that one transitions into. Such an injunction runs counter to most prevalent trans discourses and so, this political move is dubbed "post-transsexual". While she is talking about post-operative transsexuals, this act also holds true for trans identities that resist placement within a gender binary, like that of Maura. Stone sees this as important in eschewing medical discourse and creating space for trans subjectivity. At the end of season three, it seems that Maura is a permanent resident in the gender borders. The coming seasons of *Transparent* will perhaps be richer and more complex because of her location.

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"Bad Science": A Matter of Methods

Priyanka Kali

This paper considers Mary Shelley's seminal novel, *Frankenstein* and Alex Garland's 2015 film, *Ex Machina* and will draw a parallel between the methods and the product of these scientific endeavors. Finally, it shows that what is particularly damning about the scientific endeavors pursued in both texts is the invasive nature of the methods employed.

I f there was ever a novel's plot that didn't need to be recounted, it is *Frankenstein*'s. *Frankenstein* plays were being made early enough for Mary Shelley to watch. Representations in films abound; the story even finds itself being adapted into TV shows and cartoon episodes. Alex Garland's 2015 film, *Ex Machina* sees the creation of consciousness in a humanoid robot, the creation of artificial intelligence (AI), by Nathan, the founder and CEO of a Google-like company called BlueBook. Bluebook, "named after Wittgenstein's notes, is the world's most popular internet search engine, processing an average of 94% of all internet search requests". Caleb is an employee who is brought in to test the AI, called Ava. The interactions between the two comprise the heart of the film. These sessions function much like the tale the Creature narrates to Frankenstein –it not only gives us a sense of Ava as a conscious being, but also allow her to win the viewer's sympathy. The first part of the paper will consider the intentions of these creators. Then the paper will draw a parallel between the methods and the product of these scientific endeavours – the Creature and Ava.

Anne K. Mellor in her book, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fictions, Her Monsters*, says that Mary Shelley invokes Erasmus Darwin's gradual theory of evolution to show the errors of Victor Frankenstein's "bad science" (Mellor). His intentions are not inherently bad, egotistical as he may be to believe that "a new species would bless me as its creator." (36) The outcome of his endeavours –the Creature –is naturally good and only eroded by his circumstances and the reaction of society to his form. Therefore, the problem lies in his method – his pursuing of nature "to her hiding places" (36), his hubristic usurpation of the creative process.

In *Ex Machina*, Nathan, the Creator, a Promethean, Icarian figure in *Ex Machina*, is distinctly different from Victor Frankenstein. He is amoral, sinister, manipulative and seductive. Like the viewer, Caleb is, at the same time, both taken in by and wary of Nathan. While the characters in *Frankenstein* are assured of the goodness of the eponymous character, there is deep ambivalence about Nathan, so much so that when he is literally stabbed in the back by his creation, the viewer doesn't feel any fear or pity. As in the novel, Ava, like the creature, has the viewer's sympathy throughout the film. What is problematic is that Nathan exploits data to create his AIs. In both cases, the methods are symptomatic of scientific hubris.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, says:

> To the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is *obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game* (emphasis mine)... I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative."

(xxiii)

The Enlightenment is one such grand narrative "in which the hero of knowledge works towards a good ethico-political end – universal peace" (Lyotard xxiv). Frankenstein, too, imagines he will "pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (36). In many ways, it is such narratives that precipitate a Promethean impulse. What Frankenstein says is reminiscent of the *Genesis* – "Let there be light" (Gen. 1.3). His intentions are at least ostensibly good. Lyotard famously defines Postmodern as "incredulity towards narratives" (xxiv). So, when there isn't a grand narrative, legitimisation is based on "the system's performance –efficiency" (xxiv). As Jim Powell notes in his gloss of Lyotard, legitimisation is based on producing more of the same kind of research, "because the more research you produce, the more proof you produce and the more you are seen as being right" (31). Science now legitimizes itself. As Nathan asks Caleb, "Wouldn't you [create an AI] if you could?" There doesn't seem to be a greater reason than that. Hans Moravec, the founder of the world's largest robotics program at Carnegie Mellon, believes that "robots will displace humans from essential roles" (quoted in Clayton 95) and feels we should consider them our "mind children" (quoted in Clayton 95). Obviously, he thinks so precisely because creating conscious robots is the point of his research and there is great interest in such research. It is almost cyclical.

Mellor cites Evelyn Fox Keller's psychological survey of physicists working at Harvard University to show that Victor Frankenstein possesses a personality that has been characterized as typical of the modern scientist – emotionally repressed, relatively low sex drive, more comfortable with objects than people, and professional detachment that often precluded a concern with the ethics and politics of their research. Even Frankenstein's father exhorts that no man should allow "any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections" (38). In *Ex Machina*, we never hear of Nathan having any family or relationships, he lives a solitary existence with his robots in a house ensconced by nature.

So, with no "domestic affections" to interest him, Frankenstein's attention is solely on natural philosophy and his ambitions –"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through" (36). He seeks to "penetrate into the recesses of nature"(38). The language itself is gendered, pointing to the contemporary image of nature as a passive female to be subjugated. Mellor provides a wide range of examples to prove this point –from Francis Bacon who heralded the seventeenth century scientific revolution as a calculated attempt to enslave female nature to Isaac Barrow, Newton's teacher who felt that the aim of the new philosophy was "to search nature out of her Concealments, and unfold her dark Mysteries". The word "penetrate" itself was used multiple times to voice the intent of scientists, including a secretary of the Royal Society. Metaphors of slavery and sexual dominance were the two most popular ways of thinking about nature among scientists (only male, of course).

Mary Shelley, as a reader of Wordsworth, understood nature in his terms "as a sacred all-creating mother, a living organism or ecological community with which human beings interact in mutual dependence" (Mellor). However, in the scientific worldview of the time, nature was simply there to be exploited and given human status only to highlight the subjugation – Nature is there to be penetrated, analyzed and controlled. So, while the paper previously conceded that Frankenstein's intentions are ostensibly good, it

is important to remember that he also intends to aggrandize himself by usurping nature's power of creation.

Isaac Asimov said, "In Science fiction, you not only must know your science, but you must also have a rational notion as to how to modify or extrapolate that science." (*Asimov on Science Fiction*) Mary Shelley definitely knew the new scientific ideas of her times. She bases Frankenstein's invasive ideas on that of Humphry Davy, the notion of animating a lifeless form with electricity are based on the works of Luigi Galvani. However, it is never made clear exactly how Frankenstein discovers the life principle after pursuing Nature to her hiding places, but the intrusive nature of his activities is clearly established.

While Nathan is also evasive about the actual science behind the AI, in one crucial scene he does discuss how he was able to create consciousness in Ava. When discussing the trouble he had getting an AI to read and duplicate facial expressions and how he was able to solve the problem, he makes some revelatory remarks:

> NATHAN
> Every cell phone, just about, has a microphone, a camera, and a means to transmit data. So I switched on all the mikes and cameras, across the entire fucking planet, and redirected the data through Blue Book. Boom. A limitless resource of facial and vocal interaction.
> CALEB
> You hacked the world's cell phones?
> NATHAN
> laughs
> NATHAN
> And all the manufacturers knew I was doing it. But they couldn't accuse me without admitting they were doing it themselves.

Nathan's methods are also invasive, and the kind of invasion of privacy he describes isn't unusual anymore. It is very similar to a surveillance program conducted by the National Security Agency in the United States of America called PRISM, as exposed by Edward Snowden. Much of these surveillance programs are based on the internet and telephone lines. Nathan also uses his search engine to make the software for Ava:

> NATHAN
> It was the weird thing about search engines. They were like striking oil in a world that hadn't invented internal combustion. They gave too much raw material. No one knew what to do with it. . .
> My competitors were fixated on sucking it up, monetizing via shopping and social media. They thought search engines were a map of what people were thinking. But actually, they were a map of *how* people were thinking. Impulse, response. Fluid, imperfect. Patterned, chaotic.

One can also see the Icarian motif here, in this vast amount of "raw material" and the desire to map how people were thinking. So, if Frankenstein pursues nature to her hiding places, now humans are pursued to their private spaces. In both texts, one finds a hubristic breach.

Those remarks aren't the only links this text has with surveillance. The entire house/research facility is full of cameras and in important moments and the viewer is reminded of the cameras on the walls. Nathan, in front of his computer, receives the feed of all these cameras; this in itself, is a god-like position. Moreover, it is surveillance that is used to choose Caleb and to ascertain his suitability as a candidate. Ava wishes to "see how

we are when we are unobserved", she too is keenly aware of the cameras. She causes power cuts to talk to Caleb without Nathan's supervision and it is in these moments that she convinces Caleb to help her escape. Most people in the world are under a much more insidious form of surveillance and the knowledge of this only makes most people police themselves. However, in many ways, this insidious form of surveillance is unavoidable.

The Panopticon was an architectural figure posited by Jeremy Bentham to serve as the model for prisons, hospital, schools and factories. The building is arranged in such a manner that all parts of the interior are visible from a single point. This structure is informed by the need for surveillance and in such an arrangement "visibility is a trap" (Foucault 200). Such an arrangement ensures that each inhabitant "becomes the principle of their own subjection" because they control their own behaviour because they assume they are under observation. The panoptic principle is meant "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, describes the principle on which it is based – "at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells." There are two windows in each cell, one faces the tower and another window that faces the outside and allows light to enter. This arrangement "makes it possible to see constantly and recognize immediately." It is then significant that the room from where Nathan observed everything, is quite similar to the tower in the Panopticon.

We are putting ourselves in the Panopticon of mass surveillance largely because of what Jean Baudrillard calls "The Ecstasy of Communication". At least nature, in late 18th and early 19th century scientific discourse, is actively persecuted; she is Othered to be dominated. As Mellor notes, "The atmospheric effects of the novel, which most readers have dismissed as little more than the traditional trappings of Gothic fiction, in fact manifest the power of nature to revenge herself upon those who transgress her sacred boundaries." The subjects of surveillance are not passive either; most of these subjects are actively creating the state that allows their oppression. The postmodern condition is such that we enable our subjugation, we are the principle of our own subjection in ways more than one. Baudrillard posits those under the sway of the ecstasy of communication as schizophrenic, "what characterizes him… is the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat"(133). Baudrillard was just talking about the effect of TV, radio, advertising, but after the advent of social media, his assessment rings even more true. He characterizes the ecstasy of communication as being almost sexual –"the cold and communicational, contactual and motivational obscenity of today... the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an *incessant solicitation*… there is in effect a state of fascination" (emphasis mine) (131). Powell sums it up as:

> A cool, lunar seductive, electric pornography of excessive images and information feeding upon us, *penetrating all our private spaces;* the obscenity of fascination, like a pornographic close-up, producing a state of giddiness to which we surrender in an Ecstasy of Communication.
>
> (70; Emphasis mine)

The world only finds itself more and more addicted to "the ecstasy of communication" and it is becoming more and more impossible to imagine someone without a smartphone.

Even though Nathan is perpetrating a massive breach of privacy, and does not care at all about his responsibilities to the users of his search engine, the AI created as a result of his unethical breach is, much like the Creature, the most 'human' of characters. The 'official' process of verifying her AI involves a session each day, and through the course of these sessions, various matters come up, and can be considered as important to verify her consciousness. The first session brings up the issue of language. Ava has always known how to speak, but she realizes that it is strange and that language is a skill acquired. The Creature is able to acquire this skill when Felix teaches Safi. The Creature spends a good deal of time observing the de Laceys and notes that there is one other need primal to humans apart from food and shelter –love and companionship. Amongst the first things Ava asks Caleb is about his family, and if he is in a relationship. Ava has never been outside and when asked where she would go if she could go outside, she expresses a desire to go to a busy traffic intersection because it "would provide a concentrated but shifting view of human life." "People watching", as Caleb surmises. Her response is indicative both of her loneliness and her awareness of not being the same as humans, despite having consciousness. The same is true for the Creature as well; the above reasons also motivate him to stay in that hovel to be near the de Laceys. Ava draws and Mozart also comes up in conversation, so art and artistic creations (even if somewhat obliquely) are also considered during these sessions.

Victor thinks it is his duty to annihilate the Creature, but it is questionable if he has the right to do so. The Creature, rightfully, asks him, "How dare you sport thus with life?" Ava, too fears she will be switched off. She, too, questions –"Why is [it] up to anyone [else]? Do you have people who test you and may switch you off, then why do I?" Both feel that their creators don't uphold their duties. Ava even asks, "Is it strange to have made something that hates you?" The Creature seeks a home, and Ava seeks to escape.

Ultimately, Nathan posits her ability to escape as the true test of her consciousness –"She would have to use imagination, sexuality, self-awareness, empathy, manipulation –and she did. If that isn't AI, what the fuck is?" Her eventual escape might make the viewer question their sympathy towards her because she leaves Caleb trapped in the house to his death. However, it is, ultimately, a matter of survival. She is giving herself the best possible chance, and much like the Creature, she is a product of her circumstance and, maybe, all the more human for that.

The Creature, alternately, identifies with Adam and Satan from *Paradise Lost*. Not accepted by his creator, he finds himself in a kind of exile. Ava is a name suggestive of both Eve and Adam. She is also one of the first of her kind. There is a critical point in the film, right after Ava's artificial intelligence has been proved, when she covers her robot form with synthetic skin. She assumes a human form and it is at this moment that she looks at her naked form in the mirror and is "hypnotised by the sight of herself" (directions in the script), and this is bound to remind one of Eve's reaction when she sees a reflection of herself in a pool of water in Book four of *Paradise Lost*. This is one of the primary differences between Ava and the Creature. For

most of the film, we can see her robot form and only her face was made with synthetic skin. She is able to overcome this un-human aspect of herself, and will not be subject to some kind of arbitrary injustice when she finally gets to that busy traffic intersection.

The sessions and the whole business of proving Ava's consciousness provides various traits that can be seen as integral to being a conscious human being. *Frankenstein* can also be seen as an extended meditation on what it means to be human, as it deals with themes like education and the Creature's experiences. There is a scene in *Ex Machina* that gives the matter of being human a Postmodern turn. For a long time, Caleb and the viewer is under the impression that there is only one active AI in the house. Then the character who is thought to be a human house keeper reveals herself by peeling off her synthetic skin. The scene that follows begins with Caleb still getting flashes of the image of the metallic contours of her face. He then cuts himself in a moment that Baudrillard describes as the "death of the real"; this is a desperate attempt to resurrect the real. He needs to cut his skin to check that he isn't metal inside. According to Baudrillard, the era of Postmodernity is the Third Order of Simulacra and now the simulacrum has become reality itself (Powell 51).

A *truly* conscious machine is not a threat. They can become a threat as a result of their circumstances, just like any human. The Creature is a reminder of the fact that what is truly dangerous are the circumstances created by society. So, when it comes to science, the problem really is a matter of methods. In both texts, it is the exploitative nature of the scientific methods that leads to its categorization as "bad". This is symptomatic of a larger problem, and indicative of a kind of destructive nature in mankind. This is evident in the way mankind has found it acceptable to plunder nature. Maureen Dowd ends an Op-Ed about *Ex Machina*, with something she had asked the director and writer of the film, Alex Garland, "What will end humanity first? Zombies or robots?" To which Garland responds by saying, "We will. We're going to manage that perfectly without any help from zombies or robots."

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Musal(Man): Representations of Muslim Masculinities in Post-Partition India

Zehra Kazmi

This paper aims to study the representations of Muslim masculinities, with reference to the narratives created in post-Partition India. It aims to showcase the existence of certain trends in their representation and the stereotypes in play. Masculinity and sexuality become subject to markers of religious identity within these narratives. This paper has done so through the exploration of oral, film and literary sources. It has compared and studied texts where the Muslim identity has been slighted into a singular, uni-dimensional entity.

Cultural understandings of what constitutes 'manhood' in its various forms vary widely, as do assumptions about its consequences for "individual temperament", behaviour and bodily experience. But wherever manhood is associated with power, however loosely or variably, it also becomes a public social marker which is and must be maintained in specific social contexts, and to which peer recognition is imperative. Thus, the concept of masculinity is inherently relational. It is not only perceived as differences from women that define and sustain its meaning, but also the recognition and agreement of other men. Ruling groups not only valorise particular features of their own masculine code but they often stigmatise others as marginal, deviant or criminal- particularly those which seem to undermine or discredit men as possessing a proper authority over women. Sexuality is perhaps the most obvious register here, given the formal stigmatisation of homosexuality evident in many political and religious traditions. Other registers — of class, culture, race, ethnicity or age — may equally feature in the construction of 'low' forms of manhood (O'Hanlon 48-49).

This paper aims to analyse the various representations of Muslim masculinities in India, with a focus on the narratives created post-Partition. The sources for this exploration include oral, film and literary mediums. The strategies largely employed behind these representations are that of exoticization, demonization and deviance respectively. While not all representations are meant to pander to majority expectations, there remain a notable few. Therefore, it becomes important to briefly trace the history of Muslim masculinity in India in order to put my analysis within context and then move on to contemporary narratives of the same.

There is no single definition of masculinity in Islam, and like all cultures, the dominant conception of masculinity in a particular historical moment depends on various economic, political and social factors. However, certain ideas about gender are inscribed within the *Quran* and must be taken into account here. Surely, the ultimate source of what masculinity means to Muslims, has to be the Prophet Muhammad himself. As his life is transmitted to us through the *Hadith*, which was written after the Prophet's death, constructions of his masculinity are deeply entrenched in Arab understandings of the masculine in the 7th century. It must be noted that notions of masculinity in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* should be understood in relationship to the term *muruwwah* — a Bedouin virtue that roughly translates to 'manliness.' *Muruwwah* combines moral notions of integrity, fidelity, honour and chastity. Virility emerges as the very essence of masculinity in the

novels and stories of some of the Arab region's most eminent writers, both male and female. The virility of the Prophet as an attribute of his manhood is famed within Islamic culture. This concern with virility and fertility as markers for manhood can be also seen in the common Muslim practice of measuring men by their number of male offspring (Darwish).

Sufi devotional traditions which evolved during this period, however, conflated gender identities greatly. Though many of their views and actions were considered shocking, it was precisely this juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane that these poets aimed to emphasize. The use of erotic imagery is a remarkable feature in Sufi poetry. In this context, the works of Bulleh Shah, Amir Khusro and Amir Hasan become significant. There is an inversion of the female voice, and gender becomes increasingly ambiguous in the works of these poets. For example, these couplets by Khusro are loaded with suggestive references:

> Khusro has given himself to Nizam
> You made me your bride when our eyes met.

> (Vanita and Kidwai 128)

And the even more obviously homoerotic:

> Because of these pure Hindu boys, Tied up in their locks,
>
> Khusro is like a dog with a collar...
>
> You know that Khusro is famed for his sweet words
>
> If not for my heart's sake, come for my tongue.

> (Vanita and Kidwai 128)

The subversive poetry of the Sufi tradition and its uneasy relationship with modern Islam has been a topic of polemics for many scholars (Vanita and Kidwai 128).

The perceptions surrounding Muslim masculinity got violently charged around the time of the Partition. Writers like Deepti Misri identify 1947 and the Partition as the beginning of a history of politicised animosity - between India and Pakistan, Hindus and 'Others', 'India' and its fringes, the upper caste and the Dalits - and examines the gendered scripts, underwriting much of this violence, and its relation to differing ideas of 'independence'. Misri scrutinises Sadaat Hasan Manto's *Siyah Hashiyeh,* or *Black Marginalia,* (1948) and its representation of male-on-male violence engendered between warring religious mobs in a riot during the Partition ("Anatomy of a Riot"). Manto's *Sharifan* brings the idea of violence begetting violence in an infinite circle as men try to hurt other men by hurting *their* women with chilling clarity. In the story, Qasim rushes home to find his wife killed and his daughter Sharifan lying half-naked. He rushes out in a blind rage, forcefully enters the first Hindu household he finds, and brutally rapes a young girl who passes out during his animalistic attack. Later, her unconscious form reminds Qasim of his own daughter and he drapes her in a blanket. It becomes evident here that the war is between the men on both sides, but is carried out through a callous exploitation of women (29). Priyamvada Gopal writes that Manto explores "the experience of masculinity most powerfully in the context of violence that marked the nation's constitution". In some cases,

the manic violence that perpetuated itself within the divides of 'us' and 'them' transgresses its boundaries and unleashes itself into the same side. Gopal reaffirms this by saying that the story "Khol Do" "suggests that a very thin line separates patriarchal violence from patriarchal protectionism", where a traumatized rape victim immediately starts unfastening her *shalwar* on hearing the words "*Khol do*"[1]. (Gopal qtd in Gangapadhyaya 14-16)

Urvashi Butalia's book, *The Other Side of Silence* (2000), and documentaries like the BBC's *Partition: The Day India Burned* (2007) refer to accounts of Sikh men murdering 'their' women to protect their 'honour' from Muslim rioters, as women's bodies were considered to be the repositories of the same. Similar accounts exist on the other side of the border as well. However, this identity of the Indian Muslim man crystallizes further in the decades following independence.

A re-imagining of the Muslim man happened after 1947 and a more palatable version of his masculinity was presented to the masses. While the memories of the violence of the Partition continue to haunt the collective consciousness of the Indian population even today, there was, then, an effort to present an image detached from religious violence to the people. Eventually, cinema, as the predominant form of cultural change in the modern world, became the most potent site for analyzing social flux at any particular point in time. The existence of powerful Muslim figures in the primary culture industries of India—film and literature—also shaped this understanding. Muslims like Dilip Kumar, Mohammed Rafi, Kamal Amrohi and K. Asif were towering figures in early Hindi cinema, and so were legendary actresses and singers like Madhubala, Shamsad Begum, Waheeda Rehman and Meena Kumari.

Historian and cultural critic Mukul Kesavan identifies the Hindi film as, in fact, the Urdu film. He also posits that, though the rise of the Khans has been seen as a sign of Bollywood's progressive nature, it was only made possible by them playing specifically Hindu characters and consciously erasing their Muslim identity from characters on screen. He writes, "It is a fine Indian irony that at the very moment Hindi cinema has begun to squeeze Muslim characters into these confining pigeonholes, the Muslim men who define stardom in our cinema, Aamir, Shah Rukh, Salman, Saif and Farhan, play with increasing flair and success the Hindu Everyman, variously called Vicky, Raj, Ajay, Vijay and Karan." In fact, Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen recognize Muslim socials (traditional and new wave), historical and courtesan films as filmmaking traditions within Hindi cinema (12). Certain stereotypical representations of the Indian Muslims like the poet-lover can be seen in films like *Jab Jab Phool Khilein* (1965), *Mere Mehboob* (1963) or more recently, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011).

Hindi film lyrics have close links to Urdu poetry and the films celebrate relentlessly the *ghazal* and the *qawwali*. In *Amar, Akbar, Antony* (1977), the Muslim brother is a *qawwal*, named after a great Urdu poet, Akbar Allahabadi. Akbar's *qawwali*, "*Parda Hai Parda*" is about persuading his beloved, sitting in the front row with her father, to remove her veil, as she doesn't wear one while working in the hospital. In Sufi-themed

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[1] Open it.

movies, where the lead character is not a Muslim, such as *Dil Se* (1998) and *Rockstar* (2012), the film score still draws on these traditions. So the lyrics of *Dil Se*'s song "*Chaiya Chaiya*" are adapted from Bulleh Shah, a sixteenth-century Punjabi Sufi, and *Rockstar* has a *qawwali* praising Nizamuddin Auliya (Dwyer).

While the representation of the aristocratic Muslim woman as a *begum* or a *tawaif* (courtesan) has been commented upon by many critics, her male counterpart, the "*nawab*"[2], is also an important trope used to categorize Islamic masculinity in India. In literature, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1974) is a very important example of the same. The Booker Prize winning novel represents the Muslim aristocracy in classic orientalist terms. The *nawab* of Khatm (played by Shashi Kapoor in the film adaptation) may seem beguilingly charming, but is a despot and a debauch. His sexual magnetism and good looks are often alluded to in the text, but there is a definite sense of threat and violence undercutting the same. The ambiguous nature of his relationship with the closeted homosexual Harry, his pursuit of the married Olivia, and dealings with local goons to ensure political influence make him the stereotypical deceptive Easterner. A romanticized ideal of *nawabi* Awadh, seen as a symbol of both cultivation and decline, provided Hindi cinema with many of its metaphors and stock characters. Thus, the debauched rentier in *Sahib, Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962) or Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958) might figure in stories located in Bengal, but the archetype of aristocratic decadence on which he is based, is derived from the *nawabi ayyashi*[3] made famous by the Muslim elite of Awadh (Kesavan).

In cinema, a respectable *mujra*, the courtesans' elaborate song and dance session, must be graced by a *nawab*, who provides us with much scope to explore Indian Muslim culture. He could be an artistic character unsuited to the modern world such as in Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (1977), but he could also be a decadent drunk who divorces his wife by saying "*talaq talaq talaq*"[4] during an argument (*Nikaah*, 1982), or a melancholic but refined gentleman, as in *Mere Huzoor* (1968). However badly he might treat his wife and family, he never forgets his manners, is always impeccably dressed in a *sherwani*[5], speaks with flowery Urdu and demonstrates proper *adab* or etiquette. The *nawab* is always a figure that is stuck in the past and drowns himself in excess.

A more modern example would be Zain Altaf Khan from Anuja Chauhan's *Battle for Bittora* (2010). Zain is an ex-royal, a Muslim *nawab* in a sleepy town in Pavit Pradesh (a literary stand-in for the state of Uttar Pradesh). Chauhan uses words like, "noble", "regal", and "aquiline", having "pale, honey gold skin" to describe his features (24). Educated at Winchester, a renowned and expensive boarding school in England and the owner of a palace which is now a heritage hotel run by the Taj Group, Zain is the embodiment of cultural elitism and economic superiority that reflects in his words as well. Zain's appeal within the novel is derived from his faultless physicality as well as his sophistication. Notions associated with Muslim masculinity in the subcontinent's collective consciousness (for example, Love Jihad, which is based on the stereotype of Muslim

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[2] Muslim nobleman
[3] Debauchery
[4] Triple talaq: A contentious religious practice to acquire divorce from one's wife under the *sharia*
[5] A knee-length coat buttoning to the neck, worn by men from South Asia

men being smooth talking rakes with rapacious sexual appetites) are subversively dealt with. So, while Zain does remain a very charming Muslim man who manages to enamour Jinni, the Hindu Brahmin protagonist, the sympathies of the reader lie with Zain and not with the communal forces which intend to paint a negative picture of such relationships.

Another interesting representation of the Muslim man, one which has become especially prevalent since the 9/11 attacks and the rise of global Islamic terrorism is that of the Muslim man as a terrorist. Films like *Kurbaan* (2009), *New York* (2009), *Mission Kashmir* (2001) and *Fiza* (2000) deal with the radicalization of Muslim identity. *Kurbaan* and *New York* are especially effective in showing the terrorist as one of us, implicitly suggesting that even the seemingly 'modern' Muslim man is not above suspicion. Mistrust, suspicion, and the propensity of Muslims to radicalize due to ill-treatment by the majority are standard tropes in this manner of representation. However, a notable example is Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* (2010), which also deals with similar issues, but a sense of community identity informs Rizwan Khan's decision to positively change the Islamophobic discourse in the West, instead of radicalizing himself.

Another common trope is the Muslim gangster or 'the don' in contemporary Indian literature and cinema. The works of writers like S. Hussain Zaidi have dealt with the underworld greatly, and he is interested in tracing the history of the Mumbai dons. After independence, growing rates of unemployment left many Muslim youth jobless. The feeling of disenfranchisement was deep enough to cause many of them to join the underworld. The don became an anti-hero figure of sorts, commanding power and respect. Though its morality existed in a grey area, for many similarly poor and jobless young Muslims, the underworld became an emblem of a parallel model of success, where Muslims beat a system that was built against them from the start. However, this position became a lot more complicated after the Bombay Riots of 1992, when terrorism and the underworld colluded together. Dawood Ibrahim and Haji Mastaan have endured in our cultural consciousness because of films like *Deewar* (1975) and *Once Upon A Time in Mumbai* (2010), and novels like *From Dongri To Dubai* (2012).

While there are definitely characters in Indian writing and cinema that do not fall into neat categorizations like the above, and have achieved a greater degree of nuance in their representation of Indian Muslim men, they are unfortunately few and far between. The narratives surrounding Muslim masculinity are subliminally invested in creating dichotomies between 'Them' and 'Us'. In a politically charged climate as ours, it becomes even more important to view these representations from a critical lens and examine what kind of messages they are sending out in society.

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Growing Up: Negotiating the Adult Worlds of *Through the Looking-Glass* and *The Catcher in the Rye*

Stuti Pachisia

The worlds of the child and the adult are simultaneously complementary and dissonant. Drawing on social and psychological theories of child development and education, this paper explores the nature of socialization in stories of transition into adulthood. This analysis is rooted in a comparison of the adult worlds created in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, both of which may be described as literatures of socialization. Although separated by both space and history, these texts are concerned with the mutation of child to mature adult. The adult is then expected to reprise and reinforce a sanctioned role in society. This paper analyses how this adult psyche is sculpted through the force of community, and resistance to it, in the two texts.

In Salvador Dali's iconic 1977 sculpture of Alice, we find a female figure, whose head and fists have erupted into roses, holding (or being held by) a narrow bronze thread in an inverted 'U' shape. Dali's Alice is not the seven-and-a-half-year-old we encounter in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). She has breasts and is 2.27 meters tall; this is an Alice who has encountered adulthood. That her head and fists have erupted into roses leaves us questioning what the nature of this encounter is – is this Alice an adult looking at the world through the rose-tinted glasses of childhood? Or is this Alice a rosy child bound to and by her own adulthood?

The anxieties of transitioning from childhood to adulthood go beyond Carroll's seminal work. Vastly different from Alice's Victorian Looking-Glass World is Holden Caulfield's New York in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) yet, the navigations of these unfamiliar adult worlds by both Carroll's Alice and Salinger's Caulfield reveal the construction and deconstruction of social identity and roles. By comparing the two texts, one can gauge whether the anxieties of 'growing up' transcend social, cultural and material realities. In a 1979 study, the social psychologist Viktor Gecas noted that the primary role of socialization in children is played by "influential adult figures" (36). This socialization is a formative and culturally-influenced process into the adult world. It determines the nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood and how these changes are monitored by authoritative adult figures. This paper attempts to compare the processes of this socialization in *Through the Looking-Glass* and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Any such analysis can only emerge out of an understanding of the nature of the socializing agents – the "influential adult figures"(Gecas 36) – inhabiting both the worlds. These figures are the cultural artifices of the Victorian World and post-war America, and therefore, to understand them, we must examine their worlds.

The world Carroll was writing in, as Donald Rackin notes, had a "sense of life in a secularized and fragmented society where various power arrangements, competing classes, goals and values (were) rapidly changing in response to numerous technological, economic, demographic and political changes" (101). The adults in the Looking-Glass world contend with this very Victorian affliction – the dichotomy of the emergent

and the existing. Inversions are posited as new ideas to a young Alice who has to constantly rework the existing ideas in order to thrive in this arbitrary world. We have Tweedledum and Tweedledee as co-existing inversions, positing moral ideas which offer no escape (as in "The Walrus and the Carpenter"[1]). We also have Humpty, Dumpty and the gnat challenging the politics of language. It is a world that is moving forward, but is at the same time, as the Red Queen says, "living backwards.'' U. C. Knoepflmacher succinctly calls this "the Janus-like split between progress and nostalgia." (497) In short, we have a world of conflicting power in the adult world, where there is no sweeter escape than dream-like inversion – an inversion which can only exist out of reality.

Salinger's world is the world of post-World War II America – a rapidly transformative background marked by materialism and consumerism; a world obsessed with the rapid construction of a singular American identity. This America, Alan Trachtenberg notes, was a period where, "a Cold War view of the world profoundly dominated the thinking of most Americans. The picture of a world divided between 'us', 'free' and democratic, and 'them', totalitarian and 'godless', seemed unshakeable."(5) Intellectuals were straitjacketed into participating in McCarthyism[2] to retain their posts and government appointments. Trachtenberg says there was "a growing sense of discomfort at the very process… on part of politically dissident intellectuals, that integration threatened loss of independence… Creativity thrived with alienation, some post-war writers insisted– or at least they held that the condition of alienation which had played a nurturing role in fostering modern art, literature and thought was too precious a heritage to sell for an academic chair or a government post" (5-6).The adult world was "phoney"; it was "depressing" and marked by haunting indifference for the Holden Caulfields – the non-conformists – of the world. While the adult figures in both the texts are qualitatively diverse, their function is the same–as cultural products, they act as possible role models or transmitters of value systems for the two characters.

In the aforementioned 1976 study, Gecas noted that "socialization is the irreducible element of the structure known as the family"(35). The "influential adult figure" within the family are the primary caregivers; in the texts, the parents. However, for both Alice and Caulfield, while the engagement with the parent figure is personally impactful, it is not personally involved. In the first chapter of the respective books, when Alice supposes what would happen if "they… had saved up all [her] punishments" (Carroll 92) and when Caulfield laments that "they're... nice and all … but they're also touchy as hell" (Salinger 1) – the power of the adult disciplinary figure takes hold. "They" exercise great influence on both Alice and Caulfield's lives (so much so that the third-person referential defines them), but "their" experiential world is different from that of the respective child characters. The paternal authority here acts as a disciplinary centre, but the power of this centre remains in its distance and inaccessibility. This is reinforced by the physical absence of Caulfield's and

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[1] After hearing "The Walrus and the Carpenter", Alice decides that the Walrus is more scrupulous of the two. However, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, by presenting instances of his treachery, lock her in an ethical bind. With subsequent inputs, she is forced to deduce that both parties are equally unscrupulous.

[2] According to Herbert M. Orrel, "McCarthyism is a complex of repressive measures, basically anti-intellectual and anti-humanist, resulting from a crisis psychology under which external attack and internal subversion are assumed to be imminent." The origin of the word lies in the policies of US Senator Joseph McCarthy, in post-World War II America. In this time, intellectual and institutional freedom was curtailed, as academics were accused of harbouring Soviet sympathies.

Alice's parents within the text. In creating distinctions between the disciplinary adult figure and their individual selves, Carroll and Salinger are Othering the adult from the child.

As an extension, the adult world is 'other-worldly'. The Looking-Glass world is an inverted, but a reflective, world. For Alice, this world is antagonistic, shifting and arbitrary, where models of conduct are imposed on her. Take, for example, her interaction with the characters on the train in "Chapter Three: Looking -Glass Insects". At her inability to supply a ticket to the guard, "a great many voices" (Carroll 107) accuse her of flouting norms by telling her that, "Why, his time is worth a thousand pounds a minute!" (Carroll 107). When Alice realizes her attempts to clarify fail, she identifies "there is no use in speaking" (Carroll 107) - yet a preliminary socialization by this other world has taken place. Alice finds, "to her great surprise, they all *thought* in chorus… 'Better say nothing at all. Language is worth a thousand pounds a word!'" (Carroll 107). Her next thought is, "'I shall dream about a thousand pounds tonight, I know I shall!'" (Carroll 107). The physical absence of immediate parental models does not discount the 'maturing' effect of her social interactions.

In Caulfield's case, there are interlocked adult worlds, all of which are hotbeds of cultural representations of maturity – the bar room, his hotel room, the restaurant that he visits to drink with 'Old Luce' (Wicker Bar), and Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini's houses. The bar room, where he "jitterbugs" (Salinger 64) with a woman accompanied by two of her friends, and his hotel room, where he invites a prostitute, become spaces where Holden can potentially explore his sexuality. The cultural construction of sexual exploration as a passage into adulthood is rejected by him when he wants to simply talk to the prostitute (Salinger 86). He constantly rejects the material discourse around it, especially when he later suggests to 'Old Luce', that he knows that sex is "'supposed to be physical and spiritual, and artistic and all. But… you can't do it with everybody--every girl you neck with and all--and make it come out that way. Can you?'" (Salinger 132)

Mr. Antolini and Mr. Spencer function as para-educative centers in a novel whose protagonist has rejected normative centers of education. As Émile Durkheim says, "Education is… only the means by which society prepares, within the children, the essential condition of its very existence."(71) Caulfield's "flunking out" of four schools is indicative of his inability to function within its paradigm (Salinger 11-12). When he mocks Pencey Prep and Whooton as being instrumental in creating "phoneys" (the word that has become the irreverent beat of the novel), he is acting against the function of scholarly education, which, according to Durkheim, is to socialize him into "the physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him" by dominant culture.(71) Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini act as surrogates into this exercise, and both encourage him to resume conventional education. In Chapter One, Mr. Spencer says, "I'd like to put some sense in that head of yours, boy. I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to help you, if I can." (Salinger 12). Mr. Antolini echoes this thought in Chapter Twenty-Three, when he says, "'I'm not trying to tell you... only educated and scholarly men are able to contribute something valuable to the world. It's not so. But I do say that educated and scholarly men… tend to leave infinitely more valuable records behind them'" (Salinger 170). Caulfield has

unenthusiastic and indifferent responses in both instances.

On the other hand, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the educative process as a means of socialization is a more successful project. While there is no formal institution in this whimsical world, Alice's education results from multiple points of information that she has to contend with and eventually, conform to. In this inverted world, the points of information challenge the pre-existing understanding that has spilled over from Alice's world. However, as she grows, she adapts to new patterns of information quickly. An example of this is when she talks and curtseys simultaneously in Chapter Two, when instructed to do so by the Red Queen, and even goes on to think "I'll try it when I go home… the next time I'm a little late for dinner." (Carroll 102)Her education is completed when in Chapter Nine, as Queen Alice, she can challenge the body of authority that implemented codes of conduct on her, especially as she now occupies the same space as this figure:

'She can't do sums a bit!' the Queens said together, with great emphasis.

'Can you do sums?' Alice said, turning suddenly on the White Queen, for she didn't like being found fault with so much.

The Queen gasped and shut her eyes.

(Carroll 161)

Alice's responses to an antagonistic world that gives her cues for behavior, are earnest and she continuously tries to be "civil" (Carroll 104). Caulfield's response, on the other hand, is to dissociate himself from the world of adults, and to find an Edenic reprieve in the world of children. The difference in response is linked to the difference in desire – Alice would "like to be a Queen, best" (Carroll 103) and Caulfield, on the other hand, would like to "just be the catcher in the rye and all" (Salinger 156). While this desire can be addressed on several fronts, the focus of this article remains Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development and (predictably) authorial intent.

Gross notes in *Introducing Erik Erikson: An Invitation to his Thinking* (1987), that as per Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development (1959), a key stage in development (that acts as the threshold into adulthood), is Stage V: Identity vs. Role Confusion. The stage takes place between the ages of twelve to eighteen, and is typified by behaviour directed at forming adult roles and conceptualizing potential adult identities (47). While Alice is not an adolescent, her behaviour – her formalistic movement across the chessboard, directed by her desire to be 'Queen'- is a literal journey into her adult role. Insofar, she successfully *enters* adulthood (How successful this adulthood is will be elaborated on later). The fact that she is a seven-and-a-half-year-old Victorian girl illustrated in a frock and curls is of secondary value here.

Caulfield, however, is an adolescent stuck in the grips of an identity crisis. Several adult models and potential roles are presented to him in the aforementioned interlocked adult worlds. However, existing alongside these adult worlds are child worlds – in the museum, the lake in Central Park, Phoebe's bedroom – and Holden constantly contends with being pushed into the former and being pulled by the latter. As D.M. Roemer says, "he places himself in the transcendent role of the catcher in the rye… this is the domain of the child and other innocents--Phoebe, Ernest Morrow's mother, the ducks in Central Park. Storied into

vulnerability by Holden, they function as evocative foci in his nostalgic reconstructions."(8) Interestingly, this finds a physical manifestation in the shock of finding a gray hair on his otherwise young body. Caulfield often tries to pass off as an adult in order to buy alcohol, but mostly fails, because he cannot *become* an adult, no matter how much he looks like one. His indifference towards his future and potential roles is him undergoing psychosocial moratorium – which, according to Erikson, is delaying the process of adulthood because of immense role confusion (Gross 47). That he is in a state of suspension is evident from the beginning of the novel, where Salinger introduced us to Caulfield in an asylum, recuperating from tuberculosis. His life is on hold, his decision for adulthood is on hold, but the reasons for this immense role confusion are linked to the cultural world that *Catcher* and Salinger are products of – just as the contrived nature of Alice's adulthood is linked to the cultural world that the *Alice* books and Carroll are products of.

U. C. Knoepflmacher notes, "Adult transmission is equally prominent in both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, where the opening poems melancholically insist on distancing childhood reverie from adult realism" (501). The figure of the growing child is a poignant one because the consideration of the inevitable loss of innocence is a retrospective act on part of the adult author. This is significant for Carroll, who was known to be fond of young children, because much like the Looking-Glass world, they existed in transitory states. In fashioning the White Knight, Lewis Carroll enters this world in the hopes of safe-guarding Alice with pure innocence before she becomes an adult. There is a clear distinction. Before she receives a crown, she shows child-like fascination for the White Knight's inventions; after she receives a crown, she "doesn't see why the Red Queen should be the only one to give orders" (166) and she is "ready to find fault with anybody" (164). Her transition into adulthood has occurred, but the Alice we have before us is not the same who received "the love gift of a fairy tale" (88). Within the whimsical lies the ominous nature of the experiential – her transformation is inevitable, and therein lies the "melancholy" (89) of her tale.

Where Carroll imagines a young girl he once knew, Salinger imagines himself. Salinger was fairly opposed to being interviewed but consented to a short interview by a sixteen-year-old for a school publication in 1953, which was reproduced in *J. D. Salinger: the Last Interview and Other Conversations*. In the interview, when asked if Holden was modeled on himself, Salinger responded by saying, "'Sort of, I was much relieved when I finished it. My boyhood was very much the same as that of the boy in the book, and it was a great relief telling people about it."(Blaney 56) Holden cherishes the pastoral (escaping to Vermont), the innocence of childhood, and wishes that "certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone" (Salinger 110). However, towards the close of the novel, the realization that childhood – and he himself –cannot exist in the moratorium he otherwise inhabits comes over him, and he remarks, "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it is bad to say anything to them" (190).

In the end, it is not the impossibility of the dream-like world, or the impossibility of being a child

forever that remains – it is the poignancy of adults looking on children and realizing the transitory nature of their existence. The "bitter tidings" and "vanish'd summer glory" (88) that an adult Carroll mourns for in a young Alice transcends time itself. Caulfield's cavalier use of "depressing" emanates from this common sense of innocence lost. Insofar, the anxiety of gaining adulthood exists as a corollary to losing innocence. This shared loss remains unbound by social, cultural and material realities, for it is as much a Victorian affliction as one of post-war America. It is no wonder then, that Dali carries this project of universal loss forward, in a surrealist Alice erupting into roses half a century after the publication of- *The Catcher in the Rye*, and a century after the publication of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

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The Self as Artistic Subject: Theme of Representation in the Works of Frida Kahlo and Sylvia Plath

Sukanya Roy

The paper aims to examine identical themes of representation in the works of Frida Kahlo and Sylvia Plath. The author has compared pieces that may be seen as creative manifestations of similar experiences in their lives, although bearing broader scopes of intellectual enquiry. Analyses into the concepts of gender, sexuality and the self have been done, and questions regarding the same have been raised, in an attempt to acquire a deeper understanding of both the artists' psyches and their artistic endeavours.

"I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best", echoed an artist, whose portraits were, according to André Breton[1] "like a ribbon around a bomb" (qtd. in Bakewell 17). It was none other than Frida Kahlo. Three decades later, Sylvia Plath, under the nom de plume Victoria Lucas, wrote in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (87). Interestingly enough, it is this sense of being, and being to represent, re-determine and reclaim, that has likened the œuvre of the artist to that of the poet, and vice versa. Kahlo as well as Plath, in creating art, drew quite liberally from their own unmediated life experiences and incidents, thus rendering their creations with an impassioned subjectivity. This went on to become characteristic of their respective styles of expression, developing in turn into a shared leitmotif of the personal expanding into the political. Plath, who is often called a Confessional poet[2], however, dismissed the standing definition of the term with "As if poetry were some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion" (Kirsch 355), while Kahlo was convinced that, "I paint my own reality" making her more of a probable confessional painter. She continued, "The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration" (qtd. in Bakewell 22). Evidently, what they did seem to agree upon, then, was the presence of spontaneity in their ideas and musings, which compelled them to include even the most disturbing of scenarios in their work, with Plath stating in "Kindness" (1963), "The blood jet is poetry, there is no stopping it." (267)

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon was born on 6th July 1907 to Jewish-Hungarian Guillermo Kahlo and Matilde Calderon y Gonzalez of Spain. The Mexican Revolution against dictatorship started on the 7th July 1910, a date which Frida later appropriated as her birth date, in order to present herself as a 'daughter' of the revolution, going on to show little to no concern for either social conventions or ascribed identities. She was fond of her father from whom she took her earliest lessons in painting. She didn't particularly maintain an uninhibited relationship with her mother, whom she described as "kind, active and intelligent, but also

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[1] André Breton was a French writer and poet who is known as the 'Father of Surrealism'.
[2] Confessional poetry or 'Confessionalism' is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s. It has been described as poetry "of the personal" (Wagner-Martin 3), focusing on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma, including previously taboo matter such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide, often set in relation to broader social themes.

calculating, cruel and fanatically religious" (qtd. in Kettenmann 9). As a result of contracting polio at an early stage, she spent most of her childhood in isolation. Nevertheless, she was never hesitant to bend gender rules, by participating in the 'manly' arena of sport. Frida later attributed her inclination towards portraiture, to an in-depth knowledge of her body, her being, as gained from her solitude.

In 1928, she joined the Mexican Communist Party, where she met Diego Rivera, whom she went on to marry twice, sustaining an extremely tumultuous relationship with him which was to later become the subject of numerous cultural depictions. Rivera was the most renowned muralist of the post-revolution phase. In a field where there presided hardly any women artists, Kahlo flung herself right into the centre of this avant-garde mural movement by consummating a marital union of "an elephant and a dove"[3], avoiding yet again, another prescriptive identity. Kahlo could never bear children, as a fateful result of a streetcar accident, and suffered repeated miscarriages during her lifespan. A series of extra-marital affairs on both sides, accompanied by intra-marital disputes and their mutual irascibility, culminated into a formal divorce in 1939. Right till her death, Frida kept painting. She has a hundred and forty-three paintings to her name, as of now, fifty-five of which are self-portraits. Recognition for Frida's work, much like Plath's, was largely posthumous. It was not until the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, with the beginning of *Neomexicanismo*[4], that she became well-known to the global public. Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffmun-Jeep, in "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia'[5]", dissect Kahlo's motives behind wearing traditional Mexican garments over 'fashionable', Americanized ones, by stating:

> Kahlo's wearing of native clothing most frequently has been attributed to her desire to please her husband and hide her physical deficiencies. However, this dress can also be seen as a political statement: Kahlo's sartorial endorsement of post-revolutionary ideology.

(8)

"Self-portrait on the border between Mexico and the United States"

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[3] The exact expression used by Frida's father to describe the couple based on the stark contrast between their individual weights and sizes. (qtd. in Garber 33)
[4] The name given by critics to a movement in Mexico which was slightly surreal, somewhat kitsch and a postmodern version of Social Realism, that focused on popular culture rather than history.
[5] A pejorative term for the United States of America.

The impersonal, capitalistic way of the New American Life intensely displeased her, and she painted *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States (*1932), presenting herself in a "colonial-style" dress and a necklace of bones, her stiff pose contrasted casually with the cigarette held between two fingers of her right hand, and the miniature paper cut-out flag in her left suggesting a party or parade. The Star Spangled Banner is shown partially hidden by clouds of industrial smoke and removed from human connection. On the smokestacks are written the letters 'F-O-R-D', and on the pedestal, on which she stands, is carved her newly adopted name, "Carmen Rivera." Block and Hoffmun-Jeep further write:

> In situating herself, the female artist, on the border between Mexico and the United States, she takes up a position not previously occupied by a woman. A postcolonial subject, she has abandoned her culturally assigned and internationally dictated 'place'.

(10)

Orianna Baddeley in "'Her Dress Hangs Here': De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult", unspools Kahlo's fascination for, and adoption of, the Tehuana dress. The Tehuantepec is a traditionally matrilineal community of Mexico which serves for a living counter-example to the post-conquest society that believed in the myth of the 'Chingada', or the fertile Earth Mother, who was forcibly penetrated, violated or deceived – the female soil possessed and misused by the masculine force of the Spanish invader. She writes:

> In a culture where sexual metaphors are used to convey racial and political conflict, the Tehuana represents that aspect of Mexico's tradition unbowed by centuries of traditional colonial and male rule. Kahlo's adoption of Tehuana dress, while being an attractive disguise of what she saw as a less than perfect body, asserted both a feminist and an anti-colonialist position.

(13)

"My Dress Hangs There"

In *My Dress Hangs There* (1939), her Tehuana costume hangs empty in the centre of the composition, suspended between a toilet bowl and a golfing trophy. This small painting on metal, shows the artist poised

between the technological inhumanity of a capitalist North America and the archaic fertility of Mexico, done by a series of juxtapositions – the past versus the present, female nature versus masculine technology, growth versus exploitation, and in its very material presence, the traditions of fine art versus the popular. Although occasionally humorous, the work presents a bleak view of urban alienation.

This characteristic disillusionment with mechanization of culture and hyper-productivity of the American consumerist mechanism is evident in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and "The Applicant" (1962). In the former, the speaker proclaims, "Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well" (244), expressing her inclination towards being dedicated fully to the arts and an artistic sensibility, no matter how gruesome the performance may be.

In "The Applicant", the narrator seems to be compulsive, almost maniacal, in shooting a slew of questions at the applicant for a position in the 'industry' of marriage. At first, she is asked whether she has a set of false eyes, teeth, breasts, because if she did, something would be amiss, and that would correspond directly to a 'commercial loss' for this firm – the firm of illusory choices. Imperfection and inadequacy are subject to not a slow, wholesome change, but to an immediate stubbing-out. The woman who is offered in marriage is depicted as a literal object that can "sew, it can cook, It can talk, talk, talk" (222), and is meant to spend her time serving her husband miracle-cures for headaches and ready teacups. Referring to an ill-cut suit being provided to the male applicant, the narrator says, "It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof against fire and bombs through the roof. Believe me, they'll bury you in it" (221)– two of the identifying features of a rising industrialist society are ableism, and the unfaltering belief vested in its machines to be able to overpower the forces of the very nature that created it. A man in control of an instrument that could rope in profit, was the ultimate industrialist zeitgeist. This bore an implicit hyper-masculine connotation in itself, wherein objects were always perceived as females –seen in the naming of ships, cars or planes – or things to be presided over and controlled. Plath's sardonicism, however, can be seen explicitly reflected when she references the utter futility of mechanical progress in the face of inevitable death, wherein the created object can at best become a decorative device for the impending doom.

Sylvia Plath had her first poem published at the age of eight, in *The Boston Traveller*. She was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston's Jamaican Plain, to Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober. Otto Plath was a professor of biology at Boston University. Aurelia Schober was an educator, and a former pupil of Otto's. Soon after graduating high school, *The Christian Science Monitor* nationally published one of Plath's poems. In three years, she was a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine, but she soon grew dissatisfied with her job. It was this period of time that she later documented in her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). She was denied admission to a Harvard writing seminar, and that was when her depression started manifesting itself ruinously. Following electroconvulsive therapy to treat it, she crawled under the house and overdosed on her mother's sleeping pills, an event she makes a reference to, in her poem "Lady Lazarus" – "They had to call and call and pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" (244).

After surviving her first documented suicide attempt, Plath found herself receiving psychiatric care at

McLean Hospital for six months, after which she submitted her thesis at Smith and graduated summa cum laude with a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge. It was here, at a party on February 25th, 1956, that she met poet Ted Hughes, whom she went on to describe as "a singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer" with "a voice like the thunder of God" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 24). Soon after, the couple married, and in 1958, moved back to Boston, where Plath attended creative writing seminars given by Robert Lowell. The sessions saw an unhindered transpiring of discussions about each of their life struggles. Plath and Hughes welcomed their first child in 1960, the same year in which she published her only collection of poems, while still alive, *The Colossus* (1960). Plath suffered a miscarriage in 1961, followed by an appendectomy within a month. Her time at the hospital wrenched several haunting poems out of her – "Parliament Hill Fields", "Tulips", "Morning Song", "I am Vertical". In June 1962, Plath had had a car accident which she described as one of many suicide attempts. In July 1962, Plath discovered Hughes had been having an affair with Assia Wevill, and in September, the couple separated. What followed, in the final few months of her life, was the penning down of the *Ariel* collection – perhaps the most acerbic, versatile and harrowing of all the works by the poet. The following year took a harsh toll on her already disoriented mental equilibrium with various personal and medical problems. Furthermore, January 1963 saw the publication of *The Bell Jar*, which was greeted with "critical indifference" (Kirk 103).

On 11th of February, 1963, at around 4:30 a.m., with her children fast asleep, Plath committed suicide by putting her head into an oven suffering a carbon monoxide asphyxiation. Ted Hughes, in a letter to an old friend, soon after Plath's death, wrote "That's the end of my life. The rest is posthumous." (qtd. in Terry 15). Published in 1965, *Ariel* became a defining success for Plath's œuvre in the literary world, and invoked an unprecedented scale of scrutiny and interest in her life and earlier works. The poems, as Robert Lowell puts it, in the preface to *Ariel*, "play Russian Roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder" (iv). Plath was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1981, for her *Collected Poems*.

By directly or indirectly portraying the self as a medium to communicate artistic genius, neither Kahlo nor Plath bordered on narcissism. Their art was not effected in an elite social vacuum, since both these women were brought up in middle-class homes, but took root in an intricate web of personal identities that were politically exploited by the power structure to become disadvantaged social identities, like race and gender. Their works intended to have far-reaching impacts on the lives of the 'others' – the marginalised, oppressed and subjugated. Writer Honor Moore, in "After Ariel: Celebrating the poetry of the women's movement" says:

> When Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was published in the United States in 1966, American women noticed. Not only women who ordinarily read poems, but housewives and mothers whose ambitions had awakened. Here was a woman, superbly trained in her craft, whose final poems uncompromisingly charted female rage, ambivalence, and grief, in a voice with which many women identified.

(18)

It was obvious that by choosing to 'confess' through her poems, Sylvia wanted to staunchly represent, but hardly correct, the imperfections in her existence – the same ones that drove her into the depressive spiral

of compulsive suicidal tendencies – "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream." (227) Plath hoped to lay fresh claim to life, figuratively as well as literally, in two ways. Firstly, she achieved it through her characteristically morbid imagery of skulls and hospitals, moon and sea, blackness and paper– through death in small, yet acerbic doses– amounts she had the ultimate control over. Secondly, it was seen in the trope of resurrection in almost all of her major works.

In "Lady Lazarus', the speaker chronicles her multiple attempts at suicide through, "I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it–" (245). She ends the poem by likening herself to a phoenix rising from the ashes, flinging her rebirth in the face of all the intruders that she viciously spites against, mainly the German fascists and despots, "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air." (245) Through these lines, Plath is trying to redeem and reshape the memory of Semitic suffering effected under Nazism. She links what is perceived by her at the microcosmic level of self, with the historical exploitation of oppressed races and genders around the world. Her distinct hatred for nearly everything Germanic is very typical of a Plath piece. In what is perhaps her magnum opus, "Daddy", she presents herself as an immensely conflicted subject because of the feelings that she has towards her late father.

Otto Plath was a Nazi sympathiser. Hence, in the poem, he is depicted as having the ideal Germanic features himself, which to her became symbols of cruelty and brutality – something she would not expect out of a father figure. The words "black shoe" and "boot" are specifically suggestive of him having had a domineering personality that exerted an iron grip of morality and discipline on the poet as a young girl. Plath uses the harshest adjectives for her father, even at the end of the poem, where she paints a picture of villagers trampling over him in anguish.

Kahlo, through her art, is also desirous of laying rightful claim to one main identity: that of a rebellious 'mestiza'. In post-revolutionary Mexico, mixed race women were objectified and sexualised by the bourgeois. Contrary to the myth of the 'Chingada', wherein women were expected to be passive subjects of (in)action, the act of placing a 'Mestiza'[6] self at the centre of a painting, making it the creative subject, was very much an act of revolution. In her paintings, Frida transformed the passive earth into an active, sexualized woman, by focusing on her own embodied experiences. In doing so, she granted subject status not only to the preconceived earth-mother and Indian-mother, but to her children, the Mexican mestiza and mestizo. Liz Bakewell, in "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading", explains:

> Frida introduces to the study of the Mexican landscape … what she introduced the study of the female nude. Celebrating the openness of the (female) earth's anatomy, she celebrates the active, not passive, nature of the Mexican mother-earth, of the representation of woman. … Frida's mestiza-self, as embodied Mexican nation, is an active, fertile, female agent with a self-generated subjectivity and self - defined sexuality, which challenges the post-revolution constructions of the conquered and raped motherland.

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[6] A 'Mestiza' referred to a mixed-race woman, usually bearing both Spanish and Indian blood in her veins.

"What The Water Gave Me"

What The Water Gave Me (1938) is perhaps the best work to reveal the psychological bent-of-mind of a mestiza. Frida sits in the bathtub; the water is still; her toes surface. Although Frida's torso and face are absent from the canvas, her legs appear beneath the water's surface, which is teeming with a variety of images: a skyscraper metamorphosing into a volcano and then erupting; the naked body of a woman tied down with a rope around her neck; a floating Tehuana dress, a skeleton overlooking Frida's parents' portrait, and two women wrapped in an intimate embrace. Breton had described this painting as a "mirrorless room" (178). It was a painting of the body, as it knew itself without the mirror. What the water gave Frida was the knowledge of her body as a landscape– a landscape of eruptions. It is a painting inspired by the contradictions and gendered visions of the Mexican landscape – of passivity, violence and penetration. This is a landscape of upheaval, excess, disorder and rupture, which is exactly what Frida's inner self was being subjected to.

It might be argued that Kahlo and Plath could well have created art about the same issues without infusing the narratives with such personal subjectivity. They were not sympathisers, but routine empathisers, painting and writing their own realities. A deformed leg, a history of suicide attempts, a dogmatic father, and a distanced mother would not affect all people the same way. How it affected these two women was thus subject to the variable of their individual selves. By giving this 'affected self' its due importance, they were able to construct their creative vision though an agent of representation that they put forth with utmost spontaneity.

A number of recurrent, parallel tropes may be observed upon comparing both the artists' works. There is an open disregard for patriarchal norms and constructs, reflected in semantic changes. During the last few

months of her life, Plath wrote poems based on the rawest of prompts – a casual visitor or an unexpected telephone call, a cut, a bruise, a kitchen bowl, a candlestick – everything became usable, charged with meaning, transformed. In *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938), Frida challenges the "open wound"[7] concept most satirically. Frida defiantly lifts up her dress and exposes an "open wound" that is not a real vagina, suggesting an alternate reality. The painting shows only one wound as overtly 'open' – a large, vagina-shaped cut on her inner thigh. The perception of the vagina as an "open wound" is a vagina defined by the patriarchy – not as determined by biology, hence, Frida's relocation of it.

"Rememberance Of An Open Wound"

There is open derision in the words of Plath when in "Lady Lazarus", she addresses her supposed rescuers as "Herr Doktor", and "Herr Enemy", while calling herself their "opus" or "pure gold baby" (68), suggesting how little faith she has in the power of redemptive male crusaders in society. Furthermore, she objectifies herself in order to regulate the amount of terror that can be instilled in her mind, to ritualize it – a technique of brazen defiance. Kahlo again, in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1944), paints herself wearing Rivera's suit, as she sits on a chair with a stern look in her eyes, the floor around her littered with the tufts of hair that she chopped off, as a response to her husband's philandering attitude. She continuously challenged and redefined traditional expectations of femininity and attempted to appropriate conventional authority. "If I've killed one man, I've killed two—" in "Daddy", refers to Plath's implicit 'killing' of one man in the shadow of another – the death of Hughes in the shadow of her father, upon the identification of betrayal and suppression in her husband as well. This implies a revolutionary breakdown of male authority and control in Plath's life.

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[7] In post-revolution Mexico, the vagina was seen as a perpetual open wound, or 'the wound that never healed' (qtd. in Bakewell 9), suggesting infinite female vulnerability. This, of course, was a patriarchal construct.

"Self Portrait With Cropped Hair'"


"Henry Ford Hospital"

Kahlo and Plath, both gained widespread fame, but only posthumously, and were married to men who were more 'successful' than them, while alive. Both handed their spouses a divorce on account of their infidelity with other women. Kahlo, however, remarried Rivera. What is striking is the number of adverse physical and mental health issues that these women had to battle throughout their lives. While Frida had to be operated forty-three times in total because of her leg injuries, Plath tried to commit suicide nearly six times, crippled by depression. Both of them underwent miscarriages and abortions, and they both chronicled this pain in their works. Kahlo's paintings depicting miscarriages were usually bloody and symbolic, often with

scientific diagrams of fertilisation or mitosis, as shown in her small charcoal depiction of her miscarriage in 1932, as well as in *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), where she additionally paints a snail to show how slow and excruciating the process of the second miscarriage was. Plath's "Barren Woman" was one of the poems that were penned down in the hospital post her first miscarriage, where she writes:

> Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
> Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas
> In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,

<div align="right">(100)</div>

Plath is here, not only portraying herself as an infertile woman, but probably as not a woman at all, since the phallic imagery of the pillars and statues, along with the failed attempt to give birth to the fountain of life, which sinks back or penetrates herself, presents Plath as an antithesis to the essence of 'womanhood.'
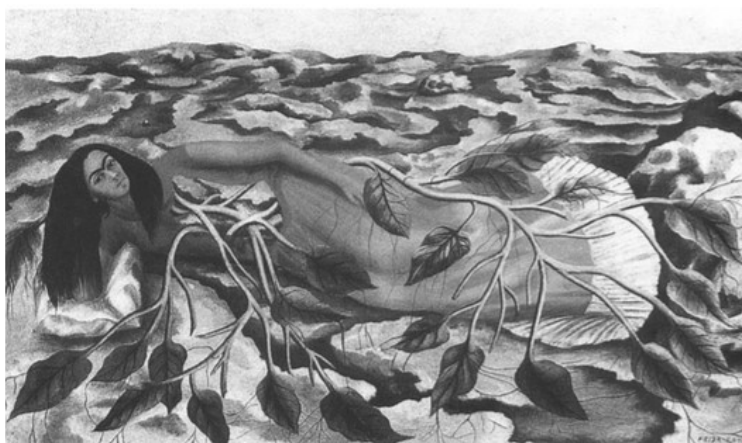
"Roots"

The third recurrent theme to be observed is that of fertility akin to Nature, which however has been subject to neoteric representations in the face of the old, patriarchal ones. Frida's most lucid representation of her feelings towards fertility, may be seen it the painting *Roots* (1943), which is a childless woman's dream of bearing offspring. It shows the subject's torso opening up like a window that gives birth to a creeper, or a vagina that gives birth to children and a bunch of vines coming out from it, to dissipate onto the surface of the earth. With her elbow propped on a pillow, she dreams that she is the tree of life. Thus, as in several other paintings, like *Broken Column*, (1944) Frida might have alluded to herself as a sacrificial victim. A reversal of *Roots* may be seen in *My Nurse and I* (1937). Frida is a baby suckling the plantlike breasts of a Mexican earth-mother, who was in reality, her female nurse; whereas in *Roots*, it is Frida who nourishes the Mexican desert.

"Broken Column"

In "The Munich Mannequins", Plath becomes more autobiographical as she assigns a German cast to the beautiful, heartless barren woman. After its revealing title, this stark poem opens:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.

(262-263)

The poet derides the physical perfection exemplified in a woman's monthly menstrual calendar for not being able to beget her children. The images of coldness, snow, morgues, and lack of voice, are indicative of the lack of life, and serve as a glaring reminder in the face of the imperfect fertility of other women. We are presented with a cosmopolitan city, with little or no interference by nature, symbolic of the de facto barrenness not only of the place, but also of its inhabitants.

The Biblical imagery of Lazarus resurrecting from the dead, in "Lady Lazarus" can be compared with the image of the sacrificial victim, that Kahlo presents in *Broken Column*. Her body is Christ-like; nails pierce her; tears run her cheeks; and a white sheet, a loincloth, covers her lower torso. Medical straps bind her since her spine – a broken, Ionic column – betrays her. This is a painting about pain, but it is also a painting about penetration –penetration of Frida's body by the accident, by machines – by patriarchy. Hayden Herrera notes,

"To some extent, the column is analogous to a phallus". (qtd. in Bakewell 170). Bakewell adds, "it is a broken phallus, whose erection crumbles. Indeed, Frida's painting suggests that phallocentricity cannot support or define her female body." (175) In *Roots*, too, given her Catholic upbringing, she was making an analogy between her blood flowing into the world and the wine that came from Noah's grapevine, predicting Christ's sacrifice.
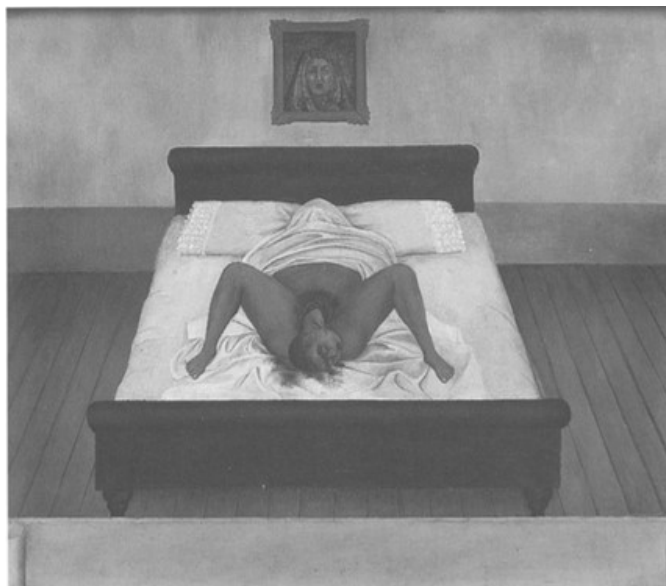
"My Birth"

Another key theme that pervades both of these women's works is the representation of female bodies as natural, blemished and imperfect; sometimes even visceral. In contrast to her husband's nudes, mostly odalisques[8], Frida's nudes de-eroticize the female form by presenting bloody, 'undesirable' bodies that were not reclining in the passivity thrust upon them by the male gaze, but creating, willingly, a certain image of control for themselves. Kahlo's paintings, especially of miscarriages, were similarly marked by copious amounts of blood. Frida wanted to challenge the long-standing deification of male blood, likened with the blood of Christ himself, amounting to a symbol of courage. Women's blood was, however, impure, taboo, and proof of violence. Kahlo in deconstructing these sexual paradoxes, sought to use blood as a symbol for emancipation, and provide an opportunity for the "long-suffering Mexican woman to come out of her culturally constructed silence and express herself and, in this expression, gain subject status". (Block et al. 16). In *My Birth* (1932), Frida depicts, as Herrera describes it, "one of the most awesome images of childbirth ever made." The haunting canvas shows a woman lying dead on a bed, face covered with a white sheet. Above her head, hangs the image of the Virgin Mother, the Mater Dolorosa or the Saddened Virgin, who weeps for the loss of her child, suggesting the sorrow Frida had felt at the time of terminating her pregnancy. Yet this seemingly dead mother, covered from the waist up, is naked from the waist down, and is giving birth to a child, a child whose protruding head is unmistakably that of Frida's. Bakewell proclaims:

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[8] A female slave or concubine in a harem, painted as a sexually attractive, passive figure.

The mother is both Frida and Frida's mother, Matilde Kahlo, and the child is both Frida and the child she has lost. Generations merge in a confluence of female bodies giving birth to one another, all defined by the physicality of one's female origins.

<div align="right">(176)</div>

In "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices", Plath delivers a commentary upon the three differing yet fundamentally similar experiences of giving birth, or failures to do so. Starkly similar in imagery to Kahlo's painting, Plath points out the aesthetic gruesomeness of childbirth in order to call for its immediate de-romanticisation, as in this couplet:

A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;
They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material

<div align="right">(181)</div>

The two terrifying images that come across –the bloody vagina being sewed up; and the immediate fear of disparagement, devaluation, that turns a mother into an object, by virtue of her having already performed the 'most important female biological function'. Furthermore, she refers to the process of her abortion, her vagina, and the regular travails of menstruation with unabashed precision, right down to the minutiae, concluding the stanza with caustic disappointment:

I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.
And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
Month after month, with its voices of failure.

<div align="right">(65)</div>

In "Cut", what is frankly terrifying is the way Plath deals with a cut on her finger – she refuses to follow the established code of conduct upon suffering an injury; instead begins to engage in an aesthetic experience with it:

What a thrill -
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush. (…)

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, everyone.

<div align="right">(235)</div>

In "Daddy", not even her father is spared from being labeled a perpetrator of violence, and is accused of having "bit my pretty red heart in two" (222). It is as if, Plath is ready for the bloodshed that will accompany her exit from this world, most probably as a sacrificial victim, like Kahlo – ''let something happen. Let something happen. Something terrible, something bloody'' (624), from Plath's short story "Stone Boy and the Dolphin" (1958), is a resounding urge echoed in a great many of her works.

If there is a uniform reason that may at all be attributed to the relevance and appeal, more so today, of Frida Kahlo and Sylvia Plath's œuvre, it is probably that the works still serve as pieces in all shades of inspiration– from incendiary to enlightening, that help further the ongoing cultural dialogue against sexual objectification, freedom of expression, subjugation of women by male authority, the pain of female physiological processes, and much worse, the glamorisation and romanticisation of the same. Kahlo and Plath have left behind an indisputably profound body of work, most certainly transcending the boundaries of their own personal lives, forming an integral part of the female 'collective unconscious'[9] for generations of women, and people to come.

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[9] A Jungian concept, which denotes the part of the unconscious mind, which is derived from ancestral memory and experience and is common to all humankind, as distinct from the individual's unconscious.

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A Womanhood of Consumerism

Muskan Sandhu

This paper compares the portrayal of women in the 21st century films steeped in a post-feminist sensibility, such as *Sex and the City* and *The Confessions of a Shopaholic,* to the 18th century English poetry such as "Rape of the Lock" and "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat." It also uncovers the narrative of blame embedded in the context of Recession that started in 2008 and British Imperialism respectively, ultimately concluding that the patriarchal construction of the female figure as inherently desirous of objects—almost obsessively so—is common to both, historical and contemporary cultural products.

Culture, in the simplest modern understanding of the word, is the way of life of a particular society. Cultural products, in the form of various arts, act as both a representation and a construction of cultural reality. They become a site to understand the organising structures of gender, race, class, and caste in a society, as well as their intersection with each other. Further, as one deconstructs these structures one recognises that "…the privileges, disadvantages and exclusions associated with such categories are unevenly distributed" (Gill 7) .

The study of gender in culture reveals "patterns of inequality, domination and oppression," (Gill 7) in relation to gender identities. Feminists, albeit practicing different kinds of feminisms, have emphasised on these patterns and endeavoured to bring about gender equality. At the same time, over the years, feminism has become one of the most prolifically appropriated political movements. Capitalist forces have appropriated the feminist discourse in cultural forms to produce what Rosalind Gill articulates to be a sensibility of "postfeminism" (148). In postfeminist texts the representation of women is seemingly extricated from patriarchal stronghold to take the shape of independence and empowerment. As the term suggests, this sensibility assumes, "…that full equality for all women has been achieved and that women of today can "have it all"; indeed, that it is becoming a woman's world, with a celebration of all things feminine…" (Lazar 1). Thus, this discourse projects a radical change in the way women are perceived in society.

Such depictions elicit a comparison with the portrayal of women in the past, so as to judge the nature and politics of the change. This essay attempts to interrogate the current cultural scenario by drawing a link between historical and contemporary portrayals of women. In the process, it suggests that a number of underlying assumptions in representing the female image in a majority of current texts seem to have remained unchanged, even as the manifestations of these assumptions appear to be different. Although the contemporary depictions of women deem comparative enquiry in various contexts such as objectification, sexuality, sexual difference and body shaming, the essay explores it in their delineation as primary consumers. A depiction which created a sense of triviality towards women in the past is today couched in a sense of (false) empowerment and self-celebration typical of postfeminist culture. Finally exploring the politics of such representations in shifting the blame to women for events they, in reality, barely form a part of. This is demonstrated by drawing parallels between cultural texts of the first decade of twenty-first century America

and eighteenth century Britain with a focus on two Hollywood films and English poetry respectively. They are placed in the larger contexts of the global recession of 2008 and British imperialism. The transnational comparison is legitimised by U.S.A being a settler colony with considerable cultural antecedents in British culture and the increase in homogeneity of contemporary cultural discourses due to globalisation. The choice of the eighteenth century as the historical period of comparison is owing to its characteristic of flourishing colonial expansion and concomitantly a significant embedding of consumer products in the cultural imagination. However, there remain the problems involved in juxtaposing visual and written texts. Both are dominant cultural forms of their own times and are analysed primarily in terms of narrative and content in the essay. Also, the focus on contemporary visual forms is to emphasise that although – with industrialisation– new narrative forms have evolved, the ideologies underlying them not only remain but have intensified.

Women have been charged with vanity over centuries in the English context – the myth goes back to Eve from *The Book of Genesis*, but the predominant association of women's vanity with objects has its roots in colonial trade. Laura Brown points out, "…after 1713, imperialism undergoes a rapid expansion and an increasing orientation toward the trade or commercially based version that serves the interests of a pre-industrial capitalist society" (145). Imperialism's economic and political gain reflects in cultural products of the times, ironically in the feminine sphere. The import of consumer goods from the colonies increased steadily and found a direct representation in women's 'toilette'. Tita Chico, in her detailed analysis of literary representations of the lady's dressing room in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, comments that "…luxury-status of imported objects were one way that the dressing room codified eighteenth-century women as the consumers of a global market…" (108). The paintings of the time are replete with women involved in the act of dressing and their corresponding articles of decoration and make-up. "There's a long tradition in painting to depict a woman at her toilette"; however, in the late seventeenth century previous mythological images – such as that of Venus – are replaced by the toilette of aristocratic ladies (Pasupathi 1). William Hogarth's *Marriage à-la-mode: The Countess's Morning Levee,* Jean Roux's *A Lady at Her Toilet*, Nicolas Lancret's *La Toilette de Madame* and Francois Boucher's *La Toilette* are a few French and English examples depicting the scene of a woman's dressing room. What is common in these paintings is a woman absorbed in self-beautification with a clutter of products on the table, evidently displaying colonial consumerism in the female domain.

Similarly, "the satiric dressing room was a commonplace in the period's literary culture" and was shaped by "the supposition that women are theatrical and excessive." (Chico 81-82). In the mock-heroic poem, *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) by Alexander Pope, a coquettish girl Belinda spends her morning decking up for a party. Her act of dressing described at great length is compared to a vain religious ceremony, "the sacred Rites of Pride." (128) The scene is rich in its imagery of a collection of haphazardly arranged objects. "The speckled and the white" (136) combs, "shining rows" (137) of pins and "Puffs, Powders, Patches" (138) are ready at her service. Throughout the poem elements of Belinda's personality are compared to objects. The hearts of coquettish women are compared to a "moving toyshop" (100), staining her honour is equivalent to staining her "new Brocade" (107) and losing her heart to losing a necklace. (109) Further, the text presents her

'dolling up' as an unambiguous act of attracting men, "Favours to none, to all she Smiles extends." She has nourished her curls for the "destruction of mankind" (19).

In another mock elegiac poem "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes" (1751) Thomas Gray makes an allegorical comparison between the death of a cat in her greed for a gold fish and a woman's acquisitiveness for gold ("What female heart can gold despise? / What cat's averse to fish?" (23-24)) as a cause for her loss of chastity, "Not all that tempts your wandering eyes / And heedless hearts is lawful prize." (40-41) Although Selima's (the cat) coveting (unlike Belinda's) isn't apparent in its intention to enhance sexual power, her loss of chastity implies the same. Other poems which follow a similar strain include Gay's "The Toilet. A town Eclogue" (1716), Breval's *The Art of Dress* (1717), Thurston's *The Toilette* (1730) and Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1732). The women in these poems are depicted as vain and covetous of luxury commodities, with a subtext of attracting men.

One can see the current cultural products steeped in similar assumptions of women's acquisitiveness. The "chick lit" novels by Sophie Kinsella, Cecily von Ziegesar, Helen Fielding, Jennifer Wiener and others have achieved great economic success and have been quickly adapted to the big screen. The transposition of these narratives to a visual mode intensifies the effect of the theme in question, a womanhood of consumerism. However, significantly, the authors of these texts are women as opposed to male writers of the eighteenth century. Yet women are also products of patriarchal structures and their writing can both reinstate and subvert these structures. Postfeminist texts tend to do the former. By taking the example of films – *Sex and the City* (1998) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009) – the similarities become evident.

Based on the popular television series, the movie *Sex and the City* revolves around four best friends – Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda and Samantha – and the ups and downs in their love lives, with Carrie's wedding at the centre of the drama. Throughout the movie, the four friends are seen dressed in spectacular and spectacularly expensive clothing with an emphasis on brands like Louis Vuitton and Prada. The narrator in the beginning says that women come to New York City in search of 'labels and love'. Carrie, a writer, also works in *Vogue*, a fashion magazine. She is clearly a clothing enthusiast, and is disappointed with the small wardrobe of her new apartment. She is soon provided a large walk-in closet by her fiancé, Big. When Carrie is roped in for a *Vogue* photo-shoot, the clothing brands range from Dior, Caroline Herrara, Lanvin and Vivienne Westwood. The movie has one shopping scene, which is an auction that emphasises the amounts of money women are willing to spend on clothes and accessories. There are two fashion shows, one being a mock show when Carrie tries on different attires to decide which clothes to keep before shifting to her new apartment; the second being a real show sponsored by Mercedes Benz. Carrie's new secretary who until recently, had been unemployed and shares her one room apartment with three girls, carries rented bags with big labels like Chanel and Louis Vuitton. The fact that they are rented emphasises the obsession of women with things, affordability does not become an issue; she is later presented a Louis Vuitton bag by Carrie.

Similarly, in the movie *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, as the title suggests, the trope of women as enamoured by fashion commodities becomes the dominant theme. The story revolves around Rebecca, a

journalist who is an impulsive shopper and whose dream is to write for the renowned fashion magazine, Alette (a probable pun on Elle). As opposed to the women in *Sex and the Ctiy*, Rebecca belongs to a lower economic class but even as she exceeds her credit card limit(s) and is pursued by a debt collector, she continues to shop, while her apartment gets more and more crammed with clothes, shoes and accessories. The clutter of her room can be compared to the eighteenth century haphazard dressing tables. As she begins to narrate her story, she remarks, "But when I looked at shop windows, I saw another world, a dreamy world full of perfect things;" and as her grown up self appears on the screen accompanied by triumphant background music, she is decked in trendy clothes with a Gucci handbag. However, Rebecca's addiction is not portrayed as an anomaly but a widespread attitude amongst women. In the 'shopaholic' help-group Rebecca is sent to, all other 'shopaholics' are women with the exception of two men, one being a Black and the other Asian; the white American heterosexual maintains a safe distance from the 'feminine' sphere throughout the movie. At a Gucci sample sale, women are shown as wild and screaming in a frenzy with Rebecca eventually having a 'cat fight' with another girl over a pair of boots. The most striking statement is made by the editor of Alette who informs Rebecca about the impact of Rebecca's debt crisis on young women, "…your appearance on the T.V show has struck a nerve with many, many girls. They identify with you." Thus, even after three centuries, women as acquisitive of shiny objects remains a constant theme in the cultural imagination.

Although in both the eighteenth and twenty first century cultural constructions, the narrative of women as essentially being covetous of objects forms a common basis, the sense of judgment which accompanies them greatly varies. The genre of the poems itself – mock heroic and mock elegiac – trivialises the sphere of interests of their female protagonists. As Chico asserts, "…satire is produced as a corrective to women's excesses…" (83) and "manufactured projection of femininity, by satiric definition, invites censure and ridicule." (95) Also, attracting men is presented as the primary purpose of dressing up. On the other hand, in the movies (being a part of the postfeminist media culture), the narrative of acquisition is couched in the seemingly feminist arguments of (depoliticised) liberation. The style in *Sex and the City* is devoid of judgement and rather celebratory, and in *Confessions of a Shopaholic,* it is an ambiguous mixture of negative judgement and celebration. The 'feminine' sphere is no more trivial, but glorious in its obsessive pursuit of self -aestheticism. Rosalind Gill suggests eight distinctive characteristics of such a culture, all of which are present in the two movies. But the ones which directly emphasise the construction of women as inherently materialistic are the features of: femininity as a bodily property; the notion of individualism, choice, and empowerment; and the mingling of feminism and anti-feminism, which seems to form the basis of the sensibility as a whole (149).

As opposed to traditional femininity being a "social, structural or psychological one," today a perfect body becomes the "source of identity" (Gill 149). This can be enhanced by cosmetics, surgeries, and attires. Carrie's wardrobe and the impeccable dressing of her gang throughout reflect an internalised sense of identity dependant on brand names. In the sphere of the house itself, the bathrobes are embroidered with glitter and heels function as bathroom slippers. Weight gain by Samantha is out of the question and treated as an anomaly by her friends. This comes across more explicitly when Rebecca, mesmerised by a scarf in a store, hears an

animated mannequin voicing her thoughts, "It would become part of a definition of you, of your psyche… it would make your eyes look bigger… you would walk into that interview confident." Her attire for an interview is more important than the interview itself.

The act of acquiring objects is presented as celebratory and empowering as women are perceived as free agents making a choice to satisfy themselves, without taking into consideration the forces which control their choices (Gill 153). Samantha is unhappy that the ring she intended to buy herself is gifted to her by her boyfriend. Rebecca describing her joy of shopping says, "I like shopping; is there anything so wrong with that; I mean stores are put there to enjoy; I mean the experience is enjoyable." She revels in her ability to buy items with her credit cards, and substitutes her lust for men with her lust for stores. There are striking images of women confidently walking on the streets, decked in expensive brands from head to toe accompanied by the music of triumphant ownership. The attention of men is evidently not a priority and the conscious aim is self-pleasure.

However, the elements of feminism and anti-feminism come together to deflate this narrative of empowerment and glory. The movies reify the stereotype of women's sphere as dominated by objects of clothing and accessories while evading 'masculine' spheres of finance – except as consumers – and state politics. Miranda is a lawyer; Carrie is a writer, but what she writes about is the traditionally feminine sphere of love; and what fill the screen are their expensive clothing and 'girly' activities. They are confident, but Samantha cannot get away with weight gain as they all internalise the male gaze. Rebecca is an aspiring journalist, but for a fashion magazine. When she mistakenly becomes a part of a finance magazine, her role is to explain financial concepts to women through the language of shopping as otherwise women are deemed to be incapable or too 'bored' to understand the field of finance. Even as Rebecca sells all her surplus items in the end to pay off her debt, they are bought by women shoppers who appear as frantic to buy them as she used to be. The movie comments on her frivolous attitude, but Rebecca's identity in the end is affirmed by her favourite green scarf, saved from the auction by her boyfriend. Thus, even when they take on a narrative of celebrated and liberated femininity, the underlying vision of womanhood is limited and patriarchal where the boyfriends still control the financial world.

As the dialogue between feminism and anti-feminism takes place within the text, it takes on greater meaning in the larger context of the times. As discussed, the poems in question belong to a period of flourishing British imperialism. The expansion however was not free of moral anxiety. "…the warnings of history (of moral corruption) were constantly invoked by those who were made uneasy or rendered marginal by commercial and imperial 'progress.'" (Kaul 240) In such a scenario, "…negative representations of 'femaleness' and female desires function as ideological surrogates for the playing out of the more anxious scenarios of imperial desire." (Kaul 239) Women become vessels of blame for male endeavours of violent mercantile expansion, (Kaul 243) as they are portrayed as desiring entities for mercantile spoils. Selima drowns next to a China vase, and Belinda has 'India's glowing gems' and 'all Arabia' in a box. The dressing room becomes "a site for the display of global loot." (Chico 61) Women, who are completely detached from

the public sphere of economics and trade, become the bearers of the produce of these entities.

The "chick lit" phenomena which quickly adapted itself to the screen to bring about the "chick flick", can be said to have gained momentum in the late 90s. It went on to become a significant proportion of popular TV shows and films in the first decade of the new century – a decade which also saw one of the worst global economic meltdowns, with the American economy suffering a major blow. The postfeminist texts of the period reverberate with its effect in subtle ways with women as potential proxies to the recession of 2008, much like they were to the imperial project. The economy's meltdown has been reported to have various causes. The major ones being – the collapse of Lehman Brothers, deteriorating state of the U. S. housing sector (the housing bubble), loose monetary policy, misperception of risk by the U.S government and so on (Verick, Islam 4). The films, however, seem to construct a different story. In *Sex and the City*, the expensive out-of-budget-apartment is bought by Big, but to fulfil Carrie's dream. Her first reaction on seeing the apartment is, "I have died and gone to real estate heaven." The film also seems to be aware of its own context as one sees a screenshot of a glossy magazine with the headline "The 1,333,316 Question: how long before our real estate bubble pops?" *Confessions of a Shopaholic* with its protagonist who calls credit cards 'magic cards' and owns twelve of them, and a plot which centres itself around her ever increasing debt and evasion of a debt collector, makes an even more striking impression. Rebecca's father makes a direct comparison between American economy's debt crisis and her own situation. It is important to note that the two movies were released in 2008 (May 27) and 2009 (13 February) respectively; one released just when the blow was beginning to be felt and the other in the middle of it. The movies then have a strong subtext which appropriates the blame of recession and shifts it to women consumers, even as the male protagonists in the movie are employed in the financial sector – Big is a financier and Luke is the editor of a financial magazine.

The claim of postfeminism thus needs revision in the context discussed. The patriarchal construction of the female figure as inherently desirous of objects – almost obsessively so – is common to both historical and contemporary cultural products. It is a depiction which continues to restrict women to the 'feminine' sphere of commodities and self-beautification; gender politics ensuring their inequality in the politics of finance, state, the body and space. Contemporary texts do so through a narrative of glorification which has replaced the earlier one of mockery and trivialisation, while the narrative of blame recurs. The task of a feminist is then amplified and the analysis of culture more crucial, because hierarchies between gender identities persist, in a sugar-coated, difficult to identify and insidious narrative.

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Tales of Desire: Black Bodies in Erotic Narratives

Akshita Todi

The paper seeks to explore the process of reclaiming literary spaces of verbalised eroticism and meta-narratives of black sexuality by tracing the history of black representations in the literary genres of Romance and Erotica. As a genre that was firmly invested in the interests and aspirations of white culture, the earliest erotic narratives featuring black characters were written by white writers. The texts had stereotypical portrayals of the colonised Africans and their sexuality. It carried negative connotations even when they fetishized and capitalised upon the black male's excessive phallic stamina and the voluptuous body of the black woman. It was much later that erotic narratives authored by black individuals entered the markets with fresh perspectives on the interiority of the sensual world and experiences of the colonised people. These narratives reclaim possession over the black body and its sexual experiences by inverting the mainstream mode of plot progression and form of representation.
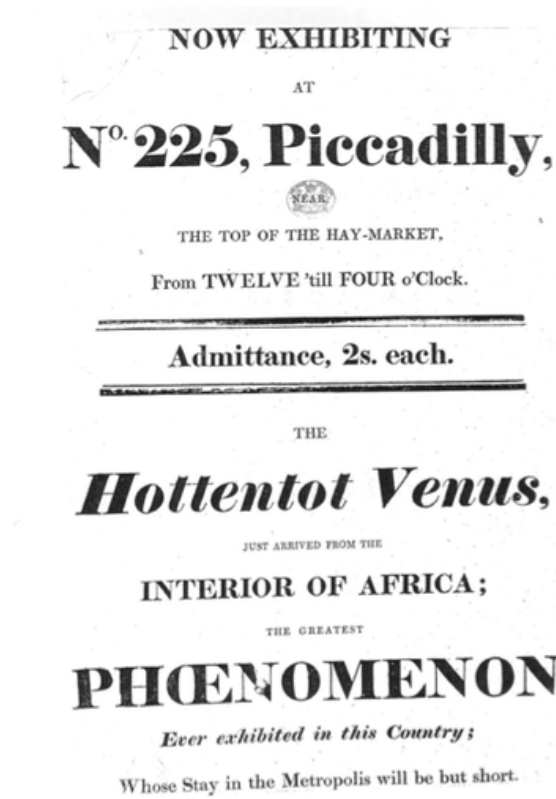

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Fig 1. *Georgian London.* N.p., 9 Feb. 2012. Web.

In 1810, the streets of London were abuzz with the news of Hottentot Venus, a young woman named Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815) from South Africa who became an overnight sensation in London's theater of human oddities, with buttocks and breasts of gigantic proportions. The name that was ascribed to her, "Hottentot" (a derogatory term for her tribe, *khoikhoi*, and Venus, the goddess of love and fertility in Roman mythology), clearly demonstrates the sexualization of the colonised body or subject for mass consumption. Her body became the focus of scientific experimentation, which eventually formed the 'biological' basis for racism in Europe. The display of her body in skin tight clothing with African beads and

ostrich feathers evoked extreme reactions from the British public, ranging from vehement abhorrence and disgust to sexual fascination with that which was 'morbid' and 'grotesque'. Her popularity and the immense publicity that the theatre enjoyed exposed the fascination of the White people with the physicality of the racial other. These physical attributes were systematically and 'scientifically' employed to underline and validate their subjugation as animalistic, excessive and sub-human. In this particular instance, Baartman's body and her 'unnatural' proportions were used to emphasize her rampant sexuality. This, in contrast to the rigid sexual codes of morality in the Victorian English society, not only provided validation for the exploitation of the Black woman's body, but also engaged a large part of the English public in perverse flirtation with the idea of claiming this body of excesses within the private and often revelatory realm of masturbatory sex. This is reflected clearly in the sheer amount of pornographic and erotic material featuring black women that was being circulated in 19th century British society.

That the Black female body has undergone constant scrutiny ever since is indisputable. It is therefore significant that two centuries after the display of Baartman in an environment controlled by white men, Black female artists like Nicki Minaj (1982-) can and have produced songs like "Anaconda" (2014) whereby they reclaim control over their physicality by asserting their agency in the display of their own bodies. The constant refrain of "Oh my gosh, look at her butt" is evocative of the racial history of being exploited and viewed as 'abnormal'. The song ends with a defiant "Yeah, I got a big fat ass. Come on!" (Minaj, Web) thereby subverting the notions of public shame and majoritarian ideas of what is considered to be a desirable body. Similarly, the very act of "twerking", a dance move which was popularized in 2011 is an example of how the change in racial power relation is exercised through the medium of the body. The move traces its origins to African and Cuban dance styles like Mapouka, Sandungueo and Perreo and involves gyrating hip movements and a low, squatting stance, which puts special emphasis on the posterior of the body.

It is clear then that the human body gives fertile space for modes of articulating the politics of subjugation, subversion and desire. It is the body that forms the object as well as the subject of desire – it is through the body and its senses that desire is satiated. Since desire in itself is predicated on the notion of unattainability, human desire is often aimed at that which is absent or taboo. It is then that the erotic and the pornographic gains significance. Sexuality is involved in the creation of power structures and the transfer of power therein, inadvertently exerting considerable influence on the regulation of the social order. Since "power circulates within the social order through discourse…historically variable ways of speaking, talking and writing that function systematically – if at times contradictorily – are used to articulate what is desirable and undesirable, legitimate and illegitimate within a culture" (Bristow 170). The bodies sequestered within erotic visual and verbal material therefore reflect on and substitute for physical desires. Erotic material not only represents the desires and sexual habits of those it caters to, but also creates and produces desire when consumed by the masses. Here, the term "erotic" is used in its capacity to arouse and stimulate sexual desire. As the body is evidently a medium for expressing and shaping a sense of subversive revolt in erotic tales, body-based stereotypes that are demeaning and dehumanizing gain special importance in these narratives.

"…she and Yakubu were black. Nobody, not even other blacks, liked to witness such open display of sexual feelings between black women and men, right out in public! Such shameless behavior fed into White folks' stereotypes of blacks. Fuck white folks' stereotypes!"

- Calvin Hernton, "Dew's Song", 1990

(Web)

Stereotypes attached to the Black body have revolved primarily around sexual fantasies which are rooted in the slave trade culture or the notion of the animalistic, sub-human African subject. Many of the "16th century accounts of West Africa…were replete with images of the lewd, lascivious, brutal Black man" (Bullough and Bullough 507). The fear of the rapacious Black man staking claim over the white woman was articulated time and again in popular culture. In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), D. W. Griffith (1875-1948) played on this fear due to which the white audiences were propelled to panic when the frail, white heroine, Lillian Gish, was attacked physically by a Black character called Lynch. Donald Bogle (1944-) comments on these stereotypes – "Pure black bucks… are always big, baadddd [sic] nigger, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh… Underlying the fear was the assumption that the white woman was the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride, power and beauty" (13-14).That the white woman was prized as the epitome of beauty and grace is further underlined by the stereotypes that were manufactured around the voluptuous body of the black female. While anxieties about the large size of the black phallus prevailed, the women were constantly exploited through images bred by decades of slave culture:

> From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to black women's oppression.

(Collins 7)

These images filtered into the realm of erotic expression at the hands of White authors. While erotic works were often dismissed as literature which lacked aesthetic value and was hence meant for the undiscerning minds of the female populace, it is significant that the earliest popular manuals on sex and fictive works on sexuality were written by men. In the 1960s, with the conflation of the Sexual Revolution and the women's liberation movement in the West, a large number of women started writing and publishing erotic narratives. However, Black authors did not enter the arena of erotic expression for a very long time. Their narratives centered more on the idea of de-sexualized romance which represented their political ambition within the domestic space. Ntozake Shange (1948-) complains about how this was a result of their desire to "combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts our loves, to the extent that we disavow our own sexuality to each other" (Willis 1). In trying to establish distance from popular notions of their sexuality and the stereotypes attached to their bodies, most writers exhibited a tendency to completely negate the physical in their narratives. Works like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964) are examples of literary efforts made by Black authors to be as non-stereotypically 'black', to be as 'white' as possible. In this context, writers like Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) were compelled to write

erotic narratives in the private space of a journal which were later published in the public domain.

Therefore, the conflation of the romantic and the erotic in the writings of Black authors in the public arena was a remarkable development – Shange wrote famously:

> & you wanna fuck
>
> I don't wanna fuck
>
> I told you that I wanna make love

<div align="right">(33)</div>

Here, she counters white notions of animalistic, barbaric and emotionless sex as being the only kind that occurs between Black individuals thereby highlighting the element of romance in Black sexuality. This presented possibilities of reclaiming sexual identities in a language that was till then replete with terminology that degraded them. "How do we speak of our desires for each other in a language where our relationships to our bodies and desires lack dignity as well as nuance?" (Shange 2) This concern has always played a significant role in postcolonial writings. However, writers like Marlene Philip (1947-) manage to resist both – the oppression of the language and the dominance of these stereotypes, by sexualizing the English language:

> Slip mouth over syllable; moisten with tongue the word
>
> Suck Slide Play Caress Blow- Love it, but if the word
>
> Gags, does not nourish, bite it off- at its source-
>
> Spit it out
>
> Start again.

<div align="right">(44)</div>

Through these lines, Philip establishes the language as a phallic master and the colonized learner as the subordinate figure. However, by using the erotic metaphor of oral sex, she not only asserts her own sexuality, she also exhibits her mastery over the language thereby staking claim over it as her own. Her advice to "bite it off – at its source" and "spit it out" if the language does not nourish forms the core of her terminology of resistance against the imposed language.

The rise of the sexual revolution in the 1960s also collided with the Civil Rights Movement (1954-68). Each of the aforementioned stereotypes and derogatory images "received re-eroticization and renewed self-image…initially stirred by the maxim, "Black is Beautiful" (Holmberg 157). As notions of beauty and the grotesque underwent tremendous change, the arena of popular media witnessed significant developments in racial attitudes. The entry of the first Black female model or "Playmate" in the Playboy magazine marked the movement of the Black body from the realm of negative eroticization as a "guilty pleasure" to a more public space whereby it was recognized as attractive, unattached to notions of the "grotesque".

Writers like Shange and Kalamu Ya Salaam (1947-) wrote erotic poetry which makes use of animal imagery that was typical of White erotica that contained Black characters. However, they subvert these

stereotypes in ways that are often humorous. In his poem, "Tasty Knees", Salaam begins with the mythic size of the Black male's phallus, calling it "my rod my staff", comparing his climax with "a bull elephant's triumphant ejaculation" and then moves on to declare "Of course I am exaggerating". The poem begins with a constant refrain of darkness or blackness-

> in the dark of touch
> My face cleaved heavy
> To your head I open
> My eyes and see the
> Night hair of you dark
> As the lightless black
> Of a womb's warm interior,
> Your wetness inviting touch
> Your earth quakes shakes and opens

(52)

However, it is clear that "black", here, carries no negative connotation. It is in fact associated with erotic notions of warmth, privacy, intensity and arousal. The reversal of color-coded sexuality which viewed only White as erotic is followed by a reference to the sexualized narrator "as a militant refusing to snitch to the improper authorities" (Salaam 52), thereby evoking a sense of violent suppression in the face of the subversive African-American movement in the sixties.

The use of animal imagery is also seen in Shange's "You Are Such a Fool"-

> where you poured wine down my throat in rooms
> poets i dreamed about seduced sound & made history
> you make me feel like a cheetah
> a gazelle something fast & beautiful
> you make me remember my animal sounds
> so while i am an antelope
> ocelot& serpent speaking in tongues
> my body loosens for you

(Web)

Again, the re-eroticization of these stereotypes converts the grotesque and terrifying animal terminology for the Blacks into something that is beautiful, desirable and positively sexualized. Notions of "savagery" that were conventionally attached to these images are undercut by the mentions of wine and poets that made history, which in turn become markers of cultural and material wealth and refinement. The evocation of "animal sounds" and a "serpent speaking in tongues" contrasts deeply with the musicality of her language which is peppered with images of the wild.

This trend of overturning stereotypical ideas continues in the works of R. Bruce Nugent (1906-87). He delivers one of the first nuanced portrayals of homosexuality and inter-racial sex in "Smoke Lillies and Jade" (1926). In the following passage, Beauty is a White male and Alex, a Black man:

> Alex opened his eyes… into Beauty's… parted his lips… Dulce… Beauty's breath was hot and short… Alex ran his hand through Beauty's hair… Beauty's lips pressed hard against his teeth…

Alex trembled… could feel Beauty's body… close against his… hot… tense white… and soft… soft… soft…

(Web)

Here, inter-racial sex is not replete with images of overpowering or dominating the racial other. While the name attributed to the White male is symbolic of deeply entrenched Western ideas of beauty, it also imbues the White male with a feminine quality. The naming then evokes the idea of *The Beauty and The Beast* with Alex, the Black male being the obvious representation of beastliness. The immense contrast between the implication of such a naming of the characters and the tenderness portrayed in the sexual act is telling. Not only does this highlight the profound altering of a classic fairytale romance, it also uses that trope to underline elements of romance and affection in a relationship which was conventionally viewed as "deviant" and inhuman, thereby normalizing it. This piece also questions the colonial master-slave relationship by feminizing the racial superior and inverting the gendered roles played by the colonizer and the colonized. The portrayal remains complex as the erotic act in itself involves no domination or submission from either side.

Notions of domination and submission are overturned and negated time and again in these works. The use of 'high culture' English literary tropes and forms becomes a regular means of establishing control over the language of the colonizers and asserting the identity of the decolonized. This is done through effective critiques of the colonizing process. In Ted Joans' (1928-2003) "Cuntinent" (1992), the narrator engages in an elaborate play of language. He uses the sexual trope of the colonizing process as popularized by John Donne (1573-1631) but inverts it by talking about mutual friendship between the "body cuntinent" and the "virgin tourist":

To laymates
I want, I shall, I must cross your body cuntinent
My tongue shall be my means of travel
My tongue and lips shall chart your cuntinent
I begin by letting my tongue flow steadily into your half opened mouth which has issued a visa and
carte blanche my tongue gliding into your mouth wanders like a virgin tourist
My tongue sliding around the insides of that vast cave of meat
My tongue caresses your own tongue in friendship
It is your tongue that welcomes the approach of my tongue

(84-85)

He begins with an expression of exploratory, colonizing vigor and rapidly moves into notions of a mutually beneficial exploration. The idea of consent is underlined repeatedly as the "body cuntinent" has issued a visa and the approach of the tourist is welcome. Interestingly enough, it is the tourist who is the virgin – a significant diversion from the conventional image of the virgin land. It is also noteworthy how the piece does not end with a phallic penetration of the body but with a soft interaction between tongues which is symbolic of sensuality and friendship.

Power relations are negotiated and articulated consistently in these works. As mentioned earlier, the trope of the slave tradition played a huge role in the shaping of White erotica with Black women characters. Yana

West challenges and assumes authority over this trope in "A Dinner Invitation" (1992) by making use of one of the legacies of slavery – the genteel tradition, which shaped Black life and letters:

> My dearest Reuben,
>
> I have prepared my meal especially for you…The entrée will include nipples toasted a deep brown and sautéed to gleam and stand erect. And while you are massaging these in your mouth, I've prepared my tongue to arouse your throat and ears. More cream is coming to cover the vegetables and, if you want, you can take your finger and stick it in and cover those tits with more sweet juicy cream: and bite and bite until I scream…
>
> Love,
>
> Yana

> (82-83)

West infuses the polite, genteel tradition with a heavy dose of eroticism and converts the entire passage into an elaborate sexual metaphor. Furthermore, the submissiveness of the slave woman is transformed into a sassy invitation – one where she is clearly dictating the terms of the sexual foreplay. The image of the Black woman working in the kitchens to prepare a fit meal, sequestered within slave culture, finds an entirely new interpretation that empowers her to the point of a climax. The ability of textual Black bodies to reach climax and to experience sensual pleasure with dignity and abandonment is the culmination of the exercise of writing back to the empire in the field of erotic literature.

In 1992, Miriam DeCosta-Willis (1934-) published the first anthology of Black erotic works– *Erotique Noire: Black Erotica*. The fact that such a piece of work was published as late as the last decade of the 20th century, is a validation of the power of racial stereotypes in shaping sexual identities:

> Given the other side of our sexual history- the myths and stereotypes, the sexual taboos and genteel tradition, the repressed desires and frustrated longings, the hidden selves and closed vaults- we find that *Erotique Noire*… is something of a miracle in its affirmation of our sensuality and eroticism.

> (DeCosta-Willis 44)

Parallel to what has been said by DeCosta-Willis; this paper concludes that the white stereotypes around the sexual appetites of Black bodies have had immense influence over the portrayal of desire and erotic behavior by Black writers. It has not only impacted the perception of the Blacks by their "racial superiors" but also their perception of the sexual self. Most of these erotic works are seen as reactionary in the way they articulate the inner sensual life of the community. The intermingling of the genres of romance and erotica (which have largely been the product of white English desire) in Black writings also conveys a shift in the perception of what is desirable and the reclamation of the Black body and its sexual experiences by inverting the mainstream mode of plot progression and form of representation. After decades of struggle for a 'fair' representation in popular texts, the Black body is finally free to touch, to taste, to stimulate and to respond to erotic pleasure.

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