



# Jabberwock

# **JABBERWOCK 2019**

**Department Of English**

**Lady Shri Ram College For Women**

**University Of Delhi**

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Jabberwock is the print journal of the Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi. This year's journal has been put together by our editorial team:

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Parul Nayar

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## Editorial

Writing this editorial was a task that both of us have simultaneously dreaded and looked forward to. As we sit and write these words, we are filled with a bittersweet feeling. Since this is one of the very last things that we do as Chief Editors, writing this makes the finish line seem all the more close. We began the year with a passion for academic writing, a love for editing and a vision for the journal that we have grown to love so much. As our journey comes to an end, this editorial is a way to sum up that vision, a tying up of loose ends if we can call it that.

Much of this year has been spent in front of our laptops, surviving on innumerable cups of coffee as we read and proofread the same paper indeterminate times over. Besides this rather intimate relationship with our laptop screens, we also managed to forge some lasting relationships with our editorial team and our authors. Strange faces have become familiar over the course of the year—shy smiles have transformed into ‘hi’s and ‘how are you’s. Now that we are standing on the threshold of college life and the bigger world awaits us, we fondly remember the days we spent trying to find ways and means to escape attending college—missing a morning lecture to sleep in late, or taking an impromptu vacation for an entire week to spend some time with our families. In these last few months, while tirelessly working to bring out this current issue of *Jabberwock*, our relationship with the college has changed significantly. Coming to college early and staying back late has ceased to seem like an arduous task—and the more time we spent in college, the more things we discovered—new spots with strong WiFi, desolate nooks and shades where we can recollect our emotions in tranquillity in the company of sleeping dogs and further the course of our labour of love.

The idea of a contemporary collage for the cover of the journal was unprecedented and resonated with us. There was something intrinsically empowering about a cover which was unique and abstract enough to make each and every reader interpret the journal according to their own perspective. The juxtaposition of seemingly disjointed images, leading towards some hidden meaning was a new concept, and we hope that it will inspire different interpretations. This experimental cover, we believed, would aptly represent what we understood as the essence of academic writing—the spirit of enquiry and the desire to add to the corpus of knowledge.

As the academic journal of the Department of English, the autonomy of *Jabberwock* gives us the freedom to explore. It has provided us with the space to let ourselves loose, to write without any restraint. This liberty is reflected in the collection of papers published this year. The student authors, have pushed themselves beyond the purview of books and literature, and explored Japanese comics, films and paintings in their papers. Graphic narratives have long struggled to find their independent place in the literary canon. We are fortunate to be publishing two papers on *Persepolis*, *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* that give graphic narratives the position that they deserve. *A Life of Estrangement* has been one of the most exciting papers to work on—it introduced us to the form of letter songs in Malayalam literature and we hope that this paper would be one of the pioneers instrumental in making this form an integral part of the world of literature. Gender has also been a recurrent theme in the selection of papers and it only affirms that we can never truly separate academics from our socio-political reality. *Jabberwock* is thus a reflection of the maxim that our professors have been fostering since our first year—anything under the sun can be a subject for research.

This journal would not have been possible without the help and contribution of our team of editors, who tolerated us with equanimity even when we disturbed them during holidays and at unearthly hours. We would like to thank Malvika, our Design Editor for conceptualising the cover and for giving the perfect face to the journal. We are also grateful to the entire design team who designed posters for us, throughout the year, at the very last minute, but never ever complained. A special thank you to Sukriti, the Editor of *Jabberwock Online*, who has been a sounding board for all our ideas. The culmination of our year long efforts would not have been possible without our staff advisors, Dr. Madhu Grover and Mr. Jonathan Koshy Varghese. They shared our excitement at every step and allowed us to make our own decisions so that we learnt from the mistakes we made along the way. Their acknowledgment of our efforts spurred us on to do better when we questioned ourselves. We thank Ms. Karuna Rajeev and Ms. Rukshana Shroff for accommodating us during their leave periods to provide us with valuable inputs. Karuna Ma'am demystified academic writing for the student body and helped us tame the beast of MLA. Rukshana Ma'am was kind enough to judge *Power Play*, the paper presentation of *Jabberwock*, despite the fact that she didn't believe in identifying one paper out of the many as the best paper. We are extremely grateful for the constant sup-

port and ever smiling presence of Ms. Maitreyee Mandal, Teacher-in-Charge of the Department of English. We would like to extend our thanks to Dr. Suman Sharma and the college administration for their help. Lastly, we remain indebted to all the bhaiyas and didis who work tirelessly day in and day out to make our days in college happy and peaceful.

It has been an honour putting these pages together. Being the editors of this fantastic journal has been the experience of a lifetime that both of us will cherish forever. As we bid goodbye and pass on the baton to the next set of Chief-Editors, we hope that this intoxicating need to express one's thoughts through the medium of the printed word would never wear off:

when it is truly time,  
and if you have been chosen,  
it will do it by  
itself and it will keep on doing it  
until you die or it dies in you.  
there is no other way.  
and there never was.

~so you want to be a writer?; Charles Bukowski

Signing off,  
**Dyuti and Sidika,**  
Editors-in-Chief,  
April 2019

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# “You Don’t See Me”

## The Conflict of Identity in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*

Pragati Sharma

*Marjane Satrapi in her graphic novel Persepolis puts forth the complex ideas and struggles of identity through the eyes of a young girl. Marjane’s conflicted notions of her own identity as reflected here renders an overbearing ambiguity to it, raising questions of who Marjane really is and her sense of real self. This paper looks at the conflict created in terms of Marjane’s overlapping national, gender, and personal and public identity; exploring and elaborating on each aspect.*

Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis* presents a girl’s experience of revolution, war, exile and return using simple drawings and a sharp narrative. It is a memoir about the protagonist, Marji or Marjane<sup>1</sup>, and her experiences in both Iran and Vienna. Satrapi’s text and images comment on each other; they enhance, challenge, question, and reveal each other (Malek 372). Her illustrations are thus complementary to her narrative—her words provide a compelling story while her drawings provide “resonance for Iranian and non-Iranian readers alike, the combination of which accomplishes Satrapi’s stated (and unstated) goals” (Malek 354).

The novel visualises complex feelings about sexuality, suicide and war, and moves constantly between the past and the present to reveal the complexity of physical and psychic survival that is dependent on a number of political, social and material circumstances. It deals with the construction and negotiation of identity issues within the diaspora—hybridity, liminality, and interrogations of the third space created in and by exile by an author who feels ‘in-between’.

Identity formation as a process involves the construction of a distinct personality in which the person comes to possess certain characteristics. These characteristics define individuals, to others as well as themselves and can be formulated in relation to various elements—nationality, gender, ethnicity etc. Identity is often understood as a collection of separate and distinct parts which are constantly evolving throughout the individual’s lifetime. These parts often overlap each other and come together to form and shape individuals. In *Persepolis*, Marjane’s identity can be approached employing multiple angles—western/eastern, personal/public and her identity as a woman in Iranian society.

Hamid Naficy applies the notion of liminality, originally given by Arnold Van Gennep in the twentieth century, to the modern exilic culture that he investigates, referring to the traveller who “wavers between two worlds” (qtd. in Naficy 8). His notion of exile liminality is an oscillation between two modes—to be neither in one place or the other but to be in-between “traveling in the ‘slipzone’ of fusion and admixture” (qtd. in Malek 355). Satrapi’s liminality allows her to create a third space where issues of identity can be performed while bending and blending Western genres with Iranian history and culture. This oscillation allows exiles like Satrapi to constantly negotiate for new positions and identities.

The notion of hybridity becomes an important aspect and it “fixes on nothing, on non-fixity, on the slippage between self and other, between home and host cultures” (Naficy 167). Cultural identities are, thus, unstable points of identification that are influenced by a yearning for the past, anxiety about the future and a crisis of identity. For example, the title of the novel, “Persepolis”, itself indicates a longing for the return to a previous, more glorious time in one’s imagination<sup>2</sup>.

The first chapter “The Veil” and the first panel itself establish the fragmented, disembodied nature of self-presentation that the narrative will encounter at various points. The first line “This is me...” and the subsequent “...You don’t see me” (Satrapi 3) coupled with the name of the chapter, “veil” Marji’s identity, both for herself and for the readers. This disjuncture depicts how the visual form of the graphic narrative uses space with all its possibilities to create complex autobiographical elements. In the Introduction to the novel, Satrapi mentions that the reason for this venture was to portray a real picture of Iran and Iranians—two entities that are misrepresented in various ways and through various mediums. Satrapi herself states

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, Marji or Marjane is used to refer to the protagonist of the novel, whereas Satrapi is used to refer to the author of the work.

<sup>2</sup> Persepolis was the Greek name for the ancient city of Persia. It was the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire which stretched over Southern Africa, India and Southern Europe at its height during 550-330 B.C.

that “You are completely reduced to a very abstract notion. But the 70 million people [of Iran] are human beings, they are not an abstract notion. They are individuals with life, love, hopes. Their life is worth the life of anybody else in the whole world” (qtd. in Elahi 313). The statement, “You don’t see me,” therefore acts as a sharp attack on the misrepresentations of Iran and its people and the consequent misperceptions of the same. *Persepolis*, then, portrays a picture of Iranian identity that most of the world hasn’t had access to even as Satrapi entails a continuing struggle to create a self, an identity.

### Marjane: The Iranian

As a person who has lived in both Iran and Austria, Marjane is conflicted by the experiences she has in both those places, which are completely different from each other. She is neither the conventional Iranian nor a true foreigner. Her hybrid positionality tears her from within, leading to anxiety and depression. Her experiences in Austria fill her with shame and guilt, having escaped the war that has enveloped her country and her family. On the other hand, her attempts at adjustment to a European society are thwarted time and again by the ever growing guilt and the need for national and familial belonging:

The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules...If they knew that their daughter was made up like a punk, that she smoked joints to make a good impression, that she had seen men in their underwear while they were being bombed every day, they wouldn’t call me their dream child. (Satrapi 195)

Moreover, she remains conscious of her Iranian identity. She states that it was a “difficult burden to bear”; it was easier to lie than assume that burden (Satrapi 197) but when she overhears someone belittling Iranians, she quickly defends it, “I am Iranian and proud of it!” (Satrapi 199). This statement of defence of one’s identity both to oneself and others finally “redeems” her and she realises that if she wasn’t comfortable with herself, “she would never be comfortable” (Satrapi 199). Hybridity requires a constant justification of identities, both to oneself and others.

Marjane is full of ambivalence towards what is being imitated and what is being abandoned in the process. This allows her to both criticise the mimicry of the host culture, while also idealising it and striving to assimilate in it. She comes to exist between self and the other, between the home and the host culture.

Satrapi also constantly uses eastern and western imagery to familiarise and de-familiarise the protagonist. Since both western and eastern influences have shaped her as a person, these images constantly inform and cancel each other. These influences are present not only because of her stay in Vienna but also because she grew up in a rich household with highly educated parents who actively encouraged her to interact with ‘western’ ideas and objects. One prime example is the panel which is divided into two halves, one showing Persian imagery and the other showing images of Western science and modernity (Fig. 1). It shows Marji conflicted, as “deep down I was very religious but as a family, we were very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi 7). Typhaine Leservot notes that cultural hybridity allowed for agency on the part of the subjects, but also consistently underlined the uneven power relations between the West and post-colonial societies which often led to identity conflicts (116).



(Fig. 1: 7/1, Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*)



Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution<sup>3</sup>, three discourses co-existed about the West—the pro-western discourse of the deposed government, the anti-western discourse of the new Islamic regime, and the ambivalent discourse of the intellectuals. The anti-western discourse dominated the public arena while both the pro-western and ambivalent discourses went underground (Leservot 120).

Most of the identity conflict is caused not by western culture itself, but by its representations or implications. From the beginning of the novel, western culture is not represented as a force that brainwashes Iranians who interact with it passively and remain mere spectators. In fact, prior to the revolution, Marji actively participates with Western culture in a sophisticated manner. As Leservot remarks, "Her nuanced look at western culture in pre-Revolutionary Iran, born out of her interaction with western ideas rather than western objects and images, is echoed by her complex rendering of world politics" (120). Satrapi depicts her young self as performing identity through appropriation, borrowing, and mixture of European and North American styles.

The transition to representing a simplistic version of the West, which acts as a kind of escape mechanism, came after the Revolution. As the BBC radio becomes the sole source for "real" news in Marji's family, the West becomes a disembodied voice of knowledge with which dialogue is no longer possible (Leservot 122).

The hunt for western objects and symbols becomes so intense that they come to be used out of frustration instead of genuine interest. Marji's discomfort at a party in Vienna, her disbelief at the sexual codes present in Europe contrast with the joy and comfort she experiences while interacting with the West within the confines of her home. The transgression of rules under the post-Revolution Iranian regime meant "gathering western products and reducing them to mere objects of consumption while preventing any real understanding of how people (not objects) interact in western culture" (Leservot 125). While all her friends wear clothes and make-up like the "heroines of American TV series," their views about western life and norms remain limited as "underneath their outward appearance of being modern women, [her] friends were real traditionalists" (Satrapi 272).

Marjane's denial of her Iranian identity is inverted after her return to Tehran, where her experiences overseas alienate her from her friends. She comes to realise that "when something is forbidden, it takes on disproportionate importance" (Satrapi 261) and that these small and superficial interactions and ways of consuming Western culture, are in themselves rebellious acts. It is not the western objects, therefore, but the sheer act of participating in a culture that is "non-Islamic" that poses a challenge to the regime. It is, therefore, the implications of an interaction with Western culture that causes conflict. Showing one's wrist or some strands of hair, wearing makeup, having a walkman, wearing red socks, are not particularly western, but they become so in a society that has a strict code of dress and behaviour. In such a situation, imitating the West or one's imagination of it becomes a way of displaying one's dissidence to the regime. Therefore, in an ironic contradiction, the 'westernization' of Iran is presented as more a product of its own repressive regime than western neo-colonialism.

She confesses her inner duality and hybridity, "I was nothing. I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I had no identity" (Satrapi 274). Trapped between the guilt for escaping a war and the guilt over hiding her experiences in Vienna, Marjane attempts suicide twice. The sharp contrast between her Islamic identity and her mimicry of a Western cultural identity leaves her divided, fragmented. This subjectivity is "not between some absolute and essential 'West' and some monolithic Islam, but between self-consciously iconic and ideological images of Western and Islamic worldview" (Elahi 318). Thus, she has to work around these fragments of her European and Iranian self to create a subjective wholeness.

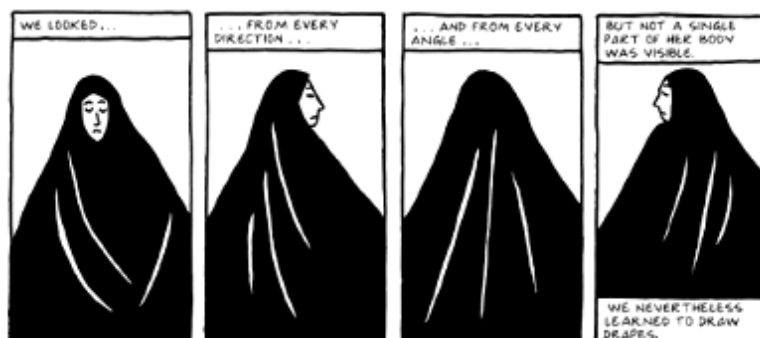
### **Marjane: The Woman**

Another aspect that is central to the novel is her identity as a woman under the Iranian regime. She identifies first as a woman, above everything, "To educate myself, I had to understand everything starting with myself, me, Marji, the woman" (Satrapi 177). Throughout the text, Marjane lays emphasis on the double standards in rules set for men and women—how women are denied their social and individual liberties and how aspects of her femininity are scrutinised and repressed.

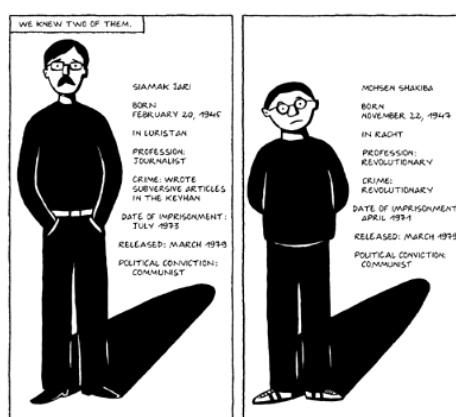
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<sup>3</sup> The Iranian Revolution of 1979, also known as the Islamic Revolution, was a series of events involving the overthrow of the pro-Western authoritarian monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah and the replacement of his government with an anti-Western totalitarian theocracy under Ruhollah Khomeini.

Some of the first glimpses of this repression are the division of the classes in school according to gender and the rules that make it obligatory for girls to wear the veil in public. The one incident that really disturbs Marji's mother is when a fundamentalist insults her on the street, "Two fundamentalist bastards... they insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And then thrown in the garbage... that I should wear the veil" (Satrapi 74). After the Revolution, there begins to exist a distinction between the modern and the fundamentalist woman, merely based on the choice of clothing; showing even a few strands of hair then becomes a rebellious act. It shows glimpses of a society that deprives women of their individuality as depicted in panels where a large number of women are present but no one can tell them apart while men emerge as discernible human beings (Fig. 2). When Marji learns about some of the communist political prisoners that have been freed, the shadows behind them resemble the chadors that many women would don under the Islamic Regime. It relegates women, literally, as 'shadows' behind men, as indiscernible human beings who are denied any freedom of expression (Fig. 3).



(Fig. 2: 302/4, Satrapi, *Persepolis*)



(Fig. 3: 47/2, Satrapi, *Persepolis*)

While the boys go off to fight the war, the girls are involved in mourning for the martyrs. Soon after the Revolution, Marji and her classmates must line up "twice a day to mourn the war dead" (Satrapi 95). Their blank expressions and the beating of their breasts showcase a shallow grief, an enforced mourning. The tessellated counters of the girls' hijabs "correlate with the oppressive conditions of this prescribed mourning" (Nabizadeh 163). This shallow, performative grief, therefore, hides the largely unconscious grief they feel under the Iranian regime.

One of the discourses that Satrapi manages to counter is that of the "girl in crisis". This image is tied to the abstract idea of women as devoid of human or political agency, especially in the representations of women from the Middle East. This is countered by Marjane's spirited and fierce defence not only of herself, but also of her gender and country. Her ultimate dream, "I needed to learn to become a liberated and emancipated woman" (Satrapi 177) and her passionate defence of her country which almost renders her homeless when she insults some nuns at her boarding school and faces expulsion, is a testimony to that.

During her ideological test<sup>4</sup> for admission into university, she is asked if she wore the veil while she was abroad. Her dry remark, "No, I have always thought that if women's hair posed so many problems, God would have certainly made us bald" (Satrapi 286), highlights her wit and her fearlessness.

Oppressive social norms are by far the most powerful weapons at society's disposal to repress women. While a person like Reza<sup>5</sup> has full freedom to be a "ladies' man", Marjane is shunned by half of her class after they discover that she is sexually active with her boyfriend. This enrages her and her statement, "My body is my own...it is nobody else's business" (Satrapi 279) is an assertion of female bodily autonomy. She also raises questions about the dress codes that are favourable only to men when the issue is raised in their convocation—"Why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they as men, can get excited by two inches less of my headscarf?" (Satrapi 299). This position that defends both women's right to choose their own clothing as well as acknowledges female desire outrages the authorities and she gets a warning for expulsion.

The institution of marriage leaves her feeling trapped—the panel literally shows her behind bars. However, when the idea of divorce is brought up, one of her friends quickly reminds her that the society looks down upon divorce and that widows are looked upon as having no right to refuse sexual relations with men because they are no longer virgins. This underlines the discriminatory way in which society treats women under marriage and curbs their right to escape an oppressive one.

When one of her colleagues, Behzad, is arrested for an illustration in their magazine, she goes to visit him. But she realises that all his rhetoric about the 'freedom of expression' only applies to men, because he does not allow his wife to speak even once during the entire conversation. On their way back, Marjane and her friend, Gila engage in a conversation that highlights their deep sorrow and anger against the oppressive ways of men both in Iran and abroad. The only difference that emerges is that the law supports men in the constant silencing of women in Iran:

If a guy kills ten women in the presence of fifteen others, no one can condemn him because in a murder case, we women, can't even testify! He's also the one who has the right to divorce and even if he gives it to you, he nonetheless has custody of the children! I heard a religious man justify this law by saying that man was the grain and woman, the earth in which the grain grew, therefore the child naturally belonged to his father! Do you realise?? I can't take it anymore. I want to leave this country! (Satrapi 339)

Once while running down the street because she is late for her dentist's appointment, Marjane is stopped by the morality police because they feel that running makes the woman's behind look "obscene" (Satrapi 340). Tired of this daily humiliation and burdened by all the repressed anguish of being a woman under the Iranian regime, she yells back, "Well then don't look at my ass!" (Satrapi 303). Appalled at such a reply, especially from a woman, they are so startled that they don't even arrest her and she walks away free. Therefore, the image of the vulnerable girl who is a markedly apolitical figure is contrasted against the individuality and vivacity of Marjane. *Persepolis* as a whole critiques the larger context of popular discourses in which this image circulates.

### **Marjane: The Personal and Public Self**

Hillary Chute mentions that the ability to use space to interlace different temporalities, to place pressure on linearity and "conventional notions of sequence, causality and progression" helps comics in addressing historical and life narratives powerfully ("Comics Form and Narrating Lives" 112).

The constant transitions from personal narrative to historical information from one panel to the next are present throughout. For example, the shift from the panel showing a group of protesters to a panel showing Marji in her school depicts a "blurring of the historical and 'everyday' registers" (Chute "The Texture of Retracing" 104). This shows trauma as ordinary and lasting. The past and present conflicts cannot be disentangled; they are a part of a historical blur that has a huge impact on the present and has future

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<sup>4</sup> In post-Revolution Iran, the method of testing shifted from being a mere knowledge test to an instrument aimed at admitting students based on their socio-political backgrounds and their loyalty to the Islamic regime.

<sup>5</sup> Marji's main love interest in the latter part of the memoir. He and Marji go to the University together, get married, and eventually get a divorce.

implications. They can “fracture both time and space to provide us with a jagged, incomplete sense of unconnected moments” (Chute “Comic Form and Narrating Lives” 112).

As identity formation is both a personal and social process, both personal narratives and historical experiences influence it. To some extent, the history of Marjane is a history of Iran and vice versa. The intersection of history and narrative is shown through various images time and again. For instance, when Marji smoked her first cigarette after fighting with her mother, the panel is juxtaposed with her stating how oppressive the regime is, linking the pressures outside to the pressures within (Satrapi 117).

Marji is acutely aware of her class position—her family forms the westernised elite middle-class in Iranian society. One of her earliest dreams was to become the last prophet because she realises the class differences and wanted to eradicate them. She becomes aware of them both in the public as she felt embarrassed to travel in her father’s cadillac during the war and the private sphere when she notices that their maid never sits with them. Her class identity makes her experiences of the war quite different from those of the poor. For instance, on a two page panel, the large upper panel shows children exploding in mines while the smaller lower panel reveals Marji “exploding with joy” while dancing to punk music at her first party (Satrapi 102).

Although her class identity helps her achieve the best education at home and abroad, she still has to bear the full implications of her national identity. Satrapi constantly remarks that her Iranian identity often led to the statement—“I am Iranian but...”

Another way in which one constructs personal identity is through self-awareness and identification. One way in which this is achieved is through the use of mirrors in the text. Hollander notices that the mirror is “a glassy surface and empty frame [that] lies in wait for the self-portrait that is to be recreated at each reciprocal view of the artist and his captive subject,” and it acts as a link between the human subject and its representation and is essentially a self-deceptive exercise (qtd. in Elahi 319).

One of the first instances of the use of the mirror is when Marji looks at herself and comments, “You have to forgive! You have to forgive!” along with the text, “I had the feeling of being someone really, really good” (Satrapi 46). This kind of self-instruction and self-enhancement helps in constructing aspects of one’s self and self-worth. But her experiences in Austria and her drug addiction leave her self-esteem completely shattered—“What do you want me to say, sir? That I’m the vegetable that I refused to become? *That I’m so disappointed in myself that I can no longer look at myself in the mirror?* That I hate myself?” (Satrapi 228; emphasis added). Another use of the mirror and the consequent self-directed gaze is when her father tells her to never forget who she is and she replies, “No, I won’t ever forget” both to the reader as well as to herself (Satrapi 146). Before she leaves for Vienna, she looks at the mirror one last time with the words, “I will always be true to myself” (Satrapi 151). But in her attempts to assimilate into a European culture, she has to abandon many aspects of her previous identity. This leads to feelings of guilt and shame that she has to overcome with great difficulty:

I think that I preferred to put myself in serious danger rather than confront my shame. My shame at not having become someone, the shame of not having made my parents proud after all the sacrifices they have made for me. The shame of having become a mediocre nihilist. (Satrapi 246)

There is a constant striving on the part of Marji to balance out her public identity as a modest, veiled woman and her private identity as a rebellious, independent woman in Iran. But a panel shows that the struggle is not hers alone, that it is the struggle of a large number of women in Iran. And she soon becomes aware of the “...contrast between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind walls...our behaviour in public and our behaviour in private were polar opposites...this disparity made us schizophrenic” (Fig. 4).



(Fig. 4: 306/7, Satrapi, *Persepolis*)

Even the identity that she constructs for herself of being a “sophisticated woman” after her return to Iran is not permanent either. In a two panel sequence, she compares the woman Reza married—Marjane, smiling, wearing makeup and a dress, overlooking a garden with birds— with the woman she considers herself to be—Marjane, frowning, smoking, dressed in pants and a shirt, looking out of a dark window (Satrapi 164). Thus, the process of getting married, even for a young woman with liberal parents, involves the construction of a self that is hardly recognizable. In situations like these, the boundaries between gender and the public/private overlap and the subject position constructed leads to a sense of confusion and a conflict within oneself. Again, Marjane’s misrecognition of herself is most strikingly registered in the image of herself looking in the mirror, not knowing what to think (Elahi 323).

Throughout the book, the faces of characters, especially Marji, are presented with shadows. The face reflected back in most cases is partially hidden, as if to suggest the continuing fragmentation or incompleteness of self as well as a self that can’t be displayed in public.

When she wrongfully reports a person to the morality police for saying something obscene to her, just to escape arrest for her own makeup, her grandmother gets angry at her. The next panel shows her looking at the mirror and the “flattening out suggests the superficiality of what she has done, her shallowness” (Elahi 323; Fig. 5). It is this reflection of herself that informs her of the mistake she has made and how much she has disappointed all those around her, including herself.



(Fig. 5: 294/8, Satrapi, *Persepolis*)

Marji’s never ending struggle to meet the standards of herself and those around her drive her story forward. She is constantly trying to work towards an ideal self, a self imagined both by herself and by her family, as she struggles with her reflection in the mirror. It points towards the complex and conflicted ways in which identities are constructed by ourselves and by others—through her own gaze, through her

parents, her friends, and the institutions around her. But the journey remains incomplete and she remains an incomplete subject, striving towards completeness.

Along with herself, there are various points in the narrative where Marjane directs her gaze towards the readers. Nancy Miller argues that memory writers and readers engage in a relational act that "creates identifications . . . conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience" (qtd. in Malek 15). This identification also leads to reading oneself across the skin of other selves. This allows for self-reflection and self-exploration for both the protagonist as well as the reader.

Thus, Satrapi has not only recorded her country's history and worked through her memories to negotiate an identity, but she has also provided a space where identifications can form across cultures and between different subjects. As Hillary Chute comments, "*Persepolis* is a work of reimagination and literal reconstruction that retraces the growing child body in space, reinsuring that body by hand to generate a framework in which to put versions of self- some stripped of agency, some possessing it in productive conversation" ("The Texture of Retracing" 106).

There is this continual process of veiling and unveiling identity throughout the novel. Moreover, "as soon as you feel confident that finally you have gotten a fix on 'self,' 'other,' 'home,' 'here,' or 'there,' a slippage occurs, something shifts and removes the shield, uneasily revealing the raw bones of incommensurability underneath" (Naficy 198). Marjane remains, like all of us, in the continual and never-ending process of becoming. *Persepolis*, therefore, deals with the various aspects of identity that exiles like Marjane have to negotiate with. It describes a constant struggle to define and understand the self as well as the larger world, through the lens of oneself, the society and larger history.

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# A Life of Estrangement and Migration

## 'Dubai Kathupaatt' and the Struggle of Representation\*

Sulthana Nasrin

*This paper attempts to study the 'Abudhabi Kathupaatt' (Dubai Letter song) written by S. A. Jameel in 1977, widely recognized as the trendsetter for the genre in Mappila Literature. These letter songs represent the desires and woes of heteronormative conjugal relations in the context of Gulf Migration in Malabar. The paper looks at the power of the canon and politics of recognition. The power exercised by the author in placing his masculine self in the 'centre' of the letter song raises questions of mobility and masculinity in relation to its female counterpart. The female voice is read as an attempt to assert agency—to withdraw from the centre of patriarchy and establish an 'absent-present' voice. Here the power 'play' of the Mappila woman, despite the author's norms of sexual discipline over her body, leads to the discovery of the author's inferior masculinity. The simultaneous deprivation and accumulation of power debilitates the author's position (power) to exert control over the female and the text itself. The paper questions the destabilized position of the genre, the author, and the female voice in the text which not only undermines secure meanings but fails to unify itself.*

### The letter song - *Abudhabi Kathupaattu*

Some of the snippets from the letter song: (h: husband, w: wife)

The addressing:

This is to the notice of my dearest and most loving

This letter, written as I weep,

A note written with the blood of my heart.

\*\*\*

By the grace of the

One I have received your letter

5

My dear, why do write so and make me cry?

(w-h) I won't allow anyone else to eat

This sweet-filled fleshy plantain of mine

I will guard this treasure till my death

But, you should remember, I am no angel.

10

The husband who knows not the woman's need,

Idiot he is,

the creator of her sins

Chance is the mother of necessity

And who gives a chance is the leader of fools

15

\*\*\*

(h-w)

What is it has been six years (since I left home)

(h-w)

Are things not going fine?

Is there a single month

You haven't received a letter and a D.D?

\*\*\*

(h-w)

The man without money

20

What say does he have?

People say many things

\* This was the best judged paper at *Power Play*, a paper presentation organised by *Jabberwock*.

But have they stopped any calamity?

\*\*\*

(w-h)

We have become rich in people's eyes  
But there is no one in our house,  
we are alone

25

(h-w)

You forgot the days of hardship...  
without money  
You forgot the bountiful God?

\*\*\*

(Shafeeq 92)

One of the significant features of growing up in a Mappila Muslim household is the presence of letter songs or *Dubai Kathupaattu*. They are mostly written in the female voice (wife or daughter) to the men in their family, who are working abroad, as well as in the form of replies from the male (husband or father). These letter songs are deeply emotional and had traversed the private to Kerala's public sphere from the 1980s.

Letter songs belong to the larger tradition of Mappilapaattu or the song culture of the Mappila Muslims, which has been in existence for more than four hundred years. They are divided into many genres—*kalyanappaattu* (wedding songs), *neerchappaattu* (festival songs), *padappaattu* (war songs), *kissappaattu* (ballad), *kathupaattu* (letter songs), etcetera. However, Mappilapaattu is withdrawn from mainstream Malayalam literature and remains outside the classical/national fold<sup>1</sup>. These songs are mostly written with fixed and named tunes in mind, which are then indicated just below the title of the song. The Letter songs with their relation to Gulf migration are understood for their characteristic simplicity in language and style (Vallikkunnu et al. 52). The song tradition has no classical lineage, traditions or teaching, but rather is sustained through memory and to some extent because of its inclusion in the State School youth festival of Kerala, the most rigorous and prestigious cultural event of the state. Recent endeavours like Mappila Kala Akademi in Thrissur which impart training in Mappila songs, and Moinkutty Vaidyar Smarakam in Kondotty of Malappuram, a major archival centre, are notable resources in the field.

*Dubai Kathupaatt* is written in the Eranadan dialect, which is predominant in Malappuram district of Kerala, densely populated by Mappila Muslims<sup>2</sup>. *Eranadan Vaamozhi*, even though spoken by different communities in the district, is most often associated with Mappila Muslims bearing their history of influence from travelling Arabs who injected Arabic words into spoken Malayalam. The presence of Malayalam mixed with Arabic affirms its direct relation to Muslims in this regard. It is also said to have made use of the literary device metathesis, wherein with the transposition of letters and words, new words are formed while entertaining the same meaning (for example, *athaayirikkum* is same as *atheykkaaram*; meaning maybe that or as mazha(rain) said as maya).

### Nation(s) and Narratives: what fits in and what does not

Mappilapaattu is unrecorded in the literary history and hasn't been understood within the realms of Malayalam literature, where the conflation of nation building, history writing and literary narratives has generally developed from the demand of nationalism. Malayalam literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is formed negotiating between the form and content of the nation, it repeats the nationalist discourse and its claim of legitimacy. The geography and imaginations of the past depend on literature as an institution which devel-

<sup>1</sup> The use of '/' is conscious as I am trying to foreground a critique on the division and positioning of one over the other. Here the '/' is expected to visually implicate the sameness and hence reject power binaries.

<sup>2</sup> Mappila Muslims, one of the many communities which form the Muslim population of Kerala, lived principally in the Malabar region.



ops the narrative of its presence and establishes it. According to Hayden White<sup>3</sup> the recorded and accepted narrative is under the surveillance of the majority or power bearing population and undocumented history remains erased from the 'events' and abolished (187). The official literature in this prospect is obtained from a 'desired' homogeneity of the nation where the narrative history occupies the hegemonic status of a discourse and ideology overbearing other 'small' histories and narratives. The project of exclusion was a necessity to prevent any 'other' stories invading the popular Kerala and Malayali figure. This absence of syncretism in studies of literary history provides one with select imagination of the nation and its people. The state of Kerala and its history, like other parts of the country, is entrenched in the Savarna Brahmanic Hindu ideal of nationhood which blinds the conflicting oppositions and heterogeneities that has together constituted 'an Indian-ness', here, 'the Kerala'.

The idea of many Malayalam(s) is scrutinized to popular engagements which represents the *Nair tharavaadu* hegemony, its nostalgia employing a language of power, authority and subjugation. The *tharavaadu* hegemony is an ancestral home usually used by Namboothiri, Nair and Ambalavasi castes as the common house, with the practice of joint family system<sup>4</sup> which was also related to the matrilineal system of Marumakkathayam in Kerala. This celebrates poets like Kumaran Asan, Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Vallathol Narayana Menon and novelists like M T Vasudevan Nair, Lalithambika Antharjanam while it proceeds to read writers like Vaikom Muhammed Basheer under Mappila literature. Malayalam literature/(s) in its conception here does not include Mappila literature(s). The claim however does not hold that the positioning of Malayalam as the official language has come about from the demand of 'print-language'. Arabi-Malayalam was prevalent in northern Kerala from 9<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century and has registered its difference to the Aryan language formed around 13<sup>th</sup> century, even finding a strong competition with Ezhuthachan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century through its literature. Despite these historical evidences, Mappila literature was not only discriminated from the mainstream but also labelled as belonging outside of the nation. The questions of intersectionality and differences in language, form and content of various literatures of the region have not been addressed as possibilities of exploration but as complications. The larger frame of binary oppositions, Hindu/Muslim, Hindi/Urdu, India/Pakistan critically extend the politics of exclusion of literature, not just to the language but to the community (Hikmathullah). The understanding of literary histories demands these coercions of differences to be acknowledged; Benedict Anderson argues to question the "unique sacredness of languages advanced by certain communities" and also to destabilize the classical and accommodate the divergences (13).

Letter songs, here written in the Eranadan dialect (vernacular), are out of the Malayalam literature despite promising the socio-historical and economical conflicts of the period. The history of Gulf migration<sup>5</sup> in most cases cannot be assessed by the parameters set by 'standard history'. M. H. Ilias notes in his study,

the traditional histories of the region, based mainly on colonial records, show a tendency to omit such memories generated by the expatriates. Because these memories fall outside the boundaries of the nation-state, they tend to be either omitted or accommodated within the national histories of the Gulf countries (88).

Here similarly, the specific record of women and men writing their inner traumas in their post-migration period are forgotten in traditional histories. The relevance of letter songs can be found in a number of letters S. A. Jameel, as the writer of these songs, has received. One of them, written as a memorandum undersigned by around ten wives of Gulf migrated men said that "Oh Great Singer, How should we praise your understanding of our inner thoughts, deep desires and young imaginations not just as a woman would know but also venting it to a song? We do not have words" (Jameel 151). These testimonies have been rubbed to the floor and letter songs, as a genre and historical record have failed to overcome the powerful spirit of 'literature' of our times. The power of the canon and the politics of recognition is not only questioned but subverted through the attempts to study the undiscerned genres of the marginalized, the significance of the vernacular.

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<sup>3</sup> Hayden White probes the notion of authority in art and literature and examines the problems of meaning and interpretation, its production, distribution, and consumption in different historical epochs.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to *Marumakkathayam*.

<sup>5</sup> Gulf migration is the mass migration of large number of people from Kerala to GCC states, from 1972 to 1983 (also called *Gulf Boom*) after the discovery of oil reserves in Eastern Arabia region. The requirement of labour force in Arab states and the unemployment rates in Kerala led to increase in immigration.

## Author, Attention and the New Genre: the many dilemmas

The interest of this section will be to analyse the authorial function of S. A. Jameel, where the male author writes on behalf of the wife. The politics of authorship, the question of 'whose voice does the text embody' and the position of the author is of significant interest as the course will follow. Michel Foucault in the essay "What is an Author?" points towards a privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy (1). He remarks that the characteristic feature of the author's function is to not a spontaneous development, but rather a complex operation that constructs a certain being of reason:

the author function is not a pure and simple reconstruction made secondhand from a text given as inert material. The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation (9).

The text and the author in this way operate in the scission of division and distance with the fictitious speaker.

S. A. Jameel has always shied away from questions on his academic qualifications or scholarships in interviews. As a self-taught artist, he wrote and sang because of hunger. His widely known letter songs, *Dubai Kathupaatt* have a curious history attached to them. It was in 1977 with a specific necessity to catch the attention of the audience in a *ganamela*<sup>6</sup> to be performed abroad that he composed the letter song. The demand for market value has been its central concern from its inception. The letter song had the emotions and desires of a wife eagerly waiting for her husband's return from the Gulf to accompany her lonely youth. The interesting sequence in this process of writing/composing the letter song was when accidentally the song got leaked after a practice session and the authorial control of the male author got shattered and de-dignified. This tension of removing him from that moment of individualization that Foucault mentions was however recaptured when the official announcement of the letter song and its author took place in Abu Dhabi. The fear of removal from the authorship status is also the fear of an emasculation of the male voice in the text who cannot fulfill the female's desire and demand. The maleness of the text and the thirst to control it in entirety has been a whirling dissatisfaction in the genre.

The theme of fear and emasculation of the male author is in relation to the patriarchal system which finds its meaning in the obeying wife or female subject. The fear is transferred to the text where the husband cannot stand the possible digression presented by the wife, and his fear is not bound in love but to his exposition to the society as an incapable husband to draw limits for the wife, the fear of losing control.

The husband who knows not the woman's need,  
Idiot he is,  
the creator of her sins  
Chance is the mother of necessity  
And who gives a chance is the leader of fools (Jameel 11-15, qtd. in Shafeeq 92)

This is, however, because of the content that the songs display; but the position of the male author is much more complicated because his persona talks for the wife whose demand for a 'male presence' is a threat to the society and strictly places her inside the clenched fists of a male partner, husband or otherwise (interestingly it stays as her demand through the male author). The level of insecurity possessed by the man and his identification forced into abilities to control lies straight in the text.

The wife in the letter song asserts that she is not an angel and cannot hold on to herself and suffer this loneliness forever. She cannot withdraw from questioning the futility of material possessions when the provision to enjoy them is taken out of consideration. She demands a practical vision from her side where the husband cannot just move outside the possibility of poverty and the blame of inability to lead the family. The language of the letter songs, despite its philosophy of life and demand of togetherness, is fleshy, and trails of lust and indications of adultery are sprinkled throughout it. The 'maleness' of the author is important here, where it is the female voice in the letter song comparing herself to a plantain, a votive hen and similar expressions of the uncontrollable lust in her mind and thoughts. This language cannot be read in

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<sup>6</sup> An informal orchestra

isolation without carrying Jameel's previous language and stylistic ventures in describing/writing for and of the female.

S. A. Jameel, the male author of the female voice in the letter songs has written a number of poems and songs preceding and succeeding the release of letter songs. This can be a pretext to reading the language and narratorial choice in the letter songs. Jameel from his early works has shown an eager and disturbing interest in the female subject, the representation of the tempted male figure by the beauty of the female has been a constant trope in his writing. He writes,

Her Eyes are the sea of lust  
 Woman is the rope of evil  
 Walking with blind eyes is the best  
 Even the prophet will sin if he sees her (Jameel 10)

In another instance, he presents a highly sexualized female body

Her pretty face  
 Addictive breasts  
 the beauty and joy in her walks  
 the angels of heaven will move away if she is seen (Jameel 10)

The language of intrusion into the female body and the anatomical survey of her physique is both a violence and exploitation that the male author figure exercises. The power of his gaze fetishizes the lady as a commodity or otherwise among a number of commodities, compared and praised for the qualities of beauty that inspires men. This is then followed by the deviating woman whose beauty is a threat to the male guardian; the oversexualized female leaves the man sleepless. The idea is repeated in the letter songs where the female expresses her unquenched lust and the possibility of her deliverance to the immoral if her husband doesn't return (Jameel 11-15). The imageries of Jameel move from the physical to her imagined mental spaces, the joy of a hypnotist.

The agency of the woman is in ambivalence because the possibility of writing on sexuality for Muslim women was a taboo and the letter songs were praised by a number of Muslim wives and at the same time rejected by others who feared facing the doubt and questions of both the husband and the society over her body and morality. This can be understood from the anonymous letters Jameel receives which either blame him for the piece or thank him for speaking out. This even led to the destruction of households where the migrated men, with hurt egos as a result of not being in absolute control of the female body started doubting her, and his deprivation of power broke marital relations rather quickly. Jameel has himself come up with these acts in his interviews and personal remarks on the letter songs (Jameel 151).

Jameel's fetishisation of the female body is related to his writing for the female. Both of these projects are carried out with clear awareness of the power-position of the author, with the use of a number of symbols or authorial signatures. This claim of control comes along with a claim of truth; he tries to prove the position and uniqueness of the text through his interviews. Jameel in his interviews attests that the stories and instances he narrates are either experiences or oral records of relatives or friends, and one out of ten listening to these songs will directly relate to its theme. He testifies that the characters in these songs are living and worldly characters on this earth (18-19).

The recordings of the song in Jameel's voice introduce the song as 'lived experiences of many'. The level of confidence in self narration in some interviews that he exhibits seems to suggest that, his profession as a hypnotist/psychiatrist<sup>7</sup> has led him to listen to the traumas of many victims of Gulf migration who have come with this dilemma. The medicalization of emotions that Jameel carries out is by exposing the fear of deprivation of power. The author here is a knowing subject, powerful to warn the husband (about the chances of the wife's immoral conduct) disrobing his wife's insecurity and possibility of betrayal. The authorial position of the author is proclaimed by providing the division of his self from the text—of the

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<sup>7</sup> S. A. Jameel is himself in his interviews conflating between the two terms. He tries to be technical as well as traditional in his approach to medicine, hence arguing for complete control over knowledge in the field of writing.

husband and wife and at the same time distancing them by taking his position between them. Foucault's 'author function', the urge of the author to establish his subject position as the author and mark his distinct sign has already been developed in the choice of narratorial voice where the author as an invisible presence stretches a warning point at the end with the woman asking the husband to return. It is here that the male author, on behalf of the female voice, unlike her husband is knowledgeable and can release a tension by tightly controlling the female voice. It is only with his possession of the female voice that the male author can express his awareness and intellect.

The deeply emotional piece positions a vulnerable man and a lustful wife who in great pains is awaiting the bodily presence of her beloved. The author as the mediator figure in the text has strict power and control in the text, not just over the female body but also over the male ego that shatters his masculinity when the female voice through the male author asks him "We have become rich in people's eyes / But there is no one in our house, / we are alone" (Jameel 24-26, qtd. in Shafeeq 92). The complication of the text in this way is of a man challenging another man by counting on his masculinity, potency and ego—the female (wife) is placed between these cases. She is a threat who needs to be disciplined and looked after. Jameel as a male author marks his authorial sign and function in the text and holds it further. The psycho-analytical function of the male author reading the female mind and decoding it is peculiar to the understanding of the text.

The author's sign and function is further complicated when read as a collective community product and outside his individuality. The letter songs as a historical subject places the authorial persona in conflict where the unity of style, neutralization of contradictions places the peril on the ideological author function itself. As earlier, letter songs were produced as per request, in whose name the song was then named; it was an oral song culture for public consumption. Mohammed Shafeeq in his paper "The Mappila Letter Songs: Analysing a Genre of Migration" says that the, "author, in most cases, was consequently forgotten, and so were those for whom the letters were written, but the songs survived by an effacement of the individual and through the appropriation by the community. This process of the obliteration of the author, or rather the non-privileging of the subject in the discourse, but the very classifying factor of the discourse being that of the community rather than an individual is linked to the universe of images which rests on a communal mode of power, and precedes the individual and the bourgeois mode of production, the creation of the latter being dependent on the political movements as well as the migration" (93). The question of author function can be observed to be solely resting in the history of migration where the denial of literary value of the author's persona is deeply worrying.

The process of making the authorial signature is not easy that Jameel, devoid of a classed privilege, is negated as a lyricist/writer of the songs. His letter songs are poetic in nature and at the same time simple, with no decoration or profound and ornate thoughts but only focus on the subject of domestic human life. The ambivalence in the nature of style and form has graded him to be a less/low poet, where the judgment from the established notions of poetry writing and interpretation have to be unsettled. Jameel's use of Er-anadan dialect and disinclination to other material philosophies but to his deep concern for male-female relations and its dynamics are just another distinct strand in the field of poetry. Here, when Jameel at one point asserts his power over his characters is left powerless and estranged like a grub-street writer. The struggle of author/writer to self-posture can be noted in this respect. The text—the genre, its author, and its character relations in this way are destabilized and form a debilitating centre through the course.

### **Unsettling Interventions: there is no straight line**

Derrida in his 1967 essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences" uses the idea of '(free) play' which can be abstracted to the understanding of ambivalence in Jameel's position as a writer and his place in the canon. Derrida in his essay and elsewhere makes it clear that 'play' means something like to 'give', or 'tolerance', which works against the ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion. Play is the disruption of presence, which means that in order for anything to be understood in terms of presence (to be self-sufficient, say), what has to be overlooked is its inscription within 'a system of differences and the movement of a chain'—a chain or series of 'signifying and substitutive' marks. This system is the play of presences and absences (292). The essay destabilizes the idea of a structure conceived of as grounded and stabilized by a moment of presence called the centre. The loss of centre or the questioning of the presence terminates where the absence itself becomes a presence.

The letter song points at a female/wife in the centre of the text who is not physically present but presents her absence through the male author. She is signified and substituted using various signs like her ad-

dress to the beloved, openness of her physicality, her demands and necessities taken forward as the author's philosophies. The problem of 'authorial intention' is superimposed on the female voice by accepting her as an absent presence and the play initiated is to ensure power and knowledge of the male authorial self over others. The centrality of the female which is assumed and pressurized by the male author however does not hold and falls at a point when she starts to assert herself over the text and keeps track of her body under her control and leaves the threat outside. The consequences of this lashing out/opening up is complicated but at the same time the shattering of the male author and the patriarchal centre by placing herself out of the center and seeking mobility from the margins is significant. The possibility of meanings is turned up in this 'play' accessed by the female voice in the text.

Play as the disruption of presence/centre works in the letter songs where the centrality of the male author and the patriarchal demand of the disciplined woman is questioned and destabilized. He is failed by the female assertion enabling an act of possible transgression. The author's voice is destabilized that it cannot anymore hold the societal intention validated in terms of patriarchy. The wife says to the husband

The husband who knows not the woman's need,  
 Idiot he is, the creator of her sins  
 Chance is the mother of necessity  
 And who gives a chance is the leader of fools (Jameel 11-15, qtd. in Shafeeq 92)

The tone is assertive and condemns the patriarchal society however remaining in the heterosexual framework it offers.

Despite Jameel's struggle to locate himself as the author of letter songs, positioning himself between the husband and wife and gaining control over their voice, body and ego do not sustain. His presence as an author is not dignified in the text with the interruption of female voice. The authorial intention is deposited in lacks; his masculinity, authorial position and generic mixtures are incomplete and powerless. The female narrator's voice generates a possibility of transgression which transforms to be an insecurity in both the male listener and male author. The centrality of the text shifts from the male power bearing hands and moves to the periphery. However the action of transgression is incomplete and the female agency of performance is ambiguous.

S. A. Jameel is present in Mappila literature as the author of letter songs but is however absent from the mainstream literature. The absent-presence is also about the dilemma of the male authorial persona being troubled and decentralized by the female presence. The genre in itself is a mixture, the invocation of *viraha*<sup>8</sup> tradition is such that the pain of separation is traversed and moves beyond where the female woe is at an extent of announcing a threat if the pain and longing are left unanswered. The husband is forced to return from abroad, spend time with his family and provide them with the pleasure of his presence. The female here is not just demanding the man to return but also questions the paradigm of male mobility. The notion of men gaining fortune for the family leaving his family as vulnerable dependents materially and physically is a matter of discomfort for the wife. She may not be claiming for the access of working conditions but is definitely moving ahead to voice the suffering she is burdened with. The single-wife of the gulf migrated man is strictly under the society's surveillance where each of her steps is counted and captured. The act of brushing away from these norms even if presented as a threat/fear of the male is an exercise of agency of her body and life. She is unsettling the male expectations and at the same time the masculine necessity to guard the female is posed to the society.

The absent presence of the female voice which is celebrated in the letter songs as a tokenistic approach enabled by the male author is subverted by the female voice which breaks the author's ultimate joy of control in the genre. Her voice is then not in the centre but moves to the periphery and looks forward to moving out of the male author's vicious circle. The circle is patriarchal and drawn with the fear of losing power and control. She places herself beyond it repressing the patriarch and his demands. The nostalgia of centre and its deconstruction in this context is in the power of language. The dominant mode of writing and style postpones the female voice in attaining a consolidation and settling itself. The meaning which is post-

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<sup>8</sup> *Viraha* or love-in-separation is typified by a bittersweet longing for union with one's beloved, who is usually imagined as a human or divine lover. Medieval literature is known for its use of *viraha*, between the relationship of Radha-Krishna legend.

poned in writing is accessed in the speech given by the female voice. Her absence is negotiated in the assertion of agency, and the controlling words spoken by the female initiates a possibility of meanings other than the single meaning of frustrated powerless man and the lustful woman. Her exploration is a wide project for the reader that she does not conclude in any single imagination to be.

The centre of the text is now revised but however its inability to break the centre of Malayalam literature and its grades of entry point is unanswered. *Dubai Kathupaattu*, S. A. Jameel and the female voice in the text are fragmented entities, disunited and subverted either in the larger power bearing platforms or played between the coherent and the incomplete. The power of the male author in posturing the female as an object capable of sexual transgression and the consequences following this has grown forward and she is beyond these pressures; an outright rejection of this endeavour set by the male author is proposed. The female lustful voice removes it from being the showpiece and it, in the margins, leaves an ambiguity of interests. The significance of disabling the centre of Malayalam literature's alluring nostalgia of casteist and class based literature and its propulsion is realised. The breaking of power, authority and control is here of the larger narrative of ideal literature and of the politics of male authorship which tries to construct a patriarchal fold through his textual exercise. The centrality of power is broken, fragmented and 'play'ed by the unrepresented in these discourses.

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# Lost and Found

## A Look into Silent Race Films of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Chahak Aggarwal

*This essay brings forth a genre within the film industry that no longer exists in the contemporary world and analyses the portrayal of the African American community through different filmmakers. The author discusses films during an era that saw the birth of Hollywood and how the movies catered to a specific audience by whitewashing other ethnicities. 'Race Films' were identified by the fraternity of filmmakers that created them, the cast, plot and the circle to which they were distributed. These films were restricted to black theatres due to their 'sensitive' and 'radical' ideas regarding the portrayal of the African American community. The author investigates the works of the pioneer Oscar Micheaux to give a better understanding of this category and how the ripples of change created by his films enabled an improvement towards representation of ethnicity that is still in motion.*

The 1920s stood as a symbol of opulence and glamour that came with the economic boom of the Roaring Twenties. It presents a stark contrast to the Great Depression of the 1930s that followed it. This era marked an integral shift in the medium of entertainment consumed by the masses. The focus shifted from theatre and live shows to a new and emerging media—the film. Economic prosperity during this decade provided greater disposable income to individuals and an opportunity for entertainers to make money off of this new audience which included the middle class as well. The 20s were replete with films of all kinds, catering to an audience that knew what to expect. Films followed a formulaic approach that was more artistic in nature, and moved away from showing things 'as-is', substituting realism for aesthetics. The modern romantic comedy genre was also born in this decade, as well as swashbuckler and horror films being extremely popular genres of the time. The films relied heavily on tropes, consisting of a traditional 'hero', 'damsel' and 'villains'. This was also a decade of experimentation, but that was confined only to the aesthetics of the film. The storylines largely remained linear and static in their expectations from the characters.

It is in response to this that a group that had till then been marginalised and caricaturised in mainstream cinema, began to venture out into the realm of independent cinema. These productions are now termed 'Race Films'. This essay will focus on the history and background of mainstream media in the 1920s and the subsequent movement of filmmakers into the domain of the African American experience and why these films were lost to time until fairly recently. This essay will also analyse the cultural and historical significance of this form of niche cinema and its impact on other minority communities in terms of representation as well as Hollywood and mainstream film studios.

The history of cinema is a long and varied one. Cinema in the United States of America had its roots laid in 1907 by the Kalem Company when they set up their studio in New York City. The rise of Hollywood can be attributed to an increase in the number of Jewish migrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who invested in this upcoming industry and gave rise to studios such as the Warner Brothers, which remains relevant even today. The period from 1917 to 1960 is called the Golden Age of Cinema in Hollywood. During this time thousands of films were produced but they only catered to a very specific audience. They were full of misogynistic gender roles and blatant stereotypes of people belonging to the minority, especially people of colour. During this time, 'blackface'<sup>1</sup> was a common movie trope, along with other tropes that involved 'white-washing' of other cultural identities such as those of Asian and Latin American people. The black community was subject to a certain form of stereotyping and racist representation in the visual medium as most of these early films were created and produced by white filmmakers and studios. DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1917, is perhaps the most striking example of a commercially successful and widely acclaimed film that bases its story on a racist narrative. The plot of the film follows the lives of two families, representing the two sides of United States of America during the Civil War—the North and the South. The love story that the narrative is built on is also in reference to the need of the North and the South to come together to defend white supremacy, which was in danger due to President Lincoln's anti-slavery stance and the defeat of the Confederation in the Civil War. There is even an intertitle in the film which states "The former enemies of North and South are united again in defence of their Aryan birthright", in response to an incident in the film wherein a black freedman causes a white woman to commit suicide. The portrayal of black characters in the film is done predominantly by white actors in

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<sup>1</sup> A form of racist theatrical make-up used by non-black performers to caricature a black person.

‘blackface’ and are depicted as uncivilised and promiscuous, especially towards white women. On the other hand, the Ku Klux Klan<sup>2</sup> are portrayed as the harbingers of peace and honesty in the tumultuous era of American Reconstruction<sup>3</sup>. The film is now condemned for its representation of Black Americans as sexually aggressive predators and the Ku Klux Klan as heroes, but it was a blockbuster hit at the time of its release, despite controversy regarding its portrayal of African Americans, which existed even then. In fact, the release of *The Birth of a Nation* caused massive protests in the country spearheaded by organisations such as the The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The protest to get the film banned was unsuccessful and led to Griffith producing a film titled *Intolerance* in 1916 as a response. *The Birth of a Nation* was even chosen by the Library of Congress in 1992 to be preserved in the National Film Registry where it was cited as “culturally, historically and aesthetically significant”, signifying the cavalier approach to racism in cinema well into the latter half of the twentieth century.

As the number of African Americans in the audience increased, white-owned studios and white filmmakers attempted to capitalise on it by producing films catering to specific communities. In retaliation to *The Birth of a Nation*, filmmaker John W. Noble produced *The Birth of a Race* (1918), with the intention of countering the negative imagery in Griffith’s film by making a feature length film showcasing the achievements of black people throughout history. However, the film was widely unsuccessful and was generally regarded as a cinematic failure. Noble’s film, along with others marketed by mainstream studios towards African American people, relied on stereotyping entire communities and were ignorant of black culture and heritage. The intention, rather than presenting a counter-narrative to works like Griffith’s, became about capitalizing on this untapped consumer market. These films were produced predominantly by white-owned studios and were extremely unsuccessful in their attempt to showcase the African American experience. In the background of this, there emerged a class of films that sought to counter the narrative presented by mainstream cinema and produce stories that resonated with communities of African Americans living in the United States. These films are now collectively called ‘Race Films’.

With a large number of white-owned studios catering to black audiences at this time, it is important to understand what constitutes a ‘Race Film’. For instance, the sudden influx of movies with an all-black cast which appeared at this time, mostly in response to *The Birth of a Nation*, cannot all be classified as Race Films. It becomes imperative to understand that there is a clear distinction between films centred on the African American experience that classify as Race Films and ones that do not. The most basic identification would be that they featured an all-black cast. However, this was not the only determining factor. A lot of films that met the above criterion are not classified as Race Films, such as *Tracks* (1922). For a film to be categorised as a ‘Race Film’, it had to be “a film with African-American cast members, produced by an independent production company and discussed or advertised as a race film in the African-American press” (Berry et al, “Early African American Film”).

Another way of identifying an all-black film as a ‘Race Film’ is identifying its origin along with the fraternity of filmmakers it comes from. This can be seen in observations made by the early curators of the African American experience in media:

Spread across the country...these race movie pioneers were aware of each other and kept up a rivalry in the black box office throughout the twenties. They often corresponded and compared notes. Actors such as Lawrence Chenault, William A. Clayton, Jr., J. Lawrence Criner, and Shingzie Howard worked for two or more of these companies. The stars of these companies worked on a circuit that often included the Lafayette Players Dramatic Stock Company. And their films played the same circuit of race theatres and catered to the same audiences. We can thus talk of a circle — a loose federation of production companies and producers who competed with and depended on each other (Bowser et al, 20).

It was a defining characteristic of Race Films to function within a circle of artists, actors, filmmakers and producers, all with the same objective in mind—creating cinema for the African American community. Therefore, our understanding of what makes a film fall under the category of Race Films goes beyond cast and plot and includes the circles in which said films were produced and distributed, as well as the independent nature of the production house they were made under.

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<sup>2</sup> An American white supremacist hate group founded in 1865

<sup>3</sup> The period between 1863 and 1877, post abolition of slavery, where attempts were made to force the South to adopt anti-slavery laws. It is generally considered a failure as it led to no long term solutions in the South.



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It is estimated that about 500 Race Films were produced between 1910 and 1950. Only about a hundred remain. This has led to a scarcity in available data and an incomplete understanding of the world of African American filmmaking in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the major reasons for the disappearance of these films was the lack of capital secured by independent production houses and filmmakers for their films. This meant that only a few copies could be made of the film on reels. These films were either distributed by the filmmakers themselves, or by hired ‘runners’ who would go from town to town and book theatres to showcase a film, carrying with them a physical copy of the film reel as they could not afford distribution agencies. The cost of distribution was borne by the filmmaker. This led them to produce only a few physical copies of their films to reduce the cost of production. Consequently, the existing reels either became too damaged with repeated use or were simply lost as people who had access to them discarded them assuming that they were not of any worth because they were not popular with the mainstream audience.

This was also the period of segregation, which meant that there were separate theatres for African Americans. There was a strong opposition to African American centric cinema among the white population, especially against the select few films that managed to gain some amount of mainstream success and attention such as Oscar Micheaux’s *The Homesteader* (1919). The ‘white theatres’ were thus neither interested in, nor willing to feature a film with an all-black cast, ensuring that these films would only be shown at black theatres, segregated churches and coloured schools.

With the advent of sound films, technologically advanced sound recording equipment was required. Many independent production houses could no longer support the production and distribution of their films. As a result, they were simply shut down or were taken over by bigger, mainstream production houses and studios. This takeover caused the loss of all archived films by the production house as the new owners had no need for commercial failures and niche films.

These films were shot on nitrate stock reels, which were highly flammable and decomposed with time. Their storage was complicated and expensive, and many studios destroyed them and extracted the silver from them.

Thus, Race Films were lost to time and were only rediscovered when early collectors saw sporadic mentions of unknown black filmmakers and films with all-black casts in vintage posters and handbooks. They sought to find them in abandoned Hollywood warehouses, with private collectors, families of the filmmakers as well as individuals who worked in this industry in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the first curators of early African American cinema was Mayme A. Clayton, whose collection was later converted into a museum—‘Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum’. Other notable collectors and historians that focused on early black cinema are Pearl Bowser, Dr. Henry T. Sampson Jr. and Lloyd Clayton, Mayme A. Clayton’s son. These early collectors ensured the survival of early black cinema and pieced together a history that complemented the uncovered films. Collection was a very tedious task. The independent production houses did not have enough capital to advertise their films properly. This meant that collectors of the later years had to rely on very little source material, mostly from advertisements in newspapers to posters that did not feature the names of the filmmaker or the studio. Collector Pearl Bowser found out about a black female filmmaker whose name and other identifiable details are unavailable on her motion picture as well as on the newspaper advertisement for the film. Her picture was found in a magazine where she was still unnamed but credited with the making of the film.

Similarly, filmmaker Peter P. Jones’ works are also lost to us. He is only known to people by mentions of his name in early black press and information about his film *Rebirth of a Nation* which tells the story of blacks after the abolition of slavery. This was no doubt an attempt by a black filmmaker to present a counter narrative to Griffith’s work. There were black filmmakers whose existence is a complete mystery to us, as are their works and stories. Yet, we do know of some prominent early filmmakers, some of whom were ethnically white, whose contributions to the field of cinema, especially independently produced, black-centric films are now known to us. This suggests an obvious bias in the early curation of films surrounding the African American experience, wherein independent cinema categorised as ‘Race Films’ has been lost to us but similar works by white filmmakers remain.

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Any attempt to trace the history of Race Films will be incomplete without Oscar Micheaux, who was an African-American filmmaker and author. His first book was an autobiographical account of his life as a homesteader and his first film was loosely based on his first marriage. He is known for his contribution to black cinema and has been described as the “most successful African American filmmaker of the first half of the twentieth century” (Moos, 53). He produced more than 44 films during his lifetime and can be called the pioneer of Race Films. He was the epicentre of black cinema in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His works inspired some of the other famous race film producers at the time.

Micheaux’s films resonated with the African American communities and people flocked to the theatres to watch his movies. He was part of the wave of filmmakers that sought to counter the portrayal of the black community in *The Birth of a Nation*. He picked up stories that were closely related to the lives of black people around the nation, bringing the previously untold stories into cinema, beyond the caricatures of mainstream films.

He was also hounded by film censors of the time as he often picked up taboo subjects like rape, lynching and miscegenation. His films were unsurprisingly despised by white communities and were often cited as the cause for riots and violence in the city, rather than the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan had revived themselves and had become popular after Griffith’s film became a massive commercial success. However, Micheaux’s popularity only grew, as he built a network of actors, filmmakers and studios that created cinema for the black audience and focused on portraying black people as human beings with real lives and varied stories.

He also founded The Micheaux Film & Book Company (alternatively called Micheaux Film Corporation in some sources) in 1918 and produced films under its banner. However, he was not without fault. Micheaux was often condemned for his use of light skinned, mixed-race actors to portray lead roles in his films and dark skinned, ethnically unambiguous African Americans to play side characters who usually belonged to a lower stratum of society. Nonetheless, he remains one of the most commercially successful filmmakers among the many that sought to portray black lives, and African American communities flocked to the theatres where his films would be playing. With the advent of sound in cinema, he was one of the few race films producers who successfully transitioned to creating sound films when mainstream cinema made the shift. On the other hand, most of his contemporaries faded into obscurity as they could not keep up with the change due to lack of capital and a decrease in audiences for silent films.

His first film, *The Homesteader* (1919), for which he secured funding by selling stocks of his company to white farmers in the state of Ohio, was a critical and commercial success. The movie featured two well-known actresses—Evelyn Preer and Iris Hall, who were associated with the Lafayette Players Stock Company<sup>4</sup>, something that gave credence to him as a filmmaker. It was a semi-autobiographical film and is considered to be the first Race Film to become commercially successful and gain some amount of mainstream media coverage. It is the story of Jean Baptiste, a homesteader in the Dakotas and the only black man in the place he calls home. He falls in love with Agnes, who he presumes to be white but who later turns out to be part African American. The story deals with important themes of racial segregation, miscegenation and discrimination faced by the black community in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It addresses issues pertinent to the African American experience and orthodox cultural practices that related to the non-dilution of the black community that were followed at the time, such as condemnation of mixed-race marriages.

The story was an important landmark in the history of black cinema as it was supported entirely by a black or mixed-race cast. It was also the first time a Race Film registered in the radar of the white population. The film received massive backlash from the white community for its depiction of white characters and for its portrayal of interracial relationships, especially in the era of segregation. It also received criticism from black critics who felt that the use of mixed-race actors with lighter skin in lead roles further emboldened the theory of the white supremacists of merit based on skin colour.

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<sup>4</sup> The Lafayette was a theatre in Harlem, New York and one of the first theatres in the country to desegregate itself, allowing people of all ethnicities to sit in the orchestra seats. It was well respected as an entertainment company by both white and black communities.

In spite of the valid criticisms of Micheaux's work, the general audience responded very positively to the film, especially in terms of accurate representation of their community. It gave rise to other filmmakers who sought to replicate the success Micheaux had with *The Homesteader* and thus provided a boost to the production of Race Films in the 1920s. It added to his credibility and gained him an unheard-of respect in the industry. Several white-owned studios attempted to cash in on the growing number of black moviegoers but failed to produce films that captured black stories, black cultural identity and their sentiment like Micheaux. *The Homesteader* is therefore a prime example of the influence a well-made Race Film had on the entire discourse surrounding the rights of the African American community as well as the narrative that was spun by white media relegating specific racist stereotypes to coloured communities.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was essential in the creation and popularisation of Race Films among the African American population. It was set up in 1916 by Noble and George Johnson. The production house was one of the first producers of Race Films in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Johnson brothers saw potential in the large amount of black audiences that had absolutely no representation in mainstream films and set out to produce films that featured African American talent in the industry. It brought about a very important cultural change as more and more minorities started creating their own films in the face of lack of representation in Hollywood. The 1926 film *Silk Bouquet* is an example of a film marketed towards Chinese-American communities, and is seen as being inspired by black independent filmmakers and the success of their films.

The company produced five films in total. This was due to high production costs and low sales that did not adequately cover the expense of creating a film. The company was also its own distributor and faced the same issues other race films producers faced at the time in relation to distribution. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company did not last long, ceasing operations in 1921 after announcing a future project that never came to fruition, but they were responsible for bringing about a change in the way films were created to cater to specific audiences, especially to those in the minority communities. It proved to the American people that films based on the experiences of specific communities, African American in this case, could be commercially and critically successful, and extremely important as a way to accurately represent minorities in the visual media. It was the most significant and respected producer of Race Films along with Micheaux's production house and was responsible for carving a niche in the world of cinema for black stories to be told and appreciated by an audience that could finally relate to their portrayal in the media.

Race Films started dying out in the 1950s with the advent of sound films and when huge Hollywood studios started to recognise the commercial potential of black audiences. Small, independent filmmakers and production houses were edged out by bigger studios that were finally investing in stories surrounding the minorities. As a niche sub-genre of cinema, it did not take long for these films to die out in people's memory. 'Race films', are also now referred to as 'Lost Films' by collectors, as the bulk of them remain undiscovered. The efforts of a few dedicated collectors and historians have ensured that at least some of these survive.

Race Films are not just a relic of the past, but also an insight into the life of the African American community in the early half of the twentieth century. They represent an important cultural movement, where the black minority community started creating spaces for itself in a highly saturated industry of white cinema with token and misrepresented characters. They were an attempt to give the African American community a sense of belonging, as well as proper representation in the visual medium. With popular racist figures such as Jim Crow<sup>5</sup>, and organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan in full swing, it became especially important for the black community to assert themselves in any way that they could. The efforts of the pioneers of black cinema ensured that black stories would continue to be heard, and could be entertaining without being offensive and type-cast. Race films also gave black entertainers and actors the space to practice and perform their art without discrimination and racist connotations that came with being part of a mainstream production as people of colour were inevitably written with stereotypes in mind and rarely had any redeeming character arcs or depth of emotion. The fact that Race Films were underfunded and struggled to even see the light of day shows the struggle African American communities faced every day in order to make their mark in any industry.

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Crow was a persona adapted by minstrel Thomas D. Rice which led to the creation of racist stereotypes against black Americans, and led to the popularisation of 'blackface'. It even lent its name to the segregation laws of the 1870s called 'Jim Crow laws'.

Race films were essential in encouraging other minority communities in America to create their own space in the film industry away from terrible representations in Hollywood. These included Latin American migrants and Chinese migrants of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The film *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) is an example of a Chinese American actress, Anna May Wong, playing the lead role. It is also an example of a ‘lost film’ that was recovered in 1985. However, Wong soon left Hollywood to pursue a career in theatre and independent cinema due to systemic racism in the industry. The issue of inadequate representation plagued all ethnic minorities in the country, and further emboldened the idea of the ‘other’ in the minds of the native population. However, these films did not have a strong impact so racist interpretations of Asian and Hispanic characters in cinema continued. It is only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that there has been a significant change in the way Asian and Hispanic characters are portrayed in Hollywood.

Race Films are also historically significant as contemporary African American communities are attempting to piece together their own history, something that has been white-washed and systemically erased from existence. These films provide a window into the lives of black people during the era of segregation and their lives during important events that are significant in American history but which make no mention of black or minority contributions such as World War I and II.

The African American community has been consistently portrayed as lazy and deceitful in American media, and yet the community has been involved in the art of filmmaking and curating black stories since the medium was introduced and popularised in the country. They have not relied on Hollywood for representation, but have carved their own independent space away from the constant pandering of white expectations.

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# Perspectives on the Black Woman in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Kara Walker's Art

Tinka Dubey

*This paper explores the depiction of the black woman in Kara Walker's artwork and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, by drawing a comparison with respect to their stylistic and thematic contexts. As creative women from the African-American community, the respective depictions by both Morrison and Walker highlight essential ideas of what it means to be empowered as both a woman as well as a member of the previously enslaved Black community. This paper attempts to gain some insight into what becomes power, especially when one must subvert existing power paradigms to assert one's own unique position.*

Strains of similar thematic and ideological inclinations have long been identified within the larger pool of art that is produced by Black women in America. Similarities within this larger pool become evident through the use of distinct tools and modes of expression. The subject matter of Black women's art revolves around coinciding spheres of the female experience, but the manner of expression is what accounts for a more distinguishable and unique manifestation of a particular art. Both Walker and Morrison tend to throw light on violent and unsettling subject matters through their expression, primarily racial aggression and violence against slaves, particularly women, which is often sexual in nature. Kara Walker's art work and Toni Morrison's writing, thus, share a common space on the thematic front, and with respect to the style they pick to express themselves in their respective creative spheres. Both their expressions are largely abstract and rely on the perceptiveness of the reader and the onlooker to decipher the deeper, often haunting and violent realities hidden behind the evasive exteriors. Deconstructing the style of artwork practised by Walker and the style of writing espoused by Morrison therefore becomes essential in order to make larger reflections on the several thematic tropes that recur in both their creative expressions. This paper looks at Morrison's *Beloved* and some pieces from Kara Walker's silhouette art to make the earlier mentioned reflections.

Neither Morrison nor Walker followed the trends of their predecessors, yet they crafted earlier styles and ideas in their own ways to adapt them to their conceptions, thus giving birth to a unique and characteristic artform of their own. A large chunk of Walker's art is in silhouette<sup>1</sup>. The silhouette as a style of art was originally used by domestic women in the Victorian era as a rather leisurely indulgence and a pastime. Walker modified and adapted this medium for her expression by recrafting this rather decorative, delicate and feminine art form to depict violent and destructive images. Jeannette Schollaert quotes Monika Seidl in "Silhouetted Stereotypes in the Art of Kara Walker": "The ornamental style of silhouettes is complicated by Walker's violent and socially charged subject matter, which transforms the traditionally meek and dainty medium and portrays harsh, ugly themes" (27). This portrays Walker's deliberate efforts to step out of the spaces that a particular normative trend would demand from her, and this very effort is mirrored in Morrison's style of writing, which gives precedence to the content instead of the conventional structural norms. Traditional accounts of plot structure, such as that espoused by Aristotle, called for the acceptance of the principle of the unity of time, place and action, and generally moved linearly across time. Contrarily, narration in Morrison does not follow any fixed time frame or even focus on a fixed character—it wavers without any indications, and often becomes difficult to follow. However, sentiment remains strong, and consequently becomes much more important than structural uniformity.

Both employ a common method to add depth to their expressions. The understanding of their works is largely contingent on, as mentioned in the beginning, the onlooker or the reader. Their expressions translate into understanding in layers, the apparent first glance at the art or the words commands a drastically different understanding in comparison to a deeper and more meaningful exploration. This multi-layered understanding is a consequence of the inherent ambiguity that Morrison's text and Walker's art

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<sup>1</sup> "A silhouette is the image of a person, animal, object or scene represented as a solid shape of a single color, usually black, with its edges matching the outline of the subject. The interior of a silhouette is featureless, and the hole is typically presented on a light background, usually white, or none at all" ("Silhouette").

have. Commenting on Walker's art, Angelica E. Perez notes that among other things, it recalls "Saussure's model of semiotic analysis<sup>2</sup> regarding the meaning of signs within a work of art" (2). Even in Morrison's writing, she only indicates at a particular reality without mentioning it clearly, or conversely mentioning an event in passing that demands serious reflection. For instance, in *Beloved*, she describes the incident of Beloved seducing Paul D and their eventual intercourse in a peculiar manner:

'Beloved'. He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part, he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. 'Red heart. Red heart. Red heart'. (137-138)

Morrison consciously complicates the union between Beloved and Paul D by bringing in the emotional and psychological and causing it to intersect with, and even overshadow, the physical. She leaves this scene largely open to interpretation, the possibilities of which are immense, and by doing so, it is the reader whom she equips with both the power and the burden of discovering the implicit meanings in the text.

The complications brought in through Walker's use of the silhouette, especially with respect to ambiguities, is comparable to Morrison's utilization of magic realism<sup>3</sup>. *Beloved* revolves around the mythical re-advent of Sethe's daughter, whose life was cut short by her own mother to rescue her from being taken into slavery. The very portrayal of Beloved, Sethe's dead daughter, as a ghost residing with the living, forces us to peer deeper beyond the surface and mingles the real with the supernatural. As is evident from the above quoted scene of Beloved's seduction of Paul D, the primary motive in Morrison and Walker is to create a web of ideas and reflections that can only be visible to the viewer depending on whether he/she wants to see it. Ambiguity, consequently, is a crucial component in their styles. In fact, this results in the blurring of boundaries between simplistic binaries of the apparent and the real. The silhouette, that only uses the black and white in a frame, is used by Walker to ironically reflect on problematic themes that make us question simplistic classifications. The shadow-like appearances of the silhouette style ensure that there is little scope for us to narrow down exactly what the artwork shows—"Though the world Kara Walker creates is black and white, figuratively and literally, she delights in gray areas, creating tensions between sex and violence, lovemaking and rape, nurturing and homosexuality and bestiality, black and white" (Searles 20). Our general approach towards any art is to engage our vision both in colour and details—it helps us distinguish between what the art tries to show. This attempt at comprehensibility is completely overturned by Walker as her work admits neither colour, nor detailing of specific features outside of the very basic outline. Likewise, Morrison's conscious fusion of the real and the supernatural exhorts us to question the believability of what we deem as real. It forces us to see how the real, especially in the world of *Beloved*, is more unbelievable than the supernatural. For instance, the brutalities that Morrison vividly accounts for in the novel—the murder of a child by her own mother, human experimentation, brutal rape and torturous deaths—make us question whether these are real at all. On the flip side, Beloved's presence is utterly normalized and woven into real life.

In Walker and Morrison, similarities emerge also in some thematic areas of emphasis in their expressions. The slave woman is an overarching area of discussion in both their expressions, but they streamline along a few recurring motifs. Notable among them is the use of breasts and milk as a trope that depicts, in multiple ways, a shared sense of perception in both their expressions. This shared sense of perception is of the lack of milk. In a detail within "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven" (1995), Walker depicts three slave women suckling at each other's breasts, while a baby reaches out for a breast but cannot suckle. There are several ways in which this detail could be interpreted, especially in comparison to *Beloved*. Several critics have noticed the striking sense of urgency within these women as they stretch out their necks to suckle. This implicitly suggests the lack of the milk, beyond just

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<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who theorized on interpreting signs and symbols and extensively. One of the primary distinctions he made to understand signs was to divide them between the signifier—information that is readily available from a particular sign; and the signified—information that the viewer interprets from his/her own analysis. Perez here applies this theoretical understanding to Walker's art.

<sup>3</sup> "Magical realism, magic realism, or marvelous realism is a style of fiction that paints a realistic view of the modern world while also adding magical elements. It is sometimes called fabulism, in reference to the conventions of fables, myths, and allegory." ("Magic Realism")

the satiation that arises from appetite, but actually deprivation on a deeper, metaphorical level, a generational deprivation of maternal care. This thirst for milk, in a sense, is reminiscent not only of that in *Beloved* for Sethe but also in Sethe for her own mother. In the text, Sethe, as the child of a slave woman, is deprived of any experience of being mothered. She has very little chance to interact with her or develop any sort of a lasting bond. Likewise, her act of killing her daughter deprives her of the same maternal care. The overweening, unspoken agent behind this deprivation is slavery. In Walker's art too, the three women, located at three different levels in the art piece, suggest a similar generational history of want. The hunger in Sethe is the hunger that these women too have, it is what causes them to reach out in such earnest to have their fill. Michele Mock notes, "If milk can be viewed symbolically as a mother's present and enduring love, then lack of milk can suggest maternal abandonment" (119). This grave reality of hunger then, can be seen as an extended metaphor for the deprivation of maternal care. This is even more relevant to *Beloved*, as one of the most horrifying incidents in the text outline the 'taking' of Sethe's milk by his slave owner, Schoolteacher, assisted by two white boys, as a part of human experimentation to outline scientific differences in characteristics between white-skinned people and black-skinned people. Mock notes how Sethe makes a claim over her milk so strongly that this taking of her milk symbolizes the taking of something she owned—"Ownership suggests responsibility, and responsibility leads to power" (120). This symbol of milk as power is a strong undercurrent in Walker's "Uncle Tom". It suggests a sense of community in womanhood and depicts power arising out of a disempowered group within society, all of which are very pertinent areas of emphasis in Morrison's *Beloved*. What complicates this piece, however, is the infant in the picture, who reaches out to suckle but cannot fulfill its thirst. The immediate point of reference that strikes in context to Morrison, is the deprivation *Beloved* faces as an infant. However, by pitting satiation of the women with deprivation of the infant, Walker fuses the image of holistic communion and tragic exclusion. Resolution, even in *Beloved*, is never complete. At the end of the novel, the woman community comes together to exorcise *Beloved* and save Sethe and she suddenly goes away. The sudden vanishing of *Beloved* does not depict a wholesome end, and after all, the novel itself ends with the term "Beloved" (324). Just like the image of the infant in this detail, the image of *Beloved* remains a hindrance in the way of a holistic resolution, perhaps of the certainty of the elimination of *Beloved*. The similarity present in Walker and Morrison's works depicts the complex reality of several African American women who survived and lived after the Civil War<sup>4</sup>.



(Fig. 1: Walker, "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven", Detail 1995, Cut Paper)

The breastfeeding trope repeats itself in "Consume" (1998). It depicts a young boy, presumed by several critics as white due to his features and dressing, sucking on what seems like the phallic appendages of an ethnically featured woman while she suckles on her own breast. Several critics have noted that this could perhaps allude to Josephine Baker, an African American dancer and singer in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Paris, who was known to dress in a banana skirt costume. By co-opting the exotic stereotypes of Europeans about coloured women, that included ideas of their overtly sexual features, Baker actually capitalized on the markets

<sup>4</sup>The Civil War was a significant historical landmark in American history, it was fought between the American North, and the American South, a collection of eleven southern states, known informally as the Confederate, that fought to preserve the institution of slavery, while the former fought against it.

and established a career out of it. Schollaert quotes Amy Tang in her essay:

The allusion to Baker in this work as well as the female figure's sucking on her own breast could be an indicator of the power found in using the limited agency available to women in order to provide for oneself. Baker profited from her manipulation of stereotypes. As the female figure in *Consume* provides for herself in her 'self-nourishment'. (28)

The idea of milk as power continues here, as it did in "Uncle Tom". The idea of providing for oneself also becomes significant. The presence of the boy however, prevents this from being a wholesome picture. This strange pedophilic depiction perhaps is of more importance on a symbolic level. The child could represent the submission of European audiences to this sexualized and exoticized image of the Other, which in turn becomes beneficial for the black woman in question (Schollaert 29). Walker introduces a deliberate ambiguity by intermingling the feminine image of breastfeeding with the sexual image of the sucking of a phallic appendage. In *Beloved* too, Morrison constantly juxtaposes the sexual facet of breasts with the motherly connotations attached to it.

While the possibilities of drawing a direct comparison between "Consume" and *Beloved* are limited, it is worth noting that both Morrison and Walker seem to put preferential emphasis on the symbolic over the apparent. The sexual encounter between Paul D and Beloved, described earlier, is more important for the symbolic importance it has rather than the literal discomfort that one would have at their union. It signifies the breaking free of Paul D's locked up, masculine heart by Beloved, who herself is a symbol of the past, of what is remembered and what is forgotten. Similarly, *Consume* prioritizes the symbolic importance of a coloured woman sustaining herself by letting a white audience 'consume' the exoticized stereotypes of her kind.



(Fig. 2: Walker, "Consume", 1998, Cut paper)

The portrayal of violence and aggression of different kinds is a recurring motif in Walker's art. Violence is shown in similar thematic context in Morrison's texts as well. The female body of slaves and black women attract immense attention in their works. In *Beloved*, the women—Sethe, Ella and the various mammy figures<sup>5</sup> are subjected to various kinds of violence that materialises through the abasement of their bodies. The reduction of the slave woman as an object of experiment, a recipient of sexual aggression or a breastfeeding machine is critically linked to the denial of her bodily autonomy. The reclaiming of the body, in whatever way, thus, is seen as a sign of rebellion against subjugation and succumbing to aggression. For Sethe, the attempted killing of her children is essentially rebellion. Schoolteacher deprived Sethe of her freedom by taking her milk, taking what was truly hers, and Sethe's unflinching resolve to kill her own children presents the reclaiming of her autonomy:

<sup>5</sup> "A mammy, also spelled mammie, is a U.S. stereotype, especially in the Southern states, for a black woman who worked in a white family and nursed the family's children." ("Mammy archetype")



Some other way, he said. There must have been some other way. Let schoolteacher haul us away I guess, to measure your behind before he tore it up? I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw a breath without my children. (Morrison 240)

For Sethe her own body is no different from the body of her children. As a mother, her identity is no different from that of her children. In this sense, the infanticide of *Beloved* is suicide for Sethe. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos notes, "For Sethe, like Sophie, to kill her daughter is to kill her own best self, to kill her best and self-gendered fantasy of the future" (53). The implications of what it means to kill a child are similar in Walker's art. Just as the killing of *Beloved* is both a symbol of rebellion and a symbol of the destruction of a future, in Walker too, the death of the girl symbolizes these exact things. "Burn" (1997), a cut-paper silhouette by her, depicts a pre-pubescent black slave girl setting herself ablaze. There are no visible signs of distress in the girl. The smoke that arises from the fire shows silhouettes of tomb stones in a cemetery. Most importantly, the side profile of the smoke is a silhouette of a black woman whose lips kiss the air. Just as Sethe's ultimate act of rebellion against her slave masters is the taking of the lives of her own children, the girl's act of killing her own self is a reclamation of what is hers, her own body. Commenting on the art, Perez observes, "Suicide in the antebellum era reflected a destruction of the white master's possessions and therefore an assault on his inherent power. What results is the disruption of power relations between master and slave, giving the latter the final say" (4).

In "Cut" (1998), we see the extension of a similar idea. What seems like a pleasant image of a girl swinging at first glance actually depicts a young slave woman who has slit her wrists with a razor blade, resulting in blood spouting from her hands, collecting in puddles to her left: "When reflecting on this act of personal freedom, it arouses at once both moods of sadness and bliss, in that it was a certain ultimate act of defiance upon the enslaved woman's white owner" (Perez 7). The juxtaposition of the overall jovial mood of the art with the bleak reality of its reflection poignantly points out how the liberation of the girl is synonymous to the taking of her own life. This odd idea of romantic happiness and liberation at the end of an extremely gory act persists in *Beloved* as well. The future Sethe conceives for herself and her children by killing them is hardly bleak—she wants to go to the 'other side' after dying, outside the clutches of slavery that threatens the real future of her children. Like the women in Walker's silhouettes, Sethe's idea of freedom is synonymous to violence and to the taking away of something that belongs to her.



(Fig. 3: Walker, "Burn", 1997, Cut paper)

The black woman is central to Walker and Morrison, and to their modes of expression. Whether it is the trope of breasts, sexual and other kinds of violence and rebellion, the black woman is inextricably associated with their reflections. Several critics have also posited a conscious ousting of the male presence in their respective works. The world of *Beloved*, and the resolution Morrison offers, testifies for this idea. The

envisioning of a matriarchal world is likewise a central myth that Walker utilizes in her works (Searles 21).

Many critics have argued if the method Walker uses to reflect this idea is at all empowering. Walker's choice to depict unsettling themes with such ambiguity has been met with criticism by several artists, other African American women included. It has also been suggested that the sexual and exoticized content is limited in scope for providing an authentic depiction of the experience of a disadvantaged community, and is actually just a stunt at sensationalising suffering. However, this view is also not wholly correct—cultural critic and Harvard professor of African American studies Henry Louis Gate defends Walker's work calling it an example of artistic exorcism: “only the visually illiterate could mistake this post-modern critique as a realistic portrayal, and this is the difference between the racist original and the post-modern, anti-racist parody that characterizes this genre” (Searles 31). That is, Walker's art is not the perpetuation of stereotypes but a satirical exposure on them.



(Fig. 4: Walker, “Cut” 1998, Cut paper)

Morrison's choice to narrate the story of a woman who killed her own children is also very out of the ordinary. Morrison received criticism for showing oppression within the black community and it was argued, like in Walker's case, that her portrait of the African American community was not empowering. Walker and Morrison approach areas that would be disconcerting to most people because it is essential in order to truly depict the inhuman, often inconceivable nature of traumas that slaves were forced to face in their day-to-day realities. More than anything, this is probably why neither of them provide outright defences or attacks on their characters or their works. The innate greyness and ambiguity within their works is what, above all, unites them at a fundamental level as creative women from the black community.

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# Othering and Social Conflict in Graphic Narratives

## An analysis of *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana*

Ishani Pant

*Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* are graphic narratives centered around notions of social dissimilarities, distance and disagreements. Although *Tokyo Ghoul* is a highly symbolic fantasy manga and *Bhimayana* is a biographical account of B. R. Ambedkar's life, comparison of the two reveals the pervasive nature of in-group, out-group conflict. It allows analysis of severe psychological attacks on identities, and their expression through visual mediums. Injustice faced by Dalits, and the marginality of ghouls can be linked and contrasted to comprehend social discrimination and disintegration of individual personality. The resemblance lies in the tensions encompassed within the two graphic narratives, pointing to the tendency of human society to hierarchise.

A comparison of *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* as graphic narratives representing conflict, provides insight into the processes of othering and domination in society. While one deals with a fictional and symbolic narrative, another discusses the very real issue of caste discrimination and atrocities. What brings the two narratives together is the manner in which they portray the divide between social groups. The notions that sustain unfair hierarchies and regulations are dismantled by depicting the destructiveness of the system, and its impact on the lives of individuals. Additionally, the graphic narratives make use of powerful visual imagery of physical and psychological struggle, and document the protests of the protagonists against power structures and stereotypes.

*Tokyo Ghoul* is a manga series written and illustrated by Sui Ishida which follows the transformation of a high school boy Ken Kaneki into a ghouls<sup>1</sup>. The story is set in a fictional Tokyo plagued by ghouls, creatures that are human in every way except their biological need to consume human meat. While several theories regarding the origins of ghouls can be speculated upon, the larger purpose of the manga is to represent a crumbling society torn apart by group conflicts and blur the lines between human and monster.

Initially, the manga depicts humans and ghouls existing within a seemingly normative society, however as the plot progresses, the social scenario is revealed to be abnormally chaotic. The difference between the two groups, although biological, symbolises the social distinctions present among all communities. The depiction of social differences as intrinsic biological distinctions lays emphasis on how communal grouping fragments society by justifying some indisputable, inalienable and naturally occurring basis of in-group, out-group conflict. For the human society, the ghouls are perceived as too monstrous to be desirable and are therefore condemned to annihilation.

On the other hand, *Bhimayana*, focuses on the specific issue of caste related conflicts rather than the larger breakdown of social systems. The similarity between works like *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* lies in the use of story telling and dialogue to portray side-lined groups.

*Tokyo Ghoul*, being of Japanese origin addresses social concerns of a similar order but the dimensions do not completely correlate with the caste issue. Therefore, what we see in the manga is a social setup on the brink of anarchy, rampant with intense group conflict and the effort to empathise with a demonised other. All of this combines to act as a mirror for present day society. Within this framework, caste can be placed and analysed as part of the oppressive and convoluted system. The main struggle is shown to be contingent on survival, that is, if humans don't destroy ghouls, and if Brahmins don't subjugate Dalits, the in-group will be endangered and will lose its power. The main tool used by powerful groups is that of popular narrative, leaving little to no space for alternate methods of assimilation or ideation on how to bring social groups together.

### Art and Thematic Style

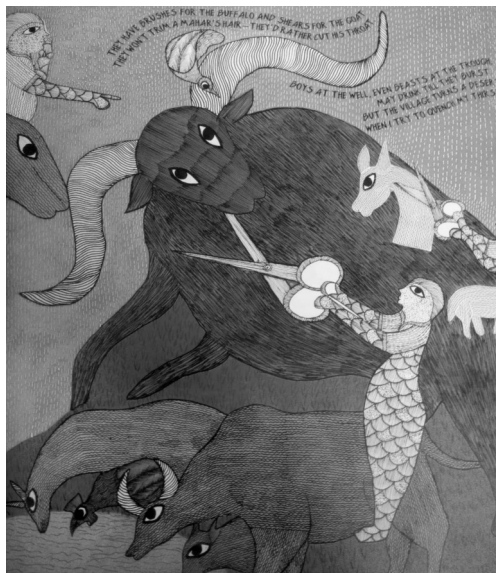
As a graphic novel, *Bhimayana* is a compact narrative focusing on the life of a single individual, but exploring the various aspects of a larger social issue. It is divided into three parts titled 'water', 'shelter'

<sup>1</sup> Kaneki is almost consumed by the ghouls Rize, but she is unable to finish and killed in a fateful accident. Her body parts are implanted into Kaneki to save his life by doctor Kanou. It is later revealed that this was not incidental, and actually an experiment orchestrated by the Clowns.

and ‘travel’, and linked by the conversation between the unaware man and the aware woman who educates him on caste related issues. As a manga, *Tokyo Ghoul* is a longer narrative, with greater complexity. Kaneki’s journey comprises the primary plot and all the subplots are associated with it in some capacity. It follows a linear progression, interspersed with flashbacks and the criss-crossing of characters’ stories. Due to the intricacy of the plot, the stories of other ghouls and humans are used to supplement Kaneki’s perspective and purpose. Similarly, by exploring the levels at which Ambedkar and other members of the Dalit community face discrimination, the experiences of caste violence are personalised, as is Ambedkar’s identity as a leader.

Ambedkar had warned his followers against making a personality cult out of his name and was deeply contemptuous of the subservient political culture rife among Congress Party workers, especially vis-à-vis the cult of Gandhi. The irreverent style of Pardhan Gondi art helps facilitate this de-iconising, by drawing Ambedkar’s individuality as inseparable from the collective destiny of his caste people (Chandra 2).

*Bhimayana* deals with a complicated problem in the Indian society. To illustrate the dynamic nature of caste violence on identity, the graphic novel format is blended with tribal Gond Art. The use of natural imagery and the lack of prescriptive panels are unique to the indigenous form. The Vyams, illustrators of *Bhimayana* have said, regarding their work: “We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is khulla (open) where there’s space for all to breathe” (qtd. in Anand et al. 100). Furthermore, many non-living entities are given human attributes, while parts of nature are colourful and all humans are black and white. This depicts the sameness of all people by dismantling social barriers and the diversity and value of nature celebrated by Gond Art.



(Fig. 1: 23, Anand et al, *Bhimayana*)

Thus, the artistic style reflects the nature of the issue being discussed. B. R. Ambedkar’s life story and struggle is related to the larger issue of caste and his identity as a member of the Dalit community, and also as its leader. The negotiation between the past and present, and the macro dilemma of all lower caste individuals is explored through Ambedkar’s personal experiences.

The journalistic checkpoints and the narrator’s explanations to the unaware man<sup>2</sup> become subplots of their own and the story is given life as readers empathise with a man who was earlier known to them only through statues and fleeting mentions in history books.

*Tokyo Ghoul* shares certain artistic similarities with other fantasy/horror genre manga, which have a tendency to be extremely violent and use darker shades and sharper brush strokes. Popular mangas in this

<sup>2</sup> The unaware man in *Bhimayana* is an upper caste individual who does not realise or accept the full impact of caste discrimination on the lives of Dalit individuals. The graphic novel begins with his complaints against reservation as a system of affirmative action which he finds unnecessary and unfair. The aware woman, on the other hand, focuses her efforts towards educating him on the issues of caste by narrating the story of Ambedkar and other instances of caste conflict.

genre follow a highly convoluted and suspense-filled plotline with issues depicted in a harrowing manner to add layers of complexity and put forth unravelable moral questions. A few examples are *Attack on Titan* or '*Shingeki no Kyojin*', *Death Note*, *Another*, *Bradherley's Coach* or '*Bradherley no Basha*', which make use of graphic imagery, complex overlapping subplots, and artwork to complement the narratives.



(Fig. 2: Ishida vol. 1<sup>3</sup>,  
*Tokyo Ghoul*)



(Fig. 3: Ishida vol. 7,  
*Tokyo Ghoul*)



(Fig. 4: Ishida vol. 11,  
*Tokyo Ghoul*)



( Fig. 5: Ishida vol. 14,  
*Tokyo Ghoul*)

However, the manga art in *Tokyo Ghoul* is somewhat unique. The cover of each volume is made using water colour, rather than pen and ink. As a result, it gives the impression of being more personalised, and the depiction appears more human and familiar. The black and white illustrations reflect the convoluted plot-line and are often unclear, both in terms of character's expressions and action taking place. In contrast, the coloured covers depict specific characters, and capture their detailed expression. The colour and the position of these images on the cover add an emphasis on personalised narratives of the particular characters. Additionally, the volume covers depict the evolution of Kaneki as the protagonist of the manga by showing how his state of mind changes and is expressed emotionally as the plot progresses. *Tokyo Ghoul* presents the action of the story through the individual experiences of characters, and the serialised form of manga allows most chapters to focus on particular accounts, threaded together under a volume. By painting characters onto the volume covers, readers are also made to pay attention to the orientation of the manga, and the process of characterisation. Thus, it makes way for the readers to subconsciously link the humanness of the characters on the volume covers to a seemingly exalted plot and the black-and-white art within the manga.

### The Basis of Discrimination

The basis of differentiation between ghouls and humans is biological<sup>4</sup>. Due to an increased amount of 'Rc Cells' and transformed digestive systems, they are unable to consume anything but human meat and other foods are regurgitated to prevent sickness. The construction of the ghouls' taste buds is unique, causing human food to taste vile. Ghouls are also endowed with 'kagune' which are clusters of 'Rc Cells' that are unleashed during times of threat. Although this seems like an evidently unbridgeable gap, there are several alternatives available in the series like consuming the meat of deceased humans and much later in the sequel *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, synthetic food for ghouls is under development.

Ironically, as far as human-ghoul relations go, the dietary or biological factors are not always a primary impediment. Several human-ghoul relationships function smoothly with an acceptance and understanding of the differences between each other. Nishiki, a ghouls and a high school student, has a human girlfriend, Kimi, who embraces his ghouls nature. Hide, a human, and Kaneki continue to be best friends even after Kaneki's transformation. Yoriko is Touka's best friend who does not know about her ghouls nature. Touka eats all the meals Yoriko prepares for her as an aspiring chef, despite the fact that they deteriorate Touka's health and taste putrid to her. The best example of a loving but painful human-ghouls relationship is Yoshimura and his human lover Ukina. Yoshimura is forced by the V organisation, a dominant and

<sup>3</sup>The Volume covers express Kaneki's internal states of turmoil and his gradual transformation.

<sup>4</sup> According to a popular theory, ghouls evolved from humans through forced experimentation by underground organisations with the support of the government. Humans were made to feed on each other and the naturally low 'Rc Cell' count in the humans increased due to this consumption. Eventually this led to the creation of ghouls, a project which was perhaps meant to give humans evolved regenerative abilities and sharper senses. ("Tokyo Ghoul Theory")

secretive ghoulish group, to kill her, so that he might protect their child. “In the end he hadn’t known her very well, all he knew was that he loved her...his last and only hope was the fruit of a human and a ghoul.” (Ishida vol. 12, ch. 119)

Unlike the situation of the ghouls, the basis of caste discrimination is not biological, although it is often justified as being biological by upper castes who label lower castes as intrinsically lesser. “A sudra though emancipated by his master, is not released from state of servitude; for being born in a state which is natural to him, by whom can he be divested of his natural attributes?” (Phule 8)

The Hindu social fabric which has been moulded by mythology, one-sided history and scripture, is what contains the foundation of caste discrimination. Jyotirao Phule traces the origin of the struggle back to the conquest of the Aryans, progenitors of the Brahmins and the aborigines who were labelled as ‘shudra’.

...From the mythological legends contained in the sacred books of the Brahmins, it is evident that there had been a hard struggle for ascendancy between the two races. The wars of Devas and Daityas, or the Rakshasas, about which so many fictions are found scattered over the sacred books of the Brahmins, have certainly a reference to this primeval struggle. (Phule 6)

The basis of untouchability and other forms of heinous discrimination are sacred texts and laws like the Manusmriti. Social control is used to suppress Dalits using a caste hierarchy, often resorting to aggression and lynching. Ambedkar noted, “If the fundamental rights are opposed to the community, no Law, no Parliament, no Judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word.” (qtd. in Roy 12)

*Bhimayana*, follows the life experiences of B. R. Ambedkar who faced oppression as a member of the Mahar caste, deemed to be untouchables. The story links the past of Dalits in India to the present through Ambedkar’s biography and the conversation of two common citizens—one representing the popular view of ignorance, and the other acting as the educator. In this manner, the graphic novel exposes the plight of Dalits as a community occupying the lowest strata of the Indian society. The news clippings present the struggle of the majority of lower castes who face even greater suppression due to a lack of education and extreme poverty. Omprakash Valmiki discusses the dehumanising effect of caste in his autobiography *Joothan*. “They did not call us by our names...The Chuhras<sup>5</sup> were not seen as human. They were simply things for use.” (29)

At large, in the manga, ghouls must live solitary lives because they are unable to assimilate in a society that fears and hates them, and works towards their extermination. For example, Touka’s father, who had tried to raise his children in the human world, was killed by the CCG despite the fact that they only fed on meat from graves. He had once told his children: “Since we are ghouls, in order to live in this world we have to blend into our surroundings and behave the same as a human would.” (Ishida vol. 8, ch. 70)



(Fig. 6: Ishida vol. 9, ch. 86, *Tokyo Ghoul*)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Chuhras are a lower caste group traditionally assigned to the occupation of sweeping within the caste system. They are considered untouchables and the concept of ‘pollution’ is associated with them. They are also known as Bhangi or Valmiki.

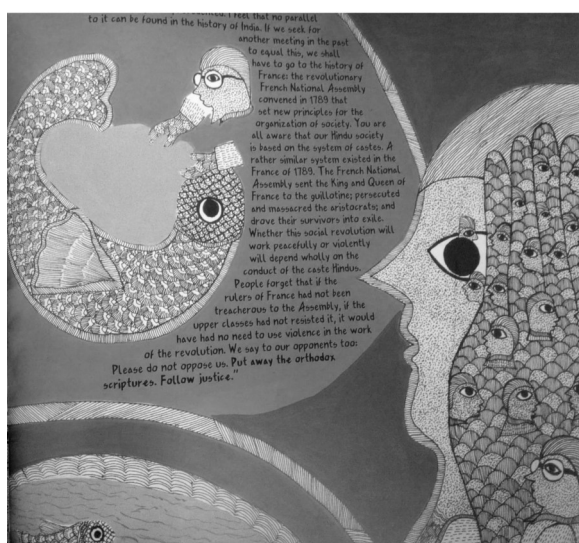
<sup>6</sup> Both are scenes of tenderness and warmth in the ghoul world.

Hence we mainly see ghouls either living as hermits or joining gangs, powerful organisations, and attacking humans to gain some control. Those who attempt to live among humans find it extremely difficult; they often don't reveal themselves as ghouls, or are rejected by the human society. Additionally, no efforts are made on part of the larger authoritative bodies to accommodate ghouls into society. Organisations like the Commission of Counter Ghoul (CCG) exists as an executive body and great amount of funds are allocated to research regarding ghouls eradication. But little to no discourse exists on substituting human meat with supplements of some kind, until much later in the sequel, *Tokyo Ghoul:re*.

Irrespective of the reasoning, the result is that both ghouls and Dalits are distanced from mainstream society. Dalits are made to eat and drink separately due to fear of pollution and they are prohibited from living in close proximity of the caste-conscious villages. Both groups must either live in secret or protest by consolidating power through formation of interest groups, political movements, petitions and so on. In the mayhem of the *Tokyo Ghoul* world, the political agitation is replaced with full-out war and ghouls react aggressively.

In this alternative Japan, Tokyo is divided into districts which play an important role in the division of CCG forces and ghouls layouts. The districts are only numerically described, imparting an impression of impersonality and neutral organisation, a feature common to post-apocalyptic areas. This system allows CCG and ghouls groups to make territorial claims over districts, adding a geographical element to the human-ghoul conflict. In *Bhimayana*, the issues of water and shelter are important features of caste related discrimination. Due to the notions of pollution and impurity, major water sources, especially in village areas are cut off from the Dalits. Dalits are forced to live in shoddy areas at the edge of the main village, away from where the upper caste people reside. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki describes how the area where the lower castes were made to live was used as an excretion ground for the upper caste women:

There was muck strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering... the pigs wandering the narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind. (28)



(Fig. 7: 49, Anand et al, *Bhimayana*)

Ambedkar is denied water as a little boy in school, later when he is travelling to Masur, and even in his adult life when he visits a fort in Daulatabad with several colleagues. In 1927, Ambedkar organised the Mahad Satyagrah to liberate the Chavdar water tank from the exclusive control of the upper castes. This movement was historic because territorial reclamation is important for the integration of lower castes into mainstream society. According to Ambedkar,

They prevent untouchables from drinking the water not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. The reason is they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals. (qtd. in Anand and Natarajan 48)



In the second section of *Bhimayana*, Ambedkar is denied shelter in Baroda despite his respectable position as a highly educated man. Geographical distancing between upper castes and lower castes dictates that specific spaces be denied to untouchables because they are not only social outcasts but also physically abhorrent to upper caste sensibilities.

As far as safe geographical spaces go, Arundhati Roy in *The Doctor and the Saint* cites examples of utopias for Dalits created by Bhakti poets in their writing.

... The subaltern Bhakti saints sang of towns. They sang of towns in timeless places, where Untouchables would be liberated from ubiquitous fear, from unimaginable indignity ... For Ravidas ... that place was Be-gham-pura, the City without Sorrow... For Tukaram, the city was Pandharpur, where everybody was equal... For Kabir, it was Premnagar, the City of Love. Ambedkar's utopia was a pretty hard-nosed one. It was, so to speak, the City of Justice—worldly justice. (33-34)

For the lower caste individual to be truly free he has to reside in the ideal world where the baggage of caste does not plague him. Mainstream society may attempt to modernise itself, but traces of harsh judgement remain entrenched in the elitist behaviour of privileged castes as long as they dominate the geographical space. Hira Bansode's poem *Bosom Friend* reflects on this theme by narrating an instance of inter-dining. "But the moment you looked at the plate...with a smirk you said...you still don't know how to serve food truly, you folk will never improve" (51)

The ghouls who reside in Anteiku, a small coffee shop and secret ghoulish haven, are able to freely form friendships, and grow emotionally as social beings. Anteiku harbours ghouls who do not hunt humans and instead feed off bodies from suicide victims and the deceased. The ghouls work as waiters in the coffee shop which caters to humans too, allowing ghouls a space in which they can safely, but secretly exist amidst members of mainstream society. On the other hand, organisations like Aogiri Tree and the Clowns<sup>7</sup> have a radical outlook and wish to reclaim spaces for ghouls even at the cost of human and ghoulish lives. Ambedkar's struggle to introduce separate electorates and frame a just constitution was ultimately a means of reclaiming social and geographical spaces for Dalits through the process of law-making.

Othering and xenophobia are the primary emotions expressed towards ghouls. In a similar manner, the threat of Dalit social mobility plagues upper castes who want to retain their reserved positions of power. The 1990 anti-Mandal<sup>8</sup> protests and the 2006 anti-reservation protests<sup>9</sup> are two major incidents of upper caste insecurity. Affirmative action like reservation has been opposed in the past, because it makes way for some subversion of the draconian system, and opens dialogue regarding Dalit rights. Narrative building is achieved through sacred texts and practices which define a specific norm and determine the lower caste lifestyle as deviant. Ambedkar wrote, "For what is sacred literature? It is a literature which is almost entirely the creation of the Brahmins. Secondly, its whole object is to sustain the superiority and privileges of the Brahmins as against the non-Brahmins." ("Who Were the Shudras" 56)

The basis of caste is a social creation that can be historically placed as part of the power dynamics. According to Ambedkar, "the doctrine that the different classes were created from different parts of the divine body has generated the belief that it must be divine will that they should remain separate and distinct." ("Caste in India" 84)

As shown in *Bhimayana*, Ambedkar attempts to overturn historical narratives by burning the Manusmriti during the Second Mahad Satyagraha. In modern India the role of the media is important, given the lack of presence of caste related conflict in the mainstream papers. Media houses are rarely owned by Dalits and this is a serious disadvantage in the battle for denouncing popular casteist narratives. Ambedkar notes,

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<sup>7</sup>The Clowns are majorly described in *Tokyo Ghoul:re*. They are a group of ghouls who do not make their purpose clear, and appear to have destructive goals. The Clowns are secretly involved in several major events and practice their influence over many of the large organisations, while remaining inconspicuous. They represent an extremist vision within the manga, and destroy both ghouls and humans who inhibit their actions.

<sup>8</sup>In 1979 the Mandal Commission was set up to look into the policy of reservation, and officially classify the socially and educationally backward classes in India. This was meant to redress caste discrimination, however upper caste students lead strikes and rioted against the move, resulting in the 1990 anti-Mandal protests.

<sup>9</sup>In 2006, the Union government's decision to implement reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC's) in higher educational institutes was met with protests held by upper caste students. These were referred to as the 2006 anti-reservation protests.

The Untouchables have no press...The staff of the Associated Press in India, which is the main news distributing agency in India, is entirely drawn from the Madras Brahmins—indeed the whole of the Press in India is in their hands...These are reasons beyond the control of the Untouchables. (qtd. in Roy 20)

The narrative of human-ghoul conflict of interests is also perpetrated by the media with the depiction of ghouls as monsters whom humans must be alerted towards. The ghouls have no medium via which they can change the narrative, and the notion of anarchy seeps in because scope for change appears to be negligible.

Ambedkar's story in *Bhimayana* shows how he is forced to keep his Dalit identity secret at several points in order to avoid ostracisation. Ghouls similarly wear masks when searching for food to prevent being recognised and hunted by CCG later on. All ghouls are by default criminals of the highest order. It is ironic, however, that ghouls who pretend to be humans for the sake of survival are accepted at face value, because ultimately there is no real distinction in the human and ghoul emotional and behavioural responses. Ambedkar is also accepted by the Brahmin man on the train to Baroda because he appears to be a non-Dalit.

The manga begins with the idea of human sentiments comprising the side of morality and ghoul instincts as the darker end of the spectrum. However the development of the plot blurs these black-and-white labels by showing the struggle within each character, human and ghoul, to negotiate with the dark emotions within. "Kaneki... you are the one person with a place in both worlds." (Ishida vol. 12 ch. 119)

Ken Kaneki as the protagonist is in the center of this struggle, and the external battle that occurs on a larger scale is a reflection of his personal battle between the human and ghoul halves of himself. Ironically, the final harmony Kaneki arrives at, indicates that the fight between the two 'sides' is fictitious. Yoshimura says to him,

The thing that you are trying to throw away is half of what makes you who you are... As you walk the line between humans and ghouls you should give it some thought...it would be good if you could help lonely souls. (Ishida vol. 12, ch. 119)

The dark elements of ghoul psychology are not necessarily 'inhuman' and actually stem from deep trauma in the past. Touka, Yomo, Eto, Hinami are ghouls who have watched loved ones get murdered by the CCG or other powerful forces and their helplessness drove them to gain strength. Yomo's words as he recounts the past can be applied to the suffering of other characters as well,

If you're a ghoul then you must've heard a story like this before. I had an older sister, my parents and older brother were killed... she died... The one that killed my sister was a specially appointed ghoul investigator. (Ishida vol. 12, ch. 112)

Some ghouls were able to deal with their pain non-violently, while others plotted revenge. The same dark psychological elements are also prevalent in the behaviour of human characters. Some CCG investigators are motivated by their past trauma, but some humans display horrifically psychotic behaviour, no less than that of many of the rogue ghouls. Symbolically this fight between the two forces is a portrayal of the dark struggle between people on the basis of some false ascertained difference. It is an exaggerated form of the in-group, out-group conflict taken to an extreme level.

Kaneki as a former human turned ghoul is able to understand the importance of integration. Amon, a former CCG investigator forcefully turned into a ghoul draws a similar conclusion after much struggle. Humans like Hide (Kaneki's best friend), Kimi (Nishiko's girlfriend), and Ukina (Yoshimura's lover) also accept ghouls as part of their personal lives, allowing us to empathize with ghouls and presenting evidence of harmonious intermixing among groups.



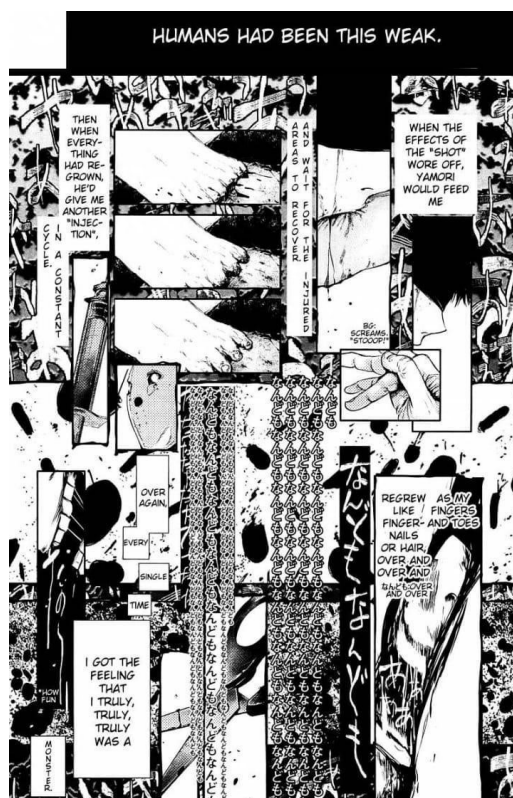
(Fig. 8: 12, Anand et al, *Bhimayana*)

*Bhimayana* presents a similar ideological dilemma, with upper castes refusing to recognise the unfair position lower caste communities are thrust into, obliterating space for dialogue. Positive changes in such adamant opinions only become possible when individuals like the aware woman are able to narrate personal struggles like those of Ambedkar's to the ignorant and casteist, to raise the level of awareness. Thanks to her initiative, by the end of the graphic novel the unaware man is able to sympathise with the Dalit struggle and this acceptance of the Dalit narrative helps pave way for future discourse and reconciliation.

### A Biographical Analysis

Both *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* revolve around an individual oppressed character working to empower himself and his community. Readers can perceive from *Tokyo Ghoul*'s plot that ghouls wish to be part of human society, and their reactions of violence or isolation are a result of rejection. When Ken Kaneki is surgically turned into a half-ghoul, he ceases to be part of the human society. The manga commences with his endeavour to overcome repudiation. The personalising of the issue is a means of seeing these political leaders as humans and comprehending their trials in the context of their ostracised status. Both Kaneki and Ambedkar undergo growth and transformation before reaching their final roles as leaders.

Kaneki's transformation is highly violent because it combines the force of the entire phenomenon of hateful discrimination. The violence Kaneki experiences before his transformation is physical and bloody. He is tortured by another ghoul, Yamori, also known as Jason, who acts psychotically because he was previously tortured by a human till he reached the point of madness. Once Kaneki breaks free, his strength increases exponentially and he consumes Yamori in a frenzied act of cannibalism. Kaneki's post-traumatic insanity is expressed through his extreme need to ensure the safety of the people he loves. He repeats a phrase Yamori had said during the torture, and combines it with his compulsive need to protect: "All the injustice in this world is a result of one's lack of ability... If I'm weak everyone will be killed." (Ishida vol. 11, ch. 103)



(Fig. 9: Ishida vol. 5, ch. 61, *Tokyo Ghoul*)

He takes on the leadership position of a ghoul movement to guard their rights. He continues to shift between bursts of radicalism and moderate approaches.

In *Bhimayana*, Ambedkar grows from a young boy subjugated by the caste system, into a man empowered by his education. He takes up the role of a Dalit leader and becomes part of the drafting committee of the constitution to provide legal relief to lower caste groups. Finally, his disillusion with the system after the rejection of the Hindu Code Bill leads to his renunciation of politics to adopt full time activism and conversion to Buddhism. “Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic.” (qtd. in Anand et al. 92)

These decisions are a result of the psychological violence Ambedkar faces, as visually portrayed in *Bhimayana* through tribal art and poetry. “They have brushes for the buffalo and shears for the goat, they won’t trim a mahar’s hair- they’d rather cut his throat.” (Anand et al. 23) Ambedkar too shifts between constitutional methods and protesting against the system.

Using the Constitution as a subversive object is one thing. Being limited by it is quite another. Ambedkar’s circumstances forced him to be a revolutionary and to simultaneously put his foot in the door of the establishment whenever he got a chance to... he left behind a dual and sometimes confusing legacy: Ambedkar the Radical, and Ambedkar the Father of the Indian Constitution. (Roy 30)

Both Ambedkar and Kaneki undertake the responsibility of leadership after their personal encounters with injustice.

A question that remains unanswered by the end of *Tokyo Ghoul* is, what does Kaneki achieve? His training to protect loved ones can only go so far, and the extremely different sentiments of humans, ghouls, radical ghouls and the other groups in the manga can hardly be reduced to a lowest common denominator. The futility of struggle in a reinforced social arrangement is repeatedly highlighted. Ambedkar also loses hope in the institution of Hinduism and commits his final act of defiance by converting to Buddhism because he believes the Hindu religion is irreparable. “It was not my fault I was born an untouchable but I am determined I will not die a Hindu.” (qtd. in Anand et al. 92)

## Organisations and Schools of Thought

The several groups and organisations in *Tokyo Ghoul* are an interesting reflection of the larger society, blown out of proportion for the sake of sensitisation. “It’s not only a world for humans, Ayato. It’s certainly true that there are many humans, but we also have our world. And in order to protect that world we have to keep enduring everything.” (Ishida vol. 8, ch. 70)

It is this sentiment expressed innocently by Ayato’s docile father that sums up the motives behind the formation of several ghoul organisations. Unfortunately, carnage ensues when the understanding of protection of one’s world becomes flexible and contradictory for different groups. Similar tensions, like those between Ambedkarite and Gandhian ideologies are represented in *Bhimayana* to provide readers with insight on Ambedkar’s experiences in politics. Given that *Tokyo Ghoul* is a deliberation on general social and political conflict, the different perspectives on the caste issue expressed by leaders like Gandhi, the Indian socialists, Dalit Panthers, the Arya Samaj are important for understanding the politics of caste as well.

The Washuu clan is a highly powerful ghoul group that masterminds the entire situation of chaos. The Washuu control the CCG and thus function like an elite class. They consolidate power through their exploitation of both humans and ghouls. Their strategy is to appear anti-ghoul for the sake of keeping humans appeased while maintaining the status of an elite class that dictates who lives and dies. The Washuu Clan is an ancient and ruthless group that partakes in cannibalism by eating other ghouls. Blurring the lines between weak and strong, predator and prey, this exposes how hierarchies are drawn between ghouls. The ghoul organisation V works closely with the Washuu and does the dirty work on their orders for the sake of maintaining ‘balance’ between ghouls and humans.

What makes the Washuu even more formidable is their anonymous position and false human appearance. They represent an evolved form of control which cannot be questioned because it is inconspicuous and pits two unsuspecting groups against each other (humans and ghouls) that would appear to be naturally opposed. It is a simple divide and rule policy used in a highly chaotic society where nothing can be traced back to the strategists.

The Washuu also partake in inbreeding for their own purposes. Firstly, they practice endogamy often incestuously and non-consensually to create purebreds. Secondly, they also practice a unique kind of exogamy by breeding with human women to create classes of ghoul workers that can be utilised for the clan’s purpose. Essentially then the unique exogamy between Washuu men and human ‘wombs’ is contained within the endogamy because: i) it is not meant to increase exchange with other communities or facilitate intermixing and ii) the sexual union appears to be restricted to upper level Washuu clan men, making it exclusive in order to retain power within their group. Thus the ‘wombs’ are not humanised as part of the other group, and are used only as a means to an end, the end being control over the system through creation of strong foot soldiers. This purely sexual use of the women is even comparable to the sexual exploitation of lower caste and lower class women by upper caste men<sup>10</sup>.

The Clowns<sup>11</sup> are a group of anarchists and show tendencies of nihilism given their belief that life is meaningless. They are of the opinion that nothing can be changed in the situation between humans and ghouls and hold onto chaos. Throughout the manga, they plot and strategise to wreak havoc as part of their plan to attain ultimate freedom. Their movements are essentially motiveless, savage and sociopathic. Thus, the Clowns represent the purposelessness of the eternal struggle between humans and ghouls. Furuta<sup>12</sup>, the leader of the organisation is a hybrid Washuu clan member and wishes to take revenge on the clan. He is a half-ghoul like Kaneki, and in his dying moments, Furuta reveals how he always just wanted a normal life with the ghoul he loved, Rize. The suspension of all hope is what leads these ghouls to take such a radical

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<sup>10</sup> Cases like the Khairlanji massacre, the gang rape of Phoolan Devi, the 2006 case of assault against Bant Singh who was fighting for justice for his daughter who was raped five years prior, are examples of systematised sexual exploitation and violence against lower caste women, by upper caste men. Notions of untouchability and pollution do not apply to rape and sexual harassment. These crimes often go unreported, and unpunished, and are even backed by rural justice systems like Panchayats run by upper caste men.

<sup>11</sup> The Clowns are briefly mentioned in *Tokyo Ghoul* and their role in *Tokyo Ghoul* is explained in *Tokyo Ghoul:re*.

<sup>12</sup> Furuta loses all meaning in his life after Rize abandons him. He has a naturally shortened lifespan as a half-ghoul progeny of the Washuu clan and thus exercises his power to maximise his experiences while alive.

stance. As a contrast, Kaneki the protagonist is able to convert his misery into a driving force to create a better world.

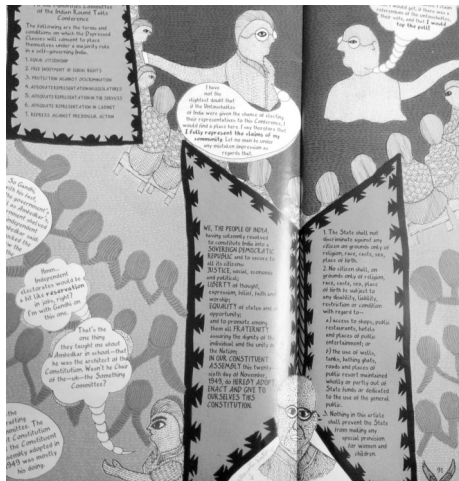


(Fig. 10: Ishida vol. 14 ch. 143, *Tokyo Ghoul*)

Aogiri Tree is another ghoul organisation which focuses on opposing the CCG to create a safer world for ghouls. On the other side of the spectrum, exists the moderate organisation Anteiku, which functions as a coffee shop, practices peaceful living and acts as a safe haven. In the sequel *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, several vociferous organisation which propound compromise between humans and ghouls emerge, like Goat, the United Front and the Tokyo Security Committee (TSC). Kaneki attempts to reasonably determine his political affiliations amidst the variety of approaches.

The caste issue has also been approached by various leaders and thinkers in different ways. In *The Doctor and the Saint*, Arundhati Roy discusses the varied views in detail. As far as Gandhi and the Congress are concerned, they were not truly serious about uplifting lower castes, and their main outlook was unifying the Indian public against the British. In 1916 Gandhi said at a conference:

The vast organisation of caste answered not only the religious wants of the community, but it answered too its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system, and through it they dealt with any oppression from the ruling power or powers. It is not possible to deny the organising capability of a nation that was capable of producing the caste system its wonderful power of organisation (qtd. in Roy 15-16)



(Fig. 11: 90-91, Anand et al, *Bhimayana*)

*Bhimayana* briefly displays the opposing views of Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi believed that he should represent the depressed classes who needed to be saved “against themselves” (qtd. in Anand et al. 91) and the system of separate electorates. An illustration of Gandhi holding an axe visualises how he used fasting and protesting as a weapon.

Roy recounts in *The Doctor and the Saint*, how groups like the Arya Samaj, and their radical branch, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, who acted under the garb of liberalism, were unable to truly discard all traces of casteist mentality. In 1936, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal invited Ambedkar to deliver a speech, but later rejected his speech as too radical because it criticised Hinduism itself as the source of casteism. (Roy 36-37) Ambedkar in “Caste in India” comments on the futility of the Arya Samaj’s opposition to casteism because it promotes the Chaturvarnya system apparently based on merit but adhering to the old caste labels. (96-99)

According to *The Doctor and the Saint*, another group, the Communists, were unable to understand the plight of the uneducated Dalit who did not understand textual theory. (Roy 83) There were no mechanisms mentioned in theory to deal with the unique Indian problem of caste. Given that Communists based their entire ideology on the book, truly underprivileged Dalits were unable to find recourse in this group. Ambedkar criticised the Socialists in his essay “Caste in India” because they believed all changes, social and political, were contingent on economic revolution. He felt that the social reality of something like caste is beyond economic power (89-90). Finally, while a radical group like the Dalit Panthers had great potential to lead a revolutionary movement, it could not materialise over time. Ambedkar reckoned with this political reality and worked towards finding a feasible balance to attain results and retain his ideological stance.

The political backgrounds of *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* are important to the understanding of the human-ghoul conflict and the tumultuous position of the Dalit individual respectively. While there are groups that subjugate for their own upliftment, like the Brahmins and the Washuu, there are other groups that fight for the freedom of the oppressed, using a variety of approaches. The political organisations involved in the fight against caste are of a subtler but more complex nature. The Arya Samaj, the Congress and Gandhi all allegedly support the cause but in reality wish only to use Dalits in the struggle against imperialism, and to maintain the Hindu religion. All the characters in the texts function within these circumstances and are influenced both directly and indirectly. Their internal struggles are informed by the external scenario, and the creation of leaders like Kaneki and Ambedkar in turn determine the political climate.

S. Anand said in an interview, about *Bhimayana*,

...This kind of a book is not meant for the Dalits as such, but they also happen to read it. However, it is [meant] to sensitise the non-Dalit, the privileged-caste [individual], and the privileged-class person, to open their minds to the ideas presented in it, and the wonderful art helps them enter this [world]. (Vellanki 276)

Dalit literature like *Bhimayana* serves the purpose of educating non-Dalits about the issues of inequality. As a graphic novel, *Bhimayana* becomes a means of communicating complex conflicts and political battles through a visual medium focused on awareness. In *Tokyo Ghoul*, the plot line becomes increasingly convoluted as it progresses and the catastrophic, unstable worldview is a reflection of the hopeless situation of reality. Comparatively, *Bhimayana* ends on a more hopeful note, but also leaves us wondering to what degree caste can be remedied in India. The impossibility of the task of answering such questions is embodied in the narrative of *Tokyo Ghoul* with its constant battles, genocides, plot twists, political organisations, and shifting loyalties that create a bleak outlook of the world.

The social position of the ghoul and the Dalit is vastly different because ghouls are not at the bottom of an occupation-based hierarchy that dictates their entire living condition. However, the social ostracisation of both groups, ghouls and Dalits is exercised by distancing them from mainstream societies. Although, *Tokyo Ghoul* does not allow us to make any simple judgements about either group, ghouls are socially disadvantaged due to an uncontrollable biological fact. As Touka says in a moment of outrage, in *Tokyo Ghoul:Days*,

It's all because I can't eat, because I could be a target at any time, all because I'm a ghoul! No matter how much I try, there's a wall I can never jump over, and there's happiness that I can never have. But I'm still hanging on to life. Despite it all. (Towada and Ishida ch. 2)



(Fig. 12: Ishida vol. 8, ch. 70, *Tokyo Ghoul*)

For ghouls the norm is human lives and despite the similar functioning of their psyches, they are denied any entrance into the human world. The battle between humans and ghouls is created by powerful others who would benefit from the chaos, and in all cases the human perspective is given primary importance. For the disenfranchised Dalits, the process of Brahminization ensures that the upper caste lifestyle is acceptable and lower caste lives are dispensable. Lower caste groups face attacks on their identity due to seemingly inalienable, ascribed caste titles. They are persecuted and executed by the system, even through legal institutions, village justice systems, the police force and general methods of social control that outlaws any inter-mixing. The perspective in *Tokyo Ghoul*, like that in *Bhimayana* is to sensitise those in power and society at large to be tolerant and considerate of vulnerable groups, irrespective of historical perception and stereotypes. The approach in *Tokyo Ghoul* is to show the demonised other as human and ultimately pave way for harmonious living amidst differences. The approach in *Bhimayana* is meant to point out the flaws in majoritarian views which demonises and oppresses the out-group. Both approaches are appropriate to the readership and context, given that *Bhimayana* is rooted in a highly hostile Indian environment which would disregard the irony and subtlety of humanising 'monsters' as *Tokyo Ghoul* does. Additionally, the caste riddled Indian society is a one-way system of discrimination, rather than the complex system



shown in *Tokyo Ghoul* where wrongs are committed on both sides. The lower caste individual is so denigrated that he has no scope, or power for counter-attacking the way a ghoul could.

In the manga, the reader is largely exposed to the ghoul world with only glimpses of human society. Thus, the reader automatically sympathises with the ghouls. Half-ghouls, like Kaneki experience the difficulty of being ghouls in a harsh world where they have no legal standing and rights. They are seen as monsters but live a life of fear, unable to rejoin the human society. The struggle of the half-ghouls puts the struggle of all ghouls into perspective. It is the labelling of ghouls that result in their complete rejection, just as the notions of untouchability and impurity are unjustly attached to the lower castes. “The Hindu must be made to unlearn all this. But how can this happen if the old labels remain and continue to recall to his mind old notions.” (“Caste in India” 97)

*Tokyo Ghoul* and *Bhimayana* are documentations of daunting endeavours that aim to transform the outlook of an entire community. The stories are simultaneously a personal phenomenon as well as a public battle. In the case of *Tokyo Ghoul*, the ghouls are, by description, flesh-eating monsters and appear at first to be irredeemable creatures. However, every stereotyped notion and preconditioned belief is reversed when readers begin to empathise with these same, so called, monsters. Likewise, for the non-Dalit individual, who has his own set of preconceived ideas about the lower castes, *Bhimayana* acts as an undermining agent by relaying Ambedkar’s revolutionary feats in the face of casteism. The poem *Water*, written by the revolutionary Namdeo Dhasal captures the struggle of men like Ambedkar and Kaneki who persevere in what appears to be a hopeless reality. “What walls, how many walls, can you build around water, How will you shackle the rushing form of water?” (qtd. in Anand et al. 22)

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# Mortal Agony

Athira Raj

Standing still, unblinking.  
The cold wind brushes against my red cheeks  
the leaves wither and fall on the  
matted wet pavement by the road,  
cars race by in streaks of light,  
men and women, old and children,  
playing their parts, unwittingly.  
Yet my eyes choose to focus  
on the ticking little red hand  
of the battered old clock  
perched up on a rusty pole, across the street.  
How did it get there?  
I cannot know; I do not wonder.

Counting every second  
by the silent grave of a dead world,  
it holds me in its power-  
absolute and intriguing.  
It pulls the strings  
and we abide, we dance along to its tunes  
with no rehearsals, whatsoever.  
Every moment, my desire to stray  
is dwindling; I end my rebellion and  
nurture sickening.  
Cradled in ignorance, I move  
on and on, without a stop—life  
heaving us along into the unending  
trail called Time.  
My mind wanders-  
listening, clustering thoughts, hoping-  
a journey, flipping through the thick white pages  
of worn out journals; remnants of time itself.  
I let myself be carried away  
in reassurances of an unsure timeline  
but weep to the inability of a physical manipulation.  
My mind-  
like those streaks of light that are cars  
racing forward and backward  
bewitched by that little red hand  
of the battered old clock, unknown-  
curious about Time itself.  
Does it ever pause? Maybe let the mundaneness flutter?  
I have no answer; I never stop wondering.

Faces, stories, cars—merge into one,  
their strings, tangled into one another,  
knotted at places,  
rooting from the little red hand  
of the battered old clock  
across the street, staring into me.  
But standing still, I feel  
on the brink of cycling into distress  
yet feel at peace  
with the hands of Time caressing me to sleep.

# Manto and the Mahabharata

## Individualization, Ownership, and Violation of Female Sexuality

Anushree Joshi

*This paper examines the treatment of female sexuality in the society represented in the Mahabharata and Saadat Hasan Manto's stories. Referring to the Mahabharata's Sabha Parva as the primary text, it traces the practice of regulation of women's sexuality to the times of the Mahabharata. It explores the several ways in which patriarchy was systematized by analysing the Mahabharata and juxtaposes it with Manto's texts that allowed women more sexual autonomy. Finally, the paper discusses how the Mahabharata is revered as a holy text and its treatment of female sexuality has manifested itself in the attitudes of the society, while Manto's representation of women as completely developed human beings with complete authority over their sexuality has been criticized among the masses as a lesser, obscene form of literature.*

The *Mahabharata* reflects the times of evolution in the Indo-Aryan society, which Romila Thapar dates to 3102 BC. The evolution was largely territorial and cultural in nature, if understood in the context of the present-day societies. According to Thapar, two of the evidences that support the historicity of the battle of Mahabharata are as follows:

The *dasharajna*, the battle of the ten rajas, described in the Rigveda has been viewed by some modern scholars as the seminal event for the war at Kurukshetra. . . . Panini in the fourth century BC refers indirectly to grammatical constructions associated with words such as mahabharata, yudhishtira, arjuna and vasudeva (Thapar "The epic of the Bharatas").

The society was fluid since the open-door class system (based on worth) was being replaced by the closed-door caste system (based on birth). Territorial lines were formed and tensions arose as power dynamics were shifting between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. According to "Interpretive Histories" by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, the *Mahabharata* has been read as a source for political, social and economic history of India in its ancient days of foundation, a religious and philosophical text, a unified literary masterpiece, as well as a guide to the psychological roots of the present-day Indic civilization (20).

Similarly, the Radcliffe line<sup>1</sup> drawn in the Indian subcontinent in 1947, and the struggles preceding its formation paved the path for a time ridden with extreme violence. The extremities of the said time span in the shared history of India and present-day Pakistan were divisive in nature, such that two communities who ate together, lived in the same neighbourhoods, spoke the same language, and had claimed spaces in their unity became immensely aware of 'the other' (Bhalla). Struggle for power dynamics, as it had occurred in a society in formation many millennia ago, was explicitly manifested in the private and polis of the nation(s). The two societies, with one integrally influenced by the other, possess similarities where female sexuality, especially its expression, is concerned. Both the societies engaged in the regulation of female sexuality, but the two texts in question represent the same predicament in different ways and approach the expression of female sexuality in contrast to each other.

With thoughts, desires, attitudes, fantasies, beliefs, practices, behaviours, roles, and relationships as dimensions<sup>2</sup> of female sexuality in mind, the paper examines how the two texts provide a mimesis of their respective societies with the representation of female sexuality being a key difference. Despite the similarities in how female sexuality was regulated in the society, the texts which acted as a reflections of the society possessed differences in their approach towards it. The difference is in how the texts treat female sexuality, and the similarity is in how the societies in two tumultuous times have tried to control it.

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<sup>1</sup> Named after its architect, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, it is the demarcation line between the Indian and Pakistani portions of the Punjab and Bengal provinces of British India.

<sup>2</sup> The channels/conduits of expressing and experiencing female sexuality have been based on surveys and studies quoted in reports by World Health Organization.

During the partition, the idea of ‘ownership’ of the sexuality of women was established and even used as a trope in popular Urdu literature<sup>3</sup>. This idea was rooted deep enough to influence the instinctive, the organized, the personal, and the public domains of the society. Ownership here refers to the control and denial of agency to women in the interests of their sexual expression. The control was vested with a male member of their family, usually the husband. The male member was, in the natural perspective of the society, the decisive and the restriction itself such that the ‘submission’ of the female body to the male was an obligation, a right he had earned the day he came to ‘possess’ her. Her body and sexuality was utilized to fulfill any erotic fantasies and pleasures he desired, and in accordance with the role, she had no choice as a ‘service-provider’ but to be consistent with. Simone de Beauvoir, in her essay titled “The Married Woman”, summarised the possession of the sexuality of women by their husbands, and the consequences of that ownership:

In regard to her erotic fate, two essential consequences follow: first, she has no right to any sexual activity apart from marriage: sexual intercourse thus becoming an institution, desire and gratification are subordinated to the interest of society for both sexes; but man, being transcended towards the universal as worker and citizen, can enjoy contingent pleasures before marriage and extramaritally (453).

The conduits for experiencing and expressing her own sexuality were supposed to be in the possession of the male dominant. Women were merely fulfilling their roles as defined by the society, essentially moderated and controlled by the male, the husband, and their sexuality was not their being’s aspect of power.

The other dominant in control of the female’s sexuality was the society concerned with the individual. The woman’s sexuality was ‘in representation of’ an ideal considered to be greater than herself. She was not a human possessing the agency of sexuality in the biological and psychological context, but she was an object, a metaphor, a medium for the society’s factors to fulfill a purpose, not decided by her own self. It was this representative nature and ownership, combined to deny individual agency of her own sexuality to the female, which stemmed from and, in a vicious cycle, led to the societal attitude towards the violation of the woman’s sexuality.

During the tumultuous Partition, violence against the female, in the form of rape and the complete annihilation of the female body was primarily, and sometimes entirely, sexual in nature unlike that against the males who were murdered without a violation of their individualized sexuality (Bhalla). This can be understood as an attempt to assert a sense of superiority and power over one community, that is the ‘other’ religion, by violating that which ‘belonged’ to the community. Therefore, a woman’s sexuality was, in a way, stamped and viewed as a metonym of the greatest possession, the most valuable property, in control of the male individual who was a part of the community. The psychoanalytic support for drawing a direct link between the paradigm of sexual excitement and a wish to harm somebody, with at least a whisper of hostility, comes from Robert J. Stoller and Ann Garry as well (qtd. in Garry 349). Though the idea of hostility providing sexual excitement has been debated against, psychoanalysis accepts sexual masochism as a disorder (Psychology Today). The interesting point to note is that tendencies of sexual masochism are diagnosed only if they disrupt the routine functioning of the concerned individuals in the society, thus making mild masochistic excitement thrive nearly unchallenged if the person(s) can successfully maintain normalcy in other domains of their lifestyle.

In her research paper titled “Mahabharata through the eyes of women”, Dr. Kavita A. Sharma cites an example which affirms that the said society was responsible for establishing the practice that took away women’s sexual autonomy and regulated sexual expression:

The scope of chastity seems to have got progressively narrowed as patriarchy gradually became more and more firmly entrenched. Pandu talks of a time when women were not immured within their houses nor were they dependent on their husbands and relatives. They were free to go wherever and to whomever they wanted and were still considered virtuous because that was the accepted customary usage. However, their freedom was curtailed by Swetaketu, the son of the ascetic Uddalaka. One day a Brahmin came and invited

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *Shonali*, and *Baad-e-Saba ka Intizaar (Awaiting the Zephyr)*. For further understanding of objectification and the male gaze in Urdu literature, read *Preeto & Other Stories: The Male Gaze in Urdu* by Rakhshanda Jalil.

Swetaketu's mother to go with him in the presence of Uddalaka his father. She readily agreed but Swetaketu did not like it and got angry in spite of his father telling him that there was nothing wrong with it, as that was the sanctioned practice. Swetaketu laid down rules of conduct for women by which they were obliged to adhere to one man and it became sinful for them to deviate from this... Thus, morality got circumscribed.

Thus, the society feared that female sexuality, governed by the respective individual females, could threaten the patriarchy as women could not only deny men the power to their sexuality, but they could also deny them lineage in the process. This imposed regulation systematizes the patriarchy and suggests a fear of equity in the power dynamics of the two sexes. Devdutt Pattanaik found that the justification of the establishment of the 'regulation' and 'subordination' of women's sexuality was fear. He wrote, "Unattached women were seen as sexual predators and fearful yoginis who could consume men, unless they were restrained by marriage and maternity. This may explain the cultural fear of independent women" ("Shunning the female").

Therefore, the *Mahabharata*, as a literary text and *itihaasam puram*<sup>4</sup>, held up a mirror to its society which systematized patriarchy and denied agency to women. As a primary text of philosophy, history and polity, long after its society is supposed to have perished in the *yuganta*<sup>5</sup>, *Mahabharata* has also contributed to the normalcy of the treatment of women's sexuality as property, and the most prominently remembered women in the *Mahabharata* lack individualized sexual agency. The *vastraharana*<sup>6</sup> sequence in "The Dicing" from the *Sabha Parva* of the *Mahabharata* of Krishna–Dwaipayana Vyasa, focuses on this particular trope. In the twentieth throw of the dicing game at the court of the Kurus, Sakuni encouraged Yudhishtir, who had already staked and lost his own self in the previous throw, to play for Panchali<sup>7</sup> (57.32). There were no explicit objections made to the throw, as the woman, not only a subject of the king, was also considered his property. The integral difference between the ownership of Draupadi and the ownership of the males, the brothers, the subjects of Yudhishtir, is the sexual objectification of Draupadi. It was not Draupadi's ownership decreed as a subject, but her sexuality that was at play, left worsened in its extreme regulation by the husband.

Unlike all the other Pandavas, Draupadi's stake was explicit in her sexual objectification, clearly implying that it was not just her body, but her sexual services as well at stake. As a woman without sexual autonomy, she could be objectified as her owner deemed fit:

She is not too short or too tall, not too black or too red, and her eyes are red with love-I play you for her... Her sweaty lotus-like face shines like a lotus. Her waist shaped like an altar, hair long, eyes the color of copper, not too much body hair... such is the woman, king, such is the slender-waisted Panchali, for whom I now throw, the beautiful Draupadi! (57.33).

It is noteworthy that Draupadi's body was described by her husband, who not only had ownership rights over her sexuality but also the expression of that sexuality. Whether she accepts or rejects the objectification is insignificant because she cannot exercise this autonomy. This erotic objectification created an unprecedented situation, as nobody else who was lost in the game of the dicing was subjected to a sexual violation.

Duryodhana furthered the objectification of Draupadi, using the same erotic comparisons her husband had used. The precedent set by Yudhishtir was exploited by Duryodhana: "You shall now love the Kurus, long-lotus-eyed one, / You've been won under Law, come along to the hall!" (60.20). Slavery, for the men, is sex slavery for Draupadi in this regard. There is, according to Duryodhana's statement, no lawlessness in the violation of sexual boundaries because there exist none for an object without autonomy, at the mercy of its master—either the husband as the owner, or the society as the decision-maker. No objections were raised by the elders and the teachers, well-versed in the law, to prevent the demand of sexual

<sup>4</sup> Literally translated to 'historical record', the term implies the significant role attributed to Mahabharata by scholars in shaping up the perceptions on the society it reflected. Read Romila Thapar's "The epic of the Bharatas".

<sup>5</sup> The end of an age. Irvati Karve calls it 'the end of an epoch'.

<sup>6</sup> The disrobing of Draupadi in the court of the Kauravas at Hastinapura, where her *sari* (cloth draped on her body) was pulled on to shame her into a naked state before the assembly.

<sup>7</sup> Draupadi was also called Panchali, which literally means 'from the land of Panchal'.

gratification from Panchali, because it had been normalized in the society to objectify her sexuality. In the *Mahabharata*, objectification is not the exception; it is the Law.

In the *sabha*, the game of dicing was intended to divest the Pandavas of any kingship opportunities and share in the kingdom and wealth. It was meant to fulfill Duryodhana's quest for revenge against them, further aggravated when he witnessed their prosperity at the *Rajasuya* ceremony<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, 'taunting' Bhima was an attempt to humiliate the masculinity of the Pandavas, and Draupadi's violation was not the primary goal but collateral damage. Touching Draupadi's hair was Duryodhana's and Duhsasana's method of 'unmanning' the Pandavas. (60.20) The gripping of her hair, a metonym of her sexual prowess and sensuality, to humiliate the masculinity of the Pandavas is a reiteration that the sexuality of a woman was not individualized to her own autonomy but used as a representation, an object that belonged, to the dominant male. The following lines resonate with the events of several millennia later when women during the Partition were doubly mistreated and their bodies tangibly defiled, not just because they were a part of 'the other', but also because they suggestively belonged to the male as their property: "Then, smiling up at Radheya and taunting Bhima, he exposed to Draupadi who was watching him his left thigh soft like a banana tree and auspiciously marked-an elephant trunk and a thunderbolt in one." (63.11).

When Panchali channeled the *Sri*, the waters of life, which had been violated in her humiliation, and attempted to exercise autonomy by questioning the *Dharmic* ramifications of the events at the assembly, the *Mahabharata* diluted it in its representation by making the saving of a transgressive Draupadi through the cosmic intervention appear centralized. Her sexuality, like the sexuality of women in the *Mahabharata*, is not individualized but is always externalized, universalized, if not controlled for a purpose greater than personal desire and boundaries. According to Kevin McGrath's "Speaking of Truth", she could question the *Dharma*, as the wives often do in the *Mahabharata*, but it was more to represent a higher ideal of subordinated, regulated wisdom and never to exercise an autonomy of opinion (203). "Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (60.8). Draupadi questioned and her original question was repeated in the *sabha*, but there was no answer from Yudhishtir. His silence and his subsequent indifference towards Draupadi after the game point to an egotism (Hiltebeitel 167-179). The text hints to the fact that he was "as if unconscious" upon hearing her question (60.9). The *Dharmic* hero of the *Mahabharata* was suggestively intolerant of a challenge to his intellect and authority over the ownership of Draupadi's being. The silence of the elders, representatives of the social law, affirmed that Draupadi's questioning was an act of defiance which they cannot condone or satiate with an appropriate response. When the respected Bhishma responded to it, he iterated the proprietorship of Draupadi to Yudhishtir, who had the right to stake her to whomsoever he deemed fit, and referred to wives as the chattels of their husbands (60.40).

Her challenge to the law of ownership was met with two responses. First, the concept of cosmic intervention and justice was introduced as an interpolation (qtd. in Hiltebeitel 158). The possibility that a woman's sexuality requires her consent in setting the boundaries is not entertained, and Draupadi is saved because of the intervention of supposedly cosmic, supernatural forces (Hiltebeitel 158). The myth of Krishna, a male deity, protecting her as she begged for mercy to him in her prayers has been popularized (Hiltebeitel 158). Individuality of sexuality is not an available option. Second, she was condemned and criticized for being a 'Lady Pundit'. The only appropriate way for her to defend her 'honour' was through the power of her tears and begging for mercy to the males and elders (Karve 99).

A woman was exposed to genitalia in a court of law before her five husbands, and extended family (63.11). She constantly objected to her mistreatment. Her act of questioning in the court of law, albeit lawless in the normative sense, was justified by the practice of *Appadharmā*:

...the principle of Appadharmā, whereby relaxing the normative codes of conduct enables an individual to avoid failing the demands of his or her own Dharma when situations of crisis arise. An authentic situation of crisis effectively places a moratorium on the application of the usual codes of behaviour (Bowles 29).

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<sup>8</sup> It was the royal consecration which emphasized the king's prowess, raising him to a divine position for his subjects. Yudhishtir was crowned as the emperor in the ceremony at Indraprastha, where he received sacrifices and gifts from allies and neighbouring kings.



Law is fluid for the protection of justice, but not when the justice serves a woman. When Bhisma and the elders claimed *Dharma* as defining a wife's status as her husband's chattel and the sons of the royal family violated her with sexual attacks, the situation of crisis demanded a practice of the normatively unconventional.

Saadat Hasan Manto and Ved Vyasa are the writer and the bard, who wrote in the times of the foundation, the evolution, the extremities and the destruction of two societies respectively. The primary purpose of both the texts' inception could be understood as the need to record the tumultuous social events of the time.

As a literary text, Saadat Hasan Manto's short story titled *Mozel* too has a background set in a society reconstructing itself without an absolute in its formation. The absolute, in both the societies, is the subordinated treatment of their women. *Mozel*, the titular character of the story was not conventional according to the standards of the society of India in 1947, as she was shown to exercise her agency of choice.

Mozel's first description by the male narrator is unconventional:

जो पहली नज़र में उसे खौफ़नाक हद तक दीवानी मालूम हुई थी ... खुले गिरेबान से उसकी नीली पड़ी बड़ी-बड़ी छातियों का लगभग चौथाई हिस्सा नज़र आ रहा था। बाहें जो कि नंगी थीं उन पर महीन-महीन बालों की तहमी हुई थीं। (The one who seemed to him frenzied to a frightening degree...From her loose attire, almost a fourth of her blue, big breasts was visible. Her arms, which were naked, had a layer of trimmed hair frozen over them; my trans.; Manto 23).

The description noted *Mozel*'s frenzy in the very first line, as if issuing a warning to the readers of what lay ahead in the story. She was not a docile woman who would prostrate herself to the whims of a man; she had a frightening frenzy of her own. The choice of words does not emphasize her naked body parts, it only states it. The chest of the woman, usually an object of great desire in works of literature, had been described, not glorified, as looking 'blue'. For what followed, this could be the narrator's way of hinting at *Mozel*'s cold-heartedness. She donned trimmed body hair, and did not create or contribute to the illusion of a woman's 'perfectly feminine' body in the stereotypical context. There is a layer to her character, on a metaphorical level as well in terms of her individual assertions against social norms, which does not fit with the society's idea of femininity.

*Mozel*'s relationship with Trilochan<sup>9</sup> was one where she, unconventionally, exercised an agency far beyond her time. She initiated physicality in their courtship, but she decided her own boundaries. She made it explicitly clear that her consent to an encounter at a particular time did not imply consent over any or all parts of her body, or any actions, indefinitely (Manto 29). Acceptance and encouragement of access to her sexuality at a specific time through a specific course of activity did not entitle Trilochan indefinite access. Like all men since the time of Swetaketu, Trilochan did desire unchallenged, unshared, uninterrupted access to the love and life of *Mozel*, but she had no patience for the restrictions he hoped to impose. She would kiss him senseless, but would also stand him up on a date to visit an old friend, indicated to be her boyfriend, before Trilochan (Manto 24). Like Draupadi's words in the *sabha*, *Mozel*'s actions and the nature of her entire character questioned the concept of ownership and regulation of sexuality. The key difference is in the poesis—the representation of the truth—of the two worlds. It was, in fact, a psychological grip *Mozel* possessed over Trilochan due to which there was a reversal of roles, implied in the scene where *Mozel* told Trilochan to shave his beard and let loose his hair<sup>10</sup> to appease others, especially herself (Manto 25). It was unheard of for a man to change his appearance to claim the attention of a woman. Despite being offended by *Mozel*'s mockery of the practices in Sikhism concerning hair, Trilochan chose to acquire *Mozel*'s love at the expense of denouncing his religious code of appearance and got his hair cut. He was entrapped in his necessity to be with her, while she was free, a freedom which was further asserted by her

<sup>9</sup> Trilochan is the main male character in the story who falls in love with *Mozel*, a Jewish girl, when she starts living in his building. They are involved in a romantic relationship during which Trilochan proposes marriage, and *Mozel* never shows up on the wedding day, thus scarring Trilochan's opinions of her.

<sup>10</sup> Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final guru of Sikhism, decreed that "Sikhs were to maintain five articles of faith, referred to as the five Ks because they all begin with the letter K in Punjabi. The most distinctive one is *kes*: keeping uncut hair, to be maintained in a turban. The other four are: *kara*, a round steel bracelet symbolising strength and integrity; *kirpan*, a ceremonial sword to emphasise martial strength; *kanga*, a small wooden comb to keep uncut hair in place and symbolising cleanliness and order; and *kachhera*, cotton shorts for chastity and readiness for battle." (*The Guardian*)

abandoning him on the day of their wedding (Manto). Mozel was not created as a paragon of female empowerment without any flaws to make her character appear unreal, her qualities unattainable. She was whimsical, but there was an individual choice in her whims. When he called her 'shameless and ill-mannered' against the 'pure' Kripal Kaur because Kaur's past, unlike Mozel's has no man accessing her sexuality, Trilochan became a mouth-piece for the society's opinions. In the very next line, he admitted that he still liked Mozel, in spite of all her flaws (Manto 28). Instead, Manto, through a set tone, asserts that her individuality is in no way a flaw, as shown in the final scene where Mozel's unconventional expression of individuality becomes a saving grace for two human beings.

The following exchange between Trilochan and Mozel, as they venture into a Muslim-dominated neighbourhood to escort Kripal Kaur to safety, is a fitting characterization for Mozel: "मगर सुनो तो- कर्फ्यू है।" / 'मोज़ेल के लिए नहीं- चलो आओ।' ("But listen to me- there is a curfew."/ 'Not for Mozel- come.');

my trans.; Manto 33). The 'curfew' existed as a fierce, brutal and frightening blow on women's agency in the society, but Mozel was not bound by the restrictions. She exercised her free will, not in an attempt to subvert social order, but she was a subversion of the accepted order in her own individuality. Trilochan attempted to make her understand the significance of wearing underwear as it made way for embarrassment and shame when she wore skirts, but Mozel listed her own discomfort of underwear as a decisive factor for not following Trilochan's insistent advice (Manto 35).

In the final part of the story, Mozel and Trilochan go to a neighbourhood unsafe for the Sikh community, in lieu of the communal riots, to rescue Trilochan's fiancée, Kripal Kaur. In Kripal Kaur's apartment, a mob startles them by banging on the door, leading to panic as to how to escape. Mozel tricks the crowd into shock when she opens the door stark-naked to the men out on a murder spree of the man belonging to the other religion and for sexually violating the woman they considered to be in his proprietorship. Mozel finally reiterates her unabashed individuality by disrobing herself free from the social construct of clothing, and thus, social conventions (Manto 40).

Mozel's final act of defiance was the refusal to cover her 'sexual', private organs and the rejection of the turban to cover her naked body smeared with blood (Manto 41). It was the last struggle between the forces of religious conventions imposed on women's sexuality, i.e. Trilochan asking her to cover her 'sexual', private, organs, and the individuality that she demanded in it. She told him to take his religion away from over her body (Manto 41). Being covered by his turban, a metonym for religion, serves as a metaphor for the ways in which society tried to cover a woman's sexuality, the expression of it, in the entirety of her life and in her death as well. Unlike the portrayal of Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, where her 'honour' in the assembly was saved by the cosmic intervention, no external regulation existed in Manto, but it was Mozel's individual denouncement of the atrocities of religion and societal constructs of division and oppression which contributed to the saving of two lives—an indication of the upholding of humanity through her act of rebellious individuality. She did not cover, or hide, the physical, the sexual, of her being but she used it because she was smartly aware, of the shock it would create for the men knocking on the door. Stripping women down to annihilate them physically is a convention, but seeing a woman stripped down, in her own right of it, is difficult to cope with.

Where Mozel exercises her agency for personal desire, such agency conventionally had to have a cause greater than personal desire. In the *Mahabharata*, this manifests in the portrayal of Kunti, who was granted a miraculous child from the Brahmin pleased by her services (including sexual services) to him (Karve 44). As a curious maiden, she chanted the mantra and invited Surya, the Sun God, without intending to proceed further with the copulation.

Kunti was aghast and said: "I am an unwedded girl dependent on my father. I am not fit for motherhood and do not desire it. I merely wished to test the power of the boon granted by the sage Durvasa. Go back and forgive this childish folly of mine." But the Sun god could not thus return because the power of the mantra held him. She, for her part, was mortally afraid of being blamed by the world. The Sun god however reassured her: "No blame shall attach to you. After bearing my son, you will regain virginity." (Rajagopalachari ch. 9).

Even though the choice of invoking Surya was her first exercise of agency, it took the shape of a coercively consented sexual liaison because there had to be fruition, an accepted higher norm, of her invitation or else it would have been a transgression of the system's order. Individualization of sexuality was treated as a stain in the society which might degrade her social standing—dependent upon virginity before

wedding and the ability to produce sons after it—and her moral standing—dependent upon the containment of pleasure and personal desire. After their coerced liaison, the maiden Kunti asked for the renewal of her virgin status each time after she bore a child to compensate for the wrongness of an individualized act of curiosity.

The practice of *Niyoga*—cohabitation with somebody else for the procreation of children—cemented the society's control over a woman's sexuality. It was a sin to copulate out of personal desire for a woman, as shown in the Kunti-Surya encounter, but the husband had the right to ask his wife to share her bed with another male for the sake of the continuity of lineage. Kunti, like many other women in the epic, surrendered to her husband's wishes for sons even if it meant copulation with another male, out of need, not desire. According to the myth, she chanted the mantras provided to her by the ascetic she had served and her three sons were born out of her relationship with three God-figures (Karve 44). Eliminating the aggravated element of the supernatural with it, it becomes clear that Kunti had to share the bed with other men, possibly Pandu's brothers (Karve 44). As a young girl, her biological father gave her away to Kuntibhoja, who then made her serve an ascetic (Karve 43, 44). She lacked agency and was treated as a commodity by the male dominants in her life. This contributed to her psychological oppression, which then manifested itself into a serious ambition for power when she was left to fend for herself after Pandu's death. The treatment of her sexuality, like that of the other women in the *Mahabharata*, can be understood by Simone de Beauvoir's inferences on the individuality of a woman: "Her relations are not based on her individual feeling but on a universal; and thus for her, unlike man, individualized desire renders her ethic impure." (453)

Manto's story titled *हतक (Insult)* represented the protagonist Sugandhi with this unconventional individualization in her sexuality, while continuing to mirror the truth of the society she inhabited. Sugandhi freely consumed alcohol, but Manto did not dwell on this act considered to be morally derogatory for women in 1940s' India (56). The physical description of Sugandhi, a prostitute, is neither sensuous, nor judgmentally objectifying her; it is rather neutral. For Manto, her body is a body, neither a metaphor, nor a sin. Along with her desire for the material superficial like her external appearance and cosmetics, Manto has also depicted Sugandhi's faith in the spiritual by portraying her praying to Gods, thus breaking the stereotype that a woman concerned with her looks is too self-indulgent to focus on other aspects of life. The moral police of the Indian society is quick to consider prostitutes spiritually deprived, damaged, but Sugandhi engaged in idol-worship just like those who frowned upon prostitution (57).

Madho<sup>11</sup> chastised Sugandhi even as he paid for her services, thus acting as a chorus of the society:

सुगन्धी से जब माधो की पहली मुलाकात हुई थी तो उसने कहा, 'तुझे लाज नहीं आती अपना भाव करते? जानती है, तू मेरे साथ किस चीज़ का सौदा कर रही है? और मैं तेरे पास क्यों आया हूँ? छी-छी-छी... अब इन साढ़े-सात रुपल्लियों पर तू मुझे ऐसी चीज़ देने का वचन देती है, जो तू दे ही नहीं सकती और मैं ऐसी चीज़ लेने आया हूँ, जो मैं ले ही नहीं सकता... यह धंधा छोड़।' (When Madho met Sugandhi for the first time, he said, 'Do you not feel ashamed of assigning a price to yourself? Do you understand the kind of thing you are dealing me with? And why do I come to you? Chhi-chhi-chhi... Now for this deal worth rupees seven and paisa fifty, you are promising to give me a thing which you cannot give to me, and I have to take such a thing which I cannot take... Quit this business. '; my trans.; 61).

He, like the society, assumed a moral stance in asking her to quit her job and to change her way of life, yet when it came to accepting any responsibility in helping her financially, he was not helpful (62). However, Sugandhi's portrayal by Manto does anything but victimize her, in the way prostitutes conventionally are. She was not 'trapped' in a trade to sell her soul as people often perceived, but she traded the service of her sexuality through intercourse, treating it like an individual entity within her body. She not only exercised control over her sexuality but also derived pleasure through the acts of foreplay and intercourse (59). Her body, which Manto represented in the utmost humane manner, desired the roughness of physical contact to attain sexual contentment (59).

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<sup>11</sup> Madho is a regular customer at the whorehouse where Sugandhi works. His relationship with Sugandhi has been shown as more than merely sexual, where he visits her to talk to her and she too shares her thoughts with him. In numerous scenes, Madho is suggested to have a monetary motive behind his mildly romantic involvement with Sugandhi.

Awakened late at night to attend to a client, she dressed up to appease him but the Seth<sup>12</sup> client rejected her on the basis of a first look (Manto 64, 67). When Madho visited her the next day to ask her for monetary help while psychologically manipulating her into believing he was concerned about her, Sugandhi got enraged, threw him out, and fell asleep embracing her dog (Manto 71-75). The rejection jolted her to the reality of how society contributes to her exploitation and then has the audacity to judge her as tainted with unimpressive, unacceptable traits.

Unlike those in the *Mahabharata*, the women in *Insult* were neither blamed, nor glorified for their individuality. The characteristic feature of the epic is that the war was pushed by Draupadi, and the epoch ended because *Dharma* had collapsed in the society (Thapar 18, 20). Even today, it is considered inauspicious at festival drama-cycles to show a menstruating, near-naked Draupadi being disrobed in the assembly (Hiltebeitel 153). It is viewed as a stain and there exists academic foundation to believe that late sectarian copyists omitted Krishna's role, if there was any, in rescuing Draupadi in the text so as to rescue him from being polluted by having any "textual contact" with a bleeding woman in disgrace (Hiltebeitel 154). In the *Mahabharata*, this shifting of blame and irresponsible proprietorship is condoned as a literary trope through the hero-making of the men who contributed to women's violation and suffering. On the other hand, Sugandhi was portrayed as a woman who saw through the farce and hypocritical nature of society's judgmental attitude on morality, and utilized her own individuality to put an end to their critical exploitation of her choices in life.

"That is, woman is not concerned to establish individual relations with a chosen mate but to carry on the feminine functions in their generality; she is to have sex pleasure only in a specified form and not individualized." (Beauvoir 454). The lust Kunti witnessed in each of her five sons towards Draupadi made her employ Draupadi's sexuality to keep the Pandavas united in the form of a closed fist (Karve 85). The woman's sexuality was, yet again, a metaphor for the base of the palm holding the fist together. On the contrary, Kulwant Kaur of Manto's *ठण्डा गोश्त* (*Cold Meat*) was portrayed as a woman who enjoyed the pleasures in sex and demands sexual gratification from her husband (52). Her sexuality was not victimised or utilised as a pawn—she expressed her physical urge for sexual intercourse by mutual participation in the act. While Draupadi's lawful relationship with five men was considered a just reason by Karna for her sexual violation in the *vastraharana* sequence, Manto's Kulwant Kaur turned the tables by assigning a fate of suffering to her husband whom she suspected of having sexual relations with another woman (van Buitenen 61.36; Manto 53). If Draupadi's fate of suffering can be called a 'feminine' fate in the context of an accepted norm, then Kulwant's assignment of the feminine fate to Eshwar, her husband, by stabbing him, as he begged her for forgiveness, was a reversal of conventional roles and fortunes (Manto 53-55). Manto thus held up a mirror to the society influenced by the *Mahabharata*, which dehumanized its women by repudiating them of their individuality. He represented the male in the situation where a woman being penalized in the name of justice would have been acceptable and condoned.

Manto's poesis of the society he represents is liberating for women in the individuality it offers them in its tone and through its conclusions. There is no moral barometer to either degrade them, or to utilize them as metaphors for something else outside of their being. Manto's work was met with a lot of resistance by readers and moral agents of the society. Manto was put on trial six times on the charges of obscenity in his works, and the popular opinion was that he sympathized with prostitutes and women his contemporary writers were wary of associating with through text (Rumi 75-77). Faiz Ahmed Faiz, admired by Manto for his writing about the partition, stated in his testimony during Manto's trial in Lahore that his work was not up to the standards of 'good literature' (Rumi 76). On the other hand, the *Mahabharata* is revered even today. *Mahabharata* has been treated as a historical text, considered to be a mirror of civilization (Pandey 59). For the academic audience, it is seen as an entire literature suited to give its readers insight into the most profound depths of the Indian Soul (Winternitz vol.1). As the fifth Veda<sup>13</sup>, its treatment of the women characters and the representations of female sexuality have influenced the Indian society immensely, while it is only posthumously that Manto's stance on women has gained popularity despite the

<sup>12</sup> It is a term in Hindi commonly used to refer to an employer, or a rich person. In the story, Manto has used it as a proper noun for a client of Sugandhi who comes to demand sexual services late at night, but refuses Sugandhi because of her apparently unappealing appearance to him.

<sup>13</sup> Literally meaning 'knowledge', the Vedas are considered to be the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, dated back between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE. There are four Vedas—Rig Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda. The influence of the Vedas is strong enough to have given way to a fable about deity Purusha which is believed to have become the foundation of the caste system in India.

criticism it garnered significantly post-partition. “If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty,” Saadat Hasan Manto often commented and went on to state this in his sixth trial at Lahore (Rumi 80). The attitudes towards the *Mahabharata* and Manto’s works among the masses of India then point to a frightening reality of the oppression women face. Ingratiating patriarchy into the ideals of societal morality has led to the construct of ownership of women’s sexuality, and the lack of agency of women to individualize their sexual expression as individual, developed human beings.

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# Heavy Words

## Reading and Writing in *The Book Thief*

Sidika Sehgal

*This paper seeks to highlight words as a powerful force in Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief*, and essentially in Nazi Germany where the story is set. Books were seen as weapons in Nazi Germany, as they acted as the vehicles for ideas that opposed the regime. The paper explores how the protagonist of the novel, Liesel, impacts and uplifts the lives of many people around her, including her own, through her reading. The practice of community reading brought people closer and became a source of comfort and togetherness in times of distress. This paper analyses how the written discourse became an important medium for influencing people and opposing ideas. It presents to the readers the therapeutic effect of writing for the characters in the novel. The paper thus brings to fore the constructive power of words in juxtaposition with the destructive force of death.*

She was a girl.

In Nazi Germany.

How fitting that she was discovering the power of words. (Zusak 154)

Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* follows the story of a nine-year-old girl, Liesel Meminger in Nazi Germany who lives in a small fictional town named Molching (based on the German town Olching). Zusak's treatment of the Second World War is unlike that in war testimonies. The war is the backdrop against which Liesel's life plays out and the novel is as much about the influence the war has on Liesel's life as it is about her life outside the war. Zusak beautifully weaves in anecdotes about Liesel and her best friend, Rudy's playful flirting with the reality of celebratory fires that were lit on Hitler's birthday during the Nazi regime. The book then is less a testimony of war and more an insight into how a nine-year-old girl understood and coped with the events around her, and how she found solace in words.

In Nazi Germany, books were seen as weapons in a war of ideas. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, was also a novelist. He recognized the power of books in shaping discourses, influencing people, and providing a medium for opposing ideas. The 1933 Book Burning in universities across Germany was the manifestation of an anxiety that most Nazis felt around books. Books by Jewish, communist, pacifist, socialist, liberal authors were viewed as subversive because they represented ideologies that were different from that of Nazism and were thus targeted. "The whole purpose of the book-burning was not merely to crush the opposition but to allow a true German phoenix to rise from the ashes, once un-German competition was removed." (Ritchie 632) Book burnings continued through the twelve years of Nazi regime; George Orwell called it "the most characteristic activity of the Nazis." (qtd. in Fishburn 226).

Fishburn argues that if destruction was the only purpose of the event, the books could have been pulped. But the symbolism of the burning was equally important. Fires functioned as a symbol of purification and also gave the impression of enjoying the event (234). The book burning therefore was a way to completely destroy the spirit of those who opposed the regime by destroying their literature (Ritchie 629). This holocaust of books would repeat itself in the future in the holocaust of the Jews.

In 1914, the German army destroyed the library at the University of Louvain. This became one of the primary examples of German brutality during the First World War. The library was rebuilt, and when it was destroyed again in May 1940 by the German army, the Nazi antagonism towards literature was fully understood by the world. The burning of the library in 1940 contributed to the idea that civilization would be defined by its attitude towards books (Fishburn 230).

When the novel begins, Liesel is on her way to Molching with her younger brother and her mother, who is delivering her children to their foster parents. Liesel's father is a communist and the decision to send his children away is a bid for safety. Liesel's brother however, doesn't survive the journey. At his burial in the snow, in the middle of nowhere, Liesel steals her first book even though she doesn't know how to read. It was 'The Gravedigger's Handbook', left behind by one of the gravediggers.

Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the print inside, she was unsure of what any of it was saying. Zusak writes that the significance of the book did not lie with what that book was about but more so with what it actually meant to Liesel:

**THE BOOK'S MEANING**  
**The last time she saw her brother.**  
**The last time she saw her brother.**

(Zusak 45)

From this first stolen book to the fourteen books she acquires through the course of the novel, words occupy a significant space.

\* \* \*

Alone at 33 Himmel Street, the Hubermann house, Liesel dreamt of her brother every night and every night, her foster father, Hans Hubermann would come to comfort her. One night, when Liesel wet her bed, Hans found the stolen book under the mattress while he was changing the sheets. This event paved the way to their daily midnight reading class. Hans admitted to her that he was not a good reader himself. The beginning of their relationship is marked by honesty and by showing their vulnerabilities to each other, very different from the beginning of Liesel's relationship with Rosa Hubermann. Liesel found her first companion in Molching in Hans, a replacement for her younger brother who was supposed to accompany her. When they finished reading 'The Gravedigger's Handbook', Liesel said, "His name was Werner" (Zusak 93). This act of reading together inspired trust in Hans, and Liesel shared some of her grief with him, bringing them closer together. Away from her biological parents and having lost her brother, she found solace in this midnight reading ritual with her new Papa, Hans.

Reading is often understood as an individual activity but research has discovered several practices of community reading. These practices began when the western world was in the process of industrialization and people were becoming concentrated in cities. Urban life was marked by anonymity and alienation, and literature compensated by "offering the illusion of participation in wide social networks – in gossip, curiosity, sympathy, outrage and other effects of social interaction." Coffeehouses, literary salons, reading clubs and tea tables became locations of community reading. Even seamen had their own culture of literary expression—the crew would stage plays following which written material such as reviews would be circulated. (Bérubé et al. 421-22) This trope of community reading repeats itself in the novel.

When air raids began in Molching, people gathered in the Fiedler's basement for protection from the bombs. During an air raid in September 1942, as Rosa Hubermann held furiously onto Liesel's hand, Liesel sensed her mother's fear and started reading one of her prized books, 'The Whistler'. As she read, the children stopped crying and an old man who was always whistling, stopped. Everyone concentrated on Liesel's words and her reading drove away the fear of death. "Everyone waited for the ground to shake. That was still an immutable fact, but at least they were distracted now, by the girl with the book." (Zusak 389) Liesel continued reading till the end of the first chapter even after the sirens had announced their safety.

Liesel's reading had a profound effect on Frau Holtzapfel, neighbor to the Hubermanns and Rosa's arch nemesis. She asked Liesel to come to her house and read to her. In exchange, she offered her coffee ration and some goodwill. Before she made this pact with Rosa, she would spit on the door of the Hubermann's house every time she crossed it. However, after Liesel started to read to her, she promised to stop doing that. Liesel's words brought out a kindness unknown and unseen in her. The enmity dissolved as Liesel and Frau Holtzapfel savoured the book. The first time Liesel went to her house, Frau Holtzapfel was her usual miserly self, but she gradually began to offer tea or soup to the young girl.

Liesel continued to read for her, even on the day Frau Holtzapfel found that her younger son had died in the war. Her elder son, Michael Holtzapfel said, "I doubt my mother will hear it, but she said for her to come," (Zusak 473). The literary exchange between her and Liesel thus acts as balm to her sorrow and indeed, it is the only thing Liesel could offer her: "And the girl goes on reading, for that's why she's there, and it feels good to be good for something in the aftermath of the snows of Stalingrad." (Zusak 477)

Words are Liesel's only weapons in the war. When Max Vandenburg, the Jew who hides in the Hubermann basement, falls sick, Liesel reads her books to him "as if the words alone could nourish him" (Zusak 337). When Max wakes up, he tells Liesel that he was afraid of falling asleep again. Liesel assures him that she would read to him. "That afternoon, and well into the night, Liesel read to Max Vandenburg...When Liesel took a quick rest, she looked over the book and Max was asleep. Nervously, she nudged him with it. He awoke." (Zusak 343) While their fathers were united by music, Max and Liesel



were “held together by the quiet gathering of words” (Zusak 258). Together in the basement, Liesel would read and Max would solve the crossword Liesel had found for him. In *The Book Thief* then, words are the reconstructive force, a fitting opposition to the destructiveness of Death. It is the act of reading together or reading to each other that provides the positive force in the novel. Faced with the devastation of war, community reading gives the characters a sense of togetherness.

On Hitler’s birthday on 20th April, 1940, Ilsa Hermann, the Mayor’s wife, witnessed Liesel stealing a book from the book burning in Molching. Sometime after this event, she invited Liesel inside while she was on her round to collect and deliver Rosa’s washing.

When she came and stood with an impossibly frail steadfastness, she was holding a tower of books against her stomach, from her navel to the beginnings of her breasts. She looked so vulnerable in the monstrous doorway. Long, light eyelashes and just the slightest twinge of expression. A suggestion. Come and see it, it said. (Zusak 140)

Ilsa had a room full of books where Liesel and Ilsa read their separate books in their corners. By sharing silence and books, they became bound in an inexplicable bond.

When she cancelled Rosa’s services, Liesel, feeling extremely betrayed acted out by stealing books from her library. However, Ilsa, knowing Liesel’s passion for books and aware of their power to shape her life, began to leave the window of her library open so that Liesel could come and read. She therefore played a crucial role in Liesel’s life—it is she who encouraged Liesel to write her story, the story that becomes *The Book Thief*. Writing thus becomes the other trope in the novel which opposes the fascism of the Nazi regime.

\* \* \*

Many written discourses exist in *The Book Thief*—the two books Max writes for Liesel, the book Liesel writes which becomes the basis of the story Death narrates to us, and *Mein Kampf*, Hitler’s autobiography. Each discourse is powerful in its own way. The three former discourses are a foil to *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Kampf* describes Hitler’s anti-Semitic ideology and his plans for Germany. Hitler didn’t use violent means to establish his rule—he employed the written and the spoken discourse to influence people. His speeches were laced with aggression and they were received by his supporters with deafening applause (*Hitler: A Career*). Hitler thus used his words for destruction.

Ironically enough, *Mein Kampf* saved Max’s life. When Max arrived at 33 Himmel Street, he was holding onto the book. When he was hiding in Stuttgart, Hans had posted a copy of it with a key to his front door taped to its inside cover. Max had known then that Hans would help him and had made the rather dangerous journey from Stuttgart to Molching. When Liesel noticed the book in Max’s hand, she asked him how it was:

‘Is it - good?’

He looked up from the pages, forming his fingers into a fist and then flattening them back out. Sweeping away the anger, he smiled at her. He lifted his feathery fringe and dumped it towards his eyes. ‘It’s the best book ever.’ Looking at Papa, then back at the girl. ‘It saved my life.’ (Zusak 224-5)

On Liesel’s birthday, when Max had no gift to give her, he decided to write ‘The Standover Man’ for her. He tore pages from *Mein Kampf*, painted them white, and wrote a story about himself over the pages of Hitler’s autobiography. “There were the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned.” (Zusak 246) He literally wrote over Hitler’s words in an attempt to diminish their negative impact.

In ‘The Standover Man’, Max wrote of his fear of men standing over him. He wrote of losing his father, of getting into fist fights (a habit he shares with Liesel) and of finally travelling from Stuttgart to Molching to seek refuge in the Hubermann house. Bishop and Starkey argue that writing has therapeutic effects: “Writing helps the survivor testify to personal and global trauma, war and dislocation.” (180) ‘The Standover Man’ then, is a testimony to war as well as personal trauma, just as ‘The Word Shaker’ is.

Max had read *Mein Kampf* and understood how Hitler had risen to power.

Yes, the Führer decided that he would rule the world with words...His first plan of attack was to plant the words in as many areas of his homeland as possible...He invited his people towards his own glorious heart, beckoning them with his finest, ugliest words, hand-picked from his forests. And the people came. (Zusak 451)

In ‘The Word Shaker’, Max wrote of how Hitler used words and symbols to manipulate people. He also wrote of Liesel; she is the word shaker in the title of the book. He wrote of how she saved him by reading to him while he was sick. He compares Liesel’s words to trees, thus underscoring the lasting impact of words on people.

In August 1943, when Max was marched through Molching to Dachau, Liesel “raced through the files of face after face, trying to match them to the Jew who wrote ‘The Standover Man’ and ‘The Word Shaker’” (Zusak 513). When she finally found him, she gave him words, incidentally the very words that he wrote for her.

‘Max,’ she said. He turned and briefly closed his eyes as the girl continued. ‘*There was once a strange, small man,*’ she said. Her arms were loose but her hands were fists at her sides. ‘*But there was a word shaker, too.*’ (Zusak 515)

She reminded him that for every Hitler who used words to sow hatred, there was someone like her who used words to sow love.

The day after Liesel met Max, she went to Ilsa Hermann’s library and her anger towards the words made her tear a book in frustration. She left a letter for Ilsa, apologizing for the damage she had caused and promising not to come back to the library. Three days later, Ilsa came to Liesel’s house and gifted her a blank book: “I thought if you’re not going to read any more of my books, you might like to write one instead.” (Zusak 527) “She gave her a reason to write her own words, to remind her that words had also brought her to life.” (Zusak 528) Ilsa answered the question Liesel had asked herself in the library: “Why did they [the words] have to exist? ...What good were the words?” (Zusak 525).

Liesel thus began to write of her life—of her experience of war as a young girl, of watching her brother die in front of her, of being away from her biological parents, of losing Max. Writing changes something in her:

Writing, it would appear, helps set the house (of the psyche) in order, even if only temporarily. It helps humans create temporary order out of a bewildering array of lived experience, it’s a speculative tool for spiritual investigation, and it’s a lens that focuses the flame of catharsis. (Bishop and Starkey 181)

Therapists today use creative writing exercises to relieve war veterans of their post-traumatic stress disorder (Haslam). Liesel, without knowing the effects of writing on her mental and emotional well-being, was writing of her trauma, not for others to read, but for her own self.

In a bizarre twist of fate, writing *The Book Thief* quite literally saved Liesel’s life. When bombs were dropped on the Himmel Street on October 7 without warning, Liesel was sitting in the basement of 33 Himmel Street, re-reading the book she had written, making it better. She was the only survivor that night.

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In an interview, Zusak revealed that he chose Death as the narrator of his book because of a common expression that war and death are best friends. Nazi Germany was a playground for death and he wondered what it would be like if Death was not an “all-powerful” figure, but instead, was afraid of humans. He chose a “vulnerable” Death, one who was haunted by humans. It made sense to him because Death was witness to the horrible things that humans did to each other but also to moments of pure beauty, such as Liesel kissing Rudy’s dusty lips (“Interview with Markus Zusak, author of *The Book Thief*”).

This “vulnerable” Death acquires *The Book Thief* when it visited Molching on October 7:

There's a multitude of stories (a mere handful, as I have previously suggested) that I allow to distract me as I work, just as the colours do. I pick them up in the unluckiest, unlikeliest places and I make sure to remember them as I go about my work. *The Book Thief* is one such story. (Zusak 553)

Death's natural instinct is to destroy. However, he is also haunted by Liesel's story, and Death's retelling of it is a triumph of words over his impulse to ruin.

April Brannon calls *The Book Thief* "a surprisingly hopeful story" (726) even as it is set in the bleakest of circumstances. What makes it hopeful are the acts of kindness performed by people living in the hardest of times—Hans trading cigarettes to buy books for Liesel or Rudy jumping into the river so that he could grab a book Liesel wants. A *New York Times* editorial in April 1941 noted that replacing the burned books at Louvain was simply a matter of money required to buy new copies and that the art of printing stood in the way of Hitler's plans (qtd. in Fishburn 231). Similarly thus, in *The Book Thief*, reading and writing stand in the way of Hitler's plans to destroy the human spirit.

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# A Shared Displacement

## Comparing Milton's Eve and Kalidasa's Shakuntala

Ishani Pant

*John Milton's Paradise Lost and Kalidasa's nataka Abhijnanasakuntalam are vastly different texts, situated within contexts that vary greatly in terms of time and place. While one is a 17th century Christian epic, the other is a Sanskrit play dated between the 5th and 1st BCE. However, in both the texts, the depiction of the position and the role of women provides certain grounds for comparison, as well as a reflection of the treatment of women in their respective societies. Both the women exist in deeply patriarchal environments and their rise or fall is largely determined by stronger social forces. The two women in question play pivotal roles within their narratives, and their textual positions are attributed specifically to their gender position. With reference to the characters of Eve and Shakuntala, this paper attempts to explore and bring to the fore the perceived nature of women, their displacement, their tumultuous moral position, and their misplacement within their narratives and within larger historical understandings.*

Two starkly different female protagonists created out of two distinct cultural contexts can be compared on the basis of their inferior feminine positions. The various similarities between the two women culminate in the fall of one and the ascent of another. Starting from the point of their presumed inferiority, the trajectory of their stories can be followed to the point of their shared displacement from society due to offences against the patriarchy. Throughout their narratives, they grapple with the moral predicament of agency versus social assimilation. Finally, they are subsumed within the greater patriarchal framework and play an interesting role as characters within their own histories, and as women in stories which become pseudo-historical for future generations to examine.

### I

The two female characters, Eve from the Bible and Shakuntala from the *Mahabharata* are re-represented in *Paradise Lost* and *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, respectively. What is it that makes them 'great' enough to be written about? Their significance is that they both act as wombs of a race. Shakuntala is the mother of Bharata, the progenitor of the race of Bharatas, ancestor of the Pandavas and Kauravas, while Eve is the mother of mankind as per Christian theology. Thus, the future they create is meant to serve the greater purpose of forwarding patriarchal societies. Genesis 1 emphasises the importance of procreation before Eve is created. The Biblical context sees her as the means by which the race of man will be carried forward. Shakuntala, on the other hand, gives birth to Bharata, the sole heir of Dushyanta, and facilitates the continuation of the patrilineal institution of kingship. Kumkum Roy points out, "The message she receives as she makes her way to her marital home is that she should be fruitful and subservient...This ideally will ensure that she will attain the status of ghrini (lady of the house)" (141).

By birthing 'great men' or historic characters, women like Eve and Shakuntala cannot define their own individual identities. They are bound by their biological functions and relationships, in terms of their identity as well as their fate.

Eve is the only female in *Paradise Lost*, and for that matter in Genesis. She is the first woman, and is attributed the function of being the 'mother of mankind'. In comparison, Shakuntala is the female protagonist with a unique, semi-divine origin in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Fundamentally, the analyses of their characters begin with an appraisal of sexual identification as female. The clearly established biological differentiation implies a kind of hierarchy, with the female as inferior.

When Eve is created, she is fashioned from a rib of Adam, making her twice removed from God and inherently lesser as a derivative creature. By alluding to Plato's theory of forms<sup>1</sup>, Milton leaves little space for believing that Eve can be the equal of Adam in his narrative. Adam is created in the image of God and

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<sup>1</sup>Plato's Theory of Forms states that all objects on Earth have a Form. The objects are mere reflections of the Form and the objects derive their essence from the Form. For instance, all the tables in the world reflect the Form of 'tableness'. There is thus a world of Forms and the world of substances, which contains the objects. Art, as a result, becomes twice-removed from reality, that is the Form. Art reflects the substance, which reflects the Form. In this manner, there is a hierarchy of sorts which is espoused.

she is a mere reflection of Adam. Book 8 refers to Eve's creation: "The Rib he formd and fashond with his hands; /Under his forming hands a Creature grew" (Milton 8.468-70).

In Book 4, Eve admits her subservient position, entrenched in ignorance and complete obedience. The process of internalising patriarchal discourse comes naturally to Eve because of the accepted notion of the biological inferiority of women.

To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorn'd.  
My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst  
Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,  
God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more  
Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise. (Milton 4.634-38)

The story of Creation itself has two versions. In Genesis 1:27, God creates man in his own image, "male and female he created them" ("Book of Genesis"). This version implies a certain kind of equality, or at least does not impose a predetermined inequality. In Genesis 2 and 3, God creates man from dust by breathing life into him, and then creates the woman using man's rib (Witcombe, Eve in Genesis). Achsah Guibbory points out that both versions are incorporated in *Paradise Lost*:

The tension between the two biblical versions of Eve's creation is evident throughout *Paradise Lost*, though the second carries greater weight in Milton's stress on Adam's need to retain supremacy. This emphasis on Adam's superiority not only reflects the dominant patriarchal values of seventeenth-century English society; we might also see it as the consequence of the fact that Milton's interpretation of the Genesis account is shaped by the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. (130)

The second story was composed according to the 'Priestly Code', presumably by Jewish theologians around 500-400 BCE. The longer version is believed to have been written by members of Hebrew tribes around 1000-900 BCE. The context of the Hebrew culture as a patriarchal society exposes the historical, and not divine, origin of the Adam and Eve story. It is on the basis of the patriarchal bias and the framing of Eve that women have been seen as sinful temptresses for generations (Witcombe). When Milton undertook the project of justifying the ways of God to men as a "shepherd-prophet-poet" (Daiches 126), he was not necessarily looking to overturn the patriarchal bias of the Hebrews. Thus, Eve's representation by Milton functions in line with the established norms of the Hebrew perceptions, and any added details in the narrative are not meant to redress issues of female autonomy. The woman's role and nature remain biologically predetermined as inferior to the man's capacity to know and govern her.

Eve is the wife of Adam, and was created specifically for that purpose. Simply put, her biological nature compels her to be nothing but the good wife, failure of which would be unnatural. Karen Edwards states, "Milton notes in Tetrachordon that Adam who had the wisdom to know the nature of all the animals that passed before him and so could name them (Gen. 2:20), must also have had the wisdom to know that Eve was created by God to be his perfect mate." (147). St. Paul's beliefs, based on I Corinthians 11, act as an exemplar of social perceptions of women bound by the matrimonial union. He states, "The head of the woman, saith he, I Corinthians 11, is the man: he the image and glory of God, she the glory of the man" (qtd. in Edwards 148).

Milton believed marriage must be a harmonious union of spirit and mind between man and wife (Edwards 146). What we then see is the creation of Eve as an ideal partner for Adam in order to facilitate unity with him, for his benefit. Milton's apparently equitable definition of marriage does not elevate the woman's position to provide her true agency. An extension of this line of thought shows how nature in Paradise is colonised by man. Adam is a gardener, and it is according to his will and instruction that nature is shaped. Eve, as a 'good woman', is expected to act likewise. Similarly, Shakuntala, in Kalidasa's Sanskrit drama, is harshly rejected by Dushyanta, her husband and lover, despite her charm and beauty. She starts out as the ideal woman, untouched by the corruption of the outside world, but by the middle of the play she finds herself struggling in the court world of men, unable to survive. Before her ascent, Shakuntala's physical and emotional presence in the first four acts is deeply entrenched in the natural world around her:

<sup>2</sup>The New Testament and Old Testament together form the foundation of the Christian holy scripture. The Old Testament is the first part which is derived from the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament comprises theological and moral teachings from the life of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament forms the basis for several principles and accounts, which are carried forward in the New Testament.

...( i ) animation of nature and ( ii ) portrayal of feminine beauty in terms of beauty in nature. His poetry unfolds varied patterns of imagery based on these analogical concepts and on every occasion he chooses to describe either Nature or Man/Woman or the two combined he irresistibly brings into operation the image-making processes by evoking the sensuous. (Tilakasiri 367)

This organic relationship of Kalidasa's heroine to nature paints a problematic picture of masculine destruction and conquest that takes place during Dushyanta's hunting expedition. In viewing Shakuntala as a woman embedded in nature, she comes to be seen as something conquerable by the kingly pursuit of power. The *nataka* which is reimagined in a specific manner, starting with the hunt of a deer in Act 1, titled 'The Chase', parallels the pursuit of Shakuntala as an innocent creature. *Rudra* (terror) and *Sringara* (erotic) *rasas*<sup>3</sup> are therefore the two predominant emotions in this scene, which also reflect Shakuntala's subsequent state of mind. Shakuntala's ultimate recognition by the end of the play, as the title 'Recognition of Shakuntala' indicates, puts her in a domesticated position. She ends up being defined entirely by her relationship to her son and husband, within the court's world, full of other forgotten queens. The natural world of Act 1 is then textually eradicated to pave the way for future masculine conquests with the prophecy of the birth of the Bharata clan.

## II

The physicality of women's displacement in a patriarchal society is vividly portrayed in both *Paradise Lost* and *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. The latter mainly focuses on displacement as part of Shakuntala's journey from an innocent and sexually liberated hermit-girl, to her ascent into her mother Menaka's world, and then her final reconciliation with Dushyanta in Marica's divine Hermitage.

As they go through the vicissitudes of life brought by separation from their lovers, Kālidāsa's heroines lose that perfection of pattern and become more and more true to life...Kālidāsa's intention was to show love in all its stages of development and growth chastening it with the final touch of pathos. (Tilakasiri 369)

The notion of love as the dependence of the woman is also not absent. If Shakuntala had independently raised her child without the rewards of the court world, she would be termed unvirtuous and a deviant for rejecting the masculine order. What Tilakasiri refers to as a kind of maturity in the heroines and a stage of love, is more so a final blow to the female sense of agency. Dushyanta kneels in front of her to ask for forgiveness, yet it is Shakuntala who receives instructions on being a good, submissive wife, and it is she who is docile and penitent. She forgives him prior to the revelation of Durvasa's curse as the reason for his forgetfulness and Dushyanta is rinsed of all blame, both by society, by the gods Marica and Aditi, and his own conscience, making his apology retroactively futile.

In *Paradise Lost*, Eve is a subordinate and culpable figure who is promptly rejected by Adam once hardships of the fall are made evident. Shakuntala too is left bereft after her rejection. There is no place for a displaced woman within the patriarchal narrative given that women are passed on from one male figure of control to the next. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of the Patriarchy*, traces the history of the patriarchy in Western Civilization, with 2nd millennium BC Mesopotamian civilisation as the point of its origin. The concepts she refers to are not unfamiliar within Milton's and Kalidasa's societies. Among these concepts, which allowed the patriarchy to grow and persist as an institution, is the phenomenon of paternalistic dominance, which is evident in both Eve's and Shakuntala's narratives.

For nearly four thousand years women have shaped their lives and acted under the umbrella of patriarchy, specifically a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance. The term describes the relationship of a dominant group considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations

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<sup>3</sup>The Rasa theory is the aesthetic theory of Sanskrit drama. Rasa refers to the predominant tastes, or sentiments evoked in the audience as it experiences the sensations expressed on stage.

and reciprocal rights. The dominated exchange submission for protection, unpaid labour for maintenance. (Lerner 217)

Furthermore, Shakuntala is rescued by her mother Menaka who notices her plight, and she is taken to a world where patriarchy is less strict—a mystical space, although not permanent or preferred. She ascends, and is absent after that point from the plot itself, which works towards a resolution that ennoble Dushyanta. Ultimately Shakuntala is accepted, as per the *Natyashastra* tradition of restoring order and recognises her place as the submissive wife and mother. There can be no reconciliation for the transgressive woman and therefore Shakuntala cannot truly rebel.

Given that sexual services of women were commodified, any form of independence would be a rebellion against the order. Thus, Shakuntala is rejected for her suspected unchastity, not only by Dushyanta, but by her family and the entirety of society. More importantly, her short-sighted sexual agency becomes part of the larger cosmic reasoning for her temporary misfortunes. According to Lerner, “‘Respectable women’ gain access to class through their fathers and husbands, but breaking the sexual rules can at once declass them” (215).

She is consequently accepted again when her chastity is reinstated by a ring, a symbol of the paternalistic dominance. In the last Act, Shakuntala attributes the unfortunate misunderstanding as a result of an action in her past life, taking the blame upon herself in some capacity. Only through this complete submission can a woman truly be assimilated into the patriarchal society and escape permanent displacement.

Eve’s relation with Adam displays a similar paternalistic dominance as a divinely sanctioned institution: “The Wife, where danger or dishonour lurks / Safest and seemliest by her Husband staes / Who guards her, or with her the worst endures” (Milton 9.267-9).

According to Achsah Guibbory, Milton envisioned ‘true worship’ as an acknowledgement of dependency, shown in Eve’s reverential love for Adam. Guibbory later also writes about signs of false worship like idolatry shown in Adam’s idolisation of Eve, and Eve’s idolisation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (137). By these standards, there appears to be a complete lack of reciprocal equality between man and woman within the union. Milton’s ideas on marriage, as per Karen L. Edwards, laid emphasis on unity of flesh, mind and spirit. This was an extension of the Genesis description of Adam’s and Eve’s bond (146). However, the assumption that a closer bond implies equality in Milton’s vision is an incomplete analysis. A union entails a single existence, but this cannot nullify Adam’s organic dominance actually stemming from unity and dependence. Adam and God are also united but this only heightens God’s stature as a divine figure by providing him a dedicated worshipper. Thus, the disobedience that Eve is ultimately punished for is layered. As a woman, she is answerable to both Adam and God. Her position of submission has a religious context to it, reinforced by Milton’s ideas on marriage and worship. Eve does not fall because of a simple act of plucking a fruit, but rather the larger narrative of female disobedience within a patriarchal hierarchy.

As opposed to Shakuntala’s ascent, Eve experiences a fall from Paradise. Whether women are pulled up by divine forces, or pushed down, a fall and an ascent can be equated on grounds of the troublesome standards of morality for women. Their displacement is different in its physical direction or form, but parallel in its intent. Shakuntala’s ascension is a veritable fall because it is a loss of the greater world of marriage and in the eyes of the patriarchy, there can be nothing so painful for a woman as the loss of her beloved husband. Thus, Shakuntala is only transiently enraged at Dushyanta, because her punishment of isolation from mainstream society is unbearable.

At the beginning of their narratives, Eve and Shakuntala have relative freedom in Paradise and in the Hermitage, respectively. Eve can independently work without Adam’s supervision, even if he insists on it. Shakuntala is also free to choose her sexual partner in Dushyanta as long as she is in the Hermitage. She has certain duties but the ‘freeness’ of her spirit is consistently emphasised through her oneness with nature. Later on, within these apparent safe spaces, Eve and Shakuntala are essentially seduced by an outsider. Their sense of curiosity plays a large role in this process. Satan, disguised as a serpent intrudes Paradise, convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge. Dushyanta, as a king and hunter intrudes the tranquil space of the Hermitage, and Shakuntala is encouraged by her friends and his advances to hastily marry him as per the Gandharva<sup>4</sup> rites. While Satan is associated with the visual of a serpent, Dushyanta becomes linked with the image of a bee that threatens Shakuntala as she goes about her duties. The bee appropriately mirrors Dushyanta’s sexual desires.

O, you honey-foraging thief! You touch  
 ever so often her glancing eyes, tremulous,  
 and softly hum, hovering close to her ear  
 as if eager to whisper a secret,  
 sneaking in to taste her ripe lower lip  
 --the quintessence of love's delight--  
 even as she piteously flails her hand.  
 Blessed indeed are you, while I wait  
 seeking to know the truth- undone. (Kalidasa 179)

Satan disguises himself as a variety of creatures, in order to manipulate Eve, and Dushyanta disguises himself as the 'Minister of Religious Affairs' to remain inconspicuous as he investigates Shakuntala's past and determines her social status. Both Satan and Dushyanta show voyeuristic tendencies of spying on the women while remaining hidden. Therefore, the association with the outside world for the two women begins on grounds of false pretenses.

The fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil represents fertility, given its traditional connotations as a fruit<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, it also implies the fertility of knowledge that becomes so tempting to Eve. The masculine God is shown as all-powerful and in-charge of the female process of creation, making him the seat of fertility. When Satan promises Eve divine powers on consumption of the fruit, godly fertility is implicit. Thus, fertility of the forbidden fruit becomes an undesirable excess—a behaviour also seen in Shakuntala's narrative, to explain the downfall of the female character. Within the Hermitage, when Shakuntala and Dushyanta indulge in a kind of excess of sexual desire, the result is a hasty marriage and a consequent sexual union. The untimely fruition of the Madhavi plant reflects this unseasonal excess, especially as the blooming of the Madhavi is meant to signal Shakuntala's time for marriage.

The forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge is God's tool for testing obedience, a test that is unfairly setup since Eve is not entirely aware of the rules. More importantly, obedience is the basis of Eve's existence at the bottom of the patriarchal hierarchy. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the ring symbolises a kind of patriarchal binding and sense of duty; the narrative implies that even if the husband has a tenuous or materialistic connection with his wife, his wife must, at all times, hold on to her sense of duty, which is embodied by the ring. The ring cannot be lost if the union is to be of any importance, because obedience is primary in the marital bond. She can refuse the ring only once her submission has been ensured, and she has fulfilled her duty by birthing the next Chakravartin ruler. The ring is later conveniently replaced by the protective amulet of Bharata.

Durvasa's curse deliberately places Shakuntala in a situation where her marital position and duty are compromised, leading to her rejection. Shakuntala's careless neglect of duty in greeting Durvasa is a symptom of minor disobedience in the eyes of a patriarchal society that refuses to take any risk and views persecution as curative. Simon Brodbeck, in *The Rejection of Shakuntala in the Mahabharata, Dynastic Considerations*, focuses on reputation as a fundamental part of royal authority (222). In Ramayana, Rama rescues Sita for the sake of his own dignity, then rejects her solely on the basis of public perception despite her proven innocence (Brodbeck 223). Biardeau has commented on the apparent inability of a woman to be believed on her own account (qtd. in Brodbeck 222). Patriarchy must punish even the perceived sins of a woman when they are sins like transgression of chastity.

Shakuntala, in her exploration of her own fecundity, and Eve, in the pursuit of knowledge and godly fertility, wish to access a larger, external world that has an undetermined allure. This world is the courtly world and marriage to a handsome, charming, and noble king for Shakuntala. For Eve, it is the promise of greater knowledge and understanding of herself, the world around her and the possession of divine power. They are persecuted for their active pursuit of positions that are denied to them by greater patriarchal forces as this approach threatens the notion of paternalistic domination because rewards are no longer contingent on obedient action, and women are able to reap benefits through their own means.

<sup>4</sup> Out of the eight traditional forms of Hindu marriage, the Gandharva rite is one based on love and agreement between two people to be joined in marriage, without any formal rituals or familial involvement required to solemnise it.

<sup>5</sup> Fruits are associated with harvest, a time of fertility and plenty in agrarian societies. In several Greek myths, goddesses are closely linked to fruits like the Golden apples of Hera's garden, Persephone and the pomegranates of the underworld, Demeter as the goddess of grains and harvest, and so on. These classical connotations are carried on in literature by relating female fecundity with the fertility of the Earth and its bounty.



## III

The narratives of Eve and Shakuntala showcase a refutation of the female moral code and the subsequent ramifications, at an essentially cosmic level. Eve's actions are so grave that humanity must be condemned. Shakuntala can truly be redeemed only after the highest gods, the regulators of the cosmos, have acknowledged her. Unintentionally perhaps, Kalidasa and Milton uncover the paradigm of women's morality, and how women are judged by the society for their actions. In their attempts to relay what women ought to be like, or ought to do, as per their social context, they also present the convoluted standards by which women are appraised. Morality becomes a perilous path with women being trapped from either side, being seen as both wilful and ignorant.

Eve falls because she is tempted to be disobedient and refutes the rules of God by practising her free will. Adam accompanies Eve in her decision—a sign of compassion perhaps; however, the choice to fall is no less his own than it is Eve's. Milton has added to the Biblical account of the fall, and does not embellish the story with reasoning or desires. By distancing Adam from the scene of the crime, Milton paints a picture of problematic female freedom. Readers are left with the impression that everything would have remained idyllic if Eve had acted submissively.

On the other hand, Shakuntala marries without the permission of Kanva, the gentle patriarch of the Hermitage, and her practice of free will carries forward into carelessness when she ignores Durvasa's arrival at the Hermitage. Dushyanta also acts irresponsibly and neglects his kingly duties during his euphoric days with Shakuntala. Despite this, he is never truly punished or rejected by the society. His sole suffering is his longing for Shakuntala; it is hardly an equal struggle. Durvasa's curse acts like a fitting punishment in the eyes of the patriarchy for a woman pushing the bounds of her independence.

Eve's disobedience in the eyes of God is also when she is most autonomous. Shakuntala's free sexuality and independence while Kanva is away, would be perceived as a romantic representation, but it would also be bordering on immorality because she does not consult Kanva before her marriage. Shakuntala, when she flouts the rules prescribed by the patriarch, is simultaneously consigning herself to the dominance of another man. Similarly, at the peak of her independence, Eve is the most manipulated by Satan.

Eve's predicament has to do with the way agency is viewed in women, specifically a woman accused of overreaching. Her act of disobedience caused the fall of man. If her actions are based on Satan's oratory skills, she loses most of her agency. If it was an independent choice, then she is condemned to the label of a wilful, sinning woman. Either her agency is nullified to abjure her of blame, or she becomes an embodiment of immorality. In the narrative, Eve is shown to accept her inferior position. She goes as far as to condemn Adam for allowing her to leave his guidance, and finally blames herself for the fall entirely. The patriarchal values have been internalised as a result of the fall. Karen L. Edwards points out that Eve's apology after Adam's misogynistic diatribe is what leads to their reconciliation:

After the harsh name calling that follows the Fall, Adam begins again to address Eve with titles of respect: 'Haile to thee, Eve right call'd Mother of all Mankind, Mother of all things living' (11.158-60). Eve, for her part promises never again to wander (158).

Obedience in women is rewarded by the label of respectability. Thus, once Eve has admitted subordination, she is once again hailed by Adam.

Shakuntala faces a similar dilemma. She can rebel against the order which allowed her husband to cast her away and act sinfully in the eyes of the patriarchy, or she can live a comfortable life as a submissive wife who forfeits her agency for acceptance. However, larger social forces are constantly attempting to punish and regulate the woman's existence:

...Female sexuality rather than male is the concern of the play. The king's judgement echoes the growing anxieties about female sexuality and the need to regulate the reproductive process evident particularly from the Grhyasutras which probably date from the mid-first millennium BC. The disorderly woman who threatens the feminine norms of brahmanical-patriarchy then needs to be tamed, marginalised or forgotten... (Sengupta and Purkayastha 161)

Shakuntala also undergoes a tacit test as she timidly resists the advances of Dushyanta. Similarly, given that sexuality cannot be divorced from the interaction of Satan and Eve, her hesitation is part of a test of female virtue:

Having thus established desire as the ruling passion of the dream world...the language in which he addresses the tree is that of a seducer...Eve is chilled with 'damp horror' when she sees him 'pluck' and 'taste' the fruit (5.56). Both verbs function figuratively as metaphors for deflowering a virgin. (Edwards 151)

Eve's fear while she relays her dream to Adam, somewhat vindicates her because there is no inherent sinful attraction. What we see is a representation of testing the woman's virginal vows. Shakuntala's playful anxiety makes her a sympathetic character for the audiences because she is not deliberate in her sexual desires. However, fractional sympathy for Eve and Shakuntala is redundant because it only serves to complicate the female moral code. It paves the way for redemption of a female character by portraying stellar submission and subsumption into the patriarchal order.

#### IV

According to the *Natyashastra*, the Sanskrit *nataka* was a play based on an older, well-known story, in the manner that *Abhijnanashakuntala* is based on the story of Shakuntala from the Mahabharata. On the other hand, *Paradise Lost* follows the epic tradition, and retells the biblical story of the fall of man while also addressing contemporary themes. Therefore, Shakuntala and Eve are women characters within texts, but they are also representative of general perceptions of their times. They carry the baggage of patriarchal judgement that remains dominant in the historical context:

For the last two thousand years or so, Eve has represented the fundamental character and identity of all women. Through Eve's words and actions, the true nature of women was revealed; her story tells men what women are really like.

Eve represents everything about a woman a man should guard against. In both form and symbol, Eve is woman, and because of her, the prevalent belief in the West has been that all women are by nature disobedient, guileless, weak-willed, prone to temptation and evil, disloyal, untrustworthy, deceitful, seductive, and motivated in their thoughts and behaviour purely by self-interest. (Witcombe, Eve's Identity)

It is important to note that male values and ideas have created the character of Eve and the story of the fall of mankind. Texts like the Bible and *Paradise Lost* have become part of this documenting process. Gerda Lerner's notion of "the dialectics of women's history" elucidates the tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from its interpretation (5). This is evident in *Paradise Lost* and *Abhijnanasakuntalam* as well. A character like Eve is proof of how women are a part of the history of humanity, and are yet kept from knowing their significance within the narrative. Eve's observation of her reflection is branded by Milton as narcissistic and compared to the myth of Narcissus<sup>6</sup>, because a woman's self-realisation is threatening. Raphael is initially ordered to converse only with Adam, and "all justice" seems to ignore the existence of Eve. When Raphael and Adam talk, Eve is not present to listen because she wishes for the information to be relayed by Adam, in keeping with the hierarchy:

Raphael, said hee, thou hear'st what stir on Earth  
 .....  
 Go therefore, half this day as friend with friend  
 Converse with Adam, in what Bowre or shade (Milton 5.224-30)

Eve is also absent when God forbids Adam from consuming the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.

Shakuntala, too, forms history as essentially the creator of the race of the Bharatas. However, by the end of the play, nothing but Dushyanta's greatness is proclaimed. He is the one who has fathered the son, and history leaves little space for Shakuntala's story to become truly significant. Shakuntala is also una-

<sup>6</sup> According to the myth of Narcissus, the nymph Echo fell in love with the beautiful Narcissus. However, after being rejected, she became desolate and was reduced to nothing but an echo. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge punished Narcissus by making him fall in love with his own reflection in a pond. The love Narcissus felt for his reflection could never be truly attained and resulted in his suicide.

ware of the curse of Durvasa that will lead to her misfortunes and she has been excluded from the knowledge of her own narrative. Such instances of ignorance pave way for disaster for the two female protagonists. Ultimately, both women apologise for consequences stemming from ignorance, even though female ignorance is what the masculine world order decrees.

David Daiches has analysed how Milton builds up an image of himself as the “inspired spokesman of God”, a process by which the Christian epic is given divine credibility. Furthermore, Milton, through *Paradise Lost*, attempts to reason and explain the world by essentially incorporating all of human history (Guibbory 128-129). As a masculine attempt to configure history, the incomplete record of a character like Eve is reflected in her desirable submission to the patriarchal set-up, and her final containment within the text. While a case can be made for how Milton and Kalidasa ultimately record the stories of Eve and Shakuntala, these are only a partial record.

The shared displacement of women in two contextually dissimilar texts raises the question of how to view characters like Eve and Shakuntala from a third-person perspective. The deliberately skewed and unforgiving moral standards of the social backdrop fail to do them justice. They fail to account for the internal trepidation of a woman who is threatened with ostracisation and otherwise held under an oppressive system. The aim and intention of John Milton was to deliberate upon larger themes like agency and reasoning within the social and political context of the seventeenth century. Although Milton adds various shades to Eve’s character, agency was not particularly a privilege made available to women. Moreover, she cannot be seriously considered an independent individual in light of the constant references to hierarchy. Even after the fall, Eve is condemned to be always submissive to her husband, while Adam is punished by having to work hard to provide food. The stark contrast lies in the man remaining dominant and being handed the primary sources of economic power even if it is in the form of a punishment. The woman is completely persecuted instead, with the additional biological pain of childbirth. In comparison, Kalidasa presents the narrative of Shakuntala through the medium of a woman-centric play, but the ultimate containment reverses any amount of initial agency. In the last Act, Aditi and Marica, the divine parents, specifically tutor Shakuntala into submission, just as Kanva had advised when she was leaving the Hermitage.

The conclusions of both texts feature docile women who have learned the lesson of not opposing patriarchal structures, either accidentally or deliberately. Eve and Shakuntala do not harbour radical views of subversion, and their rebellion is unintentional at best, allowing them to be reinstated into the system and to be converted into the examples of good women who know their place within the larger patriarchal framework. Thus, it is only through re-examination of the unfair standards of women’s morality and their subsequent portrayal that we can gauge the plight of female characters as marginalised within texts. Displacement from society, the doctrine of perceived biological inferiority, precarious moral values and estrangement from the understanding of history are not unique or exceptional conditions. Eve and Shakuntala are only the evidence of how these factors function to obliterate the voice and holistic characterisation of the woman, both in literature and in history.

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# Chiaroscuro: A play of light and darkness

## The study of *Death Note* and its interlacing Christian themes

Dyuti Roy

*The television adaptation of the popular Japanese Manga Death Note presents an interesting interplay of Japanese folklore and Christian ideas, while exploring the concepts of good and evil. This paper attempts to highlight the Christian allegories found in Death Note by analysing the imagery of the series. It draws parallels with Christian ideas of what constitutes divinity and the complexity of one who assumes the authority of a God-like figure. With the help of texts that deal with the non-linear nature of faith and divinity, mainly Milton's Paradise Lost and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, the author delves into a discussion on morality and its subversions when associated with religion and faith, through its characters. The assumption of divinity and the execution of divine matters are contested and challenged in this paper.*

While the medieval period was characterized by absolute faith in the power of God, the Renaissance witnessed a change in the mindset of people. With Renaissance there was an evident rise in skepticism. With playwrights like Christopher Marlowe staging *Doctor Faustus* and questioning the divine justice of God, Puritans strived to re-establish absolute faith in God. Milton's contribution towards this movement of restoring 'faith' was to write *Paradise Lost* in an attempt to "justify the ways of God to men". (Milton 1.26) However, in the process, the artist in Milton created a character who wasn't exactly two dimensional. In creating a Satan who the reader struggles to classify as 'all evil', the artist in Milton felt conflicted over his original purpose and struggled to understand the true nature of God, the 'omnipotent' and 'omniscient' being. This conflicted ideology influenced literatures throughout time and space and a plethora of complex paradoxical 'heroes' were created. Religious dogma failed to remain as black and white as it used to. In contemporary times, a similar notion emerges from the pages of the Japanese Manga, *Death Note*. Made famous by the television adaptation, *Death Note* took the entire world by storm with its unconventional concepts of good and evil. In addition to dealing with ideas of Japanese folklore and mythology, *Death Note* has significant underlying Christian themes.

The protagonist of the show is named 'Light', and he wants to be a 'God on earth'. In this, he parallels Satan, who, before he fell, was Lucifer Morningstar, the light bearer and the brightest star in the sky. His fall was the result of his desire to usurp the position of the Supreme Being. Similar to archangel Lucifer, Light Yagami, the protagonist of *Death Note*, is a person of remarkable talent and character. He has all the qualities of a traditional hero. He is at the top of his class, is extremely good-looking and popular amongst his mates. The story proceeds with Light coming across a death note—a notebook which has the ability to kill people once their names are written in it.

The opening credits of *Death Note* are laced with Christian allegory. The credits open with Light at the top of the screen looking downwards. The inference that can be drawn from this position of Light is that it is a visual representation of Light's megalomania and how he considers himself above all mortals, especially after he is in possession of the Death Note. The next image is that of a hurt and despondent Light sprawled on the floor in an ungainly manner. Lucifer too had been at the top or in Heaven, and then fell from Grace, and was engulfed in darkness. This opening also presents Light in a lit up background which darkens gradually to suggest Light's movement away from the light of God towards a moral darkness. Hoping to become a new God, Light succumbs to his dark temptation of employing the Death Note, believing in his ability to use it for a greater good, fueled by the exaggerated notion of his own greatness.

In another image in the credits, we find the silhouette of Ryuk, a Shinigami (who are the Japanese gods of death) overshadowing Light. This might allude to the idea that Light's opinion about his God-like stature is a delusional misconception on his part. Real divinity still remains with Ryuk and all of Light's powers ultimately originate from him. This also foreshadows the fact that Light's death will ultimately be at the hands of Ryuk.

The most glaring Christian allusion is visible in the parodied image of Michelangelo's fresco "The Creation of Adam". The image shows Ryuk and Light with their arms extended and an apple at the point where their hands meet. Ironically, here it is Ryuk, the God, who is proffering the apple and thus recalls the image of Satan tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden. The image of Light standing in front of an angel with black wings hints at Light's proximity to Lucifer, the Dark Angel. Later, however, we see Light giving ap-

ples to Ryuk. It's engaging to see how a Shinigami gobbles down apple after apple as he says, "Apples in the human world are worth a trip" (Ep. 1). The fact that a God would travel all the way to the human world for apples is an interesting concept—Adam and Eve were sent to the human world for eating an apple, the fruit of knowledge. *Death Note* thus seems to suggest that the human world possesses immense knowledge and also the power that comes with it.

Another Christian element that has been twisted curiously to suit the needs of the manga is found in the graphic representation of the title. The letter 'T' in the title 'Death Note' is always depicted with the Christian cross. It is interesting to see such religious allusions in a book essentially used by the Japanese 'Grim Reapers' as an instrument of murder and later by a Satan-like character to administer divine justice.

According to Japanese folklore, the 'Shinigami' are the rightful owners of the death notes. They mete out death by writing the name of the people who have run out of time, in the death note. With such a deadly and secret weapon in his possession, Light takes it upon himself to purge the world of all sinful beings in secret. He targets the infamous criminals of the time and goes on a killing spree. His identity remains secret and the sobriquet 'Kira' is given to this mass-murderer of criminals by the world. While 'Kira' in Japanese literally means 'killer', in ancient Egyptian, 'Kira' means 'like Ra'. The same word has meanings which are polar opposites—while it depicts someone who is like Ra, the Egyptian god of Sun and light, it also depicts someone who is as dark as a killer. It is interesting that although his name is Light, his thoughts have a deep darkness in them. Moreover, the name 'Kira' also portrays the image of what Light had wanted to be after the possession of the death note—someone as powerful as Ra, the God of gods. This echoes Satan, the magnificent heroic figure with a megalomaniac desire for omnipotence.

When Light earns the title of the mass murderer 'Kira', the entire world becomes divided on the issue. While most are delighted by the idea that a 'messiah' had graced them with his presence and eventually start worshipping him, there are many who don't want to accept Light's attempts to take the powers of God in his hands. How dare he, a mere human, try to be God? Who is he to believe that he can be God? Light's belief that he might be the 'new God' may also be a concept in contention, since he believes that it is divine intervention that led to his coming into possession of the death note: "Why was I chosen for this?" (Ep. 1) If he was God's chosen, then his desire to be the new God is reminiscent of Lucifer's rebellion against the Christian God. Ironically, however, it was merely by chance that Light had come across this particular Death Note. This Death Note belonged to Ryuk, who, bored of his activities had dropped his death note into the world in the hope of some entertainment. He was curious to see what would ensue from this.

Similarly, while reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the 'Satanists,' or the supporters of Milton's Satan celebrate Satan's courage in standing up against God. In opposition, as John Carey, in his essay, "Milton's Satan" speaks, critics like C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams who were called anti-Satanists, would jeer at Satan's defiance. According to them, Satan could never be termed a hero and they would become sarcastic at his expense, focusing on his selfishness and folly. (133)

It is very interesting to see the determination with which both Satan and Light Yagami actively defy God. Even though Light discovers that a human using the Death Note shall neither go to Heaven nor Hell for eternity—"even if it means sacrificing my own mind and soul, it's worth it" (Ep. 1)—he keeps up his killing spree. Satan is also not discouraged after his fall from heaven to hell although he "knows his mission is bound to make worse for him" (Carey 136). In his speech to Beelzebub, Satan resolves Eternal War against God:

Yet not for those,  
Nor what the Potent Victor in his rage  
Can else inflict, do I repent, or change,  
... To wage by force or guile eternal War  
Irreconcilable, to our grand Foe,  
Who now triumphs, and in th' excess of joy  
Sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heav'n (Milton 1.94-124)

Light believes that with the death note he will create a new world, "free of injustice and populated by people who I've judged to be honest kind and hardworking...and I will become the God of this new world" (Ep. 1). John Carey also says that in Isaiah 14:14 "Lucifer, son of morning" states, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High". (136) As criminals continue to mysteriously

die at the hands of Kira, L, the world's top-ranked detective, is employed to look into this situation. An indefinite cat and dog chase ensue through the entirety of the story between Light and L, who can be paralleled to the Christian God. While L works to unearth the identity of Kira, Light tries to surpass him. If L is the representation of God, Light's ability to outsmart L every time is analogous to Satan's continual defiance against God.

"Hear this: I'm not only Kira, but I'm also the God of the new world." (Ep. 25) Light's belief that Kira will bring about justice in a rotten world by killing those who make it rot alludes to the belief that God judges your path to Heaven and Hell. Light, in declaring himself the God of the new world, makes the new world his concept of Heaven. Similarly, throughout literature, Heaven and Hell have mostly been understood as concepts rather than physical places. Although, there is a very visual description of the fiery gulf and of Hell as a horrible dungeon in *Paradise Lost*:

he views  
That dismal Situation waste and wild;  
A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames  
No light, but darkness visible (Milton 1.59-63)

Satan dismisses the physicality of Hell. For Satan, Hell is not a place or a moment in time, but rather a state of mind; for him, "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Milton 1.254-255). This is similar to what William Blake says in his poem "The Clod and the Pebble":

But for another gives it ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair...  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite (3-4, 11-12)

Blake, like Milton's Satan, believes that Heaven and Hell are just states of mind, subjective to each human. Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* says, "Hell is just a frame of mind" (117) as does Mephistopheles when he elaborates that he is never free from hell for having been deprived of eternal bliss: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it." (Marlowe 118)

Although divided by religion and mythologies, the Shinigami and the Christian God are similar concepts. Their psychologies work perfectly in sync. Although they already know that humans are doomed, they do not do anything to prevent it. Ryuk, the Shinigami, keeps repeating that "humans are interesting" (Ep. 1) throughout the series, and it is this intriguing nature of human beings that keeps Ryuk in the human world. He keeps a close watch on Light's activities and seems to treat him as the subject of an intellectual enquiry. Light wades in deeper and deeper into the mire of blood and death, and Ryuk stands by watching. Although not explicitly mentioned, God also seems to observe the deeds of man from a distance. Morality plays<sup>1</sup> worked on this principle of warning humans about the wrath of God. Calvin's theory of predestination, which became popular during the Renaissance, emphasises the fact that every human is already destined to be 'good' or 'evil' and after death will go either to Heaven or Hell. However, no one could answer why someone who was already destined to be either 'good' or 'evil' would try to find a way to heaven through the means of worship. Marlowe's *Faustus* questioned this very concept of why worshipping God would then matter. Years later, Max Weber, in "Theodicy, Salvation and Rebirth" questioned "how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfections of the world that he has created and rules over" (519) This very idea is also taken up by Blake in his "Songs of Experience," in poems like "The Tyger," where he says:

What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry. . .  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (3-4, 23-24)

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<sup>1</sup> Morality Plays were a stimulus of the later Middle Ages that brought about the rebirth of drama. In such plays, virtues and vices were presented on the stage as allegorical creations, often of much liveliness. Abstractions such as Justice, Mercy, Gluttony, and Vice were among the commonest characters. The plays possessed noble pathos.

Is it really the benevolent, merciful God who created such a frightening creature as the Tiger, or is it some other being? The questions remain unanswered; just as they do in Blake's *London* where social evils such as chimney sweeping and prostitution are carried on openly as the church looks on unappalled, and the king, who is the representative of God on earth sends many a young boy to his death in the name of holy crusades and attempts to achieve supremacy over other kings. Where, then, is the justice of the omniscient God, the victory of good over evil? Ryuk's famous ending speech, "We've eased each other's boredom for quite a while...It's been quite fun." (Ep. 37) as he writes Light's name in the Death Note therefore holds a poignant truth. Ryuk was never interested in Light's ideals or his dreams of a new world. Light's journey was, just as he had believed earlier to be, a means to give him respite from the dull Shinigami life. Neither Light's death nor his life and the lives of countless others that were affected by the Death Note mattered to Ryuk as it does for the Christian God. Both remain indifferent to the dealings of humans, 'enjoying' as they go, just wondering at times how 'interesting' they are as creatures.

As the story progresses, we are introduced to Misa Amane, an upcoming model and supporter of Kira, who eventually becomes the second Kira. After receiving a Death Note from the Shinigami, Rem, she seeks out Kira in order to thank him for avenging the death of her family members by killing the man who had annihilated them and had been acquitted by the human court. Misa, enraptured by Kira's 'social work', vows to support him in his cause although unsure of his actual identity.

In a television speech, the second Kira iterates how her cause is to create a better world that everyone can enjoy, a new world ruled by benevolence and inhabited by kind-hearted, honest people (Ep. 11). This speech is an imitation of what Light had said to Ryuk in the episode "Rebirth". Thus, it is as if Misa's Kira is almost seduced by Light's Kira just as Eve is seduced by Satan into eating the apple of knowledge.

In all his defiance, the question remains: can you actually be God? Ideologically, Light's fall was predestined and morally correct. Light tried and failed to bring about the ideal utopian change he wanted and in turn, it cost him his sanity and later, his life. In the process of trying to forge his own 'light', Light ends up completely in the darkness: "But if you did that, it would only make you the bad person." (Ep. 1) However, putting aside any religious or moralistic connotations, if we take it from a pragmatic perspective, the complexity of Light's character reflects the dilemma of contemporary existence. Like Light, often individuals have felt the need to step in and take charge forcefully because the concerned authorities are not fulfilling their responsibility: "The world is rotten, and those who make it rot deserve to die. Someone has to do it, so why not me." (Ep. 1) Yet, does a person, in order to do good have the right to inflict death? Thus, the eternal debate of whether the means justify the end or the end justifies the means continues.

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